Queer Men and Smartphone Dating Applications:
Navigating Partner Markets and Managing Stigma

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This study explores the role of geosocial dating applications in the lives of gay and bisexual men. As a means of managing stigma, virtual mediums have always been popular in the LGBTQ+ community. To better understand how this group is engaging with this technology, we conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with gay and bisexual men living in a mid-sized city in the southern U.S. We conceive of dating apps as "partner markets" and build on Erving Goffman's analytic insights on stigma, presentation of self, and the interaction order. We find that these apps create unique benefits and challenges for users. While men can use them to interact discreetly, the ability to withhold or mask personal detail reduces trust and impairs relationship formation. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings to deepen our understanding of how virtual mediums are reshaping the everyday lives of a stigmatized minority.

Introduction

The desire for love and companionship is universal. Civil society is held together by our fundamental need to connect; a need vividly illustrated in the coupling process. In Obergefell v. Hodges (2015, p. 14), Justice Anthony Kennedy argued that "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." Indeed, Kennedy was laying out the legal rationale for establishing a constitutional right to marriage regardless of sexual orientation. For LGBTQ+ families, individuals, and advocates, a pinnacle had been reached. The ruling granted them "equal dignity in the eyes of the law" (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015, p. 28) and provided long-awaited legitimation.

The landmark case did not, however, eliminate entrenched anti-gay biases and institutional discrimination across U.S. society. Conservative political and religious leaders continue to call into question the legitimacy of non-heterosexual relationships (Blinder & Lewin, 2015; Lang, 2017; Meyer, 2017). In state and local municipalities, members of LGBTQ+ communities face ongoing fights for equal access to jobs, housing, and public services (Elliott, 2015; Socarides, 2016), and persistent negative stereotyping of sexual minorities continues to take a toll on their mental health (Berghe, Vanden, Dewaele, Cox, & Vinck, 2010). These social

stressors can have severe consequences for individuals. Researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that LGBTQ+ youth were three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have seriously contemplated suicide and five times more likely to have attempted it (Kann et al., 2016). Gay and bisexual men of all ages are at greater risk than the general population for major depression, bipolar disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Despite victories in the fight for legal affirmation of non-heterosexual relationships, the struggle for full social, economic, and political equality continues. In these paradoxical times, how do members of LGBTQ+ communities navigate the contemporary dating scene in their pursuit of romance and companionship?

Technological advances in communication have offered some solutions for sexual minorities when pursuing romantic relationships in this unsafe reality. Today over twenty percent of heterosexual couples and nearly three-quarters of non-heterosexual couples first meet online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). More recently, mobile applications that incorporate Global Positioning System (GPS) technology have transformed the virtual dating scene, making it even easier for users to connect. Because of smartphones' ubiquity, geosocial dating applications (apps) are now a widely-used resource for gay and bisexual men (Goedel & Duncan, 2015; McKie, Milhausen, & Lachowsky, 2017). Two of the most popular apps, Grindr and Jack'd, have millions of gay and

bisexual male users worldwide (Bonos, 2016; Statistica, 2016). With these smartphone dating apps, users can connect and interact with each other in previously inconceivable ways. Considering the rapid pace at which this technology is developing and becoming increasingly ubiquitous, it is worth exploring how these technological advances shape the dating experiences of sexual minorities.

Our study seeks to accomplish this by examining how gay and bisexual men use geosocial dating apps to manage social stigma and create a viable, if imperfect, dating market for themselves. In what follows, we begin by briefly reviewing the literature on online dating and dating app usage. We then introduce our theoretical framework, in which we conceive dating apps as partner markets and incorporate Erving Goffman's (1959; 1963; 1983) insights on stigma, presentation of self, and the interaction order. Next, we outline our methods and present our analysis.

We find that geosocial dating apps offer gay and bisexual men a mix of benefits and challenges. They can interact with one another while retaining control over the release of potentially stigmatizing information. However, the ability to withhold or mask personal details about themselves also creates interactional challenges and impediments to building trust and forming meaningful relationships. We find that the sexualization of these virtual spaces makes it especially difficult for men to see these apps as resources for long-term relationship formation. Despite these perceived limits, some participants ultimately formed satisfying long-term relationships with other men they met through a dating app.

