

## Chapter 7: Going the distance: Locative dating technology and queer male practice-based identities

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### Abstract

Hybridisation of digital and physical space is now a reality for geographies of sexualities in the digital age. This chapter moves builds on this understanding by exploring how digital-physical hybridisation mediated by locative dating apps can shape queer male ‘practice-based’ identities, and how these typologies in turn inform physical queer encounters. Drawing from a qualitative research project with men who have sex with men (MSM), I examine the impact of online connection on different ‘routes’ to physical meeting. I argue that certain modes of behaviour help to identify a range of practice-based identities, implicitly linked to different forms of hybridisation. Three typologies exemplify practice-based identities: the ‘Embracer’, the ‘Time-waster’, and the ‘Minimalist’. These fluid typologies overlap and are even evident within a single identity across time, depending on personal motivation, the ‘market’ of available online matches, and app genre. Such typologies demonstrate the range of user engagement that becomes bound up in, and mediated by, the digital and physical hybridisation enabled by popular mobile media platforms. The development of practice-based identities can be extrapolated beyond thinking about online and offline spaces to new questions about future sexualities, identities and digital geographies.

## Introduction

*‘Michael’<sup>1</sup> loads his Grindr app with a shiver of anticipation. He has been stuck in meetings for most of the afternoon, followed by an underground commute that temporarily cut off his 4G connection, but he is now back at home. He is once again connected, and ready to connect. The app opens with a yellow glow, and the bright screen fills with faces and bodies, all within his district of south London. He navigates straight to his new clutch of unread messages and replies to each with the same catch-all response: ‘good thx, u?’*

This quotidian routine, as practiced by ‘Michael’, is a fictional snapshot, but one that has been amalgamated from the narratives of several respondents in a research project exploring male-male locative dating app use amongst men living and working in London, UK. The snapshot functions as a metaphor for one typology of practice amongst many more for queer technology users seeking social and sexual relationships in the contemporary city. This chapter develops scholarship in both geographies of sexualities and digital geographies by exploring how digital-physical hybridisation mediated by locative dating apps shapes queer male practice-based identities, and how these typologies might in turn inform physical queer encounters.

Drawing from a recent qualitative research project involving in-depth interviews with 36 ‘MSM’ (men who have sex with men – a definition that includes, but is not limited to, gay and bisexual men) I explore the impact of online connection on different ‘routes’ to physical meeting, analysing how practice-based online identities inform subsequent physical encounters. I argue that certain modes of behaviour help to identify a particular range of users, and that these practice-based identities are

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.

implicitly linked to different forms of hybridisation. This chapter draws on recent scholarship in hybridisation as well as my own empirical research results to sketch three typologies of queer male app user that function as examples of different practice-based identities: the ‘Embracer’, the ‘Time-waster’, and the ‘Minimalist’. These typologies offer a snapshot into a larger diversity of use, and are by no means objective or essentialist categories: indeed, my own research has demonstrated the imbrications between different ‘types’ of use from the same user at different times, depending on personal motivation, the ‘market’ of available online matches, and the genre of the app in question (Miles, 2017). Instead, what these typologies illustrate is the intriguing variety in modes of user engagement that become bound up in, and mediated by, the digital and physical hybridisation enabled by popular mobile media platforms.

This study of typologies of practice is important because it generates implications for how identities are practiced through hybrid technologies that incorporate digital practices into physical realms, which in a contemporary context of ubiquitous, personalised and pervasive technology increasingly informs interpersonal communication. I argue that whilst different user typologies are differently represented in online locative media, it is the mode of use, as well as the ‘type’ of user, that underpins the nature of technological involvement. What follows in this chapter is a proposal that we use these sketched-out case studies as a way into understanding typologies of *practice*, which in turn generate distinctive practice-based identities that can be extrapolated beyond thinking about online, offline and hybrid spaces to wider questions about identities, sexualities and digital geographies.

