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# Sex in the digital city: location-based dating apps and queer urban life

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**ABSTRACT**

It is well established that digital technology and code mediate bodies in space. The collapse of any supposed physical/digital divide has been amply documented to the extent that everyday life is now widely theorised in terms of hybridisation. What is less clear is what comes next for those participating in this hybridisation. This article examines what Kitchin and Dodge term the 'social contour of software' via queer male locative media users who collectively negotiate digital hybridisation in their everyday lives. Using qualitative interviews with 36 non-heterosexual men using apps such as Grindr and Tinder in London, UK, I explore how locative media refigures conceptualisations of community, technological efficiency and boundaries between private and public space. The study finds that users express ambivalence about their membership of queer 'communities', and are also unconvinced by online sociality. Apps expedite searches for new partners but prove deceptively time-consuming. Public and private space are being hybridised by locative technology, but common codes of conduct are slower to develop, leaving users unsure of how to navigate physical encounter. This article concludes that schema for queer men's lives are increasingly promulgated digitally but may be uneasily embodied in everyday practice.

## Introduction

Hybridization is an increasingly popular way of thinking about the multiple, simultaneous and interconnected dimensions of spaces and practices. New developments in technology are making hybridity a key feature of contemporary culture, in particular how our identities and behaviour are produced online. Scholarship has progressed from thinking of virtual space as something distinct from the real world to more hybrid relations between individuals and their surroundings whilst online (Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford 2014; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; McGlotten 2013). Mobile and pervasive technologies are becoming seamlessly incorporated

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into daily routines, resulting in an internet more closely laid onto 'real' life than ever before.

One way to interrogate this digital-physical relationship in a phenomenological, embodied context is through male-male dating and hook-up apps. Locative media – GPS-enabled apps downloaded onto mobile devices – now dominate online socialisation for male-male encounter. Industry behemoth Grindr, founded in 2009, now counts over 10 million users across 192 countries worldwide. Tinder, originally a heterosexual app, has found huge success in same-sex dating as well as hook-ups. Meanwhile a host of popular male-male apps specialise in body type, geographical area, or fetish. The major attraction of these platforms is their mapping function, which locates a user's physical coordinates in order to sort potential matches by proximity, with the aim of expediting localised encounter.

This article contributes to current thinking on technological hybridisation and sexuality and space studies by finding out how locative app use impacts on user experiences of daily life in the contemporary city. Using interviews conducted with 36 non-heterosexual men living and working in London, UK, I demonstrate the practical experiences of users who navigate online space in pursuit of embodied meeting. The study finds three key empirical themes emerging from their app use: changing imaginings of community and sociality; the liberation and limitations of technology; and a shift from queer publics to private space. These findings inform technology and sexuality studies by showing that far from practicing uncomplicated transitions between physical to virtual encounter, locative app users must navigate tensions between new possibilities and more ambiguous or contentious experiences when practicing technological hybridisation.

## Situating queer sociality in the contemporary city

Cities have long constituted vital spaces for sexual difference and queer communities, from the Victorian flâneur (Turner 2003) and cruiser (Brown 2001) to the 'gay villages' of the Global North (Berlant and Warner 1998; Skeggs et al. 2004; Collins 2006). However, queer spaces traditionally conceptualised as sites for community are becoming increasingly fragmented by changing patterns of sociality, amidst larger neoliberal economic shifts (Andersson 2011; Ghaziani 2014; Hubbard 2011). As Samuel Delany argues in his study of New York's Times Square (1999), the 'contact' socialising crucial to building and maintaining liveable communities has been progressively overtaken in urban street life by 'networking', whereby people who already have similar interests meet to further such interests. The spontaneous sociability of chance encounter is replaced by networking, inhibiting the potential for queer communities built on physical co-presence.

