Gay men's construction and management of identity on Grindr

Rusi Jaspal
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK
Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

Abstract

This study explores gay men's construction and management of identity on Grindr. A sample of gay men was interviewed and the data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The following themes are outlined: (1) Constructing and re-constructing identities on Grindr; (2) Bolstering sexual self-efficacy; (3) Managing online and offline identities. Despite the apparent social psychological benefits of geospational gay social networking applications, the pressures of coercive norms on the application as well as perceived "addiction" to it can result in threats to identity, thereby challenging social and psychological wellbeing.

Keywords

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Correspondence

Professor Rusi Jaspal, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, De Montfort University, Leicester LE1-9BH, United Kingdom. Tel: 0116 257 7109. E-mail: rusi.jaspal@cantab.net

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Geospatial gay social networking mobile applications (henceforth "location-aware applications") play a significant role in the lives of many gay and bisexual men (GBM) (Goedel & Duncan, 2015). Grindr, which was launched in 2009, has emerged as one of the most important location-aware applications with over 2 million daily users in 192 countries.[1] Individuals use Grindr and similar location-aware applications for a variety of purposes – to meet new friends, to establish relationships and, in many cases, to arrange casual sexual encounters. Location-aware applications allow users to identify other GBM (often an "invisible" identity) in their geographical vicinity. Moreover, sexual minority men (and particularly those who are less open about their sexual identities) may prefer to utilize location-aware applications to connect with other men discreetly. This can also present challenges for managing online and offline identities.

Numerous studies have explored the social impact of the Internet for GBM's lives (see Grov et al., 2014). However, there has been only limited work on location-aware applications, some of which has examined the relationship between their use among MSM and sexual health/ HIV susceptibility (Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014; Young, Szekeres & Coates, 2013). Some studies have also explored the nature of application usage, i.e. its purposes (e.g. Dodge, 2014) and interpersonal dynamics between users (e.g. Blackwell & Birnholtz, 2015). However, this work has not examined the dynamic processes of constructing and managing identity on location-aware applications. The construction of a positive identity may be regarded as a component of sexual health, which itself has been defined as "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality" (WHO, 2006, p. 5). Drawing upon Identity Process Theory, the present study explores the construction and management of identity on Grindr among a diverse sample of British gay men.

Exploring gay sexuality on the Internet
Prior to the advent of the Internet, GBM used particular social and physical contexts to meet other men, such as saunas/ bathhouses, and bars/ clubs (Bérubé, 2003). In the 1970s, for example, many GBM employed subtle signifiers (e.g. "hankie code", colored handkerchiefs worn in back pockets) to communicate their sexual preferences (Snyder, 1989). When the Internet became widely available in the 1990s, it revolutionized the ways in which GBM could connect with one another. The Internet has enabled users *inter alia* (1) to identify other men much more easily than in many offline social settings where GBM constitute an invisible minority (Grov et al., 2014), and (2) to derive a sense of community and to meet potential sexual partners in a manner that safeguards anonymity (Shaw, 1997). This community can be accessed online in the privacy of one's own home (Weinrich, 1997). Moreover, some GBM feel safer meeting others online, rather than in cruising grounds for instance, where there may be an elevated risk of being mugged or assaulted (Hennelly, 2010). However, it is important to acknowledge that online spaces may not necessarily be safer in real terms, since some Grindr users have reportedly been targeted by violent criminals (e.g. BBC, 2015).

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[1] https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/grindr-gay-same-sex-bi-social/id308956623?mt=8, Accessed on 15 December 2015

Undoubtedly, the Internet has impacted sexual behavior and identity among GBM. For instance, in their empirical study of online/offline partner-seeking among GBM, Grov et al. (2013) found that those individuals who sought partners offline generally had fewer sexual partners than those seeking partners online, largely due to ease of access. In short, the Internet has facilitated new modes of self-identification and self-presentation among GBM, but it may also present challenges for how online and offline identities are managed.

Grindr: a new space for sexual self-definition
The advent of location-aware applications have once again transformed the ways in which GBM relate to one another and construe themselves as sexual subjects. Grindr, a leading location-aware application, allows its users to locate others in their geographical proximity with greater ease, spontaneity and frequency. When a Grindr user opens the application, he is presented with a grid of nearby users' photographs which are arranged in descending order of geographical proximity. Users can display a photograph, a brief headline, physical traits, the individual's search preferences, his geographical distance, and a short description.