### **The irresistible hybridisation of locative media**

Given that online and offline lives are increasingly interwoven, hybridisation is now a reality for geographies of sexualities in the digital age. Hybridisation provides a useful way of thinking about the interconnected dimensions of all sorts of spaces and practices as types of assemblage (following

Latour 2006, amongst others), used in this chapter as a descriptive rather than conceptual tool for exploring practice-based identities. Yet hybridisation represents a particularly intriguing way to think about the incorporation of technology into human sexual experiences. This is because sex and sexuality have been so tangibly mediated by technological apparatus over recent years, from internet pornography to virtual reality environments, and from online chatroom communities to niche-interest matchmaking portals. GPS-mediated partner-seeking apps hosted by mobile phones, such as Grindr, Tinder, and Hornet, represent a distinctive (and sometimes provocative) chapter in this ongoing relationship by collapsing established understandings of time and space into an altogether more intense sensory user experience.

Developments in mobile phone software over the past decade have made hybridity a key feature of internet access, collapsing historical separations between physical and digital terrain. Online or 'virtual' space has progressed from an entity distinct from the real world into a more haptic environment predicated on more extensive entanglements with physical or 'real' human experiences (Farman, 2012; McGlotten, 2013; Brubaker, 2014; Davis et al., 2016). Practice-based identities are constituted through the circulations between persons, objects, digital environments and material environments that make up this technological hybridisation as performed via mobile technology. Beyond the established sense of a meshing of digital and physical terrain, hybridisation is understood here to synthesise relationships established online with physical meetings realised offline.

One way in which mobile media technology has been popularised is via GPS-enabled, or locative, mobile phone dating and hook-up platforms. These platforms utilise the mapping software built into contemporary smartphone software to locate the phone, and therefore the app user, with cartographic specificity. The app then shares these coordinates with other users to build up a sophisticated snapshot of spatial proximity. These apps provide a valuable way to interrogate technological hybridity because they overlay physical terrain with an online map of potential social or sexual

partners. They go beyond providing a ‘new layer of virtual sites superimposed over geographic spaces’ (Kitchin, 1998, p. 403), to invite the almost seamless hybridisation of virtual and embodied domains, which in turn expedites new online and offline encounters for locative app users. These users can communicate remotely with others virtually whilst moving around their own physical environment, but then shift that virtual communication into its own embodied encounter in physical space, thanks to sophisticated GPS algorithms that parse potential partners by geographic distance.

Long considered ‘early adopters’ of new technologies (Mowlabocus, 2010; see also Skeggs et al., 2003; Miles, 2018), MSM have colonised locative dating and hook-up apps such as Grindr, Tinder and Hornet in particularly high numbers compared to heterosexual populations, and done so across a range of age groups, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Prestage et al. (2015) find that in Australia, for example, men meeting same-sex partners online for either casual or romantic relationships has now replaced other methods of encounter *across every age group*. This disproportionate adoption by MSM within a single decade (market leader Grindr was released late in 2009, and was not even initially internationally available) is perhaps less surprising given the historical affinity between MSM and online dating and chat communities (Campbell, 2004; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Grov et al., 2013). Grindr now boasts over 10 million users in 192 countries worldwide, and, along with its competitor apps, seems to generate affection and frustration in equal measure amongst its subscribers. The ability of these platforms to connect hundreds or even thousands of plugged-in users simultaneously based on physical coordinates is also the source of much popular media debate about how these networks are best navigated and how users present their identities online.

Research into locative technology has tended to overlook hybridisation itself in favour of thinking about what virtuality signifies for representation, masculinities and display (Woo, 2013; McGlotten, 2013). Yet the emphasis of these locative products lies in shifting online communication to physical

encounter. For example, sending one's geographical 'pin' to another user online in the virtual 'space' of an app in anticipation of meeting, mediates this intensely hybrid physical and digital space via spatial cartography, blending a social media network approach with something more erotically charged. The need now is to consider locative media not just in terms of online presentation and affect but how these online presentations inform lived behaviour. In the case of this chapter, that journey is explored through online user typologies that variously expedite or impede the route to offline physical queer encounter. Unpacking in more detail this journey from virtual communication to embodied meeting is key to understanding how technology users are subject to – or actively participate in – the sociotechnical relations that mediate contemporary geographies of sexualities.

