

**Grinding Away the Gay Bar:**  
**How the gay community adapts to online social media**

**Joseph Bernstein**  
**Advised by Professor Nathan Fisk**

**Department of Science, Technology, and Society**  
**Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**  
**Spring 2014**

**Abstract:**

How have increasingly high-tech social networking websites and smartphone applications altered the homosexual man's interactions within his community? Much of the research performed on popular gay-specific social networking apps like Grindr has focused simply on the intended and unintended uses of the technology. However, it is also important to consider that these apps and websites have been shaping the gay community around them. The gay community has endured a long history of alternative social networking methods, such as exclusive bars and clubs. I seek to understand the reasons behind a distinct recent trend of decline in the popularity of gay bars in major cities. Just as the social dynamic of the gay bar, these new technologies enable new types of relationships that result from the ways the society adapts to them. They allow for a more explicit method of relationship instigation and engender a more label-based sense of self-identity. Through a deep analysis of these new communication methods I will consider the unique social constructions of applications designed for various "types" of men, as well as the social trends that surround them. This analysis will be of particular interest to the next generation of social networking tools as well as social anthropologists and those who consider the risks and rewards of an increasingly online dating culture.

## **Introduction**

The social status of American homosexual men in the last century has undergone a tumultuous history. From secret underground countercultures to the Stonewall uprising to eventual political representation, the social plight of gay men has often diverged distinctly from the social norms of mainstream society. As a result, the gay community has followed a unique path to develop and integrate new forms of social technologies. What were once informal codes hidden from public view progressed to become bars and clubs catering specifically to the community. In the last 15 years, internet-based social media provided directly to gay men, and even to specific smaller groups within the larger community, have surpassed physical spaces as the meeting places of choice. The use of social media sites comes with its own changes in social structure; a key feature of many sites is the streamlined process of meeting potential dating partners without the classical social norms involved when meeting in public crowds. Online social media allows many men to express their sexuality privately from locations where they could not safely do so in public. Many of these social networks have enabled the cultivation of subcultures for particular interests, some of which were not realized before the internet provided a means for more open communication. On the surface it seems like social technologies in the digital age are a stark contrast to social structures of the past; in several ways they are. However, virtual social media parallels many of the communication methods of the past.

By carefully studying the way one minority group behaves in a context of evolving technologies we may better understand the similarities and differences of other minority groups of a similar circumstance. For members of the gay community, it may provide a deeper insight of the current state of social technology and how technologies might be best utilized in the near future. Gay bars, a social staple in most American cities, have been declining in popularity in the last decade (Bailey,

2010). The convenient culprit is the rise of online social media and dating websites, but the truth may be more complex.

This essay seeks to evaluate the popular perceptions of gay social networking sites as portrayed by mainstream media and social scientists. While some reports criticize these networks solely as a means for promiscuous sex and a dangerous lifestyle, interviews with users show that these networks create powerful social connections beyond their intended uses. Many social theorists study the use of these social networks from various approaches by analyzing their uses and gratifications. Others find a deeper connection between the networks and the people, that social technologies are a way of life. Using these social theory approaches, this paper will explore the unique social life enabled by these technologies.

## Background

Ever since the debut of the iPhone in 2007, we find ourselves in the era of smartphones with increasing ubiquity of mobile internet access. Mobile application developers have taken advantage of this by creating geolocate apps that can connect users by location as reported by the GPS embedded within the phone, creating a new medium for social interaction. One such app catering specifically to gay men, called Grindr, premiered in 2009 as a way for users to locate one another by proximity. Grindr describes itself as “a simple app that uses your mobile device’s location-based services to show you the guys closest to you who are also on Grindr” (“Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys,” n.d.). By uniting men of a common characteristic (an attraction to other men) within one particular collection of profiles, Grindr has achieved what years of social developments have attempted: a cohesive sense of community with an inherent notion of inclusivity that creates a safe space to meet and interact. In the time since Grindr’s inception, many other geolocate networks have appeared for groups both within and outside the gay community. Founded on similar motives as Grindr, these apps manage to unite people of common interests. Even beyond social networking apps, countless social networking sites (SNSs) continue to prevail as a means for people of various common interests to meet, network, and date.

One dominant conceptual framework often used to understand these communities is the uses and gratifications approach, which delineates a set of purposes for which a particular technology is created and a corresponding list of desired outcomes that a user receives from normal and abnormal use. Gudelunas (2012) interviews users of gay social media to see how individuals use the apps and how those uses may stray from the expected purposes. Dunne (2010) conducts personal interviews with middle school girls to gather qualitative evidence of how they use and interact with the social site Bebo. Common considerations of uses and gratifications theory include

linking the media-use motives with media attitudes and behaviours, comparing motivations across media forms, examining the different social and psychological

circumstances of media use, evaluating the link or indeed difference between gratifications sought (GS) and gratifications obtained (GO), exploring whether variations in backgrounds affect behaviour and attributes and finally, consideration of the methods, reliability and validity of measuring motivation (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010, p.47).