Although GBM use location-aware applications for various purposes (van de Wiele & Tong, 2014), the search for casual sex constitutes a priority for many Grindr users. One survey revealed that 38% of their respondents reported using Grindr to find new sexual partners and that, on average, individuals reported opening the application over 8 times and spending 1.3 hours on it per day (Goedel and Duncan, 2015). These data suggest that Grindr constitutes an important aspect of some users' daily lives, and support the hypothesis that location-aware application users are generally more sexually active than non-users (Grov et al., 2013; Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014). Given the geospatial element of Grindr and other location-aware applications, the "boundaries" between online and offline worlds may be more tenuous.

Researching GBM's use of Grindr
The proliferation of location-aware applications has facilitated social and sexual contact between GBM, with implications for self-identity. In an important study of Grindr users, Blackwell and Birnholtz (2015) note that the Grindr enables people to connect with one another in ways that transcend geographic boundaries, itself "often blurring the boundaries around physical places and communities defined by shared interests in particular activities" (p. 17). This transcendence of physical space and "communities" can offer new ways of constructing identity. For instance, a sexual preference that is habitually concealed due to social stigma can be manifested more openly when one feels affiliated to a community of like-minded others. Yet, herein lies a potential problem - modes of self-definition and self-presentation are visible to other users whose responses may not be affirmative. Indeed, in their study, Blackwell and Birnholtz describe Grindr users' competing desires to appear attractive to other users, on the one hand, and to maintain an appropriate level of "identifiability" on the application, on the other. Crucially, online identities can become "visible" in offline settings.

In his small-scale interview study of gay college men, Dodge (2014) argues that Grindr and other location-aware applications enable young gay men to construct and develop a gay identity, partly because it allows them to establish

relations with other gay men in a "safe" space. Similarly, Castañeda's (2015) study of Grindr use among young Filipino gay men demonstrates that they utilize Grindr in order to develop and explore a gay sexual identity by sharing own personal narratives with other gay men. Castañeda refers to this socialization process as "learn[ing] how to be gay" (p. 29).

Furthermore, focusing on the interpersonal aspects of using Grindr, Birnholtz et al. (2014) explored the language of self-presentation on Grindr focusing particularly on the linguistic strategies people employ for managing stigmatized identities (e.g. being a seeker of casual sex). They found that users used euphemisms for engaging in socially stigmatized behaviours (e.g. seeking casual sex). These included "fun," "NSA" and "friends". In a recent study, Brubaker, Ananny and Crawford (2014) focused on the reasons underpinning gay men's decisions to leave Grindr. In in-depth interviews, several participants cited the focus on casual sex and their perceived inability to establish more meaningful relationships as key reasons for leaving.

These studies collectively illustrate the importance of examining self-identity processes in relation to Grindr use, since users strive to gain acceptance and inclusion from others on the application and they present themselves in ways that may enhance these fundamental psychological processes. Even as some individuals leave the application, they acknowledge the consequences of their departure for self-identity.

Identity on Grindr

In order to explore individuals' conceptualizations of Grindr and its impact for identity, the study draws upon tenets of Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986) from social psychology. Identity Process Theory provides a socio-psychological framework for understanding the impact of the social environment for identity. The main premise of the theory is that human beings construct identity through engagement with the following two processes:

- *assimilation-accommodation* refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. beginning of think of oneself as a Grindr user) and the identity adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure (e.g. seeing oneself as a Grindr user and, thus, as more confident about sexual expression).
- *evaluation* refers to the process of attributing meaning and value to the contents of identity (e.g. viewing one's identity as a Grindr user as a positive and empowering aspect of the self).

These processes are in turn guided by the following motivational principles:

- *self-esteem* – feelings of personal worth;
- *continuity* – a sense of connection between past, present and future;
- *self-efficacy* – feelings of competence and control;
- *distinctiveness* – perception of uniqueness and difference from others;
- *coherence* – feelings of compatibility between relevant aspects of identity.

Individuals are motivated to seek feelings of self-esteem, continuity and so on. When the identity processes cannot be guided by these principles due, for instance, to an overt challenge to self-esteem, *identity is said to be threatened.* Identity Process Theory suggests that the threatened individual will attempt to cope with threat. For

instance, in heteronormative offline settings assimilating and accommodating one's identity as a Grindr user may be challenging for self-esteem if individuals come to believe that being gay is immoral and unnatural (Author, 2011). Conversely, on Grindr one is likely to be exposed to more gay affirmative imagery and language and, thus, feelings of self-esteem may facilitate the assimilation-accommodation of one's gay sexuality (Birnholtz et al., 2014). On Grindr individuals may feel more able to re-construe self-presentation in ways that bolster their feelings of differentiation from others, thereby enhancing the distinctiveness principle, as highlighted in this article.