### **Let's (not) get physical**

Parallel to the growing popularity of locative media as a broker for queer male (and increasingly, female) intimacies, queer-coded spaces that historically constituted sites for community are becoming fragmented by changing patterns of sociality. The decline, or at least deconcentration, of physical queer venues (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014; 2016; Campkin & Marshall, 2017) are in part the result of macro-level economic shifts (Delany, 1999; Andersson, 2011; Hubbard, 2011), as well as a sense of detachment from the gay community, not least for those historically less represented within its environs (Nash, 2013). Yet the convenience offered by locative partner-seeking apps, and their seamless domestication into the home of what were formerly public encounters, plays no small part in this shift to privatised sex and socialisation. Whilst unlikely to be the sole driver for deconcentration of physical sites for same-sex encounter, there is evidence to suggest that the use of locative dating and hook-up apps by MSM does impact on queer physical spaces, particularly in urban settings (Nash, 2013; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014; Ghaziani, 2014; Race, 2015; Collins & Drinkwater, 2016). This impact is significant, given the valorisation of urban environments for the particular affordances they have historically offered for forging connection and

encountering difference (Young, 1990). Of course, safety in public space is not guaranteed, as a long history of ‘gay-bashing’ and police scrutiny demonstrate (Turner, 2003; Andersson, 2011), but over the past half-century these public city spaces have come to represent ‘new visions of cosmopolitanism whereby plural and accommodating subject positions could be fostered amidst the tolerance and diversity of urban life’ (Koch & Latham 2012, p. 145).<sup>2</sup> The net result is a rapidly changing environment for sexual minorities that increasingly mediates encounter virtually whilst struggling to demarcate queerness publicly.

The burgeoning popularity of MSM locative apps certainly testifies to extensive male-male social and sexual encounter, with a significant proportion of these encounters now brokered by apps rather than more traditional embodied scenarios in gay bars or community venues, or comparatively older technological apparatus such as desktop websites Gaydar or GayRomeo (platforms that themselves cohered a space for a far greater range of ‘spectators’ than the average real-life gay bar (Mowlabocus 2010, p. 192))<sup>3</sup>. It is my belief that the outcome of this different assemblage may see spontaneous sociability, in the guise of chance encounters in physical space, being replaced by more focused networking. The impact may be ambiguously experienced – for some, the digitally-mediated encounter expedites a specific and desired goal; for others, the streamlined algorithm inhibits the potential for spontaneous introductions predicated upon physical co-presence. The sheer diversity in MSM populations, whether in terms of self-defined sexuality, age, socioeconomic background or ethnicity might presuppose fragmentation regarding any meaningful sense of queer community, but MSM app users do still valorise a sense of community (Hubbard et al., 2016), and to some extent exercise this via intense sociality in their locative app use (Miles, 2017). It may be that one

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<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding valid critiques of the restricted access to these sites predicated on ethnicity, class or income (see for example Bassi, 2006; Lewis, 2016; Jaspal, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging the many commonalities, as well as obvious differences, between contemporary locative media apps and their immediate predecessors on static landline computers. As Mowlabocus argues, physical and virtual concepts on desktop platforms ‘are not discrete but pervade one another, with digital communications often structuring physical practices, identities and experiences’ (2010, p. 2).

consequence of the rapid growth in MSM locative media apps is that the hybridised spaces these platforms produce can cohere entirely new composite environments that compete with established, embodied spaces for queer male socialisation; or conversely that MSM locative apps succeed in areas with an established ‘critical mass’ of interested parties – whether comprised of traditional ‘gay villages’ or more diffuse queer populations, or generally cosmopolitan locales (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2016; 2017).

What is uncontested is that the progressive foregrounding of online platforms for physical encounter in queer male culture provokes consideration of online identity, practice and even ethics. Locative hybridisation alters the parameters of the encounters that constitute sociality or community, for example through processes of selection that improve user efficiency in scoping potential partners. Aside from the debates pitting locative media against physical encounter already explored in this chapter, some scholars have argued that mobile technology commodifies intimacy itself, replacing committed relationships with more fleeting connections (Bauman, 2003; Turkle, 2011; Badiou, 2012). This is a well-rehearsed form of dissent against the creeping incorporation of digital technology into every aspect of contemporary lived experience, exemplified by socio-technical hybridisation more effectively than perhaps any other scenario. In reality, there is nothing to suggest that these hybridised and expedited digital connections are necessarily less valuable in their own form than the more orthodox relations that preceded them and which humanistic scholarship tends to valorise. Nevertheless, looking more closely at how MSM app users practice their identities online and how this impacts on ‘real’-life intimacies as they are brokered by locative technology can prove valuable, not just for thinking about changing queer male sexual practices, but as a way into larger debates about hybridised life for *any* contemporary technology user. Identifying three user typologies as exemplars for practice-based identity work helps us to conceptualise digital-physical hybridisation through embodied practices that we can recognise and digest.



