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We Can Lie About How We Met: MSM Identity on Geo-Social Networking Applications

Levi Lindsey
University of Denver

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We Can Lie About How We Met: MSM Identity on Geo-Social Networking Applications

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Levi Lindsey
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Advisor: Erika Polson, PhD
Abstract

Location-based applications (geo-social applications) gained popularity in 2010, for individuals to meet others around them with similar interests. These applications have become extremely popular within the MSM community (men who have sex with men) but have had limited success for other communities. Geo-social networking apps offer a unique opportunity for individuals to present their identities in a limited manner in order to meet other users. This research looks at how such identities are experienced, performed, and assembled digitally and why. Using a qualitative approach, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with users of the geo-social networking application, Grindr, regarding how they presented and experienced their identities in the application. These interviews yielded insight on the diverse usages of the application, how online identities are assembled and presented (mainly through presentation of photos), and how challenges in doing so are mitigated. When it came to presenting their “best selves”, which every user strived to do, the users utilized ‘self-branding’ techniques to choose the pieces of their identities that fit what the community valued the most (which echoes what offline MSM communities value). By branding themselves, users presented more appealing profiles, which made the community seem competitive. This competitive mentality influenced a sense of the users feeling commodified, while at times receiving negative feedback from others when they did not fit the community’s ‘norm’. These results indicate there is a negative paradox within the application, where the goal of connecting with people is overshadowed with the users feeling more separated from making meaningful connections.
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Introduction

“You Can’t Be Gay Unless You have A Job” is a satirical YouTube skit by Graham Gremore that tells an autobiographical story of him as a young boy learning what gay means. He discovers through discussing with his friends that to be gay one must: have a job; have gone to prison; participate in a behavior deemed as a “butt fuck,” and then “live happily ever after”. Though the point of the skit is to poke fun at the naivety of youth, it touches on an important point in terms of how one develops an identity. For the most part, children in the US are raised under the heterosexual paradigm. Homosexuality is therefore usually left unknown or misrepresented for many youth. For Gremore, he navigated whether being gay is something “he might be” based on what he learns from his friends and family—even if the information is not necessarily true. In the 1980s when Gremore’s skit takes place, main methods of media intake were radio, print and television, and lacked diverse representation of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) identities; therefore, it is no wonder Gremore’s experience with the identity was comically misleading. Now, with more LGBT representation media outlets than ever and the proliferation of LGBT-specific media on the World Wide Web (WWW or the Internet), users have the opportunity to interact with the LGBT identities differently, especially when it comes to the use of online social networking.

In the late 1990s, the first social network site (SNS) appeared on the Internet; the first recognizable site, launched in 1997, was SixDegrees.com. It allowed users to create profiles, list their friends and surf the “Friends” lists (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). This
revolutionary development allowed regular users (i.e. non-computer programmers) to upload their own content and share it with the masses. Although SixDegrees.com has lost its popularity in much of the western world, it laid the foundation of SNSs. In the past 15 years, thousands of SNSs have been developed along with many attracting millions of users. SNSs have become an integral part of many people’s daily life and have become the foundation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for many individuals. Because of the attraction of billions of users, SNSs, such as the Facebook, YouTube, Pintrest, Foursquare, Twitter, and Flickr have also had an influence on a diverse range of human interactions outside of the virtual environment. Areas such as the way businesses advertise, to how grass roots movements gain momentum, to how one finds a romantic partner have all moved in to the SNS world. Examples of the impact of SNSs range from the rise of “YouTube celebrities” (Bea, 2012) to the Arab Spring and other social movements (Howard et. al, 2011). Much of the research on SNSs is still in exploratory stages due to the relative newness and rapid diverse growth of users in the past 15 years.

Generally, SNSs give a platform for users to connect with other individuals and/or groups of individuals. Boyd and Ellison have defined social networking sites “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2008, p. 210). Because of the shared connection among users and ability to easily connect, SNSs give a ‘virtual space’ for communities that may not have previously been able to connect due to geographic and/or other social constraints. With a virtual space, geographic distance, among other social and cultural restraints, become obsolete
and users are able to find and form communities with strangers around the world who share interests and identities. Additionally, SNSs may allow for one to essentially control how his/her identity is presented since the user is responsible for the information presented in the SNS profile. Therefore, along with allowing users to connect with other users with shared identities and interests, SNSs also allow for users to exhibit behavior and characteristics that are less acceptable offline due to social/physical constraints.

Although most SNSs have a similar function (which is to allow people to connect across a variety of boundaries), there are thousands developed to address a vast variety of specific communities and their needs. There are mainstream SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Match.com and LinkedIn, which cater to the majority and serve specific purposes. For example, most users seeking personal relationship networking will use Facebook while a user who seeks professional networking opportunities will use LinkedIn. While mainstream SNSs are used broadly, other social networking sites, such as AsianAvenue, DiviantART, Care2, and OurSistaCircle, provide a virtual space for specific identities and interests. For example, AsianAvenue is a site dedicated to the Asian American community while OurSistaCircle is a site for lesbian women of color. On the other hand, Care2 and DiviantART are designed for users who have interest in social activism and art, respectively. Though these sites have far fewer users than the mainstream SNSs, they serve an important function of giving virtual space for users with specific identities to connect.

The internet has been essential in creating a larger “space” for the LGBT community by creating virtual spaces to perform identities and connect with others like them. SNSs have been vital to the formation of the cyberqueer communities because of the ability for all people with access to the internet to upload and interact within the
medium. In pre-internet years, LGBT spaces were mostly restricted to underground physical meeting places (bars and clubs) and the use of cryptic dress and visual cues for identification purposes in public spaces. According to Bargh and McKenna (2004), “the Internet has unique, even transformational qualities as a communication channel, including relative anonymity and the ability to easily link with others who have similar interests, values, and beliefs” (p. 586). The ability to be semi-anonymous on the internet gives LGBT people a safer place to connect and explore their sexual identities without having to be “out” in public and face potential discrimination. Furthermore, it gives LGBT people the ability to connect when not located in an area with a large LGBT population, thus eliminating geographic location as an issue.

These factors in themselves have transformed the way LGBT people develop their identities. For example, in 2000, a large online survey directed toward LGBT youth, conducted by OutProud and Oasis Magazine, found that two-thirds of respondents said being online helped them accept their sexual orientations, 35% said being online was crucial to this acceptance and many reported “coming out” online before coming out in “real life” (Gross, 2007). Further, the Associated Press reported that in 1996 on any given evening, one-third of all the member-created chat rooms on America Online are devoted to gay topics (Weise, 1996). The fact that these chat rooms were member-created and not part of the ‘standard’ AOL rooms demonstrates the need for and importance of SNSs for the LGBT community. Given that it may be easier and safer to develop an LGBT identity and connect within an online community, it is not surprising that marketing surveys have found that “gay men and lesbians are more likely to use a larger number of social networking sites and spend more time online engaged in social
networking activities in comparison with their straight counterparts” (“Gay and Lesbian Adults Are More Likely…” 2010).

Among the many community-building functions that SNSs serve, LGBT people also use SNSs in order to facilitate meeting romantic partners. Stanford University reported that 3 out of 5 gay couples meet online in comparison to 1 out of 5 heterosexual couples (Brown, 2012). Though not all SNSs developed for the LGBT community are specifically designed to facilitate romantic interaction between users, many will inadvertently serve this function. There are “mainstream” SNSs such as Match.com and OkCupid that allow for users to connect with strangers seeking romantic encounters, which are referred to as online dating, for both heterosexual and homosexual. There are also LGBT specific SNSs for romantic encounters, such as Adam4Adam, Manhunt, and PlanetOut.com. However, usage of the mainstream dating sites is relatively low for gay users. Gudelunas (2012) found in his study on gay men's usage of SNS dating sites that “only 39% of the focus group respondents reported having active profiles on sites like Chemistry, Match(.com), or Perfectmatch (non-gay-specific sites)” (p. 19), with the main reason for low usage that they had tried but found no romantic success or that there were too few men on the mainstream SNSs. Contrary to the low number of gay men reporting usage of mainstream SNSs, an increasing number of people overall use online dating as a way to connect with potential romantic partners. The US census reported that there are 102 million single people in the United States, and estimates report that roughly 40 million people in the United States try online dating annually (Reuters, 2012). These statistics indicate the importance of dating SNSs for not only the LGBT community but for the overall population. There are, however, differences in SNS usage between LGBT people and heterosexuals. Some of these differences are reflected in the
importance SNSs serve for sexual minorities. For example, heterosexual people typically have more resources for connecting with each other due to being in the sexual majority while sexual minorities often need to go to large cities in order to find substantial populations of others “like them”. In all, stigmatization of LGBT identities creates barriers for the individual's level of “outness” and in turn may restrict the ability to connect with others.

In the mid-2000s, a new type of SNS appeared with the growing popularity of smart phone technology—geo-social networking applications. Geo-social networking applications use location to show the distance and/or location of the user with other users. Where traditional online dating sites focus on matching users with others that have similar interests through a series of questions, personality tests, and entered data, geo-social networking application use geographic distance as the primary means of connecting the users with each other. Essentially, the user is only able to connect with others in a certain geographic area. Though there are geo-social networking applications for both heterosexuals and gays and lesbians, the most popular are for men who have sex with men (MSM). Possible reasons for the popularity relate to the anonymity, location function, and ease of connecting with others nearby.

MSM identities are often stigmatized in settings ranging from institutional policy (i.e. donating blood) to their family units. For some MSM individuals the ability to easily choose anonymity and to have an easy accessible “safe place” online can be appealing. However, how geo-social networking applications for MSM individuals differ from other SNSs is still unclear. Overall, according to Gudelunas (2012) “SNSs play a key role in gay male culture as a place to locate friends, sexual partners and even celebrity in a broader cultural context where being “out” and “publically gay” is not always an option”
He refers to celebrity more in a sense of local celebrity status where users idolize another user based on their profile. The role of SNSs for MSM individuals intercepts with how identity is managed because the interaction is heavily associated with what information is (and is not) presented. In the case of “local celebrity”, a man may show that he has an exceptional Adonis body in order to gain the celebrity status, while others might focus on other identity traits to attract more interactions (Gudelunas, 2012).

Researchers in the last two decades have looked at SNS interactions, SNS identity and online dating for heterosexuals, however geo-social networking applications have not been researched as much, with the exception of privacy and information sharing. In this study, I am interested in looking at how MSM individuals manage and navigate their personal identities on MSM-targeted geo-social apps. Through the lens of identity theories, identity information presented and not presented will be researched in order to look for and interpret how users choose to perform their online identities and why. Further I hope that this study will yield insight on how MSM individuals interpret how others perceive their identities and how they respond to these perceptions. This research will provide insight on MSM identities in an increasingly popular but very little researched area of geo-social application technology. The research will address issues in identity presentation that the applications(s) may be lacking, which in turn could provide modification and better serve the community that depends heavily on CMC (computer mediated communication) to connect. It will also look for instances of discrimination within an already marginalized community to better understand double marginalization. Researchers have tried to understand discrimination among marginalized groups and my research project adds to this area by looking at how marginalization is complicated and creates hierarchies that cross many identities.
The focus of research is the geo-social application platform, Grindr, launched in 2009. Since launching, it has exploded into the largest and most popular all-male location-based social network available. It has more than 4 million users (Grindr does not require the user to express gender, however the vast majority of users identify as male) in 192 countries around the world -- and approximately 10,000 more new users downloading the app every day. The advertisement for the application boasts that it is “quick, convenient, and discreet. And it’s as anonymous as you want it to be… a simple app that uses mobile device’s location-based services to show the guys closest to you... How much of your info they see is entirely your call” (http://grindr.com/learn-more, 2013). The main selling point the application utilizes is that the user controls how his identity is presented and he can give out as much or as little information as possible. Before discussing how users interact with the applications, I will first discuss theoretical frameworks relating to MSM identities and online identities.


**Literature Review**

The field of identity research is wide and complex due to crossing an array of disciplines including communications, sociology and psychology. Anderson (1996) defines identity as "a sense of the unified self that exists across time and situation, as well as the constellation of characteristics and performances that manifest the self in meaningful action" (p. 225). Building on that definition, identity can be understood as the multiple experiences, beliefs, characteristics, and behaviors that constitute a human being across time but also includes how one relates these aspects of self and interprets others reactions (i.e. institutions and agents) (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2003). These pieces of a human identity can be seen as identifiers, such as: age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, etc., that interact with other agents and institutions to form the individual’s experiences of their identities (Leary and Tangney, 2003). These interactions are particularly interesting because they are facilitated through the act of communication (Collier, 1988; 1997; 1998), i.e. interpersonal communication and media. Through a communication approach into identity and how it intercepts with online identities, I will discuss previous research in identity studies, with particular attention to the act of communications. From there, I will look at research on MSM identities and how those intersect with online identities.

Starting in the mid-20th century, researchers first began to develop theories on identity and how it impacts one’s life. Starting with psychology, scholars considered how people perceive themselves and how these perceptions can have considerable effect on
a person and their social groups. Generally, identity theories assert the assumption that humans are made of both personal identities and social (collective) identities (Tajfel, 1974; Robinson and Tajfel, 1996), where personal identities are often a result of how one sees and perceives oneself in contrast to how one perceives others. On the other hand, social identity is often described by how groups of individuals see and perceive their group in comparison to other groups (Robinson and Tajfel, 1996; Turner and Reynolds, 2010). The social and personal identities intersect with each other when they are affirmed or contradicted by others. Research suggests our personal identities will shift depending on the affirmation or rejection received from interactions within our social groups and on the value we place on the social group’s feedback (Tajfel, 1974; Robinson and Tajfel, 1996). Therefore, it is generally accepted that social and personal identities interact in order to develop one’s identity. However, some argue that identity goes beyond just social group and personal factors. As Mead and Vygotsky (1934; 1978) discuss, the formation of identity is a process that remains in motion and rests not only on the feedback of others and how it either affirms or disavows our self-perception but is also impacted by larger cultural and environmental factors, such as historical and biological factors. With that said, identity can be expanded beyond just the interactions between groups to a larger view of multitudes of factors that impact individuals’ perceptions of self to explain how humans experience identity (Turner and Reynolds, 2010). Approaches through areas such as sociology, psychology, biology, and communications seek to describe how identity impacts their perspective fields. In particular, the field of identity studies has seen a shift with the introduction of ‘online identities’.
Identity Through Communication

Through the act of communication, people accumulate the multiple experiences, beliefs, characteristics, and behaviors that constitute their identities across time. Mokros (2003) argues identity is constituted by self-reflection of discourse and interactions with others, i.e. communication, and that self-interpretations of these interactions help form how we see ourselves. For example, one’s beliefs are innately anchored in how those beliefs were communicated to them over time (i.e. religious beliefs communicated through church, media, texts) and they are able to interpret those interactions to determine with what aspects they identify. Further, Ting-Toomey (1999) argues that identity is negotiated through a balance between the self and others. He argues that people’s identities are asserted, defined, and/or changed in mutual communication activities. Through this identity negotiation process people approach mutually desired identities. That is to say people strive to develop an identity that is acceptable to both the self and to their community. In support of that, Collier (1988, 1997, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988) argues that identity is co-created in relationships to others and is emergent in communication. Therefore, it is argued that individuals’ identities are created through the internalization and negotiation of ascribed identities given by others. The co-created identities are avowed in communication and, as Ting-Toomey (1999) would suggest, negotiated again by others’ ascriptions. The communicative perspectives on identity note the close relationship between communication and identity; and most notably how we communicate with others influences our identities.
Theoretical Approaches To Online Identities

The internet has been hailed as a haven for identity expression. Interestingly, some argue that with the ability to remove the restrictive corporeal self’s physical identity (i.e. removal of physical forms, such as sex, race, body shape, etc.), users (which I refer to as people that create and preform online identities) find themselves able to develop an online identity based on needs, self-perceptions, and desires (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006). This assumption is embedded in the idea that humans are able present themselves however they want since they no longer are attached to physical selves and that the presentation of a digital self is a seamless act that allows complete freedom of expression and separation from the corporeal self—i.e. disembodiment (Bruckman, 1996; Reid, 1996; McRae, 1997). In other words, such perspectives suggest online identities can be completely separate from offline identities, if the user chooses. This ideology paired with social network sites’ tremendous ability for users to interact with one another across space and time has led to the assumption that the internet allows for limitless identity expression (Mnookin, 1996). However, with more prevalence in usage of SNSs, research in to online identity has found disembodiment may not be as easily accomplished. Research on how the corporal self influences and effects online identities has shown that people in fact are still very closely tied to their offline selves.