In the absence of empirical research that examines the meanings attributed to Grindr and its impact for identity processes, this study set out to address the following research questions:

- *How does individuals' use of Grindr influence the motivational principles of identity?*
- *How do individuals evaluate Grindr as a space for constructing a sexual identity (vis-à-vis offline spaces)?*

METHOD

Participants

Using a snowball sampling strategy, 18 self-identified gay men were recruited at two sexual health charities located in London and in the East Midlands of England. Participated were originally invited to participate in a social psychological study of sexual identity, health and behavior, but Grindr emerged as an important topic of discussion in the interviews. Some of the participants originally recruited at the sexual health charities subsequently recommended the study to friends and acquaintances who might be eligible for participation. Fifteen individuals were White British and 3 were of South Asian heritage. Participants were aged between 22 and 32 years (M=26.6). Twelve participants had university-level qualifications, and the remaining 6 had completed college education. Ten interviewees considered themselves "completely out," 6 as "out to most people" and 2 as "out only to close friends." Only 10 respondents felt comfortable disclosing to others that they used Grindr and several of these individuals disclosed this information only to other gay friends. This may be attributed to shame surrounding casual sex and the social representation of Grindr as a "sex app," as discussed below.

Analytic approach

These data are drawn from a separate empirical study which explored the inter-relations between sexual identity, health and behavior. In that study, participants spoke extensively about the important role of Grindr in their lives and identities, which was deemed to merit attention in a separate article. The current article is a re-analysis of that data set. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of a series of exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule began with questions regarding self-description and identity, followed by some questions/probes that elicited information concerning attitudes towards Grindr, their experiences of using the application, and interpersonal relations with other gay men. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) is a qualitative analytic technique that aims to capture participants' attempts to make sense of relevant aspects of their personal and social worlds. The approach conceptualizes the participant as a "cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being," and assumes a relationship between verbal reports and the cognitions and emotions with which they are concerned (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). The method focuses on the meanings that experiences hold for the individual, such as using Grindr, and its idiographic mode of enquiry facilitates in-depth exploration of how each individual conceptualizes Grindr, the meanings they attribute to it, and how using Grindr may affect identity processes.

The author transcribed the recordings and studied the transcripts. During each reading of the transcripts preliminary interpretations were noted in the left margin. Then the right margin was used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. The list of themes was reviewed rigorously against the data to ensure their compatibility and interview extracts were listed against each corresponding theme. At this stage specific interview extracts, which were considered representative of the themes, were selected for presentation in this article. Finally, three superordinate themes that reflected the analysis were developed and ordered into a coherent narrative structure.

ANALYSIS

The following three superordinate themes are outlined: (1) Constructing and re-constructing identities on Grindr; (2) Bolstering sexual self-efficacy; (3) Managing online and offline identities.

Constructing and re-constructing identities on Grindr

In making sense of their identities in relation to their application usage, participants widely acknowledged the sexualization of Grindr, that is, the social norm of seeking sex on the application:

> Grindr's not always the place you want it to be, is it… It can be very sexual and it's like you're on it you must be looking for a shag and if you're not one day then people are like "what are you doing here?" or "yeah OK granddad, there something wrong with you?" [...] Sometimes you sort of just think "well OK might as well then." (Michael, 29)

Some interviewees felt frustrated at their inability to establish non-sexual friendships and relationships on Grindr, given the cultural emphasis on casual sex on Grindr (Brubaker et al., 2014). In view of the perceived sexualization of Grindr, those individuals who genuinely did seek other forms of social relationship (such as friendship or a romantic relationship) felt excluded from the application and unable to establish interpersonal relations with other users. Some interviewees reported being judged, ignored or blocked by other users and, in some cases, they allegedly faced denigration because of their non-normative behavior on the application (i.e. not seeking sex). As Michael noted, the coercive social norm of seeking sex on Grindr led to the assumption among users that everybody was necessarily seeking sexual

encounters and that there must be "something wrong" with users with alternative intentions. Indeed, Licoppe et al. (2015) have also identified a strong norm of sex-seeking on Grindr. Otherising responses of this kind could lead to an uncritical acceptance of, and self-alignment with, the social norm of seeking sex, thereby sidelining other forms of social interaction on the application. As exemplified by Michael's account, in which he reported feeling unable to resist sexual advances on Grindr, several respondents appeared to lose their sense of agency and self-efficacy and, thus, resigned themselves to the "reality" of Grindr as a sexual cruising application.