Additionally, we find that these apps can offer a safe space away from a heterosexist society for sexual minority men, particularly younger men, to explore and develop their sexual identity. While this could also be true of LGBTQ+ friendly spaces such as gay bars and clubs, dating apps offer unique ease of access for men who are too young to access those spaces. Our data, thus, paints a nuanced and somewhat contradictory picture of the impact of geosocial dating apps on the romantic lives of gay and bisexual men. Dating apps are empowering in some ways and operate as inhibitors to relationship development in others. We conclude by discussing our findings' practical and theoretical implications for deepening our understanding of the impact virtual mediums have on the everyday interpersonal interactions of a (still) stigmatized minority.

Literature Review

Online Dating

Social norms around dating and marriage have changed dramatically over the past century (Coontz, 2005). The internet has played a particularly significant role in reshaping the couple formation process (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Global connectivity has broadened the realm of possibilities beyond the confines of traditional, tight-knit social networks. The internet allows individuals to meet prospective partners who cross social, religious, racial, and geographic boundaries (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Research has found that all other means of meeting potential partners, including families, churches, and neighborhoods, have fallen into decline as internet dating has risen in popularity (Rosenfeld & 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 World Wide Web in their search for a significant other (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Hardey, 2008; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Tong, Hancock, & Slatcher, 2016). Internet dating once carried the stigma of being the last resort for desperate people who could not find dates independently. Being a new phenomenon, internet dating sites were perceived as impersonal and only fit for socially or physically undesirable individuals. However, these stereotypes have been rendered moot by the now near-ubiquity of internet-mediated dating experiences (Lawson & Leck, 2006; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

People turn to online avenues in their search for romantic partners for various reasons. For some, communicating with others on the internet offers an escape from loneliness and depression, while for others, the internet provides a buffer against the sting of in-person rejection (Droge & Voirol, 2011; Lawson & Leck, 2006). At the very least, the internet has granted people from various backgrounds and life circumstances the resources to reach out and interact with others who would have been previously unavailable to them.

Geosocial Dating Apps

More recently, smartphones have further transformed daily life for those who can afford this technology, 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. Geosocial dating apps, such as Tinder and Grindr, have mobilized

the dating process, layering virtual spaces on top of geographical space (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott, 2014; Duguay, 2017). Although specific interfaces vary, these apps, by definition, use location services to determine the approximate distance of users from one another. One of the most popular apps among gay and bisexual men, Grindr, displays individuals within proximity to each other on a screen packed with several profile pictures (Goedel & Duncan, 2015; Jaspal, 2017). Depending on local users' density, distances can range from just a few feet to several miles.

Where internet dating broke down geographical barriers, geosocial dating applications have further streamlined "time, ease, and proximity" (Quiroz, 2013, p. 184). These technological advances have made the pool of potential romantic and sexual partners even broader and more accessible (Blackwell et al., 2014; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016; Jaspal, 2017; Licoppe, Riviere, & Morel, 2016; McKie et al., 2017; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016).

Dating apps have created a new social reality for everyone, but they have been especially transformative for gay and bisexual men who have historically held very little control over their dating and sex lives (Connell, 1992; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Grove, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermeister, 2014; Lever, Grov, Royce, & Gillespie, 2008). Now, finding dates or sexual encounters can be as easy as opening an app to see who is close by (Blackwell et al., 2014; Licoppe, Riviere, & Morel, 2016; McKie et al., 2017; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016). These apps also give gay and bisexual men complete control when constructing their identity and relaying their desires to others as they craft their profiles (Jaspal, 2017). While empowering in some ways, this ability also allows for a higher degree of inauthentic self-presentation and deception, which can impede relationship development and frustrate users (Jaspal, 2017; see also Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011, for an analysis of similar concerns with online dating).