We can resituate Delany's 'networking' in the contemporary context of locative dating apps to ask if and how their use by city dwellers impacts on queer communities. The ways in which queer sociality can be interpreted as community is itself a source of contestation, not least in queer contexts (Joseph 2002; Mowlabocus

2010). The internet does not unproblematically constitute a site for community; as Larry Gross (2007) points out: 'online communities, like their material world counterparts, can be ghettos as well as liberated zones' (x). Nevertheless, it can function as a platform to bring like-minded users together (Nieckarz 2005; Pullen and Cooper 2010). Widespread use of locative apps certainly testifies to extensive male-male social/sexual encounter in cities, but the extent to which these apps reconfigure and potentially diminish embodied spaces of non-heterosexual male socialisation and community has not yet been satisfactorily addressed. Yet if we accept that technology mediates bodies in space (Kitchin and Dodge 2011), it has the potential to constitute communities that might compete with established embodied spaces for queer male socialisation. The advent of these locative technologies, predicated specifically on moving online communication to physical encounter, could broker new forms of sociality and community. This prompts us to consider how locative hybridisation alters the parameters of the encounters that constitute 'community', for example through engineered processes of selection that improve user efficiency in scoping potential partners.

Technological hybridisation allows humans to attend to physical and virtual environments simultaneously, often leading to richer and more efficient interpersonal connection (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011). Research into locative technology has tended to overlook hybridisation in favour of exploring what virtuality signifies for representation, masculinities and display (see for example McGlotten 2013; Woo 2013). Yet studying the processual stages from online communication to embodied experience is key to understanding the impact of technological hybridisation. When a user virtually logs in to an online platform such as Grindr and records his spatial coordinates as a concrete location, or sends his geographical 'pin' to another app user, the two users are negotiating a shared online space that is hybridised by their consequent physical meeting. Both the virtual and embodied encounters are expedited in this scenario by the sophistication of the locative technology in use, but such efficiencies might impact on intimate relations. Some argue that the era of mobile technologies has led to a commodification of intimacy whereby committed relationships are replaced by fleeting connections (Bauman 2003, 7; see also Badiou 2012). Sherry Turkle expresses related pessimism regarding technology in human communication (2011). What is now needed is an evaluation of how technological efficiency is enacted, and consideration of what intimacy brokered by locative technology looks like.

A related question concerns how technological hybridisation impacts on embodied encounter. With the deconcentration of physical spaces for same-sex encounter in London comes the question of how sociality and community, particularly among non-heterosexual men who have historically benefitted from the anonymity offered by public space, might be resituated in a contemporary context of ubiquitous technology. A long history of queer sex in public space, typifying Delany's 'contact' encounter constitutive of community (1999; see also Turner 2003), seems to be shifting to the private space of the home. Urban planning

and governance has reduced spaces for anonymous stranger sociability in favour of regulated spaces, and this is compounded by assimilative or homonormative modes of living (Duggan 2002; Puar 2006). Interpretations of the internet as a hybrid entity (Farman 2012; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011), not separate from but in fact overlaid onto physical encounter, suggest that it offers potential as a broker for new physical encounters but do not comprehensively explore the concomitant privatisation of these new physical encounters, particularly where locative dating apps function as facilitators to sexual encounter. The privatisation of desire via locative technology may inhibit the potential for sociality and community encounter because the home cannot replicate the public space constituted by the city.

## Methodology

The goal of the study was to understand how non-heterosexual men (often referred to as 'MSM' or men who have sex with men, including but not limited to self-defined gay and bisexual men) navigate the hybridisation of virtual reality and physical encounter in their daily use of dating and hook-up apps in London. Interviews provide a way to explore individuals' subjective relationship with their environment (Brown 2001, 48), and it is this located context that I wanted to pursue. An inductive approach was employed, taking the lead from participants articulating their experiences of dating and hook-up apps to develop the most relevant empirical outcomes.