Although respondents unanimously acknowledged the sexualization of Grindr, this was not always evaluated in negative terms. Participants noted that they at least sometimes did seek sex on Grindr and positively evaluated the easy availability of sexual partners on the application. This obviated the obstacles associated with finding sexual partners in other (offline) contexts:

> I see it as, it's like a quick fix for me because you can sort of log on and hook up if you fancy it without all the chitchat or chat up lines that come before really. (Peter, 22)

> I'm not always after fun when I'm on but sometimes I am and it's ace for that. (Isaac, 22)

Peter used the metaphor of Grindr as a "quick fix" while Isaac described it as "ace" for locating sexual partners. This positive evaluation of Grindr was often juxtaposed with the challenges of seeking sexual partners in other social spaces, such as nightclubs, where it might need to be preceded by small talk or a drink in a bar. For some individuals, Grindr had radically changed the way in which they acquired sexual partners, and increased the number of sexual partners they perceived to be available to them. Indeed, the search for sexual encounters has been identified as one of the purposes of using Grindr (Gudelunas, 2012). They no longer felt obliged to invest time in identifying a potential sexual partner and in seeking their esteem through the use of "chat up lines." Interviewees' accounts suggested that these new and easy opportunities performed an empowering function and bolstered self-efficacy in relation to their sexual identity.

Grindr could be construed as benefitting sexual identity partly because it facilitated regular and varied sexual encounters. Grindr reportedly allowed its users to present a particular desire to other users and to construct an identity consistent with this desire:

> Grindr's like you can literally just go from being one thing one day and something totally different another… Sometimes I'm in the mood to be a bottom and you just stick it on your profile, or a top. (Steve, 25)

Participants' accounts suggested that Grindr enabled them to perceive competence and control over their sex lives, and individuals celebrated their increased ability to seek out different types of sex in accordance with their desires. Some respondents regarded this as more difficult on the gay scene where there might be more

identifiability by sexual role. Grindr appeared to facilitate the *selection* of a contextually appropriate identity, while the gay scene was perceived as reifying these identities resulting in one's identifiability as *either* "top" (sexually insertive) *or* "bottom" (sexually receptive). Steve, who described himself as sexually versatile, noted that he could easily find insertive or receptive partners simply by amending the description on his profile. Grindr enabled individuals to perform specific identities in different contexts. The mutability of identity – not only sexual identity - on the application was liberating for some participants, given the difficulties of doing so in offline settings:

> I could be like "today I fancy being 'Other' and not 'South Asian'. (Raj, 30)

> It's not exactly lying but it's more sort of like unclear isn't it? "White" just sounds a bit plain, I think, sometimes. (James, 31)

In addition to re-constructing sexual identity on Grindr, some participants described this process in relation to other identities. For instance, Raj and James outlined the ability to represent their *ethnic* identity in novel and creative ways on the application. Raj felt that his South Asian identity was stigmatized in predominantly White gay offline spaces (see Author, in press), while James highlighted the "plainness" of White identity which he felt obscured the diversity of people within this category. An alternative ethno-racial identity that some individuals presented on Grindr was that of "Other", which protected them from social stigma. It appears that individuals laid claim to those social categories on Grindr that could provide them with feelings of distinctiveness from others. This was largely dependent on social context, as social context determines, at least in part, how social categories will be evaluated.

The ability to change one's profile photograph also provided opportunities for re-constructing one's identity. This facilitated a form of self-presentation that was consistent with the identity that individuals wished to project to others in the sense of a "desired self" (see Markus & Nurius, 1986 for more on "possible selves"):

> I take lots of selfies and then I'll enhance it and stick on one that I really like, not necessarily like a pic that is 100 per cent like me at this point in time.. So yeah sometimes it's probably a bit of a surprise from the pic to me in person but still it's about getting the attention and then taking it from there, isn't it? (Peter, 22)

> My face probably doesn't get me that much attention but to be fair my body does more so it's that, that's what I want to go first in a chat. (Michael, 29)

There was some anxiety among interviewees concerning physical attractiveness and body image, as observed in previous research with gay men (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Participants discussed the challenges of "bad hair days" and "looking their best" before entering gay spaces, as well as the importance of "first impressions." Conversely, Grindr appeared to provide them with greater flexibility in self-presentation. Peter and several others noted that "selfies" allowed them to present themselves consistently with their "desired selves". Peter acknowledged that the

"selfies" that he displayed on his Grindr profile did not always correspond to reality due to their digital enhancement.[2] However, this did enable him to forge, and to project to other users, a particular version of himself. Similarly, Michael also re-construed the identity that he presented to other users by foregrounding his physique which he believed would be more appealing than a photograph of his face. This enabled some individuals to "set the tone" for subsequent interactions.

The profile photograph was important because it could be used to "prime" other users to interact in particular ways:

> I find that Grindr does help like to bridge what I am and what I want to like be, like it's hard to explain but the conversation kind of like goes in the right direction because they've seen the pic and know I'm on for NSA. (Isaac, 22)

Some of the Grindr users who participated in this study manifested greater agency in self-presentation. This may be beneficial for self-efficacy. Like Michael, Isaac utilized his Grindr profile (and particularly his profile photograph) to foreground particular identity aspects in self-presentation to others. Isaac was one of the respondents who used Grindr primarily for seeking sexual encounters and who wished to foreground their sexual identity (as seekers of "no strings attached" sex) in conversations with other users. The flexibility and agency afforded by Grindr were advantageous for interviewees who felt able to re-construct their identities in accordance with context and desire.