Therefore, the performance aspects of one’s identity should not lack consideration for the emotional and deep personal levels of identity (Stets, 2005). The emotional side of identity brings in to question how one presents their self online in the first place. With a greater sense of anonymity and separation from the corporeal self online, users may feel they can perform whatever identity they wish. However, this is problematic because lived experience and the corporeal self have to be taken in to account since one can
never escape them (Duits, 2007). Campbell (2001 and 2004) argues that embodiment plays a role in how users present identities and interact with others online through needing to have the experiences in order to enact the online identity. For example, someone who is not a body builder offline will have a difficult time enacting the identity of a body builder because he may not have the expertise in fitness, offline social network of gym buddies, knowledge of nutrition, etc. to fully enact the identity online. Further, Argyle and Shields (1996) dispute the ideology that online experiences are completely bodiless. How one performs their identities is tied to lived experiences and physical forms because they do not have the experiences of other identities to accurately preform them. However, in spite of still being embodied online, as Campbell suggests, people may still navigate their online identities differently than offline. This is because the act of constructing online identity is purely placed in the choice of how one performs through communication (Boyd and Heer, 2006; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes, 2004). By looking at several identity theories relevant to communications I will discuss a working approach to understanding these differences.

In the late 1970s, Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed one of the first identity theories relating to social interaction, the Social Identity Theory (SIT). Though not directly rooted in communications studies, the theory argues that social interaction between people varies along a continuum defined at one extreme by purely interpersonal behavior and at the other by purely intergroup behavior (Social Groups and Identities) (Tajfel, 1974). Though SIT lays a general foundation for explaining identity and communications, it assumes that interactions by groups (ingroups and outgroups) are motivated by a socially constructed identity where agency is solely externally located. SIT does not consider the users’ agency when creating and presenting online
identities, nor the articulation of the user's identities with other online community
identities when co-constructing a discursive space (Tyma and Leonard, 2011). Though
SIT addresses generally the interpersonal and intergroup interactions that support
identity development through communication, it generalizes the approach through the
lack of addressing user agency and the specifics behind the communication between
individuals and groups.

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) furthers SIT’s position that
identity awareness is on a continuum between the interpersonal and intergroup (Lea,
Spears, & deGroot, 2001). SIDE explains the effects of anonymity and identifiability on
group behavior and has become one of the several theories of technology that describes
social effects of computer-mediated communications (CMC). It serves in understanding
online identities due to its focus on how people choose (or choose not to) present
identities and how that impacts group behavior. Lea and Spears (1991) suggest that
online anonymity changes the relative salience of personal vs. social identity, and
thereby can have a profound impact on group behavior. One gap in the SIDE model is
that it does not view individual identities as independent actors within CMC but rather
another member of the group. Therefore it creates a lack of agency on the part of user
identities. On the other hand, some argue that users have the agency to manage their
identities online (Tyma and Leonard, 2011). For instance, research suggests that, while
online, people have significantly higher rates of spontaneous self-disclosure (i.e.
preforming identity) than offline (Joinson, 2001), which supports that people are able to
choose what to perform and not.

A handful of online identity studies (Cover, 2012; Duits, 2007) utilize Judith Butler's
performative identity theory (PIT) as the theoretical approach to understanding online
identity because it looks to explain how people perform their identities. PIT assumes that identities are merely a performance bestowed upon people through the constraints of society and culture. Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988) to argue that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman”, as the basis of her theory. She develops the idea that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts precede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-- an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Gender performance has been expanded to the other aspects of identity, therefore arguing that identity is constructed through repetitive performative accomplishment that, over time, becomes generally accepted by the audience (society) and sets the standard of the human identity. This approach argues that the actor’s behavior is not only constituting the identities of the individual actor but that the actor’s identity is only a “compelling illusion” (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

Critics of PIT argue that it stands alone and does not take in to account other factors that may influence identity. Lloyd (1999) points out limitations of PIT through an example of lesbians going in “drag” (i.e. preforming heterosexuality) in order to enter in to scripted “heterosexual” spaces. Her argument is that these performances cannot be read as performances in Butler’s terms because the lesbians are enacting a heteronormative identity but are not actually developing their identity through this performance but merely performing an identity that does not hold true, which does not detract from the fact that at a personal level, they are still lesbians. PIT does not factor in the autonomous individual who is able to control performance depending on the context. Whereas Butler’s claim is that the heteronormative paradigm influences identity performances, individuals may or may not adhere to the paradigms’ regulations,
especially in online spaces. Furthermore, one may perform an identity at a public level but in private perform a contradicting behavior that is their ‘truer’ personal identity.

**Communications Theory Of Identity And Identity Gaps**

Hecht (1993) asserts that identity is inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged, and uses this as the basis of the Communications Theory of Identity (CTI). CTI focuses more on mutual influences between identity and communication and conceptualizes identity as communication rather than seeing identity as merely a product of communication or vice versa (Hecht, 1993). CTI proposes four frames to understand identity: personal, enactment, relational, and communal. These four frames form identity as a presentation of self and locate it within situational or social contexts. In CTI, the personal frame is “a characteristic of the individual stored as self-cognitions, feelings about self, and/or spiritual sense of self-being” (1993, p. 79). At this frame, the concept of self or self-image is what defines the individual. This frame fills the gap where PIT falls short by addressing emotional and personal aspects that influence identity performance. The enactment frame is where “identities are enacted in social interactions through communication and may be defined by those messages” (1993, p. 79). In other words, people present their identities through the act of communication that they feel represent their identities. Within the relational frame, identity is jointly negotiated through social interactions and the behavior with others (i.e. the relationship to others). Hecht breaks the relational frame down in to the following three levels: people define themselves in terms of others (who they are around); people define themselves in terms of their relationships (who they are in relationships with); and relationships themselves take on identities (i.e. a couple establishes their identity as a couple). Finally, the forth frame, the
collective frame, defines identity as a group (similar to SITs approach to ingroups). Collectively, individuals make up the ingroup based on their personal identities. Within the group identity, individual identities have a hierarchy with some being more central to membership than others. The four frames are not mutually exclusive. At times, the frames will interact while at other times they act alone. For example, the enactment frame usually works in tandem with the relational because relationships are negotiated usually through behaviors and actions. CTI is helpful in understanding online identities because it addresses the different levels of identity whereas SIT looks at personal vs. communal and PIT at enactment vs. relational.

At times the four frames do not align completely and have discrepancies, or as Hecht calls “identity gaps”. An identity gap can be any inconsistency between any of the frames (Jung & Hecht, 2004). For example, when a person sees his/herself (personal frame) differently than he/she interprets the response to the interaction from others (relational), there is a gap between the personal and relational frames. Most empirical studies focus on the personal-enactment identity gaps and personal-relational identity gaps, as gaps with the communal frame are difficult to measure (Choi and Hecht, 2011). Jung and Hecht (2004) contend that identity gaps are an inevitable result of communications and social relations because communication is never perfect. Thus, when people come together for communication, identity gaps are unavoidable. Most conducted research into identity gaps has been among college students and with community groups (Jung and Hecht 2004, 2008; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), however I did not find any published evidence of applying it to online communities.
**Online Identity Assembly Theory**

Tyma and Leonard (2011) assemble the identity theories presented above to develop the Online Identity Assembly Theory (OIA), which specifically addresses how one navigates online identities. As discussed, online identities are different because the user has more agency when it comes to how to perform the self. OIA is a dynamic approach to online identities that uniquely incorporates communicative theory extending from Hecht (1993) and Hall (1996) along with inputs from social (Tajfel, 1974) and performative (Butler, 1998) identity theories. It explores “more distinctly how identity within an online space must be understood through a discursive lens” (Tyma and Leonard, 2011, p. 8) and is able to address the complexity of online identities. Online identities are in constant flux in their physical representation as well as the signified discourses supporting that representation. Depending on the user, online identity may be stable (or at least persistent) but can easily be momentarily changed depending on the users experience and/or evaluation of that experience. For Tyma and Leonard (2011), unlike a floating signifier, which retains its physical image though the meaning attached to the image, online identities (and the sign that signifies them) can shift at a moment’s notice… that shift can be motivated both by the original assembler of that online identity (the user) or by one of many outside entities (p. 8).

In other words, both groups and individuals can be responsible for rapid changes in how online identities are presented. Like Hall’s (1996) stance on cultural identity, online identities, much like personal identity, are always in a state of change or assembly. Tyma and Leonard (2011), therefore define online identities as “articulated formations created through the momentary assembly of various and discretely interconnected nexus controlled by both user and the online social community” (p. 8). The discourses controlled and managed by various internal and the external influences, as well as spatially and temporally defined moments help to form these interconnections. According
to Hall (1996), identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion” (p. 4). Therefore, online identities, within this approach, “cannot be considered as separate or isolated entities outside the sphere of external influence” (Tyma and Leonard, 2011, p. 10). In other words, online identities, though presented in a much different medium, still are influenced by outside factors, whether it is social, cultural, economic, or spatial factors (i.e. user embodiment of experiences). These outside factors, along with computer-mediated factors, result in online identity performance continually being in a state of flux within the various stages of assembly.

OIA asserts that online identities are comprised of four pieces: nexus, connections, dimensions, and assembly. The nexus contains the various structures that users utilize in order to identify aspects of self. Each nexus is a formation representing the elements the user wishes to present within the online community. The nexus is not fixed since users and the online community owners are able to revise the structure. Connections refer to the various discourses that inform the shape, scope and perception of the identities. Connections are assembled in a two-step process where first the user takes into account the various choices presented by the online community in regard to identities and then makes decisions as to what will be presented or not. These decisions are influenced by both internal and external factors such as, norms, rules, intentions, motivations, other users, the online community structure, etc. Dimensions refer to communications of identifiable factors, such as age, sex, gender, race, class, location, and time. Unlike in offline spaces, online spaces allow for some of these identifiers to be arbitrary because users can report falsely with little or no consequence. For example, age can refer to the age of the user, the age of the viewer, the age of the online
community, or the age that the particular online identity has been published. Once identifiers are placed within the SNS, other users can interact even if the identity owner is offline, therefore, allowing for the constant reassembly of identities (Tyma & Leonard, 2011).

The final part of OIA, assembly, resembles CTI’s identity frames. It refers to the process of creating and preforming identities online. Tyma and Leonard (2011) discuss assembly through a five-step process: identity genesis, identity articulation, identity culmination, identity appropriation and identity transformation. To begin, with identity genesis, the user is somehow informed and makes the decision that she wants to exist in an online social community. This means that the user is the one who decides to become part of the community and is the originator of the identity. Without the user, there is no identity. The driving factors behind her desire to exist in the online community may derive from a sense of wanting to belong, or she may be persuaded by messages or solidarity or homogenization received through various channels.

Once she joins, she begins to construct and articulate her online identity. The articulation step is where she decides what her online identity will look like. Each decision is impacted by a multitude of factors such as rules the SNS has in place to personal experiences and social rules she may adhere to in order to be accepted within the online community. This is also where the different dimensions of identity come in to play. Some SNS require disclosure of particular dimensions while others only suggest disclosure but leave it up to the user to determine what is to be shared. Ultimately, it is up to the user to decide which portions of her identity she wishes to disclose and how closely those identifiers match up with her offline identity. Each decision represents presentation or enactment of the online identity, whether it signifies the user’s reflection
of gender, race, sexual orientation or social indicators (such as musical and activity interests). Throughout the articulation process, the user will deconstruct, rearticulate, present and deconstruct again until she reaches an initial online identity.

Once she reaches this point, she then moves to the culmination step. The culmination step begins once she publishes her identity. Once published, other users in the community are able to view her identity and can either accept, reject or begin customizing it per the norms within the SNS community. The act of publishing however is not the final product. At this point the online community will appropriate her identity. At the appropriation step, the user’s online identity is no longer strictly her own but rather a collective discourse. Through various and simultaneous communicative acts, the SNS collective identity is formed. Due to the nature of the online environment, online texts are unstable, thus allowing for rapid changes. This causes an endless cycle of publishing and re-articulating, which is fueled by the expressed agency of the users, other SNS members, and the SNS’s structure. At this point, the online identity is transformed through the collective power of the SNS.

Within transformation, there are a series of possible reactions. If the original user agrees with how her identity has been transformed online, she will accept the transformation. When this happens, her new identity remains in the community as approved, while the appropriation and transformation processes are further perpetuated to other users. If she disagrees with the transformation of her online identity, she may reconstitute her identity at articulation, remove the online identity and start over completely, or disengage with the SNS (Tyma and Leonard, 2011). Through these steps, the user experiences how to assemble an identity online while interacting with other forces (like self and communal evaluation) to come to a mutually agreed upon outcome.
The steps above touch on the theoretical approaches important to understanding identity in a general sense. The user interacts within the online community at first with a personal level and then moves towards a more public identity that is reconstructed within that framework, much like SIT’s argument that identity is found along a spectrum between interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Tajfel, 1974). Further, with SIDE, anonymity applies toward how an individual chooses to disclose the dimensions of identity in the online format to share with the community. When it comes to the different aspects of the dimensions, it is the social and cultural constructs of the SNS that allow or discourage performance of identity, much like the PIT approach to identity performance within the heteronormative paradigm. Lastly, the steps for OIA are in line with CTI’s frames, where the individual develops online personal and enactment frames (during genesis and articulation), and develops her relational and communal frames when publishing the profile in the public sphere in order to initiate the culmination, appropriation, and transformation processes (while continually enacting identity throughout the process). OIA’s incorporation of different identity theories addresses the specific process that people go through when creating an online identity. With that said, OIA serves as a theoretical framework to understand user identity online because it takes in to consideration the different levels of an individual’s identities while acknowledging the fluidity allowed by an online space. This theoretical approach combines the most relevant aspects of other identity theories that allow it to interpret online identity within the framework of social networking sites. However, in order to look at the significance and understanding of geo-social networking sites’ impact on MSM community, a discussion of homosexual identities is needed.
Homosexual Identity & Being Online

In order to develop the approach to how MSM individuals navigate their identities within an online environment, it is useful to explore what a homosexual identities look like and how they intercede with other identities. Before doing so, I want to clarify what I mean by the usage of MSM (men who have sex with men) and gay. For purposes of my study, MSM refers to men who engage in sexual intercourse with other men, however they may identify as gay, straight or bisexual. Those who identify as gay however, are people who see themselves in the wider social spectrum of the gay community and beyond just the physical act of intercourse with the same sex.