Thirty-six participants became involved in the project, in three ways: responding to recruitment posters in public spaces around London including libraries, health centres and universities and online on public social media fora; contacting a recruitment profile on Grindr and Tinder; and finally 'snowball' volunteers who expressed their interest as a result of hearing about the study from two pilot interviews. Recruitment criteria were deliberately broad, inviting London male-male app users to be interviewed about their daily use of these apps, with follow-up communication moved from the app to an email account after first contact. The eligibility criteria for participation was current or very recent use, but long-term users were as welcome as those who were comparatively new to the environment. The use of a convenience sample suited the specific aims of this exploratory study. The key to this sampling was not to focus on subgroups of male users channeled by age, background or ethnicity but to bring together different voices to learn more about divergences and commonalities in how different users navigated these apps into their everyday lives.

Interviews were conducted in public spaces including cafes, libraries and meeting rooms across London over the course of one year. Each interview took one to two hours and followed a semi-structured format. Questions were open-ended, beginning with an invitation to the user to tell the interviewer a little about themselves before opening up to the larger topics of sexuality, community, technology

and spaces of encounter. Topics explored included participant relationship status; participation or non-participation in queer communities; daily routines, including when and where the apps were used; and wider technology use and integration into daily life, including personal histories of technology adoption. Products discussed by participants were numerous, including Grindr, Tinder, Hornet, Scruff, GayRomeo and ReCon, but market leader Grindr dominated conversation. The topics explored with all 36 participants were highly personal, and as such a relationship of trust and confidentiality needed to be fostered by the interviewer as a way of making 'legible' the participant in the research process (after Domosh 2014). The result of this co-constructed rapport was strikingly uninhibited and honest conversation from participants, ensuring clarity in the feelings expressed about technological hybridisation. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed in a cyclical process in order to build up conceptual layers of understanding informed by what participants themselves expressed as the key issues affecting them. Pseudonyms were employed throughout to protect anonymity.

Locative media apps have been shown to reflect and reinscribe gendered and racialised inequalities (Woo 2013). This project worked within those realities but incorporated participants from a broad diversity of demographics in order to interrogate such positions, resulting in a snapshot of the sheer diversity of the larger context in which the research was conducted. Of the men interviewed, 25 participants were white/Caucasian, six were 'BME' (black or minority ethnic) and five were mixed heritage. Participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old, with a mean age of 30. Age skewed towards younger participants, matching wider demographic trends in app membership (Brubaker et al 2014). Thirty-one participants identified as gay, three as bisexual or bi-curious, and one as straight but nevertheless sexually involved with men; several participants volunteered a secondary self-definition as queer. The majority of participants were single at the time of interview, but five were partnered, of whom three were in open relationships. This diverse sample demonstrates the range of technology users within a city of 8.6 million residents, and yet there was interesting common ground in their narratives. These meaningful commonalities inform the findings that follow.

## Community and queer space

This section examines the ambiguities and ambivalences of community as expressed or performed by participants. What was immediately apparent from the research was that sociality was evident in a variety of ways, but key for participants was the idea of sociality in terms of 'community'. Community is an inherently ambivalent collective (Joseph 2002; Young 1990), and the sheer diversity in participant age, socioeconomic background and ethnicity might presuppose fragmentation. Yet community proved significant in how participants considered both their physical lives and the way they conceived locative apps. The idea of what constituted community was unified amongst participants: they defined it

as a group of like-minded people who share something in common, and most referenced specific examples of offline LGBT or queer communities including pride events, Soho, and drag performance. Thus beyond representative categorisation, the way community was performed for users was generally through the spatial characteristics of queer-coded space. However, in their own lives they were dubious about the extent to which they belonged to communities linked to their sexual identity, either in 'real' life or online.