Since dating apps are a relatively new phenomenon, the literature on their use is fairly sparse. For instance, no study has shown how Goffman's dramaturgical frameworks help explain the appeal of the creative and deceptive functionalities of these apps for sexual minority men who seek to protect themselves from stigma while pursuing relationships. Similarly, little research has examined the interactive processes by which men use this technology to explore and develop their sexual identities. The next section outlines the theoretical framework we use to understand these processes.

Theoretical Framework

This study conceives of geosocial dating apps as dating or partner markets (Schmitz, 2014). Max Weber (as cited in Schmitz, 2014, p. 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." The concept of a "partner market" dispersed throughout the social happenings of everyday life is not new to sociological inquiry (Droge & 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 and individuals are displayed on a screen as commodities complete with pictures and descriptions.

In these virtual venues, the self becomes a commodity that must be carefully structured in its presentation to outperform the competition. The unique aspect of virtual dating markets is that all users can be thought of simultaneously as competition and potential partners. Consequently, physical attractiveness standards often become homogenized for both men and women and those who identify as straight or as members of the LGBTQ community. For gay and bisexual men, the challenge is to demonstrate adherence to hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). While the definition of masculinity differs across cultures, hegemonic masculinity in this context refers to an idealized image that emphasizes strength, toughness, and sexual prowess, coupled with adherence to White-racialized and westernized standards of physical attractiveness. Individuals who do not measure up to these standards often feel rejected and may seek out specialty venues (or markets) that value their body type, such as clubs and bars specifically for "bears[1]" (Brubaker et al., 2016; Jaspal, 2017; McKie et al., 2017).

The fierce competition found in the dating markets of geosocial dating apps can create an incentive for deceptive presentations (Droge & Voirol, 2011; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Schmitz, 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, research has found that individuals who

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[1]Bear culture in the LGBTQ+ community typically values larger, hairier bodies and a more rugged style (Manley, Levitt, & Mosher, 2007).

exhibit more concern for how others perceive them tend to be less honest in their self-presentations and create idealized personas of themselves (Gibbs et al., 2006). Schmitz (2014, p. 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 on the expectations of what other users desire "so as not to suffer any competitive disadvantage." In the end, however, the desire to eventually meet someone in-person gives individuals motivation to temper the amount of embellishment and deception in their presentations (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011; Hardey, 2002).

This study also draws on the interactional perspectives of Erving Goffman. We use his theories concerning the interaction order (Goffman, 1983), presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), and stigma (Goffman, 1963) to frame our analysis and discussion of the data. Given the longstanding marginalization of members of the LBGT community, we treat stigma as a background assumption in our study. Stigma's impact on individual interactions directly affects the overall experiences of dating app users, influencing the venues they might choose for meeting potential partners. Thus, the assumption of stigma and its continuous impact on these men's dating experiences run throughout our analysis.

Virtual spaces challenge traditional sociological perspectives on interpersonal interactions because these theories were developed to explain face-to-face interactions (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). Goffman's (1983) classic conceptualization of "the interaction order," for instance, emphasizes the importance of identifying people categorically and individually. If we have met someone previously, our interactions with them will be shaped partly by what we already know about them – what Goffman referred to as individual identifiers. However, when we are meeting someone for the first time, we do not have access to those individual biographies. To avoid interactional awkwardness, we will often draw instead on categoric identifiers, or what we think we know about people who share their social categories (e.g., women/men, teenagers/the elderly). In face-to-face interaction, it is relatively easy to identify people individually and categorically and to use that information to carry on meaningful conversations. In the virtual world, where access to these same identifiers is much more constrained, how do dating app users navigate these interactional challenges? This is one of the questions our study seeks to answer.

Goffman (1959) also argued that particular elements of face-to-face interaction tend to create order. In his work on the presentation of self, for instance, he argued that when individuals are in social interactions, their self-presentations – or performances – must be credible to one another. 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. Once one's identity claim has been discredited, it can be virtually impossible for an interaction to proceed smoothly. In virtual spaces, one can present oneself in almost limitless ways without concern for being found out. For members of stigmatized groups, including gay and bisexual men, the potential to "be" whoever one wants to be is appealing; however, as we will show, this seemingly boundless freedom to craft imaginative (and deceptive), dating profiles can also create challenges for developing authentic and trusting relationships. By combining the interactional theories of Goffman (1959; 1963; 1983) with the concept of partner markets (Schmitz, 2014), we are better able to understand how dating apps can be experienced as both a liberating resource for sexual minority men and another tool of oppression that can reproduce stigma even in a purportedly safe environment.