## The Research Project

Thirty-six participants were involved in the research project on which these results are based. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in public spaces including cafes, libraries and meeting rooms across London, UK over the course of one year. Participation in the study was voluntary, and recruitment, data collection and analysis all adhered to institutional ethical requirements.

App users became involved in the project by either responding to recruitment posters in public spaces around London, contacting a passive recruitment profile<sup>4</sup> on Grindr, Tinder and Hornet, or becoming involved as ‘snowball’ volunteers who learnt about the study from their peers. The eligibility criteria utilised in recruitment were left deliberately broad in order not to narrow focus to subgroups of male users channeled by age, background or ethnicity but instead to ensure that empirical outcomes captured the commonalities and differences typical of this diverse cross-section of use. 25 participants were white/Caucasian, six were ‘BAME’ (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and five were mixed heritage, and participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years old. Thirty-two participants identified as gay, three as bisexual or bi-curious, and one as straight but sexually involved with men. The majority of participants were single at the time of interview, but five were partnered, of whom three were in open relationships. The sheer diversity of users, and their corresponding approaches to the hybridised practice central to locative technologies, invites us to sketch out several typologies of user amongst many more modes of use described by participants.

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<sup>4</sup> i.e. A deliberately general invitation for involvement rather than actively approaching users.

### Three User Typologies

The following section argues that the hybridisation of digital and physical environments enabled by locative media has the effect of producing distinct practice-based identities, which are demonstrated here via three fictionalised vignettes amalgamated from real-life users. These typologies are informed by data collected, but they are not the only three, and being aligned to one typology does not invalidate commonalities with another. Nevertheless, these clusters of behaviours provide a fitting reflection of the way in which participants tended to categorise or ‘sort’ other online users into groups as a way to ascertain their availability and interest in offline partnering. Approximately one third of the total participant group expressed ‘embracer’ traits, another third expressed ‘time-waster’ traits, and a smaller proportion – about one-fifth – demonstrated ‘minimalist’ traits (see Fig. 1). The paucity of ‘minimalist’ typologies amongst the group logically correlates with the comparative reluctance of this type of user to volunteer for involvement in a research project about app use. An overlap between ‘embracer’ and ‘time-waster’ traits suggests changing appetites within each user for app-mediated encounters over time, but more surprising were small overlaps between ‘minimalist’ and ‘embracer’ traits, emphasising the flexible, rather than rigid, nature of these practice-based identities. These overlaps also serve to emphasise that it is *type* of use, rather than user, that informs each profile (after Gorman-Murray 2009).