Bolstering sexual self-efficacy
Some interviewees had not disclosed their sexual identity to heterosexual friends and family members and, thus, enacted their sexual identities discreetly, often by using Grindr:

> I'm not totally, totally out, like to everyone and so Grindr can be less like in your face. (Ben, 27)

> It's been a way to meet up with lads discreetly. You know, without your parents or your family noticing, you message a guy, he answers, you meet up, do whatever and then you're back home and they're none the wiser. (Michael, 29)

Some individuals avoided using gay social venues to seek sexual partners to avoid the risk of compromising their desired level of "outness". Indeed, several interviewees described the initial challenges of attempting to meet sexual partners while maintaining discretion as an impediment to their self-efficacy – they felt less empowered as "closeted" gay men. Some interviewees reported having to make excuses in order to depart surreptitiously for a sexual encounter, while others lamented their several missed opportunities due to the social stigma of casual sex. Given this social stigma, some individuals concealed this aspect of their lives from others in order to protect their self-esteem.

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[2] Some individuals digitally enhanced their profile photographs using features on their mobile device, such as by adding a "chrome" effect, adjusting the colour setting etc.

Michael and Ben perceived Grindr as a means of enabling them to find sexual partners while maintaining their desired level of "out-ness". Their accounts suggested that this bolstered their sense of self-efficacy and protected their self-esteem, as they perceived a renewed ability to seek sexual partners despite the social constraints of not disclosing their sexual identity to others. This may be particularly applicable to gay men who identify as "down low" (Wolitski et al., 2006). Indeed, Michael described the step-by-step process of meeting sexual partners and the ease with which he could now enact his sexual identity. The reality of homophobia constituted an important factor in participants' decision to rely on Grindr as a means of connecting with sexual partners – they could seek sex discreetly.

In addition to perceived stigma from heterosexuals, interviewees also highlighted the emerging social stigma of casual sex among gay men, commonly referred to as "slut shaming" (see Blackwell & Birnholtz, 2015, for more on "slut shaming"):

> I got to say there is a bit of turning your nose up at you if you meet a guy and have sex or whatever, it's like you come across slutty and nobody really likes it even if they're doing it too, so I don't like people knowing my business... On Grindr you check your message, reply, and nobody really knows how much you're slutting around [laughs]. (James, 31)

James preferred not to disclose his desire to seek casual sex with other men because he did not wish to be perceived as "slutty." In an attempt to protect his esteem among other gay men, James concealed his sexual behavior by using Grindr rather than seeking sexual partners more publicly on the gay scene. Furthermore, some respondents reported concealing their identity on Grindr, for instance, by displaying a photograph of their torso rather than of their face. This too was attributed to fears of "slut shaming." They did not wish to be recognized online by acquaintances associated with their lives offline. In short, Grindr, as a discreet means of connecting with others, restored the sense of self-efficacy that was sometimes challenged by the social stigma of casual sex among gay men.

The themes surrounding the flexibility of identity construction on Grindr and increased agency over one's sexual behavior were powerfully reflected across the participant sample. Interviewees seemed to perceive greater agency over the identities they constructed and partner selection, but also over the *type of sex* they engaged in:

> It makes me feel pretty much in the driver's seat about the stuff I do and who I meet up with because you can, actually we all do really quiz a guy before meeting up "top or bottom, big or small, soft or hard", that sort of thing, so it doesn't happen much that I'm you know in a tricky situation. (Steve, 25)

> I've definitely found it easier to say 'no' to some things and to some guys on Grindr because it's more kind of like anonymous right. (Peter, 22)

Some GBM find it difficult to negotiate the type of sex they have and, crucially, condom use (Shernoff, 2006), which is contingent upon several social, situational

and psychological factors (Peterson & DiClemente, 2000). Interestingly, those respondents who indicated difficulties in negotiating sex with their partners when meeting them in person highlighted the increased self-efficacy that their use of Grindr conversely afforded them. For instance, Steve felt that Grindr made him "feel pretty much in the driver's seat" both in terms of the people he met and the type of sex he engaged in. His inability to reject the sexual advances of men who propositioned him in gay saunas and dark rooms sometimes led to unsatisfactory sexual encounters. This later induced feelings of regret, guilt and decreased self-esteem.