Certain aspects of uses and gratifications theory (UGT) are difficult to argue. Critics do not always defy the theory, but instead often dismiss it as a weak, inferior, or trivial theory. Some criticisms note that many UGT assertions lack “internal consistency” and “justification for the model offered,” that the theory makes broad, sweeping claims with little rhyme or reason (Ruggiero, 2000, p.11). Dunne (2010) creates a body of work focused on social networks that asks only “what” and not “why”, essentially arguing that anecdotal survey results alone constitute an “appropriate and relevant” study that is sufficiently comprehensive. The study successfully returns reasons why girls use certain social networks, but does not theorize the social factors surrounding these uses. Sometimes UGT attempts to claim evidence far beyond its scope, such as a claim that the internet “lends itself to a uses and gratifications approach...in part due to its interactive nature” (Dunne et al., 2010, p.48). While the internet is indeed an interactive medium, that interaction is exactly why social causality is a necessary factor in an internet-based study. Similarly, Denise Caruso, Digital Commerce Columnist for the New York Times, once stated that “the Internet has evolved into a force strong enough to reflect the greatest hopes and fears of those who use it” (Curry, 2012, p.3). She stops short of what could be a much more insightful analysis of the internet. Rather than the internet *reflecting* its users’ hopes and dreams, does it not also *affect* its users’ hopes and dreams? Gudelunas (2012) studies the uses and gratifications of apps like Grindr in order to better understand “the needs and motivations that bring gay men online” but he neglects to consider what happens once these men form online networks.

The media ecologies framework provides one of the strongest challenges to the uses and gratifications theory. Media ecologies recognize that the purposes of technologies depend heavily on their social contexts. Media ecologies has sought to understand the technological practices of children, noting the “digital divide” between “in-school and out-of-school uses” of the same technologies (Ito, 2009, p.2). Alternatively, in his essay titled *Technologies as Forms of Life*, Langdon Winner compares modern technology to many other fields, like politics, aesthetics, and epistemology, all of which have a deeply established history of philosophical inquiry. Winner (1983) notes that technologies are often invented and released into the world with little consideration for the ways society will accept, enable, and adapt to its uses. He claims that “technologies are not merely aids to human activity, but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning” (p.105). If gay social networking sites are like any other form of modern technology, they contribute more meaning to their users than simply a list of prescribed functions. In the following pages I will seek to find ways through which social networking sites and apps like Grindr are not only used by the gay community, but how they have and continue to shape the gay community around them. If these technologies are more than simple tools, they will have their own politics, create controversies, and affect the way people behave.

The following research was performed primarily as a synthesis of existing sources, combining a wealth of existing science, technology, and society concepts and frameworks with other studies performed on social networking applications, both within and outside of the gay community. Expert approaches regarding media ecologies and the uses and gratifications of technology were considered for this study. Additionally, data taken from app store reviews and discussions from certain pertinent websites were considered as they apply to the literature. I also interject some personal experiences and findings within the research as I take a participant-observer approach to this analysis. This research supplements an ongoing personal inquiry into the nature of digital relationships as I have observed firsthand since identifying myself as a member of the gay community.

## **A History of the “Homosocial”**

In order to look at the current social climate within the gay community, we should first consider the long history of social technology among gay men. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gay men in America found themselves in a largely oppressive social climate. From this stemmed a gay culture whose motif of social rebellion would remain present even as the social climate progressed. Leading up to the 1930s, cities built up by industrialization had enabled a social climate that allowed “gay men and lesbians to forge distinct identities” and facilitated “cohesion as an oppressed and ostracized group” (Poindexter, 1997, p. 611). Sexual identity was a taboo concept at the time, and many men feared the “hostile world” surrounding homosexuals in public (Poindexter, 1997, p. 611). However, this did not prevent gay men from forming homosexual relationships, and it only served to establish a social structure somewhat independent from any other. Finding others like oneself in such an environment was paramount to forming a supportive coalition of gays and lesbians, and from that necessity formed the opportunity to seek alternative modes of communication.

The earliest of these communication methods were nonverbal, “including green carnations in the time of Oscar Wilde [and] red ties in the early twentieth century” (Crooks, 2013, para. 29). These methods were employed because of their ambiguity; in a hostile social climate, a green carnation could very possibly be coincidental, but it greatly increased the chance that the person was safe to talk to about sexuality. It was from these early methods that gay men began to meet each other in private contexts and thus began the underground gay male counterculture from which the gay community—and ultimately the wider LGBT community—formed. By World War I some urban meeting places had formed for gays and lesbians, including “clubs, bars, bathhouses, drag balls” and “communities on college campuses” (Poindexter, 1997, p. 611). The earliest of these venues existed in a private and largely independent social context from their heterosexual equivalents.



Once the communication network was established, gay culture as we know it could form. Aside from the typical and stereotypical interests that naturally created a community aspect to homosexual culture, many formed geographical communities and gay villages. One such example is West Hollywood, “an independent, self-governed gay city within Los Angeles County with its own laws, mayor, city council, and police force” (Crooks, 2013, para. 19). In a time when many gay men and women could openly discuss their sexuality but still were largely unaccepted by friends and family, they flocked to the large American cities to create their own villages. This fulfilled many of their social desires while allowing them to be seen with a significant other at the post office, movie theater, or restaurant without maltreatment. Similar villages appeared in New York City, known as Greenwich Village, and in small, remote resort towns like Key West, Florida and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