One widely accepted theoretical model of homosexual identity development is the Cass Identity Model (CIM). Similar to other identity theories, CMI is based on the broad assumptions that identity is acquired through a developmental process and that stability and change in behavior is reliant on the interaction processes between individuals and their environments. Cass (1979) argues that individuals have both private and public identities (similar to Hecht’s personal frame vs. communal frame), and by increasing identity development, consistency between the two identities increases. Much like in CTI’s approach with frames of personal, enactment, relationship, and communal identities, each stage of CIM revels how the individual navigates the identity from an interpersonal level up to the community/social level. Although CIM focuses on the successful development into a gay or lesbian identity, it does not address several important issues relating to social stigma and socio-cultural changes since its publication. Further, CIM suggests that one who does not successfully complete all six stages does not develop in to an “adjusted homosexual” (Kaufman and Johnson, 2004). This is problematic because it focuses the singular identity without taking in to account
the impact other identities, such as race, may have in terms of identifying as a member of the LGBT community. Additionally, there have been major paradigm shifts that have changed the stigma attached to the homosexual identities (both in positive and negative ways), such as legalization of same-sex marriage in certain places along with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These paradigm shifts likely have changed the “coming out” process for many LGBT people, for which CIM does not account.

It is suggested that it is easier to come out online than offline (Shaw, 1997). That is to say, online environments allow for easier experimentation with homosexual performance with little commitment to owning a homosexual identity at first. Before virtual environments, an individual interested in learning more about homosexuality either had to research different forms of media (through limited availability in television, movies, books and magazines) or commit to going to a known “homosexual place” (i.e. gay bars, cafes, book shops, etc.). Now, one is able to more easily and anonymously research, observe, and participate in homosexual identity performances in chat rooms, social networking profiles, and online forums without full commitment to the identity. Additionally, one is able to quickly change online identity with a few clicks (Tyma and Leonard, 2011), which allows for less stability and commitment to an identity one may be in the process of exploring. In her study of the website of Finland’s most popular teen girl magazine, Demi, Laukkanen (2007) concluded that different discursive spaces (the heteronormative public spaces in Demi and the queer spaces of the #closet) produce different experiences of ‘self’ and sense of security. The online queer spaces she analyzed are productive and safe spaces for the group of young Finns who represent themselves as non-heterosexuals (Laukkanen, 2007). This suggests that online spaces dedicated to certain identities can create ‘safer spaces’ for individuals. It is important to
remember though, identities are multilayered and composed of many different identities that interact to create the individual as a whole. For MSM individuals, there are many other identities that interact with MSM identities. Other researchers have looked at how identities are presented in the MSM community, such as ideologies regarding masculinity and femininity, race and ethnicity, age, and body image. These identities are of particular interest because research indicates there is stigma toward non-hetero conforming identities, i.e. feminine acting males; and value placed upon other identities that adhere closer to heteronormativity, such as masculine acting men.

**Masculinities**

How are masculinity and femininity defined? Are they defined through toy trucks and Barbies? As Hall would argue, masculinity varies across culture (1996) and therefore cannot be given a singular definition beyond its innate tie to the male gender performance across time and place. Though ideology of masculinity differs across culture (Herdt, 1982) and time (Roper and Tosh, 1991), Connell (1995) argues that within the dynamics of hegemony in contemporary Western masculinity, the relation between heterosexual and homosexual men is central to what it means. He discusses that for “many people (within contemporary Western culture), homosexuality is a negation of masculinity and homosexual men must be effeminate” (p. 736) and that homophobia serves as a way to police male sex roles, i.e. heterosexual masculinity. However, like Hall's (1996) cultural identity approach, Connell points out there is no singular definition of masculinity because of its basis within culture. In his research, Connell argues that most gay men are raised within the heteronormative paradigm, which enforces heterosexual gender roles; therefore, gay masculinity is often based off the hegemonic masculinity. In terms of how masculine identity is enacted, some gay
men rebel against the hegemonic masculinity (i.e. embrace enacting non-masculine behavior) while others exhibit hyper-masculinity. For example, when a man who sees himself as masculine perceives that someone thinks of him as slightly feminine, the man may exaggerate his masculine behavior so that the others' view matches his cultural identity standard of masculinity. In agreement with several other studies (Stets and Burke 1994, 1996; Riley and Burke 1995), Thorne and Coupland’s analysis of gay men’s dating ads found that gay men often use discourses of “hyper-masculinity due to the context of heterosexist discourse which typifies the homosexual male as a ‘feminised’ or ‘failed’ man” in order to evoke realization of a fetish for the desired “straightness” (1998, p. 253). Because of both rejection and exaggeration, gay men can fall anywhere on the spectrum of the contemporary hegemonic ideology of masculinity.

This invites the question, if there is not a solid definition for masculinity, why is it important within the context of homosexual identity? It could be argued that masculinity is a main driving force behind gay men’s sexual attraction. In an examination of gay and lesbian personal advertisements, Laner and Kamel (1977) found that “gay men were very likely to claim or request masculine characteristics” (p. 961) whereas lesbians request androgynous characteristics. Furthermore, Lumby (1978) noted that gay males were more likely to describe themselves as masculine and reject feminine characteristics. Taking into account that Lumby, Laner and Kamel’s research was conducted in the 70s and several generations have passed, the preference of gay men for hegemonic masculinity still persists and is supported with the conclusion of Bailey, Kim, Hills and Linsenmeier’s (1997) study that “both gay men’s self descriptions and their desired partner characteristics were massively biased toward masculine descriptors. Gay men tend to portray themselves as masculine looking and masculine
acting and to desire masculine-looking and masculine acting partners” (p. 964). The pervasive self-masculinization that gay men seek, therefore paradoxically “imposes its own discursive hegemony, which may marginalize those who would prefer to self-present in some way as feminist” (Thorne and Coupland, 1998, p.253) within the community.

Finally, another identity label that intersects with masculine and feminine identities within the MSM community is how one self-labels as either a ‘top’ or ‘bottom’; this refers to the sexual role one takes when engaging in anal sex, and serves as an (at times false) enactment of either masculinity or femininity. A ‘top’ refers to the individual who inserts his penis into the anus while a ‘bottom’ receives anal penetration. In terms of stigma and sexual role identity, not all gay men are created equal. Within the MSM community, there can be stigma against ‘bottoms’ due to the association with femininity and negative conditions impressed upon society by the patriarchal paradigm. Culture plays a key role in the stigmatization of ‘bottoms’ especially when masculinity is seen as superior (i.e. machismo culture) where as more gender egalitarian cultures do not reflect as much of the same stigma (Wegesin et al, 2008). Race intersects when the limited definition of masculinity leads to white males “being ‘men’ while men of color are placed lower on a hierarchy much in the same way that the mainstream creates a hierarchy of men and women” (Han, 2007 p. 61). This ideology infers that in order to be ‘masculine’ (and therefore desirable), one must be white and exhibit traits of mainstream masculinity.

In all, gay men are often placed into an unsolvable conundrum when it comes to masculinity and femininity. Generally speaking, on one end, many gay men strive to be (or be with) the idealized hegemonic masculinity and reject hegemonic femininity. On the
other end, hegemonic masculinity is defined purely as heterosexual within the western cultures. This predicament therefore restrains gay man from attaining “mainstream masculinity” because the enactment of having sex with men excludes them from the hegemonic. Therefore, in terms of identity development, gay men, along with developing a homosexual identity, must transition from the hegemonic masculinity and come to terms with gay masculinity. Connell’s (1995) research suggests that gay masculinity takes in to account the hegemonic (stereotypical) masculinity, but allows room for contradictions. In return, the stabilization of a gay masculinity has begun to offer a public alternative to the ‘norm’ (i.e. metrosexual men). Although an alternative is becoming more readily available, gay men still highly value hegemonic masculinity in terms of self-identity and desired partner identity.

**Race And Ethnicity**

Traditional discourse on LGBT issues intersecting with race is often divided into two categories. One approach to research and activism is to focus on the LGBT rights movement (i.e. gaining civil rights for gays, lesbians and transgendered people) and how it portrays LGBT community as “middle class white people” (and often men) (Barrett and Pollack, 2005; Teunis, 2007). The criticism against this political movement in the US is that it often is not representative of the all identities of the LGBT population and therefore policy makers overlook the needs of people of color and those in lower socioeconomic groups. The other area of race’s intersection with sexuality focuses on public health concerns around gays and lesbians, namely HIV/AIDS and the increased rates among MSM individuals of color. These representations (or misrepresentations) of the LGBT community provide a disservice to both white and non-white members of the community because they allow for segregation and hierarchy. The invisibility and
segregation of LGBT people of color serves to pit the LGBT community against ethnic groups because the ethnic groups see LGBT as a ‘white only issue’. For example, in Colorado before Amendment 2 (state legislature that would prohibit the recognition of gay and lesbian individuals as a protected class) was passed, its supporters developed an ad campaign that depicted mostly white gays and lesbians at festivals and then contrasted it with black civil rights marches from the 1960s. The take home message from the ad was that the experiences are not the same and that this amendment would keep white gays and lesbians from getting ‘special treatment’. The ad was then distributed to mostly black churches and politicians, and in return gained support from the black heterosexual population by fueling the fear that whites would get more civil rights, by appealing to homophobia and by successfully defining LGBT and blacks as two separate populations with separate histories (Hutchinson, 2000). Furthermore, this segregation and invisibility of LGBT people of color makes it possible to lead to more racial discrimination and further marginalize an already marginalized identity. Diaz suggested that interpersonal experiences of racial discrimination lead to low self-esteem, a perception of low personal control and increased fatalism about the inevitability of HIV infection (1998; 1997). Therefore, this factors into the higher rate of HIV infections of MSM individuals of color and leads to another form of segregation and marginalization (HIV positive identity vs. HIV negative identity). In addition, LGBT people of color are impacted by social and physical locations that implicate their access to resources and other social rewards. Ayala and Diaz (2001) argue that social and sexual opportunities are sometimes mediated by “skin color, immigration status, and language preference, or a combination of the three” (p.75). So paired with differences in access to resources for LGBT people of color, experiences and opportunities are often different. These
situations therefore lead to a social stratification within the gay community, whereas, much like within the heterosexual paradigm, white men are often placed at the top of the social order. Diaz (2001) supports this point with his research in gay Latino communities, where he found participants viewed a gay identity as strictly ‘white and middle class’, and in order to fit that mold they needed to conceal identity (especially that of being poor) as well as exhibit the exclusive attraction toward only white men. Han (2007) agrees with the racial hierarchy placed within the gay community. He argues that gay men of color deal with issues of self-hatred more so than white men, due to being immersed in a culture that devalues their non-white racial identity. This in turn causes men of color to value gay white men over their own race and therefore exclude each other while competing for allusive white male attention, which is often ignored by gay white men due to being on top of the social hierarchy. Through different studies and approaches, the researchers presented above (Diaz, Han, and Ayala) all argue that the hierarchy within MSM community favors white men above men of color from a social value stance.

In looking at partner preference and race among gay men, there is debate whether this is racism or just a preference. Research on partner preference and dating ads suggests that “most advertisers prefer either their own race or Whites, and least prefer Blacks, regardless of sexual orientation” (Phua and Kaufman, 2003, p. 991), which supports that whites are again more valued. In regard to homosexual preference and race in the same study, “gay men mention race more often than straight men but that being gay and Black or Hispanic actually reduces the likelihood of mentioning race” (p. 992). Phau and Kaufman also suggest this could be a result of the interaction between two minority statuses, that of race and sexual orientation, and therefore may
produce a desire for non-white gay men to avoid limiting categories in their search for romantic partners. On the other hand, they suggest that gay white men may just be more interested in experimenting with other races more so than non-white gay men. This desire brings up another concerning factor for race’s intersection with the gay community-- the objectification of gay men of color. Much like within the heterosexual paradigm’s sexualization and objectification of women of color (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011), gay men of color can also be categorized this way. One example of this comes from the Village People. Each ‘character’ in the band represented a gay fetish. Whereas most of the characters were given an occupational or behavioral role often fetishized within the gay community such as cowboy, biker, construction worker, soldier, and cop, the ‘Indian’ was a representation of a man of color as one of these fetishes (Han, 2007; Barrett and Pollack, 2007). The implication is that men of color are fetishized for what they are while white men are fetishized for what they do. Thus, white men can choose when they want to be objectified, but men of color are simply objects (Han, 2007). Objectifications, such as these perpetuate stereotypes of gay men of color in to categories where Asians are seen as “the docile, loyal partners”, Latinos as “the passionate, fiery lovers” and black men as the “well-endowed, forbidden fruit” for white men’s sexual gratifications (Phua and Kaufman, 2003, p. 992).

So what does this all mean for identity of gay men of color? These social and economic differences for gay people of color have implications on their overall identity development. Studies indicate that GLB (gay, lesbian and bisexual) people of color often feel that their sexual identity comes secondary or tertiary to other identities and roles (Phellas, 1999), but often prioritize the development of a racial/ethnicity identity due to socioeconomic and their race/ethnicity (Wallace et al, 2002). In fact, some gay men of
color have pointed to the need to connect with their racial and ethnic communities in order to maintain a sense of self-esteem (Han, 2007). However, the level of homophobia within the racial and ethnic community negotiates the ability for the man to be ‘out’ to family members and friends. Research indicates that race impacts how and when one identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. For instance, Grove et al (2006) found that the GLB people interviewed in their study, regardless of race and ethnicity, came out to themselves and to other people, as well as experienced relations with a member of the same sex at roughly the same age. On the other hand, white GLB men and women were significantly more likely to be out to parents/family compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Asian/Pacific Islanders men and African American men and women were the least likely). The racial hierarchy within the gay community could explain this difference because, as discussed, gay identities are more often associated with whiteness, while other racial and ethnic groups remain invisible. This in turn hinders GLB people of color from finding the space to develop that identity within a familial and communal context.

As discussed, another explanation for this difference could have to do more with the cultural view from minorities that gay is something ‘white and western’. In Chan’s (1989) exploratory study on identity development in gay and lesbian Asian Americans, she found her focus group members who were not out to their families cited possible rejection, stigmatization and no place for understanding of the homosexual identity within the families cultural background. Along with that, Han (2007) suggests that there is no vocabulary in some cultures to present a homosexual identity in a positive way. For example, in Spanish the word maricon, implies the feminine role of a man, which within the context of machismo, is a negative connotation for a Latino man. With no positive way to verbalize the identity in their language along with general stigmatization, familial
rejection might play a larger role within the cultural context of peoples’ ‘outness’ to family when the culture places more emphasis on family and community relationships.

Similar racial hierarchy trends are found in online MSM communities as are found in the offline. Grosine’s research (2007) on Gay.com suggests that ‘being white’ comes with its own set of undeserved privilege much like white privilege in offline environments. In his study, Grosine (2007), a gay man of Indian descent who was born in the Caribbean, performed ‘race play’ (i.e. disclosed in his user profile) different race characters in Toronto’s Gay.com chat room. He found that out of all the races he performed, his ‘Robbie’ character (marked as having blue eyes and blonde hair) was the most sought after by other chatters while his performance of other races did not garner him much attention. Interestingly, when not choosing to disclose any race, he found that users assumed him to be white until asking for clarification. The assumption of whiteness in the online MSM community may be a result of the assumed whiteness of the LGBT community (in the US), or could be based on the assumption that white is the norm in these online environments (Campbell, 2004). Therefore, it could be argued that passing white or by not identifying as non-white affords MSM men a chance to ‘play white’ and in return gain limited online white privileges, whether it be the attention from other users or a temporary comfort from—but not absolute from—the disadvantages of being a person of color (Grosine, 2007).