Methods and Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered from fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with gay and bisexual men. Since transgender men also use dating apps such as Grindr, transgender men that identified as gay or bisexual were eligible for inclusion in the study. In the final sample, one participant identified as a queer, transgender person. Interviews were conducted in a mid-sized city in the south-central region of the U.S. The area is considered part of the "Bible Belt" and has a reputation for being socially, politically, and religiously conservative. A Pew Research Center (2012) report found that people living in this region expressed the greatest opposition to marriage equality compared to all other regions, with the majority of south-central respondents (56%) opposing it and just over a third (35%) favoring it. This reflects a 14-point shift in attitudes since 2003 when only 21% of respondents supported marriage equality. Despite these changes, this region's longstanding reputation as being conservative has particular relevance for this study. It is expected to influence how gay and bisexual men experience issues related to dating and relationship formation (Blackwell et al., 2014).

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, interviews were arranged through a snowball sampling strategy. Additionally, all interviewees were given a consent form to read that advised them of their rights as participants and any benefits or risks involved. To avoid collecting participants' names on paper, verbal rather than written consent was given by each participant. Individuals from the first author's personal networks served as the initial participants. They were then asked to pass along the interviewer's contact information to other individuals who might be willing to participate.

It should be noted that while this is a useful strategy for studying marginalized populations, it may have limited the diversity of the final sample in terms of race[2], age, and background. Since the snowball sample was started with an openly gay man's contacts, this likely resulted in the over-representation of men who were also open about their sexual identity. Additionally, beginning with participants familiar to the first author raises questions about the information these initial participants might be willing to disclose. While it can never be known for sure what these participants might have shared under different circumstances, these first interviews were some of the longest and most in-depth. In this case, familiarity seems to have positively affected participants' willingness to give frank and honest answers. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that their identities would remain confidential and that they should feel comfortable to speak freely. Throughout the interview process, the interviewer maintained a friendly but professional demeanor and asked open-ended questions that allowed participants to craft their own narratives and limited interviewer bias (Turner, 2010).

Furthermore, all questions and probes were phrased neutrally to avoid leading participants to particular responses (McNamara, 2009). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 49. Fourteen were White; one was Black. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to an hour. Most lasted 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim using NHC's Express Scribe software. All names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Data collection and analysis were guided by the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser

& Strauss, 1967). With this approach, constant movement back and forth between analysis and data collection, and coding and memo-ing are ongoing, iterative processes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Kleinman, 2007; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Transcripts were initially coded by the first author and then reviewed by the second author. Codes and themes that were not agreed on by both authors were discarded. Transcripts were recoded multiple times for themes and concepts that might inform the formulation of new inquiry lines at the next interview. Analyses and interview questions were modified as we learned more.

Findings and Analysis

Stigma Management

Goffman (1963) outlines three places stigmatized individuals may find themselves on any given day: (1) forbidden places where exposure means expulsion (churches for gay people), (2) civil places where acceptance is tacit (government services, public businesses), and (3) back places where everyone shares the same stigmatized identity and need not hide it (gay bars). Goffman argues that it is in these back places that "persons of the individual's kind stand exposed and find they need not try and conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it.... Here the individual will be able to be at ease among his fellows and also discover that acquaintances he thought were not of his own kind really are" (Goffman, 1963, p. 81-82). "Back places" are conceptually similar to what Goffman earlier referred to as "back stage" regions (1959), or private spaces where people do not feel compelled to manage impressions others have of them. However, while everyone has a backstage, only stigmatized individuals have back places.