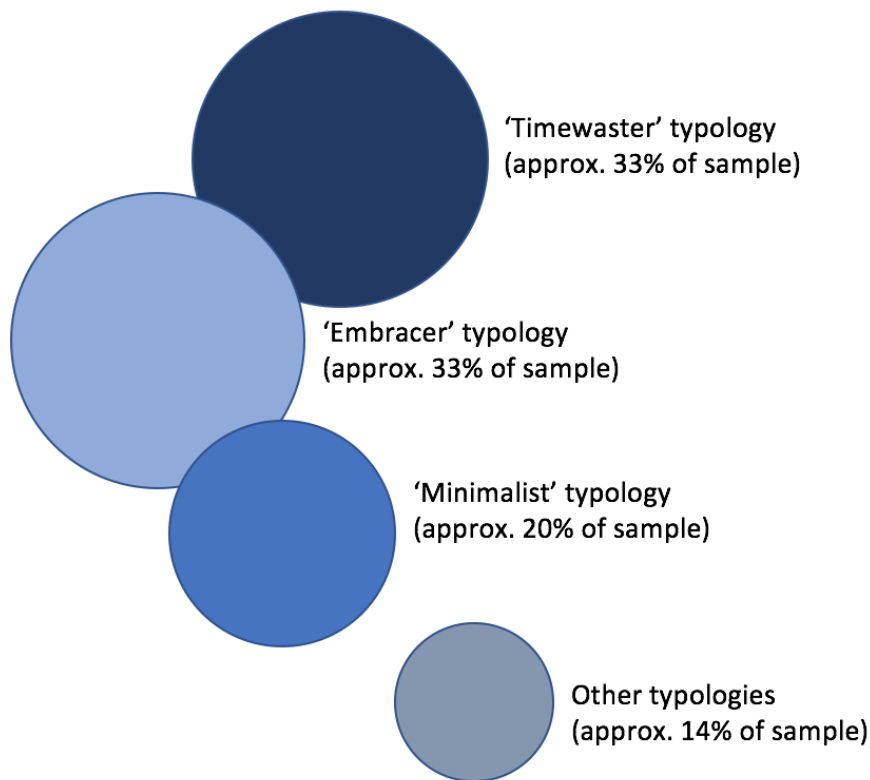


Figure 1. Visualisation of different male-male dating app user typologies

## 1. The embracer

*Mikori, 29, is a long-time user of Grindr, Tinder, Hornet, Jack'd and Scruff. He logs into all five of these apps every day, reasoning that each app brings with it a different (and sometimes overlapping) selection of potential matches. Grindr, he points out, features the users of almost every other app he uses, and some more besides. Mikori works as an advertising executive for a global brand and has no qualms about displaying his smiling face in his profile picture, along with his age, weight, interests and hobbies. He is looking for dating and longer-term relationships, but is happy to meet for sex too, and has in the past cycled between these goals as and when he meets other users. He sometimes uses the app in his workplace and shares particularly exciting matches with his (female) colleagues, as well as debriefing them after his weekday evening dates at gay bars in Soho, London.*

The ‘embracer’ as a type of app user (recognising the elasticity inherent in that labelling) is able to adapt quickly to the hybrid experience of locative media, and uses the apps in a manner that broadly reflects the idealised mode of use promoted in the way in which these apps are marketed. The embracer is happy to include a photo of their face in their online profile and furnishes that profile with an honest and extensive biography that may include metrics such as height and weight, location, interests, HIV status and a description of who (as well as what) they are looking for. This is a consumer who willingly participates in, rather than refutes, the entangled public-private model of hybrid digital-physical engagement promoted by MSM locative apps. Amongst the sample for this project, whilst around half of participants’ narratives suggested ‘embracer’ traits, only one-third of participants actually evidenced ‘embracer’ traits in relaying their online practices to the researcher (Fig. 1). Whilst these attributes can only ever be subjectively categorised, it does suggest an intriguing disconnect between self-perceived and actualised identity practices in the sample, since the ‘embracer’ is arguably seen to be the most confident or socially secure typology (even while acknowledging that the typologies were only sketched out after fieldwork was complete).

The openness with which these apps operate for those opting into the semi-public app environment is especially striking compared to predecessors in online MSM dating and hook-up culture. Indeed, Tinder – an app that dominates the heterosexual matchmaking scene in the U.K and U.S. – goes as far as to connect the user’s account to their Facebook profile, with the neat (or unnerving) result being a list of friends held in common with hitherto unknown potential partners in the vicinity. The assumption made by Tinder that integrating an ostensibly private dating or hook-up profile with a vastly more public social media outlet should be *de rigueur* is telling in terms of the kind of hybridisation that is taken for granted in this scenario. It also reveals those practice-based identities who participate, or are able to participate, in this public assemblage, where for queer users ‘outness’ is both assumed and socially accepted. Given that queerness is highly visible in public space by dint of its very existence as an exception to heteronormativity (Skeggs et al. 2004), the embracer is likely

to self-define as gay or bisexual, and be 'out' to friends, family and colleagues, because their queerness is made public by their technological involvement and therefore visibilised. They are in turn less likely to self-police their online identity for fear of it affecting their lived reality.