**Age Identities**

Age is another important factor for gay identity due to generational and cultural influences that impact how men develop and enact their identities over time (i.e. differences in views of masculinity discussed previously). Arguably, GLB youth are at an advantage due to social changes that shine a more positive light on views of
homosexuality. Studies support that youth are coming out at an earlier age due to the ease of identifying with a homosexual identity with less stigma (Dank, 1971; Grov et al, 2006). In conjunction with coming out earlier, gay youth are also experiencing sexual intercourse with a member of the same gender at an earlier age (Grov et al, 2006). By ‘coming out’ earlier in life, gay and lesbian youth are more likely to face homelessness if familial rejection is experienced due to less financial resources and relying on family for support. With that, younger GLB individuals have less control of their lives and social networks than that of older GLB people which therefore results in the young (18-29 years old) reporting overall lower levels of social wellbeing (Kertzner et al, 2009). While older GLB people report higher levels of social wellbeing, older gay men in particular are impacted by ageism as early as middle age and are stereotyped as being lonely, sexless, or sexual in an age-inappropriate manner (Berger and Kelly, 1996; Kooden, 2000). Research, however, indicates that older gay men are no less likely than their straight counterparts to be isolated (Shippy, Cantor, and Brennan, 2004) which supports the partial falsity of this stereotype. The influence of ageism helps to stigmatize older men in the gay community and allows for the placement of higher value on younger gay men.

Fox argues that within the gay community, age and perception of age can forecast the direction and expectations of interactions between gay men and perpetuate the segregation within the community (2007). The physical cues of age relay general perceptions of one’s age (i.e. graying hair) and therefore impact the way people communicate with each other. For example, a man with graying hair may be perceived as being older and therefore carry the burden of ageism’s stereotypes. Such stereotypes perpetuate metaphors, one being that older gay men are vampires that pray on younger
gay men in order to recapture their youth or that older gay men are father figures (daddies) who are looking to take care of younger gay men in a sexual manner (Fox, 2007). These metaphors then influence the identity of both young and old MSM individuals. These metaphors evoke a sense of ‘otherness’ within the community when they tie the individual to a behavior based on their age and appearance. To use the example above, a man who is called a ‘daddy’ is therefore tied to the identity of seeking younger sexual partners, regardless if that is his true intent.

**Body Image**

Body image is another important identity factor for MSM community because it is also tied to physical attractiveness value and sense of self-value. Body image is essentially the attitudes and feelings one has towards one’s own body (Cash, 2004). Studies indicate that physical attractiveness is the most important determinant of gay men’s desire to continue dating partner (Sergios and Cody, 1985). Another indicator of how body image is an important identity factor for MSM men is the higher prevalence of eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia. When sexual orientation is assessed among men with eating disorders, between 10% and 42% report identifying as gay or bisexual (Carlat et al, 1997). As previously noted, there is an emphasis placed on physical appearance, such as race, within the gay male community as well as the associated competitive environment that results from that (Mann, 1998; Siever, 1994). Competitiveness is often an associated trait of hegemonic masculinity and therefore supports the impact masculinity also has on body image. Further, being perceived by others as attractive, allows for belonging to the ingroup of the community. With race, earlier I discussed the preference for white men, which goes in tandem with attractiveness. If one has a poor body image or does not fit the definitions of ‘attractive’
for his community, he may be ostracized and left out from joining. On the other hand, being attractive (or white for that matter) allows for more ease in joining the gay community (Udall-Weiner, 2009). Intersecting with HIV identity, Pope et al (2000) notes that muscularity becomes an important component of the idealized body due to thin body types’ association with AIDS and eventual death. Finally, as also discussed in regard to race and objectification, both gay men and women are subject to sexual objectification by men. This has also been cited as a reason for the poor body image frequently identified in each population (Siever, 1994). To counter the idealized body image they gay community emphasizes, counter-sub cultures have arisen, such as Bears. The Bear Community deemphasizes the traditional Adonis body type placed upon the gay community but still emphasizes masculinity in a more traditional ways (Manley et. al, 2007). Although this movement provided a physical space (physical places such as bear bars, clubs, and conferences), it segregated the gay community based on body type and perceived image. Body image, therefore, is a very important aspect because it influences how MSM individuals navigate other identities. With that, I’d like to turn the focus on the implications online communities bring to body image.

Much like online race and ethnicity performance, online body image can be performed in the same ways; either through posted photographs or through texts. This way, whomever the user interacts with can visually see what the user looks like or body image can be speculated as to what numerical values or adjectives, such as height or ‘good-looking’. As mentioned, the rise of sub-cultures within the MSM community allowed for space for those who do not adhere to the general gay communities’ desired identities. These subcultures have also transferred to the online environment. For example, Egan (2003) points out that the internet has increased the visibility and
cohesiveness of the bear community offering an alternative to bars for making social and romantic contacts for men who may not have access to a local bear organization or network. Sub-communities within the overarching gay community value non-hegemonic body images and therefore seek different ways of performing these body images. For example, the sub-communities use different vernacular in order to describe themselves, like calling one “bear” vs. “otter” (Campbell, 2001). Once again, online communities allow for those who seek a similar identity to find each other easier than in offline environments.

**Identities And Being Online**

The discussion above only touches on the complexity of some of the identities that make up a person. At times, the identities influence on each other, in the case of race and ‘outness’ where certain races are more likely to be ‘out’ to families based on cultural and familial norms. Therefore, along with developing his sense of self as a homosexual individual, gay men also negotiate other identities that at times may aid or hinder his identity presentation. On top of that, the gay community has a tendency toward a preferred archetypical identity. The previous research shows that in order to be accepted in the dominant gay community, one must be white, middle-upper class, masculine, in shape, and young. These limitations can influence online identity performance by making people feel obligated to perform certain identities in order to be seen as valuable to others. That is to say, a Latino man may feel same sex attractions but because he is not white and middle class, may not be feel he can identify as gay or may disregard his Latino identity to fit the mold of the gay identity archetype. The rise of subcultures within the gay community has helped give other identities spaces and community but at the same time it works to segregate gay communities (i.e. bars and online communities
dedicated to different “types”). These segregated communities, however, can also be confusing and limiting for MSM individuals because they often cannot be inclusive to everyone. For the example described with body image, the bear community started as a response to the hegemony of the Adonis gay male body within the gay community, however even within the bear community it has even more subcultures, like: muscle men, chubby men, older men, younger men, etc. (Campbell, 2004). When beginning to develop a homosexual identity, one is often only exposed to the hegemonic gay community and its associated identities. The complexities of the subcultures are just another twist that may complicate how one chooses to perform his identities.

The internet offers LGBT people a way around some physical barriers (i.e. rural people can be connected and not need to travel to large metropolitan areas to find community), as well as adding a sense of anonymity and safety for people to explore themselves before having to commit to anything offline (Gross, 2007). However, Campbell (2001) found that online places are much like physical spaces in that they are automatically marked as heterosexual unless explicitly marked as non-heterosexual. Laukkanen (2007) echoes this sentiment. Campbell (2001), however, noted that when a site is explicitly marked as non-heterosexual, it at times became a target for ‘online gay bashing’. Although online bullying and bashing can be harmful to users emotionally, the absence of the corporeal self adds allows for physical safety. Additionally, sites allow for blocking or ignoring other users. Much like bouncers at bars, chat rooms have moderators who are able to kick out unruly chatters, as well. Therefore, users can have more of a sense of physical safety when exploring non-hegemonic identities.
Bringing Physical Space To The Virtual

With a general understanding of how people assemble their identities, both online and offline, and how MSM identities are perceived and valued, I turn to looking at geo-social networking applications influences. Some research surrounding the use of geo-social networking sites has centered on usages, in particular gratification (Gudelunas, 2012), but not identity. Unlike traditional online social networks, many geo-social network applications incorporate physical space as another primary way to interact with others for the purpose of offline meet-ups between strangers. The physical proximity piece causes the social network community to change depending on physical location, creating compelling circumstances for online communities because users are once again tied closer to a physical space along with their embodied experiences.

As discussed, online communities are important for LGBT people both for identity development and finding a sense of belonging and place. Plunkett (2011) claims that if an online environment "provides a meaningful experience, participants may develop a sense of place in, and place attachment to, that online world" (Polson, 2013, p. 4). With geo-social networking applications, what Polson (2013) refers to as ‘digital place making’ occurs through the combination of the geographic space with the virtual. Finding that "online interfaces that both produce and manage offline interactions can be understood as platforms for mobile place-making" (p. 14), Polson argues that the places created are "no less real to the subjects who rely on them for a feeling of belonging" (p. 4). Therefore, geo-social networking application may provide a meaningful place for MSM individuals looking for community in their immediate vicinity. Additionally, it is important to note that geographic location influences a community’s identity and norms (Massey, 1994), (i.e. societal acceptance of different identities, such as race, gender, etc.).
Therefore online identity performance and presentation is impacted across geographic space within geo-social networking applications.

**Conclusion**

The theories discussed fall under the umbrella of the interpretive paradigm, where the researcher’s main goal is to draw meaning from people’s experiences. The intersections between MSM identity archetype, Online Identity Assembly Theory, and CTI’s Identity Gaps provide a framework to this research. Through the lens of the archetype, we can understand the diversity and challenges MSM people experience. This is important for identity gaps that look to explain the discord between multiple layers of an individual’s identity, especially in an online medium. With OIA, we can further understand how one navigates and manages an identity online, including the decisions made at each step of the ongoing process. Since OIA accounts for users’ ability to assemble their fluid online identities both through real life influences and the community ascribed identities (the communities’ feedback on their presented identities), the user has agency to manage and perform identities online. However, with this ability to easily manage identity online, and finding more diverse and accepting communities, will users experience identity gaps or will they find more alignment between their identity frames?

Interestingly, geo-social networking applications have the ability to bring together diverse identities within a specific geographic area. Massey (1994) contends that multiple identities within a singular place can yield richness or conflict, or both. Therefore, do individuals experience their multiple fluid identities within geo-social networking applications with richness of diversity or conflict, or a mix of both? Although the internet is seen as a place to harbor non-heterosexual identities, the reintroduction of
geographic location along with online embodiment brings to light questions about how
multiple and fluid identities are presented (i.e. is diversity really harbored in this
environment?). These circumstances create the basis of my research question on how
MSM (men who have sex with men) individuals navigate their multiple identities on geo-
social applications, such as Grindr. With that, I have developed my research question:
how are identities experienced, performed, and assembled in Grindr and why?
Methodology

This study is meant to understand how users construct and navigate their identities online. The research has been conducted within the interpretative paradigm, which aims to understand the meanings of the participants’ experiences (Wimmer, 2011) in the Grindr community. Qualitative studies seek to understand how social experience is created and given meaning by “stressing the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and subject, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). By designing research with these factors in mind, qualitative researchers are able to interpret the meaning of experiences. I chose a qualitative approach because my study was exploratory, meaning I wanted to capture a wealth of in-depth individual data from participants’ firsthand accounts. From their in-depth accounts, I was able to better answer my research question regarding how users construct online identities.

Since my research question looks to understand identities on geo-social networking sites within a queer space, I utilized Warner’s (2004) suggested methodological guidelines for queer research. The first guideline asks that the researcher qualitatively accounts for the object of inquiry through the methodology. In other words, the qualitative approach offers more space to account for individual queer experiences because it takes into account the in-depth experiences of the actual people living them. Second, Warner claims that it is important to remember research is based
on the good faith submission of queer individuals. This means that researchers need to be cognizant of benefits the research can contribute toward the wellbeing of all queer people as opposed to contributing to the further perpetuation of a singular queer normality. Third, he argues that the researcher should abandon any sense of “the quixotic search for an aetiology of homosexuality” because it further perpetuates the otherness of the queer individual in comparison to the heteronormative (p. 334-5).

Lastly, Warner points out that, using queer methodology, the researcher should be reflexively aware of the way it constitutes the object it investigates. That is to say, one must be aware of the role the researcher plays in the production of knowledge from this study. With these guidelines in mind, I designed a qualitative methodology that gave space to interpret the meaning of the queer users’ diverse experiences in Grindr.

**Reflexivity: My Role As The Researcher**

In line with qualitative research scholars (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006; Warner, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), I acknowledge my role as the researcher and consider how my identities may have had an impact on the recruitment and data. Identifying as a 26 year-old, white, gay man certainly influenced the recruitment; I felt that it was easy for users to connect with me because I fit more in to the ‘mainstream’ gay identity described in the literature review. I had many users interested in the study, and I am not sure that would have happened if I were not a member of the MSM community. Additionally, I believe the nature of volunteering to participate in a study like mine impacted the type of person I interviewed. Since there was no material incentive to participate beyond offering users a place to talk openly about their experiences on Grindr, the participants I recruited were either interested in knowing me personally or were interested in
contributing to research. Therefore, my sample is missing people who either were not attracted to me or people who did not see the value of my research. Additionally, as the researcher and analyst, I had my own personal experience that helped me connect with the participants while allowing me to pick up different cultural cues language (i.e. gayspeak and netlingo) and behavior. This allowed me to interview and analyze the participants’ experiences with a lens that acknowledges the diversity in MSM identities. Although my identities helped with certain aspects of the study, they also influenced how I interviewed and determined what was important for the analysis.

**Subjects, The Sample, & Recruitment**

I gathered data through hour-long, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with users of Grindr. The populations of the study were self-identifying MSM people who use (or have used) the geo-social networking application, Grindr. According to the terms of service of Grindr, “services are available for individuals aged 18-years or older”, so all users were over the age of 18. In accordance with ethical requirements set by the University of Denver’s Institutional Review Board, I also verified this verbally before every interview. I recruited a sample of 10 users for in-depth interviews. I recognize that with such a small sample, I am not able to make broad generalizations. However, as Crouch and Mckenzie argue (2006), exploratory studies are best done with small samples because their purpose is to indicate, rather than conclude. Further, sample sizes for qualitative research are often smaller than quantitative research because an “occurrence of a piece of data is all that is necessary to ensure that it becomes part of the analysis framework” (Mason, 2010). Therefore, more data does not necessarily mean more information because qualitative study does not look for statistical significance or trends. What is
more, a small sample of 10 in-depth interviews can yield valuable information regarding how users experience their identities in Grindr and indicate trends for further studies.

I chose to focus on this population because some people can be subject to double-marginalization for their MSM identity and for not fitting into the mainstream “gay identity”, as mentioned previously in the literature review. Before recruiting participants, it was important to acknowledge the stigmatization against the MSM community, which led me to place importance on confidentiality for the participants. In addition, the Institutional Review Board approved my method of recruitment and obtaining consent. Before setting up interviews, I made participants aware of the risk of confidentiality breach with the approved informed consent letter given to them electronically.

Participants were recruited using two strategies. I first created a Grindr profile for myself with my personal iPhone and a downloaded free-version of the application. In my Grindr profile I used a recent clear photo of my face. I thought the photo was a good representation to use because it was bright (I had previously learned in a LinkedIn workshop that people are more likely to click on bright and clear photos) and non-threatening (i.e. smiling at the camera). In addition, I shared my weight, height, and age in the biographic statistics section, however I chose not to disclose race, distance, and relationship status. I did this because I did not feel my race needed to be explicit since I felt my photo obviously presented a white person. As for relationship status, I felt it unimportant for the purposes for which I was using the application, i.e. research interviews. Additionally, I felt like posting my distance might have adverse effect on my recruitment, as I wanted to connect with anyone who saw my profile, regardless of distance. By leaving my exact distance vague, others could not see how far away I was
and may be more open to talking to me even if they were not in Denver. For my bio section, I entered the following text:

I am a graduate student working on my master’s thesis. I am conducting interviews about peoples’ experience on this application and how it has impacted their lives. If you are interested in participating in an hour-long (anonymous) interview, please send me a message. Thanks.