Conversely, Grindr enabled its users to "quiz a guy" and "to say 'no' to some things" while conversing on the application, thereby bolstering self-efficacy. The ability to discuss these matters prior to meeting in person provided feelings of sexual empowerment and increased self-efficacy in the negotiation of sex. In view of the social psychological benefits of using Grindr, several interviewees had come to regard this as a primary means of meeting other men. However, there was also some acknowledgement of the challenges of managing online and offline identities.

Managing online and offline identities
Participants' criticisms of Grindr focused largely on the management of identity online and offline. For instance, while some individuals certainly felt empowered by their newfound ability to create and present particular identities on Grindr, there was some discussion of the difficulties in maintaining a sense of coherence between their self-presentation online and offline:

> Seriously I'm another person when I'm on Grindr… Sometimes that's not such a good thing… You think "yep, this guy is into me" and the conversation goes really well but in person you meet and he's not really into you because you're not acting with the same confidence or something, you know, or saying the same stuff is difficult you know. (Matt, 27)

> You're putting your profile together or whatever and you're like saying horny stuff on it but then I meet up and actually wear my heart on my sleeve a bit.. I reckon that freaks some guys out a bit because they're just after NSA [no strings attached sex] (Dave, 24)

Matt noted that, while he presented himself as a confident individual in online interactions with others, he sometimes found it difficult to manifest the same level of self-confidence in subsequent face-to-face interactions. Grindr enabled him to create a socially desirable identity which bolstered his self-presentation and provided him with self-esteem but he felt unable to live up to the high expectations he believed this created in others. Similarly, interviewees noted that one of the ways of getting other people's attention on Grindr was to display a provocative photograph of oneself or to make sexually provocative statements on one's profile page ("horny things"). This constructed a sexualized identity online, which in turn created expectations about the user's intentions offline. Yet, when Dave met with his Grindr acquaintances in person, he sometimes found it difficult to "adhere" to the identity that he had constructed online.

Both Dave and Matt believed the disjointedness between their self-presentation online and offline discouraged some people from pursuing further relations with them. Participants' accounts evidenced a threat to psychological coherence, given that some came to view their online and offline identities as incompatible - they struggled to perceive any unifying thread between them. Some individuals even expressed shame about the sexual nature of their Grindr profile when they met an acquaintance in person. As highlighted above, the attempt to resolve this threat to identity by pursuing the identity that they perceived as more "authentic" to their sense of self often resulted in undesirable interpersonal consequences.

A second challenge was presented by perceived "addiction" to Grindr. Respondents expressed the view that Grindr needed to be "used wisely" and "in moderation," given that it could reportedly "lead to addiction" like alcohol or drugs might:

> I do think it's taking over my life a bit... You're watching a film on Netflix and you go "I'll just check my messages" and then you're on until like 4 in the morning, just chatting and chatting and trying to hook up.. It feels like a massive waste of time sometimes but I'm hooked. (Peter, 22)

> Sometimes I end up falling asleep with it open on my phone and I wake up thinking I should really get a life. I feel like an idiot (Mike, 28)

Like Peter and Mike, several interviewees believed that they were spending an excessive amount of time on Grindr, which distracted them from other important daily activities. This has also been observed in previous qualitative work on Grindr (e.g. Brubaker, Ananny & Crawford, 2014). However, the present study demonstrates some of the psychological consequences of this - Peter metaphorically described Grindr as "taking over my life" while Mike reportedly felt "like an idiot" due to his activity on the application. There was a clear sense of shame in relation to their use of Grindr. While acknowledging its positive aspects, some individuals believed that their excessive use of the application was having an adverse effect on their offline identities by encroaching on their social lives.

While most felt that they used the application moderately, some expressed concern about possible addiction to it. The present data show that this could be challenging for one's sense of self-esteem due to the perceived stigma of using Grindr so frequently. Frequent usage was perceived as implying an antisocial personality, which led some individuals to question their own self-worth. Individuals in this position actively strove to reduce their use of Grindr or to delete it altogether (Brubaker et al., 2014). Failure to meet this objective often resulted in feelings of decreased self-esteem and, crucially, self-efficacy given their perceived lack of self-control:

> John (31): I find it really frustrating basically when I've deleted it yeah and then I'm in a new place and I'm like downloading it from the app store again.

> Interview: Why do you find it frustrating?

John: Because I know I'm like letting myself down you know but I can't help it, like control it.