Throughout history, gay and bisexual men have found respite from social stigma in back places such as bars and private clubs (Grove et al., 2014; Lever et al., 2008; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). These have traditionally been thought of as physical spaces where people bearing stigma are corporally present. Dating apps operate as a virtual back place where gay and bisexual men are free to explore issues related to their sexuality and make connections with similar 'others'

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[2]The racial homogeneity of participants is likely a result of the snowball sampling strategy that drew initially on the personal connections of the first author, a White man. We discuss this study limitation in our conclusion.

in relative safety. When asked about his initial impression of dating apps, Jason, a 23-year-old gay man, 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.

For Jason, dating apps gave him a private way to meet others like himself. Since bars were off-limits to him as a minor, the apps were beneficial in this regard. 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." As Goffman (1959, p. 112) explained, in back places, "The performer can relax. . . drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character."

Because most dating apps' platform design lets users control the flow of information, they can reveal whatever they feel comfortable revealing and conceal the rest. Kevin, a 28-year-old, openly gay man, believes dating apps have allowed him to connect with local men who are not as open about 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.

Kevin believes dating apps have allowed him to expand his dating pool by letting him interact with men who would otherwise be invisible to him – men who would avoid socializing in openly gay spaces such as bars or clubs for various reasons. For some of those men, dating apps give them a rare opportunity to interact socially without having to feign heterosexuality.

Other participants found the sheltered environment offered by dating apps helpful in 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, a 24-year-old gay man, before adding the caveat, "Or what you can over an app." Similarly, Shane, a 27-year-old gay man, 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, a 25-year-old, queer, transgender man, found communicating through online dating forums, including geosocial dating apps, to be good practice for future, in-person interactions. He said the apps helped him develop "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."

These stories demonstrate dating apps' appeal as back places where sexual minority men can explore their sexual identities and develop social skills for the dating world. Whether as a tool for escaping homophobic stigma in the local community or for managing personal shyness – or both – dating apps helped to alleviate the pressures and anxieties of being a sexual minority while pursuing romantic connections in a heterosexist society.

Presenting Masculine Selves and Reproduction of Stigma

Even though social stigma around homosexuality may lead individuals to seek out virtual meeting spaces, the effects of stigma are not left behind once one enters the back place of dating apps. Gay and bisexual men have long been stereotyped as effeminate and not adequately masculine (Connell, 1992; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The stigma of effeminacy and the expectations of masculinity are still very much present in gay enclaves. Here, even among other gay and bisexual men, individuals find that they must work to craft a sufficiently masculine self-presentation (Connell, 1992; Payne, 2007). After all, their performances are being judged by other men, and the risk of having this performance deemed to be insufficiently convincing is much higher.

Dakota described how dating apps helped him hone his (masculine) presentation of self. As he explained, "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 also noted in the interview that he has "become very hetero-presenting over the past few years." Not only does he work hard to project a conventionally masculine image of himself in his interactions on dating apps, he actively seeks out other men who he thinks present masculine selves as well. He made this preference 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 says, "Hiiii" (uses high-pitched voice). And I was like, "Oh! Oh no! You're like REAL gay, like real effeminate."

Participants' efforts to put forth a conventionally masculine image can reinforce the very norms that undergird homophobia and heterosexism. Coston and Kimmel (2012, p. 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." Dakota's comments are a vivid reminder of how hegemonic masculinity norms have been internalized and reproduced by many in the gay community.

Dating apps can be essential tools for stigma management for gay and bisexual men who, for whatever reason, are unable to be public about their sexuality. In these spaces, they experience a temporary reprieve from social pressures to give a convincing heterosexual performance. They may even discover that there are more people like them. As we see, however, protection from social stigma only goes so far. Many also soon discover that hegemonic masculinity norms are still in operation even in this supposed "safe" space.

Commoditization and Marketing Selves

While many of the men in this study saw dating apps as a positive alternative to meeting potential partners in public venues, that wasn't the case for everyone. Several participants found the process of sifting through endless profiles and marketing oneself to others to be cold and dehumanizing. By design, daters on these apps are commoditized, and the approach of choosing is correspondingly rationalistic and consumeristic. Consequently, first impressions are crucial.

The penalty for failing to project a desirable persona can be an 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.