Beyond that information, nothing else was disclosed to the Grindr community until the user chose to contact me through the chat feature. From there, I was open about myself and answered all questions truthfully. Once my Grindr profile was assembled, I logged in to the application periodically for three weeks, beginning the last week of December 2013 and ending the second week of January 2014. I tried to log in to the application during different times of the day and in different areas of the Colorado Front Range, including Denver, Boulder, Longmont, and Fort Collins. I did this to reach different people living in different neighborhoods and areas.

For the second strategy, I reached out to my social circle through a recruitment email to try to get what is known as a ‘snowball sample’. According to Wimmer (2011), this recruitment strategy is where the researcher contacts known qualified individuals and then asks these people for referrals of others they know who may be qualified. For the recruitment email, I sent a general email requesting interview participants to MSM people I personally knew. I asked them to then forward the email to others they thought might be interested in participating in my research. Those who were interested were instructed to then respond to the email for more information.
Reflecting back to the first recruitment strategy, I experienced first-hand how the typical user ‘assembles’ the self in Grindr. I was faced with the dilemmas of how I would accurately present myself in this environment in order to get the reaction I wanted. Acknowledging that I had somewhat similar goals as most users – that I wanted to attract people to view my profile and reach out to me – I was faced with the dilemma of how I would present myself to attract other MSM users. At first I was nervous about what type of reception I would receive from the community, as I did not know how the users would react to a researcher in this space. I wondered if they would be welcoming? Would anyone want to contact me? And if so, would they follow through for an interview since there was no real incentive? Would I be chastised in offline environments for impeding into this space for a purpose it was not meant to serve?

Setting Up The Interview

To my surprise I had more than 50 users from Grindr contact me with interest in an interview. Out of those from Grindr, seven were interviewed. Additionally, my recruitment email yielded three people who were interested and all three followed through with an interview. Due to time limitations, I could only conduct 10 interviews (i.e. the 7 recruited directly from Grindr and 3 recruited from the snowball email). Two participants from the snowball email were one-degree of separation (were in my contact list and I knew firsthand), and the other was second-degree (received the email via someone on my contact list). I did not previously know any of the participants recruited from Grindr. It is important to note that the recruitment from Grindr was much more time consuming than the snowball email because in many cases I had to engage in chat through the application in order to build a level of trust before the user would agree to
share his email and take the next step to set up the interview. Generally, the typical interaction in Grindr went something like this:

Potential Participant: Hey (what’s up, how are you?, what are you doing? What’s your study about?)
LL: Hey there, I am doing well thanks, how are you?
PP: Not bad. Tell me about your study? [At times the conversation would start with more friendly inquiries regarding where I am from, what I am studying, etc.)
LL: Well I am interested in knowing more about how people experience Grindr and how it impacts their identity [explain more if needed or to address more directed questions]. Are you interested in participating?
PP: Sure
LL: Cool, well if you give me your email, I can send you the informed consent letter. From there you can email me back any questions or concerns and if you still want to participate we can schedule an interview. I am happy to do the interview in-person or over Skype/phone. And I promise this isn’t spam!
PP: [users asked more questions to verify I am real or really there for just research (for example, one asked me a simple math question to make sure I wasn’t a spam robot!), or they gave their email, in which I responded with the email text and the informed consent letter]

Some users at times were skeptical that I was really using Grindr for research. At times, users tried to engage in sex-talk or asked if “I really just want an interview” but overall most were respectful and understanding when I reiterated that my profile was for the advertised purpose. Out of the ~50 users who contacted me with interest/chat in Grindr,
about 20 shared their emails and received the informed consent letter. Out of those, seven followed through with interviews. I had some users from the group that received the informed consent letter contact me after I had completed the 10 interviews, however at that point I declined due to time limitations and the span of the study.

Once the participants emailed me back that they were interested, we set up a time and place to meet. I was flexible as to where and when we could meet in order to give the participant space to choose where he was most comfortable. Two users chose phone interviews (one due to anonymity and the other due to distance) while the others all preferred in-person interviews. Of the in-person interviews, three took place in my office, two at public libraries, one at the participant’s place of work, one at a café, and one at the participant’s home. I let the participant choose where he would be most comfortable in order to make the interview more smooth and give him space to be more open with his answers. As mentioned, interviews followed a general script of questions (see appendix) along with a scripted introduction and conclusion to verify participants’ eligibility for the study and maintain continuity for the type of information he received prior to the interview. Before the start of each interview, they were given the informed consent letter again (a hard copy if in-person or asked if they still had the electronic copy if on the phone). They were also asked for consent before recoding.

Participants & Data Collection

Below is a summary of each participant’s background in the order they were interviewed (most participants used aliases in order to protect their anonymity):
**Ethan**

Ethan contacted me via Grindr one evening in December. His first message read “what’s your study about?” and a photo of his face soon followed it. Interestingly, his profile was blank. After chatting in the application for a little bit, he shared his email and over the next few days we emailed back and forth to settle on an interview time. The day before the interview he asked that it be over the phone because he felt more comfortable that way. The interview was recorded and lasted a little over an hour. He identified as a 34 year-old white (Caucasian), gay, single, male from Colorado. He has a bachelor’s level of education and has used Grindr on his smart phone for about four years. He currently lives and works in Denver, Colorado. He also uses other, similar geo-social applications, for meeting people sparingly.

**Julian**

Julian contacted me via Grindr one afternoon in December. His first message was a general greeting. In his profile he had a photo of his bare chest and some physical statistics. We chatted in Grindr before exchanging email and then moved over to text message to organize where and when we would meet. We settled on meeting at a library near his home. Until we met, I had no idea what his face looked like. The interview was recorded and lasted a little under an hour. He identifies as a 28 year-old mestizo, gay, single male from Peru. His brother, mother and he moved to Colorado roughly 10 years ago. He is completing his bachelor’s degree and has used Grindr on his smartphone for about two years. He currently lives and works in Aurora, Colorado.
John

John contacted me via Grindr one evening in December. He asked me directly about my study and had a very short chat (less than 10 messages back and forth) before he shared his email. His profile had a mug shot-style photo and some physical statistics (age, weight, race/ethnicity, and height). After emailing, we set up a time to interview over the phone because he had returned to his home in Long Island, New York (and I was in Denver). The interview was recorded and lasted a little under an hour. He identifies as a 30 year-old, white (Caucasian), gay, single, male from Long Island, New York. He has a PhD and teaches college-level mathematics. He has used Grindr on his smartphone for around one year and also uses similar geo-social applications for meeting people.

Skipper Warhawk

Skipper Warhawk reached out to me via Grindr in early January. Our conversation started as a regular chat, then to verifying that I was really there for research only, and then moved to discussing the basics of my research. His profile was more complete than many I had seen. He had a short bio, complete physical statistics and a somewhat unrecognizable photo of his face. After emailing him the informed consent form we set up a time to meet, however the morning of the planned interview, he canceled due to having a “rough night”. We rescheduled for later that week in between some encrypted messages, where I had to reiterate that this was strictly a research meeting and that he should expect no more than an interview. Our interview lasted a little over an hour and took place in his place of work. He identifies as a 25 year-old, white (Caucasian), gay, male from Colorado who is currently engaged to his partner.
He has a bachelor’s degree and lives in Denver, Colorado. He has used Grindr for about three years on his smartphone along with other similar applications for talking to others.

**Seth**

Seth responded to my recruitment email in January. I have personally known him for several years, so we found a time for him to meet in my office after sending him the informed consent letter. The interview was recorded and lasted a little under an hour. He identifies himself as a 39 year-old, Asian, single, gay male from Texas; however, a white Jewish family adopted him when he was an infant, so he said he culturally identifies as white. He has a bachelor’s degree and currently lives and works in Denver, Colorado. At time of the interview, he no longer used Grindr, but uses similar applications for talking to others. He used Grindr for around two years before disengaging with it.

**Larry**

Larry messaged me on Grindr in January and asked me about my study after sending a general greeting. We chatted over the application for around 30 minutes before sending the informed consent letter. His profile had a photo that was not recognizable and included standard physical statistics (height, weight, and race/ethnicity). We scheduled the interview at a library over that weekend. The interview was recorded and lasted a little over an hour. He identifies as a 45 year-old, white (though he mentioned he his half “Hispanic” but feels more culturally white), gay, single, male from Colorado. He has a bachelor’s degree and currently lives in Denver, Colorado. He uses Grindr and other similar applications on his smartphone and thinks he has had Grindr for about five or six years.
**Alejandro**

Alejandro responded to my recruitment email in January. He was a casual acquaintance that I had personally known for less than a year. We organized to meet for the interview at a coffee shop on one of his days off. The interview was recorded and lasted around 40 minutes. He identifies as a 32 year-old, gay, Latino, single male from Colorado. He has a bachelor’s degree and currently lives in Denver, Colorado. He has used Grindr for about three years along with several other similar applications on his smartphone.

**Ben**

Ben messaged me over Grindr in January. His first message directly addressed his overall experience on Grindr where he shared that it had caused him emotional trauma and he wanted to share his experience. His profile was a close-up picture of his face with some physical statistics. Additionally, he had a short comical bio line. I sent him the informed consent letter and later that week we organized an interview time at a library. The day of the scheduled interview, he messaged me to say he had food poisoning and that he preferred to meet at his home. We met in his living room for an interview that went for about an hour. He identifies as a 34 year-old, white (Caucasian), single male from Washington, DC. He identifies as gay since he is attracted to male bodies but prefers to be referred to as queer. He has taken some college-level coursework and works and lives in Denver, Colorado. He has used Grindr off and on for a total of three-months over a two-year timespan. He mentioned he briefly tried other
applications like Grindr on his smartphone but did not feel like they were a good fit for him.

**Derrick**

Derrick reached out to me on Grindr in January. He was interested in my study due to his own research in LGBT studies and wanted to contribute. By far, he had the most questions about my study. His profile was a photo of his face with some physical statistics and a short bio referring to him looking for tennis buddies. After discussing over Grindr and over email for some time, we settled on a time to meet for the interview. We met at my office for a recorded interview that went over an hour. He identifies as a 28 year-old, black, gay male from St. Louis, Missouri, however he has lived all over the country for work. He is currently completing his PhD and lives part-time between Denver and a mid-western city with his partner. He uses Grindr and another similar application on his tablet.

**Nick**

Nick responded to my recruitment email after it was forwarded to him via one of my acquaintances. After receiving the informed consent letter, we settled on meeting in my office for the interview. The interview was recorded and lasted a little over an hour. He identifies as a 27 year-old, white (Caucasian), gay, single male, from a small town in Mississippi. At the time of the interview he no longer used Grindr, but had used it for around two years on his smartphone. He has several other similar applications installed on his phone, but doesn’t regularly use them. He is currently a graduate student who lives in Denver.
All participants gave me permission to record the interviews, which allowed me to transcribe them. I used the transcription software, Express Scribe, to manually transcribe the interviews in Microsoft Word. Once transcribed, I read through the interviews closely to begin the analysis of data. Through reviewing my conversations, I recognized trends across their accounts and experiences, which lead me to use ‘thematic analysis’ for interpreting my data.

Data Analysis

As mentioned, after transcribing the interviews, I began to review the transcripts thoroughly using thematic analysis. I did this by looking for trends in the participants’ experience. In line with Baptiste’s (2001) approach for interpretive analyses, I analyzed my data by ‘tagging’ and labeling trends I noted throughout the data collection and transcript review process. As per Baptiste’s approach, “tagging refers to the process of selecting from an amorphous body of material, bits and pieces that satisfy the researcher's curiosity, and help support the purpose of the study” (p. 10). I tagged both serially (proceeding through each complete transcript individually) and in parallel (across similar sections of the interview transcripts) in order to exhaust the data. Drawing from the literature on Communications Theory of Identity, Online Identity Assembly Theory, and MSM identities, I developed the following ‘tags’: usage of app, photo emphasis, online embodiment, identity performance/enactment, non-performance/vagueness, gaps between enactment and relational frames, gaps between personal and enactment frames, gaps between offline and online self, self marketing, competition, consumerism, discrimination, community value, emotional impact, and welcoming environment.
As the analysis concluded, it became evident that some tags overlapped, from which I derived three major themes that were most commonly noted throughout the interviews along with ‘usage of app’. For example, ‘usage of app’ was a stand-alone, while online embodiment and photo emphasis had overlapping qualities (i.e. photo emphasis related to physical form). With that, the three major themes I developed were: ‘online embodiment’, ‘identity gaps’, and ‘marketing the self online’. In addition, I looked at the various usages of Grindr in order to have a better understanding of how the application functions for the users. Once the tagged data was separated into the four categories, I further analyzed to develop subthemes, which more accurately interpreted each participant’s experience of the major theme. For example, all participants experienced online embodiment, but some experienced it more through their presented and enacted selves in their photo (a subtheme of embodiment) while others experienced it through enactment of virtual self (another subtheme of online embodiment). Aronson (1994) argues that themes emerge from participants’ stories and are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The subthemes therefore provide different meaning to how individual participants experienced the general theme to demonstrate a fuller story.

Conclusion

With this methodology, it is important to note that I faced some limitations when analyzing. First and foremost, my philosophical perspective as the analyst impacts how I interpret the data. Baptiste (2001) argues that the values, beliefs and interests of the analyst “determine what the particular analyst considers desirable; and they form the outer limits of what the particular analyst considers theoretically possible” (p. 3). With
this in consideration, my experience as a user and researcher in Grindr impacted how I analyzed the data, or, in other words, what I saw as important to me. If I were to give my data to another, it is possible different themes and conclusions could be drawn. My approach to the study, however, addresses the goal of understanding by describing some of the meanings behind the experience—not an absolute truth. With that, I will move on to discuss the experiences the participants had in Grindr through the general themes and usages.
Results

The ten interviews yielded a plethora of data that provided insight into how the participants experience and navigate their identities in the geo-social networking application, Grindr. Their experiences provided the basis for the three themes: ‘online embodiment’, ‘identity gaps’, and ‘marketing the self online’. Each theme is constructed by subthemes that highlight how individual participants experience the theme. For ‘online embodiment’, participants experienced their embodied identity, through their photo, their enactment of certain identities and choosing not to present others. Participants experienced ‘identity gaps’ through disconnections between their personal-enacted identities, enacted-relational identities, personal-communal, which all contributed to impacts in their offline lives. Lastly, the participants seemed to navigate these gaps by ‘marketing the self online’ in a competitive market with identity management and branding, which resulted in the commodification of the user. Before discussing the major themes, I would like to start with an overview of what the participants reported as their main uses of Grindr.

Usage Of Grindr

For the participants, Grindr had multiple uses ranging from finding friendships and community, information gathering, entertainment, and romantic encounters. As explained previously, Grindr is a smartphone application directed toward gay and bisexual men that allows users to create a profile and chat with other users based on
geographic proximity. The application works by loading a grid of other users (100 users for the free version and more for the paid version) with those who are physically closer more near the user. Those who are physically closer appear closer to the top of the grid than those who are physically further away. As a user moves through physical spaces, the make-up of the grid changes depending on who is nearby. The user is able to tap on the square grid to see an expanded view of the other’s profile. Grindr allows users to publish personal details and a photo in order to create a profile, however this is not a requirement for usage (i.e. users are able to have completely blank profiles and still participate in the community). The profile platform allows for users to upload a single photo, enter in pre-determined physical statistics, such as race, age, weight, height, distance from others, relationship status, etc., as well as a short character-limited biography section they may choose to fill out. After clicking on another user’s profile, there are several options available. The user can click the message icon and send the owner of the other profile a private message, photo, or a screenshot of a pinpoint GPS map location to disclose his physical location. The user can also block another by tapping a red “x”. If blocked, that user disappears from the grid; the blocker may also report the user to the webmaster.