These gay villages provided an expedited network through which gay men could disseminate information. In the late 1940’s, some gay men found safe providence by networking with the also-underground communist subculture in America. At the height of the Red Scare, communists also felt unsafe to organize in public. Communists and homosexuals formed a mutualistic relationship, organizing joint meetings that eventually grew to become more public, and “by 1953 the founding members had set up an organization of cell-like secrecy, with groups meeting in several cities throughout California, as well as in New York City and Chicago” (Hennen, 2008, p. 66). The fascinating phenomenon of this joint network, Licata (1981) notes, “is how quickly the movement spread to the large urban gay ghettos, proof that a gay communication network had already existed surreptitiously but effectively in the large cities”. Later, this combined communist and gay coalition would become a social movement unto itself—the gay Faerie movement. Described as a “social movement,” a “spiritual revival,” and “a green political experiment,” the Radical Faeries are one of many subcultures that have developed out of the larger gay community (Hennen, 2008, p. 59). Like

many such subcultures, one of its divergences is its challenge of the traditional notions of masculinity. Subcultures will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

As gay men began to feel more comfortable outside of the largest metropolises, a staple of many medium-sized towns and villages became the gay bar. As bars are a major feature of adult social entertainment for people across most demographics, it is no surprise that specialized gay bars became features of the gay community. However, they hold a deeper meaning to the gay community than the social significance of other kinds of bars. Across all demographics, bars serve not only the use of serving alcohol to adults, but also create a social atmosphere conducive to meeting new people. From 2006-2008, 11% of married adults met their spouse at a “bar, club, or other social event” (Bailey, 2010). That statistic is no less significant, and possibly higher, for gay men. However, the gay bar also represents the safe space for people of many gender and sexual minorities. One of the key foundations of the gay rights movement was the Stonewall Uprising, which occurred at The Stonewall, a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1969. The riots that occurred that night stemmed from a resistance among “drag queens (the most thoroughly feminized members of the New York gay community) [who] refused to tolerate ongoing police harassment” (Hennen, 2008, p. 11). Gay bars are also the meeting places for organizing gay pride events and gay-related charity events.

For decades, gay bars thrived, even shaping the community around themselves. Stonewall opened up an entire culture headquartered at the bars. As one Greenwich Village writer recounts, “In the years after Stonewall, clubs like the Firehouse and 12 West represented safe spaces in a hostile world where we could flirt, make out, and hook up (usually on site).” He laments that in more recent days, “gay men don’t define themselves by the clubs they frequent anymore,” though he implies that they once did (Weinstein, n.d.). As the demand for bars continued to increase, some of the larger cities saw a desire for niche gay bars, catering to interests such as lesbians or subcultures such as bears and leather. John Blair, a NYC gay bar promoter, notes that “the gay community wants to be around people like themselves” and that for quite some time “that’s all their social life was” (Weinstein,

n.d.). By this he means that, prior to the digital age, gay bars were the primary and sometimes only successful method to be social in a big, thriving city like New York.

During the gay bar era, the nonverbal communication methods of the past had formed into more complex semiotics. The 1970s brought the first gay pride flag, consisting of a six-colored rainbow to represent inclusiveness (Higgs, 1999, p. 173). This pride flag became a way for people and businesses to show their support and tolerance of the community. Around the same time, a detailed handkerchief code developed. Whereas the rainbow pride flag was meant as a way to communicate between the gay community and the outside world, handkerchief code, also known as “flagging”, was a way for men within the community to communicate specific messages to one another. It involved wearing a handkerchief or bandana in one’s back pocket. Various colors of handkerchief conveyed different sexual or niche interests, such as preferences for oral sex, piercing, leather, and various other kinks. If the handkerchief was worn on the left side it meant that the wearer preferred the more active or giving role, and those who wore it on the right side preferred the more passive or receiving role (Gudelunas, 2012, para. 12). At this point discussing one’s homosexuality in public was no longer the taboo that it had been in the past, opening the opportunity for the handkerchief code to occupy its place in the edgy communication that became emblematic of gay social networks. A common theme of gay communication networks is the tendency to discuss the much more explicit aspects of one’s sexual interests that would not be discussed outside of gay-specific spaces, even by heterosexuals in casual conversation. This is an artifact of the early exclusion of gay men from mainstream society. By creating safe spaces where the orientation aspect of one’s sexuality was already predisposed, men communicating through the underground gay communication methods had little more to risk by discussing their sexual interests further.

With the gay bar remaining an active yet waning mode of gay social life in recent years, we move on to the social developments of the digital age. We have discussed how many of the social challenges of the gay community have been due to the inability to find one another, both in their own

localities and across the country. Beyond meeting men of common sexual orientation, it was difficult for men to meet those of other common interests without meeting by chance in a bar. Only those most common niche interests deserved their own specialty bars, and even those only existed in some of the biggest cities. With the introduction and mainstream availability of the internet to gay men across the country, new methods for social networking began to develop.

Despite the great strides made by the gay rights movement during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the beginning of the internet age, life was still not easy for many of those who openly confessed their sexuality. This was more frequently the case in more rural and conservative areas, where homosexual relationships were still illegal. The internet provided an opportunity for men to hide behind the variable anonymity of website usernames. Men could create an account on a website to explore their sexual curiosities that they may have been previously afraid to verbalize. The demand for such communication networks paved the way for “gay-related websites providing chat rooms and other computer mediated interaction” (Brown, Maycock, & Burns, 2005). Chat rooms that were “often very specific in relation to geographic area as well as purpose” offered social possibilities for men who had been afraid to be seen near a local gay bar (Brown et al., 2005).

As commercial websites became more popular, many websites formed for the specific purpose of connecting dating partners. One of the first ones to cater specifically to the gay community was the aptly named Gay.com. Even among many outside demographics, matchmaking websites were popular. From 2008-2010, 17% of newly married couples met using an online dating site (Bailey, 2010). These sites became popular because, unlike many physical meeting spaces, dating sites allow the user to create a profile and filter people by their physical and emotional characteristics.