Complicating arguments about the deconcentration of 'post-gay' urban spaces in the global north (Bettani 2015; Ghaziani 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014), participants frequently coded the historically queer central London district of Soho as a physical space for community. Yet they also felt ambivalence regarding its assumed centrality as a point of queer sociality, wondering if it was more a symbolic space of the past. Many expressed affection for what Soho meant in conceptual terms, with Simeon (35), a former asylum seeker from west Africa now living in Tower Hamlets, remembering the liberatory potential of the area on his first visit: 'you don't have to hide from anyone, you are holding hands in the street. That was a powerful moment: where I said you know what, this is me now.' However, whilst Simeon codes Soho as an emotionally significant space of community in a general sense, he rarely visits the area now, nor thinks of himself as part of a gay community represented by that space.

We might assume that Simeon's experience is far removed from Cain (25), a London-born, university-educated professional, and yet their app use and preferred sociality is strikingly similar. Cain works in Soho but prefers to socialise with friends and the new partners he meets via locative apps in straight venues around his own south-central home, because he finds the gay scene intimidating. Despite his consciousness of the historical struggle for queer communities that have made it possible for him to socialise openly elsewhere in the city, he cannot shake the competitive feel of Soho venues, where 'you are being watched by a crowd'. It is certainly true that queerer bodies are excluded from homonormative spaces (Binnie and Skeggs 2004; Brown 2009), and Soho has come to typify these homonormative tenets. Yet for a young, middle class, Caucasian participant like Cain to feel similarly excluded suggests less straightforward drivers at work in the disassociation from physical queer spaces for community in London.

The theorised tension between offline and virtual queer communities was replicated in interview by users' imaginings of what a queer community could offer them, and in what context. Contrary to scholarship evidencing community online (Campbell 2004; Mowlabocus 2010; Nieckarz 2005), participants tended to reference online community in terms of its paucity, and this was often linked to usage. Toby (34), a health worker living in east London, does not see apps as hosting communities because for him an app does not by itself establish meaningful fixity:

> I appreciate that it can be regarded as online space or [an] online hangout platform, but I really don't personally see it as a, or least I don't imagine it as something that is virtually somewhere. I really just kind've use it as an in-and-out tool.

Users explained that their app use superseded the role that Soho would otherwise have played in their search for social and sexual encounters, but not that community was more in evidence online (*contra* Pullen and Cooper 2010). For example Craig (36), a non-native Londoner who lives and works in the city centre, formulates a concrete definition of community whilst showing how online app conversation fails to meet that definition:

> Community to me means people who have a similar identity, who are there for each other, who are able to interact on a friendly basis, and let's be honest, in real life the community doesn't start by saying 'what's your length' and 'what's your girth' you know, 'how are you going to use it?' kind of thing.

There was similarly a feeling that a sense of community was personally desirable but not evident in the networks in which they were involved. As Gary, a 23 year-old student, argues: 'to me a community is bound by some kind of social identity. The only thing we have in common is that we use the same app. I don't think that really constitutes a community per se'.

Where there was evidence of online community, it existed amongst those who used the app most frequently. Graham, 51, is a compulsive user and sometimes meets men in his West London home several times in one day. His high usage means that he is particularly aware of what seem to be a set of cooperative online social structures operating in Grindr. He identifies this as a shared code of conduct: 'we share many things in common, the users. Even the app we share in common, we subscribe to that. There is an unwritten code of conduct I suppose, and the majority of people do adhere to that'. In this sense, Graham matches Peter Nieckarz's (2005) definition of online community, with its 'distinct values and norms that are sometimes negotiated and renegotiated among its members' (409). Graham's community membership has developed from sheer time spent socialising with other frequent users online. Other regular users reported a similar sense of affinity, suggesting that more time spent in the virtual realm of the platform led to a greater sense of community, regardless of consequent physical encounter. In this sense, male-male locative apps function for some in a similar way to older chatroom environments of the 1990s, but only where log-ins are so frequent that physical meetings do not impinge on time spent surfing the locative app in question.