Grindr’s portrayal in media has perpetuated the stereotype of the application’s main function as a way for men to meet up with men for causal sexual interactions, or hook-ups. For example, an article in the BBC claims that because of the ability to pinpoint other users within meters of you, such apps have “become popular with people looking for casual sex” (Harvey, Feb 11, 2014). However, the participants in this study shared a wider range for the application’s functionality that goes beyond hooking-up that also includes finding friendship, community, information gathering, and romantic
relationships. While Grindr’s mission statement prides itself as providing “a new kind of dating experience” and claims that “turning Grindr off and being there in-person with that guy you were chatting with is the final goal of using the app,” participants in this study agreed that the application serves this goal with some success, however it also has broader usages.

Friendships And Community

Instead of engaging in a hook-up frenzy, most participants reported one of their primary uses of Grindr (or similar virtual communities such as Scruff or Adam4Adam) was simply to connect with other men for friendship – for both online and offline interaction and information gathering. Across the board, participants expressed the difficulty of finding and meeting other gay people in their area without the help of social media and online communities. Thus, Grindr’s locative function served as a promising way to connect with others nearby to chat and potentially meet up. For example, Nick is from a rural part of Mississippi where there are not many physical places for gay people to interact (the closest gay bar is over 4-hours away from where he lived). He found the application useful for connecting with other gay men in his area when a physical place was not accessible. He explained:

I think that, you know, it [Grindr] played a very crucial role when I lived in Mississippi. Helping me to meet people… that’s really the only way at the time I had of meeting people because it’s just so repressed in Mississippi.

However, conservative rural areas are not the only place the application served this function. John, who is from Long Island NY, said, “I was looking for some other way to talk to other gay people. Um, in Long Island, it’s very, very restricted; you really can’t find social venues to meet gay people at”. These two different examples demonstrate how
the application may serve the same purpose in both a rural and urban area, and speaks to the overall frustration gay men have when trying to meet others, regardless of their physical location.

In any case, the participants all claimed they had the intent of meeting other men on the application for friendship. While Alejandro said he met a lot of friends through Grindr, most of the others expressed frustration on the limited number of meaningful friendships they had actually made with the application. Interestingly, Seth used the application for friendship with others nearby but did not intend to meet them in-person. He said:

There is someone that lives probably two blocks, two miles [away], I mean, he and I text to this day… but we never met in person but I know a lot about him and I think he knows a lot about me.

Other participants talked about how they developed groups of friends facilitated though the application. This was especially prevalent for users who were new to a city and had little or no connections. When Derrick moved to Washington, DC and did not know anyone, he made a group of friends through the application, however not without the frustration of meeting a lot of “horrible people”, as he put it.

The idea that Grindr offers a virtual community is what seems to drive participants’ initial decision to join. Nine participants said they initially joined the app because of friend referrals and that they wanted to be part of what was going on. Larry talked about how joining Grindr at first “was really just that my [his] friends were on it [Grindr] so we [he and his friends] could all just see where everybody was at”. Seeing where his friends were, and allowing them to see where he was, allowed him better access to his offline community. Ethan further expressed how belonging to the virtual
community was his motive for joining when he said: “[I had this feeling] like something is going on without me [not being on Grindr]. And or like I am missing the boat, kind of.” On one hand, participants used the application to make new connections, but on the other they used it to maintain a sense of belonging within the virtual community.

**Information Gathering**

In terms of usage of the application in unfamiliar places, a few participants who traveled for work and pleasure used the application as a way to figure out what was going on. Derrick pointed to using Grindr to figure out what gay-related events/things to do were available in unfamiliar places. Interestingly, he used the analogy of using Grindr in the same way as *UrbanSpoon* (a location-based app for finding restaurants) in order to gather gay-specific information about the city (i.e. where to go for bars, clubs, cafés, etc.).

**Entertainment**

Another common usage for the application was as a form of entertainment. Alejandro said, “I think a lot of people see it just kind of as a way to waste time,” and went on to discuss one of his frustrations with the application is it is a “time suck” because he spends too much time on it. In considering the amount of time the participants spent daily on the app, most either expressed it was “too much time” or mentioned that they would check it throughout the day when they were bored. This has a lot to do with the ease and accessibility of logging-on to their mobile device. Many pointed out using it daily in places ranging from their home, work, and public spaces, like bars and restaurants. That is, they would use it to merely see who is online and nearby or to have casual chat, but with no intention of doing anything beyond just checking out
the scene in the area. Several of the participants (Larry, Alejandro, Derrick, and Skipper Warhawk) were in relationships at some point when using the application just for seeing “who was around” for entertainment, but explained that the sought nothing beyond that. Depending on their relationship status and agreements with partners, this function changed to allow for a form of “interactive porn” (i.e. exchanging pornographic photos with other users and sexual chat) or even hook-ups. For example, Skipper Warhawk used the application for gratification and emotional stability. He explained “from an immediate gratification standpoint, it’s severely impacted my life because I can just hop on and either just talk to somebody or do a picture exchange or whatever and then I am a happy boy”. Beyond that he uses the app when he is feeling low or depressed to be overtly sexual. This in turn brings him back up to feeling good about himself. This provides an example of how Grindr emotionally impacts the users’ life as they use the application to connect with other users.

**Romance**

Finally, participants used the application for romantic encounters, whether for fleeting hook-ups, dates or a long-term relationship. Julian found a long-term relationship on Grindr and decided to discontinue usage while in that relationship. Initially, Ben saw Grindr’s primary use as only for finding sex and “getting off”. After consideration of how he uses the application though, Ben said, “maybe deep down I am trying to get like, maybe I could meet someone. I don’t know. I actually kind of did like a week ago”. Other participants mentioned that they wanted to find a more meaningful romantic encounter outside of fleeting hook-ups and beyond information sharing. Nick and Derrick both mentioned when single they have long-term romantic relationship goals for the application but became frustrated with the overtly sexual nature of the community. For
Ethan, his intentions changed the longer he was immersed in the Grindr community. He said “it evolved into being, very quickly being an application where it felt like I was going to meet people and date them and mostly became a sexual titillation thing”. It is unclear if the hypersexual environment is a byproduct of the immediacy of interaction and proximity factors or was the original purpose of the app's function. However, the participants found that the hypersexual environment brought frustrations and challenges for creating the meaningful relationships they intended to find in the application. When asked how meaningful their interactions were within the application, all participants said the majority of their interactions were essentially meaningless, with a few exceptions.

I ended each interview with one question: do you feel Grindr offers a welcoming environment for people? All participants said they did not feel the app was necessarily welcoming to everyone. Some said it was welcoming to certain groups of people (that fit the ‘mainstream’ gay identity mentioned in the literature review), where as others said it was not welcoming at all. By welcoming, they interpreted it as a place where they felt that they fit in and a good place to meet others. As discussed, everyone mentioned they joined the app in search of some sort of connection, and in very few cases found meaningful interaction. Initially, participants are driven to join the Grindr community by curiosity and a need for easier ways to meet others like them. While some intended uses remained static through the participants’ usage (i.e. looking for friendship and community), other uses changed depending on what each participant needed at any given time (i.e. short or long-lived romance and information gathering). Since the participants find that most Grindr interactions hold very low meaning, there is a disconnection between what they use the application for and the actual lived outcomes. This presents a troublesome paradox for users where the goal of connection with others
on communal and platonic levels is overshadowed by an overly sexualize experience in the environment. Although Grindr boasts that its unique “uncomplicated” approach makes it easier for people to connect, usage of the application may lead to more complicated challenges than benefits. One of those challenges is found in how people are embodied online, a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews.

**Theme 1: Online Embodiment**

Throughout the interviews the online importance of the physical self, or how the user was physically embodied within the application, was a reoccurring theme. Most participants tried to connect the presentation of ‘virtual self’ in their profiles as closely as possible with their offline selves. The participants also mentioned that they were skeptical that everyone was as honest about their presentation as they were, however. Some potential reasons that participants might wish to misrepresent themselves online could be to avoid racism, detection by others, market their selves, enjoy having an alternative identity, or because they may be ashamed to be on the application. For the most part, the participants asserted that they did not misrepresent themselves in the application and expressed themselves as closely as they could to their offline selves.

Before discussing the breakdown of how the participants expressed the experience of embodiment within Grindr, I would like to clarify what I mean by “online embodiment”. For the purpose of this study, online embodiment is when physical appearance and the accumulation of lived experiences transcend into the individual’s online identities (Campbell, 2001). That is to say, aspects of the user’s offline identity remain part of and influence their online identities. For example, an overweight person who experiences their identity daily in real life may not be able to enact a thinner identity online due to lacking the lived experience of not being overweight (assuming he has
always been overweight and thus created an identity through interactions with the perceptions and responses of others to his physical being). Therefore, as argued by Campbell (2001 & 2004), even in a virtual environment, the user cannot escape his corporal self completely. The participants dealt with the tensions of online embodiment by enacting an accurate yet idealized version of themselves in Grindr through their profile information, their photo, and their behavior.

**How To Show The Self: Photo And Embodiment**

One of the main ways the participants of the study demonstrated the salience of ‘online embodiment’ issues was through the importance and value placed on an accurate photo in their profiles. Photos of users’ bodies and faces represent their physical selves within the virtual medium with cues about other pieces of their embodied identities (i.e. body type, race/ethnicity, age, etc.). Skipper Warhawk summarized the general view on the importance of photos when he said, “Well I think a picture is key umm again… just something to show that this is an actual person that you’re talking with”. John furthers this trend when he mentioned, “a blank profile turns me off, like if you have no time to fill anything out then I have nothing to say to you”. Generally, photos of a user’s face or body are valued above photos of landscapes, animals, etc. This is because many users stated that they would not interact with others who did not have a face photo. This is because they expect in offline interactions to see the other person’s face and body, so why change it for online interaction? In some cases users without a photo of their faces were referred to as ‘the faceless’ and ‘the headless’. For example, Alejandro said “I always put face photos as opposed to headless torsos…I mean sometimes they [other users] don’t have photos, so I don’t even talk to them”. Ben showed a similar sentiment when he said, “I say a few people [have contacted him]. Not
including the faceless”. Ben’s feelings about the “faceless” demonstrates the value of seeing who he is communicating with and those who he cannot see, are disregarded completely. The disregard for users who do not show their physical appearance in the app is an example of how the participants put lower or almost no value on those who did not represent their physical selves online, regarding them as not worth interacting with. I was curious to understand more about those users who, behind a photo-less profile, had made a choice not to represent their selves online in this manner.

Ethan was one of those users who chose not to be physically represented. In other words, he had no photo published in his profile. Ethan said originally he had joined the application with a photo and physical statistics posted, but after using the application for several years he felt left out of the community and felt that his physical self did not fit in. He became more comfortable with keeping the physical representation of his identity absent so that when he chose to interact with someone he had the power to share what he wanted, when he wanted. This, however, creates a paradox for Ethan; where users are not likely to interact with non-physically presented identities (as Alejandro mentioned), which in turn makes it more difficult to interact overall.

The importance of physical representation is also demonstrated in that the photo seems to be the most frequently updated part of the profile. Seth updates his photo regularly when he takes a new photo that “looks good”. Alejandro exhibits a similar behavior, but uses the number of Instagram “likes” to determine if it’s a good photo. Julian said, “I think by putting a different picture, people might get more interested, like there is something new to look at”. Similarly Larry keeps his profile “fresh” by updating his photo periodically. By doing this, the participants are keeping their profile up-to-date
with what they see as the best version of their physical identities and with what will yield more interaction.

Another indication of the importance of the online physical representation through photos was evident when asking the users about what their profile looked like. Surprisingly, all users only described their profile picture (if they had a photo) and did not indicate other aspects such as physical statistics or bio text until prompted. They would talk about the photo, whether it was a face, body, or other, as well as style of photo, if applicable. At the time of the study, all users had some form of a face photo with the exception of Ethan and Julian.

All users point to the importance of the profile photo in making them interact with others. For most users the picture was mandatory for interaction on some level. As previously mentioned, Ethan, who did not have a photo on his profile, would still send a photo in the first message when reaching out to another in order to increase the odds of interaction. Larry claimed he messages everyone (even ‘the faceless’) because he was more interested in getting to know who these invisible users were, but after a short period of chatting wanted to know what they looked like. The importance of a photo as part of their Grindr identity provides an indication of the importance of the physical form in the virtual world, as Campbell found (2001 & 2004). It also indicates how it affects the interactions users experience in the community because some participants report receiving more interaction with certain photos. Additionally, referring back to Communications Theory of Identity (CTI), it serves as a piece of the users’ enacted identities because it represents a presentation of the physical self.
Choosing What To Show: Enactment Of Embodied Identity

Referring back to OIA and CTI, the presentation of self (either offline or online) is an enactment or articulation of different pieces of one’s identity. Further, what the other sees of an online identity is essentially the presentation, or enactment, of the virtual self (Tyma and Leonard, 2011). For the most part, participants said they tried to present themselves as accurately as possible in Grindr. This may be due to the GPS proximity factor of the application and the possibility of meeting and/or seeing others offline. Additionally, the profile infrastructure gave the participants the opportunity to decide how to present their identities. When a person chooses to display a physical form, behavior or action, they are enacting an identity through those actions in order to claim a desired identity (Hecht and Choi, 2012). The way participants navigate their enacted identities within Grindr yielded positive and negative implications.

As mentioned previously, Ethan chose not to present himself at all by not disclosing any part of his identities in Grindr. He explained this, saying:

So I think about that by having really no profile the only person who probably in those circumstances who is probably going to initiate interaction is me. Because no one even knows you [or] know who might be on the other end of that. So I can choose to umm interact with people who are let’s say, they’re new, maybe I haven’t seen them in my vicinity over and over and over again and already established that we have a connection. So I suppose a little bit of a power play in that.

On one hand, this allowed him the power to control what others see of him, but on the other, it made him the responsible party for all interactions and made it more difficult for
him to interact with others. His decision to remove his physical representation on Grindr stemmed from him not feeling like he was part of the community of the application. He said:

That was my most recent choice [not having a profile] and it was a mixture of a few reasons I supposed. After being on it for a while and seeing the same faces, I felt a little bit like the uh awkward schoolgirl at the school dance.

After feeling left out of the ‘dance’ he literally becomes a wallflower by not standing out at all. This way he no longer has to worry about his identity being public to the community, but rather he has the power to present what he wants to whom he wants.