The embracer conceptualises the contemporary offering of MSM locative media products as helpful tools to broker new encounters, and they tend to balance online conversation with a willingness to meet up with other users for embodied encounter too. Whether these encounters are uniformly successful or smooth is another matter entirely, given that the reality of hybridisation may diverge from what the online introduction promises (Miles, 2017). Being a user who embraces the hybridising qualities of locative apps for the efficiency of their scoping abilities or their assistance in meeting new partners does not necessarily protect that user from the complex and sometimes confusing social realities of a physical meeting.

## **2. The time-waster**

*José is 21, studies at a London university and came out to close friends and family as gay just over a year ago. He uses a range of MSM dating and hook-up apps, is happy to sketch out what he sees as the differences between their intended use, and finds all of them be interesting, even educational environments. It is here that he has learnt about other users – their likes and dislikes, their relationship formats (monogamous, poly, open), and their sexual interests. He has gathered from different users the best places to go gay clubbing in central London, and hopes in time to make use of these recommendations. However, he has only met one user from Grindr in real life, and found the experience as confusing as it was exciting. He uses the apps every day and strikes up conversation with a whole range of people, but when they move the conversation to hooking up (the Minimalist) he blocks them, reluctant to commit to such a significant meeting with so little preamble. Others chat online for a night or two and then invite him on a date (the Embracer), but José worries*

*that the chatty person he is online will translate to a stuttering, shy guy who can't keep up with the English or know what to say when his date asks about his previous relationships.*

The 'time-waster' represents perhaps the most maligned trope of online dating: the user who is, intentionally or unconsciously, in the opinion of other participants, somehow 'misusing' the app against a collectively conceived mode of practice amongst the user base. As participant Liam explains: 'it's just chatting, chatting, chatting.' The active hybridisation of the user experience on MSM partner-seeking apps, in which users are able to go about their daily routines in physical space whilst simultaneously communicating with men on a virtual platform provided by the apps, means that apps should speed up time spent searching for potential matches and shorten the distance needed to encounter those matches. However, the timewaster complicates this 'ideal' hybridised experience because they are so comfortable in the online space of the locative platform (or conversely so *uncomfortable* in the 'real' world of physical encounter), that they communicate with other app users for long stretches of time, seemingly without any desire to progress virtual conversation to a physical encounter. Their motivations are negatively interpreted by participants, and they are commonly criticised for their (perceived) selfishness, given that they waste others' time without committing to a real-life meeting. We see, then, that online space has a tendency to replicate the very same divisions that often demarcate offline spaces (Gross 2007), even where the hybridising abilities of the platform in question could logically invite the user to think differently about how bodies might be categorised or conceptualised.

In short, the time-waster is not complying with the hybridisation that enables these apps to collapse virtual and physical space. Yet their tendency to prevaricate is not necessarily alien to any of us, given that a successful offline encounter is mediated by online rapport. Despite the ease with which different 'types' of use (and user) can be corralled into different practice-based identities, every app user is different, and whilst a user might feel attracted to one conversational partner and pursue a

physical encounter, they may in turn be repelled by the over-direct or unappealing approach of a different user. For example Liam, having identified the traits of time-wasters, reflects on his own aimlessness online: ‘most of the time I go there I think ‘why am I even coming here?’ I’m not *looking* for anything.’ This behaviour could constitute exactly the same prevarication that frustrates him in conversation with others. The reality is that the time-waster represents a *mode* of use, flexibly inhabited by a range of users, rather than a concrete identity of a subset of users. This is made even more apparent given the striking recurrence of time-wasting narratives from a range of participants who criticised others for precisely the time-wasting behaviour that they themselves admitted to exhibiting at other times in their conversation with other users.

Data from this research project also shows that the time-waster personality is overrepresented amongst younger app users, and users who are not yet ‘out’, or users who are new to the locative media platform itself. For this subset of users, what might be conceived of by others as interminable delays to in-person meet-ups, or aimless prevarication, may actually be more accurately described as a ‘testing the water’ of the online environment before committing more fully to the hybridisation that the app centres as the intended progression for its user interactions. José’s narrative suggests that the time-waster typology should not be dismissed for its inability to effectively realise hybridisation, but considered more carefully for what it means in the larger assemblage. There is much that José can gain from the rich queer network of locative media; the bigger question here is which variables influence willingness to participate in the invited hybridisation.