Once internet access achieved a mainstream user base, social networking websites began to grow. Whereas the main utility of many dating sites is to meet potential dating partners, or even be so direct as to find instant sexual partners, many rejoiced in the more casual social atmosphere of social networks. One frequent user of the once-popular social site Friendster describes the appeal of the site

as not “threatening, like dating sites. It’s called Friendster, not ‘F[\*\*\*]ster’ or ‘Makeoutster,’” and then he adds, “it’s like the kiddie pool of online dating” (O’Shea, 2003, p. 7). Interestingly enough, whereas most gay social networks up until this point had been created specifically for the uses and purposes of gay men, gay men were the ones who helped get Friendster off the ground and to become a thriving social network. Given that its friendship-oriented nature was rare at the time, it only “gained traction among three groups of early adopters who shaped the site—bloggers, attendees of the Burning Man arts festival, and gay men—and grew to 300,000 users through word of mouth before traditional press coverage began in May 2003” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 215). Given that there were only a few friendship networking sites at the time, the fact that gay men were so eager to adopt the small site to meet each other was a heavy indication that a gay-specific social network was desired. A solution was not very far away.

It was not until the proliferation of mobile internet technology, primarily through smartphones, that what is quite possibly the most successful gay social network appeared. In 2009, Joel Simkhai released a smartphone application called Grindr. Drawing upon the embedded GPS capability of smartphones, Grindr opened the door to an entire movement of geolocative dating services. Within its first three years on the market, Grindr accumulated 3.5 million users with tens of thousands of new users downloading the app daily (Tudor, 2012). Grindr bills itself as “the largest all male, location-based mobile network tool for Android, iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad and BlackBerry” and allows “users of the service navigate a representation of other nearby users ranked according to distance” (Crooks, 2013, para. 2). Users create a profile with a picture of themselves, along with information such as their height, weight, age, relationship status, and a brief description. Once a user has a profile, he can view the profiles of those around him, displayed on a grid of thumbnail images, showing dozens of them at a time. Users can send a message to another profile, mark a profile as a “favorite” to be displayed in a separate list, or block a profile from viewing their own information.

According to its public relations fact sheet, over five million Grindr users send a total of more than one billion messages per month across 192 countries.

Grindr revolutionized communication within the gay community, as evidenced by the dozens of similar applications that have since been developed for similar purposes. Grindr's stated purpose is for gay people to meet other like-minded gay men in their area. It does not try to disguise the fact that one of its primary purposes is for men to find dates or easy casual sex. In fact, the ease by which a user can find a compatible sexual partner may just be the reason "950,000 people access the service daily from nearly every country in the world, collectively transmitting some seven million messages and two million photos daily" (Crooks, 2013, para. 2). Among one interview group, the facilitation of sexual encounters was "the single most mentioned primary use of a SNS among respondents and a key use of all SNSs among gay men" (Gudelunas, 2012). However, one cannot limit its uses to those most apparent.

Users cite a variety of uses for geolocative apps. One student in the gay village of West Hollywood describes how useful it was when he moved to the neighborhood, that he "learned from other men on Grindr when the best time to visit the local library is, where the public pool is, and what bars and restaurants to try, information that [he] might once have gotten from a published guide or periodical" (Crooks, 2013, para. 18). Additionally, Grindr can be used for "making friends," "learning about a new city" while traveling, and interestingly enough, "to reach sexual minority populations with public health messages pertaining to HIV and AIDS prevention and awareness" (Crooks, 2013, para. 11; Gudelunas, 2012, p. 351). And yet, if one were to ask the popular media how Grindr is used, the New York Times and Huffington Post seem to dwell on negative anecdotes of using the apps, considering them "emblematic of gay male promiscuity" (Crooks, 2013, para. 5) Vanity Fair has even drawn an extreme comparison to gay bars, calling Grindr "the scariest gay bar on earth that is all over the earth" (Crooks, 2013, para. 5). Comparisons like these come from the fact that Grindr enables a hookup culture free from many of the securities provided by meeting in person.

Users often strike up conversation and just as quickly offer to meet at private locations like one's home. Any wise internet user knows to take caution in trusting that an online personality is genuine and safe. Media reports such as that from Vanity Fair stem from cited examples of murders that have occurred by men who met on Grindr, such as the murder of an elderly Michigan man (Tharrett, 2013) or the 19-year-old who murdered and robbed his date (King, 2010). However, these draw no more significant a comparison to incidents outside of the gay community on dating and meetup sites like OKCupid or Craigslist. Additionally, bars of all kinds have led to their own cases of violence and assault. It is possible that in-person meetings can provide a false sense of security in the person they meet. While it can be heavily debated how "scary" Grindr is, the comparison between the app and the traditional gay bar is apt.

Grindr and similar apps have begun to completely reshape the way the gay community socializes. It is one of the most apparent reasons that "[b]etween 2005 and 2011, the number of gay and lesbian bars and clubs in gay travel-guide publisher Damron's database decreased by 12.5 percent, from 1,605 to 1,405" (Crooks, 2013, para. 21). A poster found in a predominantly gay neighborhood of New York City puts it more bluntly, "MORE GRINDR=FEWER GAY BARS" (Weinstein, n.d.). While some critics note that apps are "unraveling the entire infrastructure of gay life that once brought people, however uncomfortably at times, together" they also reassure that it "is not the end of gay culture as such; just the end of what we knew as gay culture, and its isolation from the mainstream" (Sullivan, n.d.).