When not feeling their physically represented identities fit in to the Grindr community, other participants navigated their identities in other ways. When Ben joined a similar application to Grindr (called Scruff which is directed to a sub-community of MSM individuals), he tried it out and said, “I realized I didn’t fit in to Scruff. Not, only in my physical appearance. The long hair, petite body. It’s just not what Scruff’s [about]. It’s kind of funny, it’s just not”. He responded by deleting the application and staying with one that was a better match for his physical representation. But with that, he still experienced a difficult time presenting the identity he wanted in Grindr. He mentioned the first thing someone would see of him in a physical encounter would not be that he is feminine, however within the application, he says “I think in a picture, uh, you see an effeminate uh you know, man. I can’t make my picture look masculine”. Therefore he is confronted with a conundrum where he has to weigh out the benefits and drawbacks of how he presents himself, either by trying to present a false hyper-masculinity (which he says he cannot do) or risk enacting his “truer-self” that may appear more feminine.
Julian shared that he had falsely presented himself in Grindr as a personal experiment to see how others would interact with him. After breaking up with his partner, he was once again on Grindr and looking to meet new men. Being mestizo and an immigrant to the US, both online and offline he faced stereotypes and felt like some users were not interested in getting to know him because of his race. After experiencing this, he decided to play with his identity presentation in Grindr and enact a “very handsome, white, muscular guy” with a photo he found on the web. He said the community’s response was completely different toward him. He said, “Everybody was talking to me, especially white people. Well and I mean obviously everybody”. He went on to describe how users he had interacted with as his mestizo-self were completely different toward his white and muscular ‘self’. They told the white and muscular guy they were more interested in love and emotional connection, but as his mestizo-self, he received no interest. Though Grindr offered Julian the opportunity to present a new identity, he eventually returned to his truer identity because he did not see a benefit to present a false identity online beyond seeing if other users were superficial.

Other than Julian’s experience, all the other participants stated they presented their identities as accurately as possible. This commitment was due to the opportunity to meet up with people nearby as well as just seeing them around. For example, Nick valued the accuracy of his identity as what he saw as the most important part of his profile. Contrary to this, some participants pointed out that they were skeptical about the accuracy of other users’ profiles; that they either were completely incorrect or falsely enhanced. Skipper Warhawk summarized nicely the skepticism of others when he mentioned, “there are so many instances of people not being who they say they are online that you just have to be prepared for any kind of curve ball that’s thrown at you”.

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Derrick and Seth noted the use of an inaccurate age and photos seemed most prevalent.

Nick, who understood the importance of a photo for successful interaction, "wanted a picture but [he] put very little identifiable information" in his profile in order to still remain somewhat unidentifiable. Since Nick lived in a conservative community he did not want his profile to “out” him to his family and offline community. This is interesting to me because a photo (the photo he cites is a face picture of him at his cousin’s wedding) would be more identifiable than height/weight and other statistics. It is surprising that Nick chose to use a photo which leads me to think that he understands the value of being physically represented in Grindr and did this at risk of being ‘outed’ at the time. When he moved to Denver he felt safe to disclose more information and expanded his profile to present more accurate information. Across the board, the participants are aware that their enacted identities impact their interactions, therefore they critically choose how to present themselves, with an emphasis on accuracy. However, as seen with Nick, at times presenting the self accurately does not offer the participant the interaction he desires, therefore they mitigate this by choosing what to present and not present.

**Leaving It Vague: Choosing What Not To Present**

Another trend in online identity presentation was that participants would be vague about certain aspects of their identities. For the most part, participants concluded that there was an accepted identity in the application and it was not all that inclusive for those outside of that. This “accepted identity” was strikingly similar to my conclusions in the literature (i.e. white, masculine, fit, young men) or as Seth explained, “[in Grindr] you have white, male, mid-20s to early 30s [and] sometimes the Abercrombie body”. Not
surprisingly, the participants that did not fit this archetype explained they felt discriminated for not fitting in to what the Grindr community values. In terms of dealing with not adhering completely to the ‘idealized type’, some participants choose to not share certain aspect of their identity.

For Nick, he chose to not disclose his weight in his profile. He says, "Especially in Mississippi that I left weight off intentionally. I went through a period where I lost a lot of weight but then gained some back and then lost again, sort of fluctuating. I think of the gay community as being very judgmental about that."

On one hand, as opposed to face-to-face interaction, Nick is able to be vague about his weight and still potentially interact with others without discrimination, but on the other hand, the nature of the application could imply a physical meet-up at some point due to the proximity where this vagueness would not serve him well. Larry does the same thing with his age. He says, "I don’t have my age on there… I think it’s a lot, especially on Grindr, like people are very umm, they’re very discriminating towards you if you’re older. I’m definitely on the higher end of that". Therefore, Larry is able to interact with other users before disclosing his age. This gives him chance to feel out if they are going to hold his age against him before committing to something further. Julian spoke about a friend with a physical deformity. He mentioned, "I remember he [his friend] mentioned sometimes, he doesn't like to send body pictures because of this [deformity]". Again, this gives his friend the opportunity to feel out the person and see their views on non-archetypal identities before committing to more interaction.

All participants felt at times discrimination was present in Grindr. When asked to elaborate, participants mentioned instances of racism, ageism, sizeism, and gender expression discrimination (i.e. discrimination non-“masculine” men). Since Grindr’s
infrastructure does not allow for a public forum and interaction is mainly one-on-one between users, instances of discrimination are often kept private. Because of this, the only repercussion for the offender is being blocked or reported (to the webmaster).

Overall, the participants showed that their identity presentation was important for successful usage of the application. Participants were much more likely to interact with someone who was physically represented within the application, through disclosing more information and most importantly a face photo. The application gave room for the participants to choose how they enact their identities, however this came with consequences, such as at times not being able to connect their online identities with the offline world (in the case of Julian’s white and muscular presentation) or not being able to interact with other users based on their actual online presented identities (for those who do not fit in to this archetype not feeling as they fit in to the community). The participants used creative measures to navigate this by using their best photos, not presenting identities they felt did not appeal to others, and presenting the identities they felt fit in to the archetype. However, the physical proximity factor made for even more importance placed on the embodied identity because it brings the online user even closer to the offline world through ease of physical meet-ups. I believe this creates a disconnection between the presented online identities and user interaction. The issues that identity presentation brings to the participants are influenced by the gaps found between identity frames.

**Theme 2: Identity Gaps**

The goal for the Grindr application is to bring users from a virtual meeting space to a physical meeting space. This goal is made easier because users are interacting based on their physical proximity to one another, therefore making an offline interaction
much easier. For the participants in my study, issues with continuity between the offline and virtual environments were brought up through pointing out identity gaps within accurately representing self, difficulties with other users seeing them as they wanted to be seen, difficulties with finding meaningful connections with other users, and the application impacting how they interact with each other offline. Through these discussion points, I look back to Hecht’s (1993) frames of identity: personal, enactment, relational and communal, and gaps between these frames. With this, the participants showed that Grindr creates gaps between their offline life and their interactions with others on the app. Overall, these gaps were presented as frustrations the participants had with both the infrastructure of the application (i.e. limited amount of information in profiles) and the behavior of others in the Grindr community.

**Representing Self In The App: Gaps Between Personal And Enactment Frames**

When asked about how they represent themselves in the application, many users made comments that the application was limiting because there was not a space to present more of themselves. For me, this seemed like a gap between personal and enactment frames. Looking back to the theory, personal-enacted identity gaps refer to “the inconsistencies found between an individual’s own views of his or her self and the identity he or she expresses” (Hecht and Choi, 2011, p. 143). Because the infrastructure limits how the user can present the self in the profile, a personal-enactment gap is possible. An example of a participant’s experience with this gap was how Alejandro complained that the profiles are “basically a tweets worth of information and one photo so you don’t get a very good idea of who that person is”. This demonstrates a
disconnection between how one presents the self (enactment frame) and how one sees the self (personal frame).

Overall, participants mentioned that their profiles were not a good representation of themselves due to the ability to present one photo and around 250 characters in the bio section. Further, due to the small amount of information presented, some felt this made it difficult to have meaningful conversation along with not intriguing people enough to initiate conversation. For example, Nick said, “I didn’t put very much information because of the length [limitations] and everything. I didn’t put that much in the bio so people that weren’t chatting with me probably didn’t get much of a picture of who I was at all. Neither positive or negative.” Because of limitations within the profile, participants did not feel that other users necessarily were able to engage easily, which is an interesting contradiction for an application founded on helping people connect with others.

Beyond the limitations in the profiles, some participants felt that the way the application made them present themselves did not yield the type of interactions they were seeking. Derrick, who uses the application for friendship only, can only write that he wants friends in the bio section or the “looking for section” of his profile but explains that he “still get[s] people that will be like ‘hey, do you want to hook up?’” in the first message. In spite of presenting himself as a “friendship only” user, there is a disconnection between what other users think he is there for and what he is actually seeking. This conflict results in a frustration for many participants whom use the application to find meaningful friendships/relationships and community.
One of the largest frustrations mentioned by the participants was based on their interactions, or lack thereof, with other users. For me, this seemed like a gap between how participants presented themselves (through their enacted frame) and how others interpreted them (through their relational frame). Participants modified their enacted identities through changing their profiles in order to attract and interact with others, like Skipper Warhawk, who intentionally presented his profile in a way to “bring the men flocking”. Looking back to CTI, enactment-relational identity gaps refer to “a difference between an individual’s perception of his or her presented self and the individual’s recognition of how another person views the presented self” (Jung, 2011, pp. 166). An example of this gap is how some participants felt that their presented online identities did not yield the type of interaction they wanted from others. Skipper Warhawk summed up the gap nicely when he talked about frustrations with meeting others offline after a positive online interaction. He said, “I think it’s the fact that nine times out of ten you are not actually meeting the person [offline] that you thought you were [meeting]. And that’s on both ends”. For the participants, this gap became evident through several forms. Some participants experienced it based on how others (mis)interpreted their presented online selves versus how the participant sees himself, and for others, it was through how they (mis)enacted their identities online.

Seth’s experience demonstrated how issues with his online presentation prove to cause a gap between his enacted identities and his interactions with other users (relational). He identifies himself racially as Asian but feels that he is culturally white. He mentioned that from his experience he feels “like in this city [Denver] at least… there’s a lot of people that don’t really get in to the Asians”. Although he feels culturally white,
other users only see his presented Asian identity and base if they wish to interact with him solely on that aspect. In other words, he views himself as more white, while others are viewing him as purely Asian. But he admits to doing the same thing. He says, “I’m guilty of it too, [I] judge people by the book, by the picture” within the application. This is problematic for Seth because his photo does not match his overall identity. He explains that:

The anxiety I have… it’s what I want to be perceived as, and I am not. And I need to realize that’s not the case. And going back, because the majority of my friends are Caucasian and my whole family is, I need to remember that from a surface, when we are just starting to scroll through all the pictures, that’s what they see [an Asian person], but that’s not really who I am.

Seth is presented as just Asian on Grindr, without the ability to show any other part of who he is or how he feels. Unlike in offline environments, he would be able to present a fuller version of himself through his personality, sense of humor, etc. however Grindr limits him to just this physical form that is quickly judged by other users as they scroll through the hundreds of other profiles. Other participants experienced similar situations with the assumption that their online identity was too feminine, overweight, and/or old.

Ben pointed out a similar experience:

I think a lot of people if they’ve never met me before [would be attracted], but they just see that picture and I look very effeminate. I think if [they] see me more in person that’s not going to be the first thing that comes across.

Limitations of profiles and others’ assumptions of what is presented proved to be another reason behind participants feeling this disconnection with relating to other users. In Ben’s experience he feels good about himself, that he “has a good head on his
shoulders” however on Grindr, his interactions with others did not yield the response that he felt he deserved. Within Grindr he felt extreme rejection partially because of his physical appearance (i.e. appearing effeminate). Because he is able to potentially interact with so many men very easily on Grindr, he experienced more rejection than he would have in a similar offline environment. He explained that the rejection he experienced on Grindr caused him to spiral in to a depression where he lost a lot of his sense of self-worth. In a way, since the application limited his ability to fully present himself, he was challenged with limiting how to present what he saw as his best identity traits with little avail to attracting others. When asked how interactions within Grindr would be different than in the offline world, he said:

Many of those people [who rejected him in Grindr] would be in to me if they had known it was me. Not all of them but many of them. Umm just from the way I carry myself, whether it be my confidence, I have a lot of fun. My sweet dance moves. I love to dance.

For Ben and several other participants, the application’s limitations for the profile make it difficult to virtually enact pieces of identity that are relatable and desirable to other users in the community beyond simply their physical forms. This further perpetuated the importance placed on just the photo and created gaps between user’s relational interactions with how they see themselves. Ethan realized the hypocrisy he experienced in this regard by doing exactly what he felt causes the disconnection. He explains:

The weird thing about Grindr, is there is a big disconnect between the version of being pretty selfish and self-centered, where I might feel like… how do you know that I am not even worth while to talk, maybe you would find me worthwhile if we were actually meeting face to face. But just my picture isn’t a good representation
of that, but then I will do the same thing. To weed through all of it, I will state my preference or I will say “I am sorry, that I don’t like this or I don’t like [that] or whatever”.

Although he realizes that people base interaction on how the photo looks, he does the same thing, which further perpetuates the major disconnection for an application meant to bring an already marginalized group together.

Based on the interactions the participants had (or did not have) with others, they became more aware of how their enacted Grindr identity impacted the overall experience. For Ethan, not knowing what these factors were caused him to question how he was enacting his identity:

I am not always sure like how I am seen [by others], you know, there is obviously a block feature and what not and sometimes you’d be surprised that sometimes you’d say hello or something like that and you get blocked and you’re not sure what people, what people are perceiving.

After experiencing being blocked by others for merely saying hello, he removed his presented identity from Grindr (i.e. clearing all information from his profile to make it blank). This may be because he was not able to figure out what the gap between his enacted identity and relational. According to the participants, blunt responses, such as blocking the other with no explanation, were very common for Grindr. All participants expressed that bluntness was usually regarding sex or discrimination. Derrick shared that he often experienced unsolicited sexual and racist messages. He shared that at times he will reach out to a user by saying “hi” and receive, “sorry I am just not in to black people”. Additionally, he experienced another user writing him just to say, “everybody knows black people aren’t attractive”. The participants felt this behavior, and
openness in general, was common due to the security of being behind a screen; or, as Julian put it,

I'm a very shy person. So since I haven't met them yet I am not sure if I am ever going to meet these people so I am just texting them. Like I am not as tense as maybe when I meet someone in person.

In return though, some participants felt this freedom to behave more openly impacted their ability to belong to the community because it was too blunt, and at times, hurtful.

**Finding Community? Gaps Between Personal And Communal Frames**

When asked how meaningful their interactions were in Grindr, all participants responded that the majority of interactions held very little meaning. For the participants, most were futile efforts at finding a real connection. For me, this seemed like a gap between the personal and communal frames because there seems to be a disconnection between the community’s identity as a whole and how the user sees the self as a member of the community. Many studies have not looked at gaps between the other frames and the communal frame since most focus on the gaps between the personal, enacted, and relational (Hecht and Choi, 2011). However, in order to develop a definition of this gap based on logic of the other gaps, I would define it as ‘a difference between an individual’s perception of his or her self and how the community views itself as a unit’. In this study, on one hand, the participant sees their individual membership in the community as a place to have meaningful interaction and connect with others, while on the other hand, the community identity seems to play up to the stereotype of a place to find only fleeting sexual encounters. John summarized this nicely when he said, “I thought I would meet people who would actually want to have a conversation first, as
opposed to finding out my exact location and come meet me. So I didn’t actually get any, like, stimulating conversation [from Grindr].

Although several participants said they had met others and developed something meaningful, it was rare. The participants dealt with the disconnection of not finding what they seek in several ways. As mentioned previously, Derrick does not respond to those who are obviously looking for something sexual. Ben on the other hand, decided he would prefer something more meaningful than purely hook-ups, so he adjusted his profile to reflect more of who he was as a person (i.e. he changed his enacted identity by changing his picture, adding a little plant emoticon since he loves nature and the bio to say “guys who care about their community give me a boner”) as opposed to focusing on purely his physical form (i.e. just a photo and no text). That way he could convey to the Grindr community that he is looking for something more on a personal level. The frustrations from not finding community within the application at times resulted in the participant deleting the application and discontinuing use for a period of time. Nick said, “I quit using it because it seems like so many people are only interested in that [hooking-up]”. Although he was looking for friendship, community and dating, the prevalence of purely sexual interaction resulted in him removing himself from the community. These frustrations and gaps in some case changed how the participant saw his offline self as well as how he interacted with others offline.