Conversely, for Lambeth resident Darren (32), previous iterations of online dating platforms encouraged friendliness and information sharing and implied a sense of community as a result, whereas today's locative apps specifically foreground the individual. The larger the app membership, the less a sense of community can flourish. As a result, 'mainstream' apps like Grindr constitute a more anonymous, self-serving public:

> I definitely wouldn't think Grindr is a community at all, I don't know why, I think more – I suppose because Grindr is propelled by self-interest more than the other two? Even though the other two are as well to an extent. I suppose yeah, I don't know, people seem less self-interested on Scruff, I don't know. Or self-absorbed maybe is a better word.

Thus for Darren the kinds of scoping for partners promulgated by these locative apps discourage virtual community, particularly in the most mainstream products. The community earlier identified by Graham seems to exist in tension with a narrative of self-interest on Grindr that suggests sociality is only offered by users in expectation of a reward in the form of physical encounter.

Yet community was frequently felt as a *familiarity with local spaces and inhabitants*, rather than either conceptual like-mindedness or physical congregation in queer-coded space, and in this iteration, the apps were helpful. Having moved alone from the south London suburbs to busy Camden after the breakup of a long-term relationship, Richard, 32 testifies to a 'sense of belonging and ownership because I've met partners and friends. I think it's a more woolly, overall feeling that this is my community, this is my area, partly thanks to Grindr.' Thus whilst community is not itself predicated via these apps, app use does foster informal networks for social cohesion. By making a concerted effort to meet men online in his new home borough, and converting their virtual introductions into physical meetings around their shared local area, Richard was able to usefully hybridise his online experience with offline encounter. The proximity filtering offered by Grindr made this community-building process useful in his local context.

With the ongoing deconcentration and commercial redevelopment of previously queer-coded physical space in London, the idea that sociality and community can be refigured online is persuasive: not least if, like Richard, users can hybridise their online connection by converting encounter to embodied scenarios. Yet aside from the sense of community promulgated by heavy use amongst a subsection of users, community as a whole was not widely attributed to locative apps, and nor was it significantly in evidence in embodied scenarios. This paucity seems not to be attributable to the wide demographic range of users so much as a subjectively desired but mostly unrealised conception of community amongst users. Thus the potential for online sociality is qualified by its co-option as a tool to pursue sexual encounter.

## Time saving and technological efficiency

The previous section argued that 'community' is understood by non-heterosexual locative app users as something organic, elusive, and only partially replicable through technology. This section argues that apps can expedite social relations brokered online, but in turn generate their own phenomenological inefficiencies.

Locative apps are popularly assumed to speed up time spent searching for potential matches and shorten the distance needed to encounter those matches. The Grindr marketing slogan '0 feet away' acts as shorthand for the company's supposed goal of 'turning Grindr off and being there in-person with that guy you were chatting with' (Grindr 2014). Locative apps compress the two variables of space and time so that from one spot the app user can survey thousands of metres in radius, and do so in mere seconds. Use is hybridised because the user is able to go

about their work in physical space whilst also communicating with men on a virtual platform provided by the apps simultaneously and in an interconnected manner.

Participant views on the technological efficiency of locative apps indicated differentiated experiences of digital platforms. Some praised the efficiency of apps and celebrated the number of 'available' queer men in London. They relished the way that apps took a measure of their surroundings, whether on familiar or unknown territory, to save time in having to scope out ideal partners. As they pointed out, distances traveled to meet other men could be condensed now that the technology existed to order opportunities by proximity. Patrick (21), a British-Asian student studying in central London, capitalises on his location in the heart of the city. For him, proximity motivates action: 'if they send their location to me and I know that they're close then I think it's more likely for me to meet them'. Similarly, dedicated user Sakio (22), a graphic design assistant living in west London, embraces the technological efficiency that apps offer. Logging on as often as possible in as many places as possible, he explains, is the goal: 'you want the traffic to be as fast as possible – looking for the right person for the right purposes'. He particularly enjoys using the app whilst socialising with friends in central London because he can access a higher density of men within the same time frame. Yet Sakio is less concerned about the quality of conversation with those matches, overlooking the impact this might have on building a rapport either online or in preparation for physical encounter.