Like many of the other gay networking sites, Grindr provides an exclusive space for those whom "being 'out' and 'publicly gay' is not always an option" (Gudelunas, 2012, p. 351). Whereas many men may be apprehensive to out themselves on larger social networking sites like Facebook, apps like Grindr remove a fear of homophobia by creating a space where every user is assumed to exhibit a same-sex attraction. Where Facebook is considered "perhaps...the most public social space we have" (Tudor, 2012, p. 46) given its expansive and pan-demographic user base, Grindr enables an

atmosphere where gay men can feel more comfortable with self-expression. Many gay Facebook users who do not express their sexuality to their co-workers or family choose to either not out themselves on Facebook or restrict their Facebook profiles from their families. Gudelunas (2012) interviewed users who describe that on public sites like Facebook, they just “play it safe and keep things professional...It’s not that I’m ashamed, I just think it’s just my business not everyone on the Internet’s business”. Another user who lies to his family that he is not on Facebook, says “I don’t want to not actually be there. It’s weird, I don’t think I’m lying, I’m just choosing to be discreet” (Gudelunas, 2012). Many gay men face this dichotomy between networking sites and see “Facebook as something you join for others and gay social networking sites as something that you join for personal gratifications” (Gudelunas, 2012, p. 356). Borrowing from a common gay pride chant, one user describes that Grindr “lets its users be here and be queer, but it does not require that anyone get used to it” (Crooks, 2013, para. 22). The additional social pressure exerted on gay men on Facebook results in either a more difficult experience befriending potential dating partners or a more strained experience among gay and non-gay friends, pushing gay men to become more reliant on alternative social networks than their straight counterparts.

Though Grindr proves to be popular in cities as an alternative to gay bars, its importance is much more pronounced in areas that lack other media through which gay men can communicate.

According to the Grindr fact sheet, users have accessed Grindr from countries like Iran and Yemen, where gay men can face serious criminal penalties for publicly identifying themselves as gay. Even in the US, users find Grindr to be important in less friendly regions. One App Store reviewer claims that Grindr is the “only gay dating app that is utilized in northern Michigan” (“Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys,” n.d.). Despite the fact that he finds the app to be “buggy” he acknowledges that it is “the only way” gay men can “meet other guys in a not-so-gay-friendly environment” (“Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys,” n.d.).



The inability of gay men to accurately express their sexuality on public sites parallels the struggle that led to the creation of gay villages in decades past. The establishment of gay villages was once a key in the movement toward civil rights for the gay community, and many of those rights have since been achieved. However, the villages were also a much more deliberate social tool whose purpose has not been outgrown. The creation of exclusive physical spaces was “an assertion of identity politics, as an alternative social organization set in contrast to the prevailing hegemony of the family and the rejection of sex in the culture at large” (Crooks, 2013, para. 20).

Thus, Grindr is a technology deliberately designed in the wake of the gay social technologies preceding it. Its success stems from the similarities to physical gay spaces, from the ability to flag one’s interests as with the handkerchief code, from the ability to find others like oneself. Logging on to Grindr to find a list of a hundred other profiles nearby provides the same validation that gay men have sought in their own communities for decades. Seeing others with whom one can connect in at least some way is reassuring to those just beginning to accept their sexuality. Unlike other social technologies, the concept of Grindr was developed long before a non-homosexual alternative had existed. This was not by coincidence; the essence of Grindr is its unique parallels to serve these needs that the gay community has historically desired.

Regardless of the social progress made toward the gay rights movement in recent history, there will always be an apparent division between the gay community and the outside social community. The fact that most social situations assume men and women to be straight and to desire only the most commonly conventional types of relationships means that gay social politics will continue to be fundamentally different from the greater social landscape. And as such, gay men will continue to desire private social spaces, whether physical or virtual. Gay urban landscapes have historically emphasized a privatized method of communication, be them “phone sex lines, classified ads, and Internet chat rooms,” but social networking apps like Grindr replace them “with a pronounced emphasis on space” (Crooks, 2013, para. 20). But if simple fundamental differences in relationships

is enough to prevent the gay community from becoming socially congruent to the larger social landscape, it is only logical that the non-homogeneity of the gay community would cause a similar rift in the gay social structure. And it does.

## **A Complicated Identity**

To say that all gay men are the same would be just as naïve as to generalize any grouping of people. While united by a common interest--a sexual attraction to other men--gay men vary wildly in terms of identity, personality, and interest. Along with the divergent history of communication among gay men came a more open dialogue of sexual interests. It is none too surprising; the men who were willing to overcome the social taboos to discuss their sexual orientation were likewise more willing to discuss a more specified personal sexual interest as well. Additionally, the social constructions surrounding a gender binary can be confusing to some, as many gay men and women can relate to traits both classically masculine and feminine. The role of masculinity often creates a philosophical debate within homosexuality and its own social constructions. Each gay man “must contend with a resilient social narrative of feminization that continues to shape his social, sexual, and political life” (Hennen, 2008, p. 8). Given the creation of a mainstream gay culture, along with it came the “carefully patrolled permissions of the homosocial” (Hennen, 2008, p. 8). That is, the physical and virtual clustering of gay men has created its own social etiquette that is becoming more apparent with an increase in social networking sites.