### **3. The minimalist**

*Jason, 40, sometimes has sex with men but does not identify as gay. When he wants to hook up with someone he downloads Grindr, surfs it only for long enough to find someone local to come over to his apartment, and then deletes the app again until the next time he wants to hook up, in a cyclical*

*pattern that repeats every month or so. He is not interested in chatting online, nor in dating or meeting in gay bars, pubs or nightclubs. He prefers not to spend too long getting to know a 'match' in person, preferring to prioritise sex. To this end when he messages another user online he opens with the question 'what are you into?' and, after establishing they are interested in 'no strings' sex, he checks what specific sexual practices they prefer and whether they are free immediately. Jason reasons that sex is the primary intended use for these apps, and that to think otherwise is naïve.*

Contrary to popular assumptions, the minimalist user may well be aware of a range of MSM locative media products and enrolled on several, even if only intermittently. Their restricted participation does not necessarily foreclose any experience with this technology. It merely suggests that their use is oriented to their goal of expediting offline sexual encounter. One could even argue that this approach reflects Sherry Turkle's (2011) concern that technology inhibits embodied communication, although Turkle's anxieties centre on the intensification of online communication as a substitute for meaningful socialisation, whereas for the minimalist, emotional rapport is not required for sexual encounter (indeed, it may even inhibit the erotic potential of precisely this kind of meeting). In this dataset, many participants demonstrating 'minimalist' identity traits are comfortable with operating apps precisely *because* they prioritise physical encounter over online communication; moreover, they prioritise casual, non-intimate sexual encounters over dating, relationships or even repeat encounters with previous partners. After all, by logging into an online platform such as Grindr, the user is committing his spatial coordinates to the algorithms of a program that prioritises spatial proximity over any other variable for partner matching.

The minimalist user is often typecast by others as closeted, sexually opportunistic or more generally as obstructive to collectivist notions of queer community, but the fact that their mode of engagement is more fleeting, more goal-oriented and less interested in socialised paths to encounter is moot. The minimalist is using these apps in their simplest sense, as a networked assemblage of people and



devices. For users like Jason, the hybridisation that results from the assemblage is distinctive only in that it makes meetings happen, and if a new apparatus becomes available that scopes potential partners more efficiently (eliminating the Time-waster typology, perhaps), the minimalist would switch without hesitation. In short, for the minimalist there is no collectively imagined community or meaningful space fostered by the hybrid app environment, but that is not an issue because the minimalist's mode of use remains viable.

Despite the logical assumption that MSM locative dating apps are able to overlay heteronormative physical space with a queerer virtual network or 'skin' of men seeking other men for erotic encounter, and therefore construct a place for the queer bodies who are normally 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996) in heteronormative society, as a practice-based identity the minimalist user is himself 'out of place' in this app-mediated online network because his focus remains in the physical environment. For this kind of user, the app provides a means to an end rather than a tenable environment for meaningful connection in or of itself. From the point of view of the minimalist however, the time waster, and even to an extent the embracer, are both typologies that are antithetical to how MSM locative technology platforms are best utilised. The embracer is comfortable with the hybridisation of public and private, online and offline, which does not suit the low-key approach of the minimalist; meanwhile the time-waster squanders their own and others' time online by pursuing virtual rapport at the expense of a commitment to physical meeting: even though, as José's narrative demonstrates, the reality may differ altogether.

Again, this is not to say that the minimalist's approach to the assemblage is wrong; on the contrary, he efficiently utilises the affordances of contemporary hybridisation. Theoretically, technological hybridisation enables users to attend to both physical and virtual environments at the same time, ideally generating richer interpersonal connection (Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011). Locative male-male partner-seeking apps evidence this ability with an ostensibly undirected but widely

practiced focus on accelerated encounter to sexual contact. On Grindr for example, matches are ranked by proximity, with the ‘grid’ of available men rearranging in real-time as both the mobile app user and others move around their physical environment in order to expedite localised encounter based on shared desire. Apps can therefore evaluate the local topography in order to save time in having to scope out ideal partners, and cater both to those users seeking social or dating connections with those looking to expedite ‘hook-ups’ in their own or a nearby partner’s home. A user like Jason therefore epitomises the dichotomy of these locative media platforms: he is using the GPS function of the technology to seamlessly hybridise his online scoping with offline sexual encounter, and he does so extremely efficiently. Yet at the same time, his style of use jars with other users and also the officially marketed image of these apps as constituting devices for neighborliness or a similarly subjectively-experienced queer community.