There is a contemporary desire for efficiency in forming and maintaining social relations, and the rhetoric accompanying these locative apps imply that they can help to achieve exactly that. However, there are less desirable outcomes of this efficiency. Whilst locative apps ostensibly expedite the process of meeting men by filtering many more people for desirable characteristics than would be possible in person, participants noted that the potential offered by the apps was often mitigated by unsatisfying real-life encounters. Bryce (24), a newcomer to London from Australia, blames 'the illusion of connection' fostered by locative apps for his difficulties in making emotional connections with the men he meets despite having felt an initial rapport with them online. Working in 'the City', London's financial district, and living in Shoreditch, he questions the ability of Grindr in particular to forge friendships or dates. Nevertheless Bryce continues to use the app compulsively, rationalising this as optimism; ultimately, he 'live[s] in hope'. Bryce's awareness of the limits of technology for interpersonal rapport is echoed by Graham, who muses: 'you are detached from the actual person you're speaking to. It is purely electrons on the screen'. Indeed, by making physical meet-ups premeditated, with partner characteristics and appearance a known (and filtered) quantity, the chance of spontaneous or serendipitous meeting on the street is drastically reduced.

As a freelance costume designer Cristovo (30) finds himself travelling through London frequently, and uses his app as a way of making new friends as well as for dates and hook-ups. He is so acutely aware of this double-bind, with his daily app use impinging on his ability to meet people through random encounter, that

he forces himself to limit time spent online: 'I think it's a bad routine for you to be spending too much time on your phone. You're kind of missing the whole world out there, you know?' His anxiety about 'missing' what is happening in his physical environs suggests that the hybridisation that so often mediates locative app use is not universal, and not always reliable. For Cristovo, the technological efficiency that the apps offer deserves its own scrutiny: 'sometimes it takes a bit of the fun [out] of meeting people […] It's just too easy, you know, to hook up.' Cristovo's attitude mirrors Francis (21), a student living in north-east London. Francis uses three of the most popular male-male locative apps, but stops himself from downloading any more:

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

What Cristovo and Francis share is use of locative apps as efficient broker for new encounters combined with a conscious awareness of a false economy offered by the hybridising device. Despite the orientation of these apps towards embodiment rather than virtuality, Cristovo and Francis are both keen not to 'disassociate from the real world', and this is a concern that undermines the apps' *raison-d'être* to expedite physical encounter.

Participants also commented on the poor ratio of online conversation to in-person meet-ups, expressing their frustration with the limited social or sexual connection the apps had fostered for them. Malcolm (23) had previously chatted extensively to men online, but now minimises online conversation in hopes of expediting a physical encounter. He cautions: 'it is very overestimated, the amount of people who actually meet on Grindr […] for a lot of people, it is just the fantasy of speaking to someone. Because you're lonely, because you're bored, or because you're horny.' Similarly, George (27), a teacher living in north London, has experienced apps not as time-savers but as time-wasters, which mitigates their ability to save potential awkwardness experienced when trying to meet men in person: 'I think there's a line which online dating can cross if you have that online conversation too much. It can become quite false'. Despite the historical affinity between non-heterosexual males and online dating and chat communities (Campbell 2004; Mowlabocus 2010), participants overwhelmingly privileged embodied encounter. George's wariness regarding excessive virtual communication shows that for many, locative technology seems to do its job best when it brokers physically meeting, and does so without more online sociality than is absolutely necessary.

At 65, Eric is the oldest participant in the study, and questions the extent to which the efficiency of locative apps balances out the issues that become apparent only when online connection progresses to embodied encounter. For him, this comes in the form of 'catfishing' (Drouin et al. 2016), those instances when a physical partner doesn't match their online profile appearance:

> I had one incident, from Hornet, where everything about the description of the indi-
> vidual, the face picture, I thought: this is someone I want to meet. And the reality of
> it was absolutely nothing of the description, and I had the door open, and I thought I
> don't believe this. Bye. Because if someone lies to that extent, how can anyone trust the
> individual for anything more? Perhaps it's my expectations. Perhaps I expect too much
> from people.