Author Peter Hennen (2008) explored the association between effeminacy and identity within the gay community. He explored three key factions of the gay community, the Radical Faeries, the bears, and the leathermen, all of which reside on the fringe of the larger gay community. Faeries, as described in the previous section, are a group of radical gay men who eschew conventional power and politics and convene in wooded communes. They confront the social expectations of gay effeminacy with highly effeminate parody and drag, adorning themselves in dresses and costume jewelry, frolicking in the forest in an unstructured carefree lifestyle. Bears, on the other hand, confront gendered constructions by bridging the gap between gay stereotypes and conventional heteronormative masculinity. They are a culture who values typical notions of masculinity with an appearance often characterized by jeans, t-shirts, flannel, and beards with a rugged attitude. They

rebel from the conventional gay social structure by developing an inclusive atmosphere, accepting and celebrating the heavysets and the hairy men rejected by gay figureheads and magazine models of decades past. They have been described as being “just like regular guys—only they’re gay,” which creates further controversy in the rebellion from gendered norms, but describes the perception of the bear subculture nonetheless (Hennen, 2008, p. 9). In further contrast, the gay leather community outright rejects the ideas of effeminacy by promoting exaggerated details of hypermasculinity: those of leather, aggression, dominance, and assertion. While these three groups are only among many various stratified identities in the gay community and masculinity is only one of many dividing factors, these groups provide an interesting insight into how social subcultures are created within a community, especially in the pre-internet era. These groups are also fascinating in their social structures, given that they all exist for a nonconformist purpose and yet promote a great deal of chauvinism and internal conformity.

The establishment of social networking sites enabled a wealth of opportunity for men of certain types and interests to unite. With the increase in social networks available on the internet came an increase in specificity of interests offered by each site. Within a short time, sites catering to groups like the bears and leathermen, and even for the less technology-dependent faeries, appeared. Not long after the creation of Grindr followed a number of similar geolocate applications including Scruff, Growlr, Mister, and Recon that provided services similar to Grindr, but for specific groups and sexual subcultures of the gay community. The uses of these sites provide an interesting perspective on the ways these subcultures, along with the greater gay community, view personal identities.

One of the apparent benefits of the breadth of available social networking apps is to sort men by the physique one finds attractive. This may explain why so many of these subculture-specific apps use terminology that refers to certain body types. According to an ongoing census of cliques in the gay community, two-thirds of respondents identify with a particular subcultural identity. These identities are varied and range from broad, including twinks (skinny, little body hair, with a generally

strong attachment to mainstream gay culture), bears (discussed above), and cubs (smaller, younger versions of bears), to narrower groups like muscle cub (hairy, fit, muscular), chaser (thin, less hairy, often attracted to someone outside of their own identity), and gainer (heavy and seeking to gain more weight) (Noodles and Beef, n.d.). Some of these identities have existed for many years. For example, the bear community traces its ambiguous origins to the late 1970s and 1980s during a rebellion from the publicly projected imagery of gay men as seen in “home gym commercials” and “fashion advertisements” that “created a common aesthetic of what the male body *should* look like” (Charlesworth, 2012). From the bear community developed many resulting terms, like the cub, the otter (a skinny, but still hairy man), the chaser, and the antithetical term twink. However, social sites seem to be increasing and propagating the specificity of these identifiers. By default, the app Growlr allows users to identify themselves by the options: Bear, Cub, Muscle Bear, Chaser, Chub, Polar Bear, Otter, Daddy, Silver Daddy, Sugar Daddy, Leather, Sir, Boy, HIV+, and Trucker. It also allows users to specify which of the above categories they are looking for in other people (“GROWLr,” n.d.). In a similar fashion, Grindr was proud to introduce subcultural identities to its app in 2013, encouraging users that, “whether you’re a Bear, Clean-Cut, Daddy, Discreet, Geek, Jock, Leather, Otter, Poz, Rugged, Trans or Twink, there’s a Tribe for you.” Grindr also claims that these identity options are desired by its users, stating that filtering options “have been a long-time request from our users, so we’ve added multiple filter fields. On Grindr you now have the option to filter by ethnicity, body type, looking for, Grindr Tribes, age, height, and dating status” (Simkhai, 2013). The use of the term “tribes” to describe these identifiers implies what may be a significant problem with these terms in the first place.

Any social website that asks users to create a profile invites the users to describe themselves as succinctly as possible. That is the nature of a social profile—to create a digital representation of oneself that best reflects the user’s personality. Such specificity calls for an exaggerated reliance on gay subcultural terms. One could argue that the handkerchief code of the past similarly pigeonholed

men into simplified categories, but the nature of online profiles explicitly written for all to see removes interpretive ambiguity enabled by such visual semiotics. Brekhus (2003) describes the personality type of a “gay lifestyler” who “carve[s] out identity-specific spaces in ‘gay ghettos’” such as gay-specific apps like Grindr (p. 46). The gay lifestyler described by Brekhus is one for whom his homosexual identity dominates his self-image. Brekhus uses the term identity density to describe a high dependence on a particular identity. Smartphone apps and social media profiles do indeed fulfill their goal of allowing a user to describe himself more deliberately as these terms become more widely recognized. However, the increasing amount of time users spend on these sites where their identities are reduced to a handful of words, the more these users begin to attach themselves to these identities. Social networking sites are not only metaphorically condensing personalities into a decipherable profile; they are creating personalities as flat as the phones that run the apps. Reliance on certain descriptors has been cause for a more complex set of uses for these apps, and have unleashed a new degree of identity politics.