The self-efficacy principle of identity played a key role in interviewees' perceptions of Grindr, primarily because several felt that they lost all control and competence due to their "addiction" to it:

When I go on holiday like somewhere new it's there's like a massive curiosity I have about what the guys are like, who is online... I've spent the whole day in my holiday room just looking for a hook-up when I could have been like actually talking in a human way and like exploring the place and what have you. (Kumar, 30)

Participants described aspects of their lives which they perceived to be adversely affected by their use of Grindr. Kumar reflected on his inability to enjoy holidays abroad due to the constant desire to log onto Grindr in order to discover local Grindr users. Although Kumar had planned to spend his holiday sightseeing and meeting new people, he described the compulsion to remain in his hotel where he had a consistent Internet connection and, thus, access to Grindr. This was clearly disruptive to his plans and to his ability to relate to other people. Several respondents echoed this hindrance to their social lives, which they felt unable to resist. This inability to resist temptation also led some to question their self-worth, which jeopardized self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

Drawing upon tenets of Identity Process Theory from social psychology, the present study set out to explore the meanings that GBM append to Grindr, a leading geospatial gay social networking mobile application, and the impact that their use of Grindr can have for identity processes. Previous research has explored the role of the Internet (see Grov et al., 2014) and location-aware applications (Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014; Young, Szekeres & Coates, 2013) in the lives of GBM. Some of this work alludes to the significance of studying self-identity processes in relation to Grindr use, such as how particular patterns of self-presentation may impinge upon self-construal at a psychological level. Unlike the present study, none of the previous studies has taken identity processes as an empirical starting-point.

The meanings appended to Grindr and its implications for identity processes are clearly complex and are heavily contingent upon social context. While under some circumstances interviewees' sense of self-efficacy was bolstered by their use of Grindr, under other circumstances the same principle of identity could be seriously jeopardized. Furthermore, respondents were ambivalent about their reasons for using Grindr – it could be construed as a sexual cruising application in some contexts and as a mechanism for forming platonic friendships in others. Yet, the present data illustrate a coherent pattern of social psychological engagement with the application – people construe and utilize it in ways that can enhance identity processes. When intervening factors cause Grindr to challenge identity processes (e.g. addiction to the application), individuals came to regard the application as an impediment and

contemplated departure from it. Given that Brubaker et al.'s (2014) work on departing Grindr did not consider identity threat, the present study provides a novel perspective on users' (dis)engagement with Grindr.

The findings of this study can be clustered around three overarching themes that focus on (1) how gay and bisexual users construct and re-construct their identities on Grindr, (2) how Grindr can enhance the self-efficacy principle of identity, and (3) the challenges associated with straddling the boundaries between their lives and identities in online and offline settings. There were two principal "tension-points" in participants' accounts. On the one hand, interviewees acknowledged the strong norm of seeking casual sex on Grindr but, on the other, they described the powerful stigmatizing effects of "slut shaming" which conversely impeded the search for casual sex. Furthermore, while interviewees' accounts highlighted the positive effects of using Grindr for self-efficacy, there was also some indication that continued use of the application had come to undermine the same principle of identity. These tension-points could present challenges for the assimilation-accommodation and evaluation processes of identity.

The sexualization of Grindr and "slut shaming"
Interviewees acknowledged the coercive norm of seeking casual sex on Grindr, which could lead even those who were not seeking casual sex to feel excluded from the Grindr "community" and many reported negative experiences of prejudice and even denigration from other users. Indeed, individuals who contravene strong ingroup norms may be positioned as ingroup "Black Sheep" which can invite harsh repercussions from other ingroup members (Marquest, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988). This could plausibly challenge the otherized individual's self-esteem. The strong social norm of casual sex led some people to accept it and to modify their behavior accordingly. Despite initially wishing to develop platonic relationships on Grindr, some individuals described their inability to resist the sexualizing norm and felt "sucked in." Thus, some users assimilated and accommodated casual sex in their identity, which in turn displaced other desires on the application.

The vast majority of interviewees were relatively open about their sexual identities. Nevertheless, many of them were secretive about their use of Grindr partly because they believed there was social stigma appended to gay sexuality – in particular, the stereotype that gay men are sexually promiscuous (Kahn & Fingerhut, 2011). Furthermore, despite the overt sexualization of Grindr and the relative acceptability of sexual promiscuity in gay communities, there was also an element of "slut shaming" on Grindr and in offline settings. Due to the associated social stigma, the assimilation and accommodation of casual sex in identity could challenge self-esteem among application users. As a coping strategy, some Grindr users resorted to concealing their identity on the application or to using subtle linguistic techniques for communicating their desire for casual sex. Indeed, the use of linguistic techniques for averting stigma has been observed elsewhere (e.g. Birnholtz et al., 2014). Moreover, the prevalence of "slut shaming" led to the compartmentalization of their online and offline lives, as a coping strategy – although some individuals constructed a sexualized identity on Grindr, they did not wish to project this identity in offline settings. There was an emerging silence around casual sex which in turn led to less discussion of issues related to sexual preferences and sexual health (cf.

Shernoff, 2006). The desire to protect identity amid the tension between slut shaming and the social norm of casual sex resulted in suboptimal strategies for coping with threat.