## **Conclusions**

The embodied experience of technological involvement in everyday life is key to understanding geographies of sexualities now and in the future. This chapter has posited that locative MSM dating and hook-up apps demonstrate one way in which ‘people incorporate digital media into their routine practices of relating’ (Baym 2010, p. 5), but it has also pursued the less-asked question of what this form of technological assemblage looks like in practice, and how digital identities, with all their quirks and subjectivities, are implicated in this involvement. Focusing on the *use* of apps as platforms that cohere different practice-based identities, rather than their more obvious post-human qualities alone, offers an insight into how technological mediation interplays with lived spatial and social concerns. We have seen that different practice-based identities enact different forms of hybridisation, with ‘embracers’ and ‘minimalists’ moving comfortably between online and offline spaces, while ‘time-wasters’ may resist moving offline. Demonstrating how hybridisation functions via mobile technologies not just theoretically, but as it pertains to practice-based identities, valuably extends

work by Angela Meah (2014) in interrogating masculinities, identities and practices to understand how they combine (or resist combination) in the circulations of technology, people and spaces. These are circulations that look set to dominate social and sexual communications for years to come.

My aim in this chapter has been to illustrate how MSM apps help to develop quite distinctive practice-based identities, and do so in ways that encourage both scrutiny of other queer users as well as self-reflection for the user's own position in a complex and novel technological assemblage. As Meah (2014: 205) notes, scholarly interpretations based on qualitative observations in fieldwork 'must be considered provisional' since they are based on a limited sample and may not reflect the experiences of others outside that scope. Nevertheless, the 'provisional' picture built up by the typologies identified in this chapter is striking for what they tell us about how technology users pursue different routes to embodied connection. Therefore, although different 'types' of users understand their participation in technological hybridisation in different ways and with different outcomes, it is the *mode* of use, rather than inherent characteristics of a person, that informs engagement in digital-physical sexual encounter. The typologies I have described in this article reflect the ongoing tendency of MSM app users to categorise online bodies into assumed groups. However, by understanding these typologies as flexible modes of use rather than describing 'types' of person, they come to constitute practice-based identities. The practice-based identities on display here refer not to the individual user but to certain modes of behaviour that can identify a certain range of users, or a quality or tendency *in that use*. For any user, app use evolves over time; indeed it *must* if mutually satisfying social or sexual encounters are to develop. These locative media also represent different things for different queer bodies at different times – as a tool for encounter, an educational resource, a drug trading platform or even a virtual lifeline on a lonely night. Locative app users must navigate tensions between the possibilities offered by the platforms and more ambiguous or problematic experiences when practicing technological hybridisation.

A key point of exploration in this chapter has been how technological hybridisation impacts on embodied encounter. Digital-physical hybridisation is differently practiced by different bodies at different times, and the socio-sexual environment of queer locative dating and hook-up apps is no exception. As we have seen, hybridity is realised not just in the tantalising overlaying of virtual queer networks onto neutral geographical space, but also in the transition from online conversation to physical meeting. The sophistication of the locative technology in use invites this constantly-in-production hybridity, but generates its own inefficiencies when these practice-based identities meet in physical space. The newness of these platforms means that commonly held social codes for use are still under-established. Such issues may include incompatibility (sexually or socially) between two users only realised through physical encounter, or uncertainty regarding the social codes that should mediate physical encounter. The sheer plurality in modes of use impacts on established social norms for intimate relations, with the end result revealing an ambiguity in agreed models for interpersonal communication both online and offline. The fact that different users engage with the platforms in different ways is further complicated by the tendency of each user to approach each app differently and search for different outcomes on each. In this contextual flux, satisfying sexual encounter is far from guaranteed. There is therefore real value in continuing critical debate that interrogates how technology mediates real-life social and sexual encounters in embodied space, and what this means for queer technology, identity and belonging.

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