Brice, a 29-year-old gay man currently in a relationship, described similar experiences. If "you send them one bad picture, they will stop talking, period. . . . If it's not what they like, they will stop talking." As these men's experiences demonstrate, interacting on dating apps can be akin to checking out a product's features. As more information is requested and received, undesirable features can lead to an immediate rejection as the consumer browses other options.

The perceived detachment of virtual spaces from physical reality contributes to the marketization of dating apps. The likelihood of being forced to interact with an individual in the future is quite low on virtual venues like dating apps (compared to public social settings). As such, it is of little consequence to ignore or outright reject the advances of another user. It's easy to see how profiles can be evaluated as competing products that consumers casually pass over if they don't 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." Alex similarly 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." Despite this, some individuals have been successful in making long-term connections. 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 dating apps' impersonal nature can invite individuals to dole out rejection with impunity,

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.[3].

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 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 (relatively) less consequential.

Strategic Deception

While some participants were put off by the consumerist culture created by dating apps, others were frustrated by the endless potential for deception. Goffman (1967) argues that people experience social reality through their interactions with others. Accordingly, 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 (Goffman, 1983, p. 4). These identifiers are given off by an individual's physical attributes and their presentation of self. Of course, Goffman had in mind physical, face-to-face interactions.

Geosocial dating apps "co-situate" virtual and physical spaces, complicating interactional norms (Blackwell et al., 2014). While users of dating apps may be in close physical proximity to one another, they can conceal their identity from each other on the app until they feel comfortable. The inability to use cues gleaned from face-to-face interactions to confirm an individual's identity and gauge their intentions has created a deficit of trust among the dating app users in our study. Kevin recounted an incident where he was misled by someone 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." For our participants, using fake or misleading pictures was not the only or even most troubling form

of deception. Kevin said it was common for people to misrepresent their personalities and/or intentions. As he explained, "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." Jeremy described being more dubious when interacting with other men on geosocial dating apps: "I was always very skeptical when I was on there. I was always super cautious." Alex placed the blame for this crisis of trust, 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."

People often conceal and alter facts about themselves during face-to-face interactions to ensure smooth exchanges and minimize awkwardness and offense (Goffman, 1983). The design of many dating apps such as Grindr offers users the opportunity to conceal and alter even more things about themselves. In traditional settings, the ability to disguise undesirable traits and exaggerate favorable ones is limited by natural constraints. However, virtual environments 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. Shane, a 27-year-old gay man, recounted an online and telephone relationship he had been involved in for some time with someone who 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 overseas." 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 had he known this person's real identity, Shane replied, "He wasn't my type, to be honest. He's not somebody I would've went for just based on looks. But personality-

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[3]"Swiping" is a feature of some apps in which users swipe their finger across the screen to move from one profile to another.

wise? Yeah." The ability to operate anonymously and explore romantic relationships without risking stigmatization is one of the primary benefits of dating apps. Still, it can also be a major obstacle for relationship development. Lacking the traditional indicators of identity and trustworthiness found in face-to-face interactions, users resort to other means, such as using their intuition, to gauge one another's authenticity and avoid risky situations. When communicating online, Kevin relied on his "gut" instinct for warning signs that someone 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 he was interested in to video chat with him. As he explained, "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 came off as threatening in their interactions.

Goffman's (1959; 1983) conceptualization of the presentation of self and the interaction order is still relevant for understanding and analyzing interactions on geosocial dating apps (Hardey, 2008). The absence of the identifiers Goffman considered necessary for smooth interaction leads app users to employ other means of verification and trust-building until or unless they meet in person. Because deception is easy on dating apps, until individuals can identify one another categorically and individually, a heavy dose of skepticism dominates communication between users.