Grindr: identity enhancement or threat?
Participants' accounts of using Grindr demonstrated its complex implications for identity processes. Identity Process Theory highlights a number of motivational principles that are central to the construction of identity (Breakwell, 1986). For some interviewees, use of Grindr had a clear impact for their sense of self-efficacy. Fundamentally, Grindr accentuated the agency that they had in constructing, re-constructing and projecting identity in accordance with context and desire. On Grindr and plausibly on other social networking or dating platforms, identities are no longer perceived as "fixed" but rather as mutable and malleable, as suggested by Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986). Interviewees perceived increased feelings of control and competence over their identities. For instance, by using features on the application (e.g. displaying a profile photo or text), they felt more able to project a sexualized identity in order to seek casual sex. This facilitated more frequent and varied casual sexual encounters than in offline settings. Individuals appeared to perceive agency over their multiple identities as they could foreground some over others and attenuate those that were stigmatized, with positive outcomes for self-esteem and distinctiveness.

Some of the research into GBM's use of gay location-aware applications has contended that there is a positive correlation between application usage and sexual risk-taking (Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014; Young, Szekeres & Coates, 2013). However, participants' accounts evidenced their increased self-efficacy in relation to the negotiation of sexual practices and safer sex. In short, they often initiated conversations about the type of sex (e.g. oral, anal) they were looking for and the safety procedures that they might follow (e.g. asking their partner their HIV status, using a condom). Some contrasted this enhanced level of self-efficacy on Grindr with sexual encounters that had been initiated in person, where they had felt pressured into engaging in undesired sexual behaviors. On Grindr, they felt that they could simply decline an undesired sexual practice or, indeed, risk. Although people take sexual risks for a number of reasons (Shernoff, 2006), decreased self-efficacy is a key reason (e.g. Schwarzer & Fuchs, 1995). The present data suggest that the self-efficacy principle of identity may be bolstered on Grindr, with potentially positive outcomes for sexual health. This newfound agency over identity and behavior may be empowering because it does not necessarily compromise the level of "outness" about one's sexual identity or behavior – people are able to be and do what they want without having to face social stigma.

Despite the potential benefits of using Grindr for self-efficacy, there were competing indications of threats to identity associated with use of the application. Interviewees perceived some stigma surrounding overt use of Grindr, partly because of the association of the application with casual sex. The shame surrounding their use of Grindr, and particularly when they perceived their use of the application to be excessive, could be challenging for individuals' sense of self-esteem. Moreover, although the application facilitated fluidity in identity and enabled users to construct and project distinct identities in accordance with context and desire, there was some

evidence that this could result in threats to psychological coherence. The data suggested that some people simply failed to derive a sense of coherence between the identities that they projected in distinct contexts and thereby came to question the authenticity of their identities. Identity authenticity constitutes a key component of a positive sense of self (Vannini & Franzese, 2008)

Conclusions

This article summarizes the results of a small-scale qualitative study of the accounts of 18 gay men who use Grindr. Although it is acknowledged that the results cannot be generalized to the entire Grindr user population, a clear advantage of this qualitative approach is that it provides thoroughly contextualized and holistic insights into the relationship between Grindr and identity, as experienced by this particular sample of users. The research elucidates key areas of interests that should constitute the focus of future research using alternative methodological approaches. For instance, quantitative research facilitates an understanding of general trends in the dataset and systematic relationships between key constructs, while a more representative sample would provide greater scope for generalizability. Furthermore, although these data shed light on the experiences of a cohort of Grindr users, it is unclear how generalizable these findings might be to users of other location-aware applications such as Scruff and Tinder. This should be explored in future research.

Location-aware applications like Grindr can enhance identity processes and interpersonal relations among GBM. Despite the apparent social psychological benefits of applications, this study provides some evidence that the perceived pressures of coercive norms on the application as well as perceived "addiction" to it can also result in threats to identity, thereby challenging social and psychological wellbeing. The role of applications in GBM's lives needs to be acknowledged in policy and practice concerning health and wellbeing among this population. Therapeutic interventions that seek to enhance and modify health and social behaviors should take into account how GBM use applications like Grindr.

Further research into location-aware applications, using more generalizable methods and in other geographical contexts, is needed. However, the present study suggests that, for the participants in this study at least, location-aware applications appeared to play an important role in encouraging feelings of self-efficacy with potential benefits for sexual health and wellbeing. It would be most beneficial for future social and therapeutic interventions to acknowledge the use of location-aware applications, and to help GBM use such applications in ways that enhance, rather than threaten, identity processes. This could include workshops that explore the functions and implications of Grindr use for self-presentation, identity and wellbeing.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later

amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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