For a user like Eric, technology circumnavigates the need to cruise more efficiently, but the strangeness of seeing a partner in 'real life' so unlike their online persona is an example of a hybridisation gone wrong: a clash of virtual and physical that disrupts the fantasy of a streamlined, hybridised encounter. Participants subject to or participating in technological hybridisation recognise its obvious benefits in efficiently scoping potential partners to great effect, in urban space in particular. However, through the unexpected repercussions of locative app that they have to navigate, they also become aware that what is ostensibly technological efficiency is subjectively experienced. With this in mind, we consider the final theme of public and private space.

## Public and private space

This final section suggests that locative apps complicate the oppositional rela-tionship between familiarity and the stranger, with the privacy of domestic space being reconfigured through the entry of the 'stranger', which itself reconfigures the category of what a stranger is. The porous boundaries between public and private space have long been key to sexualities and space research (Berlant and Warner 1998; Crang 2000). A grand narrative of contemporary cities is that they are being privatised, and that urban space is losing its centrality as a site of encounter, including queer encounter. My results suggest less of a straightforward shrinking of what is normally thought of as public space in favour of an opening up of the personal space of the home to stranger-access in new ways. Rather than a simplis-tic trade-off between public and private, we see a reconfiguration of sex at home as a new imbrication between domestic and public spheres rather than just an expression of, or retreat into, private space.

At the same time as urban public space is increasingly subject to surveillance and access reduction, locative media can be seen to resituate what were formerly public spaces for sexuality to the private space of the home. As well as changing the structures of socialisation already discussed, locative apps allow cruising for sex in public to be replaced by residential encounter. It is not just that public space is being restricted, but it is also less necessary as a broker for sexual encounter. For Joseph (45), a self-defined locative app 'addict' living in north London, Grindr assists in this privatisation of intimacy: 'it's very specific, it's verbal and it's pictures, whereas cruising is definitely about the rules of how to be [in] public'. This public performance in the pursuit of sex can be achieved more conveniently via a digital platform that organises intimacy into the home. Even more conventional queer

spaces of the public lose primacy as a site for encounter when the home is so convenient for digitally-brokered meeting. As Graham comments of West End entertainment venues as spaces for socialisation: 'they're all so packed nowadays. And predominantly a very young group. Those days have passed.' Conversely, locative apps allow new forms of queer space production that can be adapted according to the personal preferences of users.

Urban encounters in public space are being domesticated (Koch and Latham 2013), but in the context of intimacy this familiarity is not a pre-requisite for domestication, because users invite into their domestic context new partners whom they have only met virtually. As Ali (22) reflects when asked about his arrangements for meeting partners: 'people forget that you really are – I don't consider them strangers because I talk to them before I meet them – but in reality, you don't know who the person is'. For Ali, this does not predicate against meeting men met online altogether, but it does influence his preference to invite them to his own home, because he perceives less risk in hosting. Participants either did not need to feel familiarity to admit others into their domestic space, or they trusted that digital communication would function as sufficient introduction for embodied meeting. When either model for stranger-access failed, users recognised the imperfect hybridity promulgated by the app employed for the encounter. As Gary reasons: 'chatting to someone online is very different from chatting to someone in person in that you don't have those visual cues or body language that is a function of offline conversation'.