Hook-Ups and Relationships

Participants were not at a loss for words when discussing the suitability of dating apps for relationship formation. Assessments were generally negative but often included qualifiers that noted the possibility of exceptions. Despite their skepticism, most participants were 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 provided through the layering of geographical and virtual space (Blackwell et al., 2014). The intersection of "time, ease, and proximity" (Quiroz, 2013, p. 184) seems to have a sexualizing effect on most dating apps' culture. 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 James was asked 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 and looking to date seriously due to the sexualization of most dating apps: "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 reaction may seem extreme, 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 want 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, p. 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 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 other people's intentions on the apps. For example, Brice met his current partner through Grindr but, like James, feels that most people use dating apps for casual sex. He also believes 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 regarding relationship formation from dating apps, there was a general agreement that dating apps often function mostly 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 see dating apps as a double-edged sword. Jason, for instance, thinks they are beneficial for finding relationship partners, but he doesn't think they help keep 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.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is clear that geosocial dating apps have—for good or ill—revolutionized the dating lives of gay and bisexual men. Our study participants reported using dating apps either currently or previously when single; a few were partnered and had met their partner through a dating app. Only two stated that they do not use dating apps anymore. 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, p. 1132). Findings here suggest that this is not the case. While geosocial dating apps are incredibly popular among gay and bisexual men (Goedel & 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.

As we found in our research, dating apps offer an improved—albeit imperfect—backstage space (Goffman, 1963) for gay and bisexual men to meet and interact. Men in all stages of the coming out process can access this space without the fear of being spotted by outsiders. At the same time, many gay and bisexual men are not fully able to "be at ease among [their] fellows" (Goffman, 1963, p. 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 conventionally attractive as possible. However, it is unlikely that any venue that has as its purpose the creation of a partner market for gay and bisexual men would operate differently. 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 entirely able to let down their guard and interact, free from the oppressive expectations of others.

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 inserted a heightened level of skepticism into most, if not all, virtual interactions. 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, p. 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 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 LGBTQ+ community, especially among gay and bisexual men, and is likely to continue to be so despite 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, our study suggests that although geosocial dating apps make deception easy, they also

give a marginalized community a means of managing stigma. Individuals who are not public with their sexuality can interact with other gay men without displaying an identifying picture or name. Young men who are new to the dating scene and possibly even need help to come to terms with their sexuality can 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 users to be creative with their presentations 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 can let down their guard, be themselves, and even find others to interact with that might have the 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 impossible to overstate the role of stigma – at multiple levels – in shaping the dating experiences of gay and bisexual men. They have to contend with overt forms of homophobia in the broader society; they must also manage insecurities about not measuring up to narrow, homogenized masculinity standards within the gay and bisexual community. Without the various forms of stigma that individuals experience, there would not be much need for faceless or blank profiles that sometimes frustrate interactants. Indeed, absent stigma, it is likely that some interviewees would not use dating apps at all. Virtual venues such as those provided by 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 & 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 nuanced—and sometimes even contradictory. Overall, however, the challenges posed by dating apps were often presented as merely 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 resigned to finding partners through dating apps and other virtual mediums. The limited geographical scope of this research did not allow for comparisons across different cultural and ideological contexts. Likely, experiences with dating apps differ markedly in regions where homosexuality is not as stigmatized. Less stigmatization could lead to fewer "faceless" profiles and, therefore, fewer interactional and trust-building challenges. It is also possible that people who live in regions where sexual stigma is diminished may feel less inclined to use dating apps, especially if there are frequent opportunities for in-person interactions. A comparative analysis of different regions could shed further light on how stigma shapes gay and bisexual men's interactional decisions.

Finally, our analysis was based on interviews with predominately White gay and bisexual men. Our interviewees' racially homogeneous nature likely reflects the racial makeup of our respondents' social networks and reveals a limitation to our snowball sampling approach. Future research should explore sampling techniques that would yield a more diverse group of participants. It is quite possible that the experiences of racial minorities are different from those of their White counterparts. One of the (White) respondents in our study alluded to this possibility, noting that, "Unfortunately, there is still a lot of discrimination even within the gay community. It's not uncommon to see profiles that state outright 'no Blacks' or 'no Whites' or 'no fems.' It's sad because, as an historically oppressed community, we should know better." Including the perspectives of more geographically and racially diverse respondents would provide a more robust understanding of how gay and bisexual men use geosocial dating apps to facilitate romantic relationships.

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Disclosure Statement

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