It may be unclear whether the added degree of identity specificity actually improves the ability to make intended connections with other people, but it certainly adds a degree of identity confusion as well. I invited a group of gay men to look at the results of the gay cliques census (Noodles and Beef, n.d.) and interpret its findings. One feature of the census is the ability to input one’s own biometric statistics and find what identity best matches their body type. One respondent replied “I’m a pup, I don’t even understand,” which leads me to believe that while certain subsets of the population created these terms to better describe themselves, the terms are imposed on new populations and create more confusion than they offer clarity. Reviews of Grindr on the iTunes App Store imply a degree of exclusion based on body type. One such review laments that “if you’re not buff and have a torso shot forget it” (“Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys,” n.d.).

Meanwhile, a website dedicated to the public shaming of the more arrogant and exclusionary Grindr users indicates that while many users subscribe to the various “tribes” of the app, surprisingly

few exclude others by using these terms. However, the simple use of the word “tribe” holds connotations that each group is its own subsociety, implying that tribes are mutually exclusive both for identity purposes and communication purposes. While some describe that they “dig cute twink,” many more seem to care more about the less-jargoned factors, stating that they want “masc[uline] guys only,” or that they want “no fems and no queens.” Many of the users filter explicitly by age, weight, or race than by relying on the app lingo (“Douchebags of Grindr,” n.d.). This site exists as a community policing mechanism, indicating that a broader section of the user base does not filter so superficially. These arrogant and shallow types have always been a part of the community; apps like Grindr did not create them. However, until such social networking profiles enabled them to express their personalities so explicitly, their qualities were latent. They would still exclude the same people and act in the same manner, but people would not notice without getting to know them. In a sense, social profiles provide cautionary flags in both directions; some of these men state with whom they want to communicate, and others can find personality flaws in other users before talking to them. This social dynamic was much less prevalent before the introduction of online profiles.

Despite the Grindr criticisms not being as terminology-dependent as expected, these social apps are subject to interpretive flexibility, much more so than uses and gratifications theory alone can explain. Grindr, Scruff, and Growlr all utilize the same technology, and their stated purposes dictate which types of users they seek. However, these apps have experienced various diasporas due to changes in social trends. Scruff markets itself as an app for bears, jocks, and “just guys,” but lost many of its bear user base when Growlr, which markets itself exclusively to bears and their admirers, was released (“SCRUFF,” n.d.). Consequently, when many Grindr users began to complain about the arrogance and attitude found on the app, they migrated to new apps like Jack’d or repurposed ones like Scruff (“Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys,” n.d.).

Sites tailored to specific groups also tend to be successful because they naturally create a devoted following due to the tighter-knit relationships they enable. Smaller groups allow users to create a

social hierarchy specifically within the context of the group. Within these smaller subgroups users can stand out from one another much more easily than they can within larger social networks and therefore they have more social mobility. Gudelunas (2012) describes the phenomenon of “mycasting,” where “gay men in certain urban contexts have used sites like bigmuscle.com to become an online local celebrity even if in off-line contexts they are not known as gay much less a gay celebrity” (p. 351). While these subgroups usually exist independently of the social networking tools, the social networks allow for a means by which highly mobile social hierarchies can form.

The nature of these apps to be “for” certain people is an interesting fact about social technologies. From a technology standpoint, there is nothing about Growlr that makes it “for bears” and nothing that differentiates it from any other social app. The essence of these apps comes from their social constructions, the ways their users interpret and interact with them. Similarly, gay bars can have their own “types” and specialties, but are still social spaces that serve alcoholic beverages. However, just like the people within them, new social sites and apps create an explicit social dynamic that allows people to legitimize their uses and purposes, even at the expense of excluding others unlike before.



## **Conclusion**

Ultimately the effects of modern social networking sites are evident in the current state of the gay social sphere. Placing websites and apps like Grindr in the historical context of the community reveals that the app exists in the wake of the networks that preceded them. The need for geographical gay villages waned, but the desire for that sense of proximity to other gay men never disappeared. Grindr, and all of the similar apps that followed, would not be the successes that they are today without the precedent of physical gay spaces. The community formed around networks of the past and naturally tends not to stray far from its cultural roots, even as it adapts to evolving technology. Had the plethora of gay bars in large cities not developed their own niche clientele, the similar phenomenon of subcommunity-specific apps and sites would not have occurred. Had sexuality not been a taboo topic in public, the discussion of specific interests would not have been confined to exclusively gay contexts, eventually leading to the explicit discourse of sexual “types.” Without such a concept, Grindr tribes would not have become such a standard feature of the app and users would not likely be so candid in their descriptions.

However, this new, explicit propensity of social media communications demonstrates how the community has changed since the appearance of such technology. The delineation of social spaces is nothing new to the community, but the limitations are much clearer now than they ever were. A bar might have become the social hub of the bear community, but rarely would there be a sign on the door saying “for bears” like one might find on the App Store page for Growlr. Men have always had their preferred types, but one would not walk around wearing a shirt that says “looking for masc guys only” like one would find on a Grindr headline. If this were not fundamentally different from offline social networks, methods of community policing would not be present as they are. Men share screenshots of profiles on other social networks and social

network meta-blogs designed specifically for purposes of public shaming the types of people they can find on modern apps.