Accepting that non-heterosexuality is highly visible in public space due to heteronormative conditioning of what is acceptable there (Skeggs et al. 2004), queer subjects must navigate their right to both public space and to privacy. Participants in this study overwhelmingly interpreted their homes as private and secure spaces. They met men for sex at either their own or their match's homes for what they argued was convenience, but considered what this meant for their domestic space and safety, often at great length. Tim, 28, worries: 'people are more at risk of being attacked […] I've had those concerns like going to hook-ups that you're actually alone with someone in their space.' Others explained how they rationalized inviting a partner home, from 'de-strangering' their sexual partners in order to justify entry to their private space, to policing the times at which they invited people home. They considered not just parents or family in the house but also flatmates, landlords and even neighbors. Aaron (27) shares a flat with a female friend and prioritises her right to their shared space when deciding whether to invite men over: 'I think it would feel like an invasion of her privacy and trust, just to have a stranger [there]'. Thus the new sexual partner is de-strangered in order to justify entry to the home, or is perhaps de-strangered *by* his very presence *in* the home. These strategies seem to be a way of rationalising a sense of being 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996) that for queer minorities is more usually encountered in public, not private, life. Here it functions to reassure the inviter that the invitee is suitable to bring into their private, domestic quarters.

What happens when de-strangering for access to private space goes wrong? Several participants spoke of being pressured into sex at a partner's home, now engineering first introductions in a public venue as a result. These experiences were not exclusively skewed to young respondents; their narratives were similar in maintaining that some of the pressure came not from the partner involved but a self-directed obligation to complete a sexual contract implicitly agreed to in online conversation, despite critical arguments that social responsibilities are curtailed online (Bauman 2003). Brandon (20), who has used male-male locative apps since his mid-teens, summarises his experiences thus: 'there's a cycle, so I know how I'll feel afterwards, and it's not necessarily like 'oh I feel really bad about myself', it's more like that wasn't as good as I expected it to be'. Safety in public space is itself far from secure, as a long history of gay-bashing and police scrutiny demonstrate (Andersson 2011; Turner 2003), and inviting sexual partners back to the home is nothing new. But doing so after only a virtual, rather than physical, introduction sometimes resulted in users feeling confused because virtual intimacy remains something constructed and subjective compared to a 'real-life' meeting. Add to this the emotions tied up in ideas of home and we see how public and private boundaries are having to be re-negotiated for each app user pursuing embodied connection.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted several ways that subjects incorporate the social contour of hybridised digital environments into daily life. Rather than just providing a 'new layer of virtual sites superimposed over geographic spaces' (Kitchin 1998, 403), hybridisation of virtual and embodied domains expedites new encounters for non-heterosexual men using locative apps. However, it also provokes uncertainty and ambivalence in daily networked experience. These findings show that (1) queer male community and sociality, increasingly fragmented in London's physical spaces, is only partially reconstituted via locative apps, with 'heavier' users more commonly identifying shared community online. (2) Locative technology ostensibly streamlines the procurement of social and sexual encounter, but encounter is not guaranteed and where it occurs is complicated by individualistic preoccupations. (3) Locative apps contribute to a larger shift from queer publics to encounter in the private space of the home, brokered via apps; in the process users de-stranger others to justify entry to the home.

We can also see tensions between the generative potential of ubiquitous technology and ambivalence towards the implications of being so plugged-in for users of these apps. Running counter to the welcome socialisation offered by these locative apps is an inward pressure on participants to be always searching and always available in order to maximise opportunities for the imagined perfect match. These men constitute technically attuned bodies, and adapt easily to the code/space that

enables their social or sexual encounters; yet they navigate meetings of digital and real-life spheres with some difficulty.

These ambivalences and subjectivities regarding dating app use tie into larger questions about lived queer experience, from sexual health to the right to public space. As Tim reflects on the impact of hybridised digital life: 'if people aren't seeing drag queens, aren't seeing gay couples in the street … then people will become less accepting of it because it's not going to be normalised.' Sherry Turkle's (2011) argument that technology leads to breakdowns in interpersonal communication now seems simplistic in many ways, but the counter-argument that social connections, rather than being lost, are refigured in a digital context (with more potential reciprocity) does not sufficiently answer the question of how hybridisation affects public life either. Such an impasse highlights the need for continuing critical debate about how technology mediates real-life social and sexual encounters in embodied space, and what this means for the relationships between technology and queer community, interaction and public/private space.

## Notes on contributor

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