For the reasons discussed above, modern social networking techniques mean more to the gay community than simply being a tool to use and be used by its members. If modern gay social networking apps were merely a tool, they should not be distinct from apps designed for heterosexual audiences. If only the technological capabilities of these apps were considered, then these dating apps would appear to be the same as friendship networks. Given that Grindr, Growlr, Scruff, and similar apps have created marked social spaces with their own types of people, their own social expectations, and a new brand of dating by convenience, these apps are more than simple tools and deserve more than a simple analysis. Therefore such apps have their own media ecologies, wherein they are an interactive part of the community within which they exist.

## Bibliography

- Bailey, C. M. (2010). Match.com and Chadwick Martin Bailey 2009-2010 Studies: Recent Trends: Online Dating. Match.com. Retrieved from [http://cp.match.com/cppp/media/CMB\\_Study.pdf](http://cp.match.com/cppp/media/CMB_Study.pdf)
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
- Brekhus, W. (2003). *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, G., Maycock, B., & Burns, S. (2005). Your picture is your bait: Use and meaning of cyberspace among gay men. *Journal of Sex Research*, 42(1), 63–73. doi:10.1080/00224490509552258
- Charlesworth, A. (2012). *As Bears--As Brothers*. Providence, Rhode Island: Rhode Island School of Design.
- Crooks, R. N. (2013). The Rainbow Flag and the Green Carnation: Grindr in The Gay Village. *First Monday*, 18(11). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4958>
- Curry, R. (2012). Relationship Between Usage and Age: How LGBT Individuals Use Online Social Networking Applications For Personal Relationships. *Annual Research Symposium of the College of Communication and Information*. Retrieved from <http://trace.tennessee.edu/ccisymposium/2012/session4/3>
- Douchebags of Grindr. (n.d.). *Douchebags of Grindr*. Retrieved April 2, 2014, from <http://www.douchebagsofgrindr.com/>

- Dunne, Á., Lawlor, M.-A., & Rowley, J. (2010). Young people's use of online social networking sites – a uses and gratifications perspective. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 4(1), 46–58. doi:10.1108/17505931011033551
- Grindr - Gay, same sex, bi, social network to chat and meet guys. (n.d.). *App Store*. Retrieved March 19, 2014, from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/grindr-gay-same-sex-bi-social/id308956623?mt=8>
- GROWLr: Gay Bear Social Network. (n.d.). *App Store*. Retrieved April 1, 2014, from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/growlr-gay-bear-social-network/id393402212?mt=8>
- Gudelunas, D. (2012). There's an App for that: The Uses and Gratifications of Online Social Networks for Gay Men. *Sexuality & Culture*, 16(4), 347–365. doi:10.1007/s12119-012-9127-4
- Hennen, P. (2008). *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine*. University of Chicago Press.
- Higgs, D. (1999). *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*. Psychology Press.
- Ito. (2009). *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. MIT Press.
- King, J. (2010, April 28). iPhone's Gay Social Networking App Leads to Murder of Phoenix Man, Police Claim. *Valley Fever*. Retrieved April 17, 2014, from [http://blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com/valleyfever/2010/04/iphones\\_gay\\_cruising\\_app\\_leads.php](http://blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com/valleyfever/2010/04/iphones_gay_cruising_app_leads.php)
- Licata, S. J. (1981). The Homosexual Rights Movement in the United States. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 6(1-2), 161–189. doi:10.1300/J082v06n01\_14

- Noodles and Beef. (n.d.). Gay Cliques Census Results — Presented by. *Noodles and Beef*. Retrieved March 31, 2014, from <http://www.studiomoh.com/fun/census/results.php>
- O’Shea, W. (2003, June 3). Six Degrees of Sexual Frustration. Retrieved February 2, 2014, from <http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-06-03/news/six-degrees-of-sexual-frustration/>
- Poindexter, C. C. (1997). Sociopolitical Antecedents to Stonewall: Analysis of the Origins of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States. *Social Work*, 42(6), 607–615.  
doi:10.1093/sw/42.6.607
- Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3(1), 3–37.
- SCRUFF: Gay app for chat, dating, and social networking with guys worldwide. (n.d.). *App Store*. Retrieved April 2, 2014, from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/scruff-gay-guys-worldwide/id380015247?mt=8>
- Simkhai, J. (2013, October 1). The new Grindr is here. A word from Grindr CEO and Founder Joel Simkhai. *Grindr*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://grindr.com/blog/the-new-grindr-is-here.-a-word-from-grindr-ceo-and-found-joel-simkhai>
- Sullivan, A. (n.d.). Why Are Gay Bars Shrinking? *The Dish*. Retrieved from <http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2012/06/27/why-are-gay-bars-shrinking/>
- Tharrett, M. (2013, December 21). Elderly Michigan Man Meets His Murderers On Grindr. *Queerty*. Retrieved April 17, 2014, from <http://www.queerty.com/elderly-michigan-man-meets-his-murderers-on-grindr-20131221/>
- Tudor, M. (2012). Cyberqueer Techno-Practices. *The Department of Journalism, Media, and Communication, Stockholm University*, (Spring 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:532984/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Weinstein, S. (n.d.). Where is Everybody? *The Village Voice*. Retrieved from

<http://digitalissue.villagevoice.com/article/Where+Is+Everybody%3F/1095259/116093/article.html>

Winner, L. (1983). Technologies as Forms of Life. In R. S. Cohen & M. W. Wartofsky (Eds.),

*Epistemology, Methodology, and the Social Sciences* (pp. 249–263). Springer

Netherlands. Retrieved from [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-1458-](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-1458-7_10)

[7\\_10](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-1458-7_10)