**Gaps And The Offline Self: Blunt Behavior**

The overall impact Grindr brought to the participants is the ability to virtually meet people who are located nearby and be less inhibited due to a higher sense of security from being behind a screen—in other words, the ability to enact the self with more
freedom. There is a level of security online for the participants where they can protect themselves in a way they otherwise would not be able to offline. For Nick, due to online interface, he can take extra precaution when interacting with strangers in Grindr before meeting them offline. For example, before giving out more personal contact details, such as his phone number, he would take precautions, as he explains:

I would usually talk to someone for at least a week, regularly talking to them, like daily or every other day before I sort of gaged the level of security, craziness, that kind of thing. If I felt like it was a safe person to give my number to, then I would do that.

Another interesting point the Grindr interface brought users was the ability to interact more openly with strangers in a way they would not do in other mediums or with friends. Seth mentioned how he enjoys “being able to say something that [he] may not be able to say to [his] friends” to users that he has never met before. Larry felt that the ability to be more open created a tumultuous environment:

I think that takes a lot of effort to get to that point where you actually meet somebody. And I think you have to have a really tough skin to be on that stuff [on Grindr and other applications]. I mean you can send out a bunch of pictures and you’ll just get blocked sometimes. Or you get the “not interested” or you know, people are just way blunt.

Larry points out that although the participants are able to be more open, it comes with drawbacks, such as people being rude and instant rejection. Furthering the idea of rejection, Grindr made some participants more self-conscious. For example, Ethan became more aware of his weight and size. He thinks “Grindr has made [him] a little more hyper-aware in some ways of [his] body type” as he is a self-described “bigger
guy”. Additionally this openness made some participants feel that at times the applications only function was for sexual encounters. For Julian he felt other users seemed:

To be very polite and virtuous, but they start sending naked pictures or they start like ‘what are you up to, what are you doing?’ [with a sexual intonation] and I'm like I'm sorry and I try to change the conversation to different subject.

However, this overtly sexual nature of the application brought some positive aspects for some participants by allowing users to negotiate their interaction in more secure environment. Ethan felt that because of this Grindr had impacted to his offline life significantly. He expressed that due to the usage of this application he felt that he was able to be more open about his desires:

One of the schizophrenias of being involved in social media or on an app like this, is other people feel and over time I would feel permission to be much more sexually aggressive or direct whether I was seeking [sex] or not than I would ever feel comfortable being in person and certainty get a feeling sometimes like sometimes I would feel definitely perceived as just being sexually aggressive and sometimes I took rejection like ‘oh my gosh I’m a pervert’ and sometimes it takes form like oh my gosh, I am so surprised this person is quote-on-quote attracted and in reverse of that, sometimes you start an immediate chat and someone… I gotten that sense that immediately thinking ‘this guy older than me is just trying to hook up’ and it’s like ‘I didn’t even say that.’ I haven’t even indicated anything other than saying hello.

On one hand, Ethan feels that the overt sexual bluntness is complementary to his ego when he receives a positive response from the other user. On the other hand, when he
gets rejected there are lessened repercussions or embarrassment than an in-person rejection. As he put it, 20 guys can reject him in an hour on Grindr, which would not be possible in a night out at a bar or club. Although blunt behavior on Grindr helps negotiate the interaction that will follow next, Ethan feels his behavior on Grindr has negatively impacted his overall ability to have offline interactions. As he explained,

I do feel like it has changed my sense of being out in real social interactions and feeling like I know how to engage like that. Like I am out at a bar and I see someone attractive, I feel so tainted by having had established a pattern where through Grindr, you would have an immediate sexual conversation… on Grindr, you negotiate if you are going to hook-up or you are just going to have a sexual chat, you negotiate all the details ahead of time… in a real life situation, you can’t walk up to someone in a bar, [and say] are you thinking of me sexually, or you will we just have sex tonight, there are all these nuances when interacting, I feel like it has almost changed my ability to enjoy and negotiate just the slower, nebulous nuances of interaction with people especially when there is potential romantic or sexual connection out in the real quote on quote real world by just meeting people in the world.

Through finding a more secure way to openly interact with other men, Ethan has changed the way he can engage with others. Because he can negotiate interactions safely from behind the screen, he no longer is able to navigate similar offline interactions. He went on to say this inability that he blames on Grindr is the thing he hates the most about the application.

With the ability to be blunter and open in Grindr, participants find it brings both positive (more freedom) and negative (hurtful interactions) outcomes. The participants
acknowledge the ability to be more open and blunt with others paired with the
community’s value on the presentation of physical embodiment contributes to Grindr’s
hypersexual and competitive environment. Beyond that, Grindr enables users to interact
with hundreds of other users, which creates a mentality of “there will always be another
chance with someone new”. These factors influence the participants feeling that they are
immersed in a competitive marketplace, where they are simultaneously competing for
meaningful interaction while trying to present their “best” selves. For the participants, this
brought another way in how they manage their enacted identities in Grindr—through
marketing the self.

Theme 3: Marketing The Self Online

Many of the participants described their experience on Grindr as similar to a
market, where they act as the products for consumption and the consumers. Because
the main goal for usage of the application is interaction, the market environment values
certain interactions, such as positive messages and attention from other users. Ben
points out the value of attention and messages when he explained why he was upset
with Grindr:

Not getting responses [made him depressed]. Uh, saying “hi” to people, people
not responding at all. Umm. I would say “hi”, you know to get different people to
say hello to me but no one really does. I mean in the 6-weeks, it played its role, it
took its toll for sure.

In order to gain the valued messages, the participants, at times, manipulated
their online identities to appear more attractive to other users, or in other words, better
market the self for consumption. They did this by appearing younger, fitter, more
attractive, masculine, etc. in order to be perceived as a “better product” in the
marketplace; meaning they were able to get more attention and positive interactions with others. This in turn further made them feel valuable. As previously discussed, the community places importance on the consumption of physically represented identities, where the users' physical appearances are highly valued. This paired with the fact that there was a constant influx of new users nearby influenced the participants' view of Grindr as a competitive environment.

**The Competitive Market**

As mentioned, Grindr makes it easier for MSM individuals to interact. However, the ease of doing so made many of the participants uneasy. They understood that since they had many options for potential connections, so did every other user. Larry pointed out how much easier it was to talk to many men at once on Grindr when he said:

> You can't go to a party and hit on like 15 guys at the party, you know. Or you can be at home in bed and hit up 15 different guys in the span of an hour and be like “hey what are you doing, do you want to have coffee?” and kind of talk to a whole bunch of people at once and that wouldn’t go very well at a party or bar.

The participants understood that they had many potential options in terms of meeting new people and assumed other users did as well. Because of this, the participants felt that the environment was very competitive. For Ethan, the competition made him feel like he was not going to find anything meaningful.

> From my perspective is that I have options but the other perspective is that to each of those people on there [on Grindr], they have this huge circle of options they are filtering through. So it was kind of a feeling like… I am certainty not going to meet people from this, I am not gonna feel alright in that competition.
Alejandro was also frustrated with the competition on Grindr. He explains:

There is always people available [on Grindr] so you are starting something out new [with someone] and then the other person still has the app and it’s like at what point do you stop using it and actually like just try to focus your efforts on one person… because if that doesn’t pan out, there is like 100 people within 2 miles.

The competitive marketplace of Grindr encouraged many of the participants to market and advertise their profiles in a way that they saw was attractive to the other consumers— managing and branding their online identity.

**Identity Management & Branding**

As previously pointed out, the way the participants enacted their Grindr identity impacted their experience. The participants manipulated their profiles in order to display their best selves and in turn, yield the highest number of interactions. In addition to this, a large factor in how the participants presented their profile was to manage the type of interaction sought. Julian changed the type of photo in his profile in order to manage the type of interaction he wanted. For example, when he had a face photo, he said, “I feel like most people were talking expecting more a friendship instead of hooking up” while the shirtless photo of his chest resulted in more interactions looking for hook-ups.

Similarly, Nick was not interested in anything sexual so his identities reflected that. He explained:

I kind of put that [that he was not looking for hook-ups and removed that he was single] in my bio to sort of steer away people who were only looking for that [hook-ups] and then just a little bit of information about, you know “I was a grad student” and that sort of thing.
On the other hand, Derrick and John admitted to completely avoiding profiles they interpret as overtly sexual because that is something in which they have no interest. This shows how the interpretation of other users’ profiles determines the willingness to interact based on their interests. Larry, who uses Grindr both when he is single and in a relationship, will alter his identity based on what he seeks at the time. When he is in a relationship, he keeps a modest profile with a mug shot photo, however when he is single, it changes.

I’m recently single again so I kind of like moved back to the ambiguous yoga pose [photo in his profile], it looks a little hotter… One [photo, the yoga pose one] is prowling and one’s not [the previous mug shot photo].

Changing identity presentation to shift interaction is just one way participants used their identities to market themselves for an interaction, however the participants need to understand the community in order to know what works best for them. In order to figure out what works and what does not work for their presented identity and desired outcomes, participants used various methods of research to figure out how to best brand themselves for the community.

As previously discussed in Julian’s case, when he presented a “white, muscular and handsome” self he received positive (yet superficial) interaction from many users. On the other hand, as his mestizo self his interactions were more limited. He was not the only participant who played with presented identity to change how others perceive and value that individual. Through doing ‘market research’ and enacting what they found as the most positive identities, the participants were able to gain higher value in the Grindr marketplace.
Ben tested his presented self in Grindr to find the identities that would work best for what he was looking for:

I am trying different things [with the profile] to try and get a different kind of response. My intentions for making it a little more personal than who I am is to maybe attract someone maybe a little more mature.

At first, Ben presented an identity that did not yield interaction with what he considered mature people. Because of this, he tested out presenting different online identities to attract more users he found desirable. In the quote above, he made his profile a little more personal (i.e. including hobbies, etc.) in hopes that it is more marketable to a different audience through trial and error.

Similarly, Alejandro understands that the photo is the most important factor in advertising himself, therefore he updates the photo regularly and tries out new photos to see how well they attract others. When asked when the last time he updated his profile he says “I just changed the photo today. Back to an old one that was getting more traffic”. By ‘more traffic’, he is refers to the number of interaction the previous photo brings. I later asked him to describe how he decides on a “good photo”. He explained that “sometimes I test it on Instagram to see how many likes I get [laughs] and then that means that it’s better for Grindr”. By doing this, Alejandro researches through other medias to find the most valuable way to present his identity on Grindr.

Nick also researched to better advertise his profile by looking through other users’ profiles and mimicking. For example, when deciding how to present his weight and what was appropriate he explained:

There were times I would look around at similar profiles [to his], and see like ‘ok this person’s about my height and they weigh like this much’ and if it was too far,
or sort of an average there [he would determine if it was ok to display his current weight].

By seeing what was appropriate in the market place, Nick managed an identity that would be competitive with other users in the market. Through trial and error and research, the participants were able to construct their best selves. On the other hand, Seth understood that he was not marketing himself in a way that was yielding a valuable response from the community and therefore terminated his usage of the application. He said, “Maybe I am not advertising myself correctly. I mean I don't, again, I don't put a lot [of personal information] out there”. By questioning how he advertises himself, Seth realizes that he can manage how others see him and that may impact his success in the application, however he chooses not to engage further.

The idea of Grindr being a competitive market results in the participants trying to put their best Grindr identity out there. For some, they test and research the market to figure out what is seen as valuable while some find the inability to properly advertise their identity so limiting that they have to withdraw themselves from the marketplace. Overall, in the Grindr marketplace, users value attention and interactions, which come in the form of messages from other users. Not only the messages alone make the participant ‘feel good’ but also messages that are positive in nature make for a more enjoyable experience (i.e. messages that address the sort of interaction they seek). Because of this, the participants manipulate their Grindr identities to enact and present the most marketable profile that yield the outcomes they desire. Much like real world economic markets, users in the Grindr market undergo marketing the self in order to achieve more attention as they navigate through the experience.
At times, the participants felt while on Grindr, other users treated them poorly. In spite of this, many participants continued to use it (albeit some used it off and on). Because participants market themselves, users are treated like products for consumption within a hypersexual and competitive virtual community. This at times negatively impacts the participants’ experience when they seek more meaningful interaction. Rather, they find themselves in a place where users are treated like products. The feeling of dehumanization brings to light some of the negative sides of Grindr, like discrimination and emotional consequences. These unintended consequences play a large role in explaining why all participants, to some extent, find that Grindr is not a welcoming environment for them.

**Commodification Of The User**

Due to Grindr harboring a competitive environment where users advertise their best identities in order to yield positive outcomes, users find themselves in a situation where they must present themselves much like a product is branded for sale. The participants at times felt as if others in the application treated them as a form of entertainment. In this light, some of the participants felt they were dehumanized and just there for a transaction. As Derrick puts it:

They [other users in Grindr] don’t really care about actually getting to know people as a person. And so it’s just like, efficiency and immediacy of whatever, like “oh, lets talk for a few minutes and then lets figure out if something’s going to happen sexually”.

From his experience, he feels the majority of other users are only there for consumption. Ethan calls it “interactive porn” because he says that the main goal for others’ interactions with him is the same as why one would view pornography. Much like how
pornography is commodified and used purely for viewer consumption, the participants felt that within the application, at times, they too were solely there for the sexual pleasure of other users. Ethan furthered this sentiment when he said:

You know when I first download it [Grindr], if I would get a chat [that] immediately said “hey” or x-rated pictures or “looking?” [and] it was surprising and abrupt. I was like “I am a person for god sake”.

In addition to the feeling of being objectified, some participates felt that the objectification of users caused for people to be more critical toward other users, much like consumers critiques of products.

I asked participants how they felt about users displaying what they like and do not like in potential romantic partnerships (i.e. stating their preference of whom they wish to interact with in their profiles). Some participants shared that they included similar statements in their profiles, such as “no one over 35” or “fit only”. They rationalized the behavior because they saw it as a way of communicating to the Grindr community with whom they wish to interact. This seems to be the way someone shopping for an automobile might say “no red or black cars” or “Mercedes Benzes only”. In line with that, not all participants felt that it was appropriate to display this information, some even considered it to be discrimination. However, as Ethan puts it, some users think behavior on Grindr “will have no effect on anyone because [they are] not really interacting with people” when in the application. Although they might realize there is an actual person behind the screen, the digital separation paired with the consumerist view make it further influence the commodification of the user. As Larry and other participants pointed out, the view that users are not real people when in the application leads to discriminatory behaviors of certain groups.
In all, the sentiment about Grindr was that it was not a good place to find meaningful connection but in spite of that, the majority of the participants continued to use it because there is not a better alternative. This unwelcoming feeling can be relayed back to the commodification of the user, though. For users, myself included, who fit in to the archetype of what is valued in the Grindr community, find that their experience is much more successful than those who do not fit this mold. Using the analogy of a consumer market, those who are selling the best products in the market are going to find the market much more welcoming, while those with inferior products will face more challenges. This is problematic when applied to the Grindr community because it deals with real people and real identities, not inanimate objects. When communities place value on certain identities and disregard others, catastrophic things can happen, such as discrimination and negative impacts to lives, such as emotion trauma.

**Conclusion: How Are Identities Experienced And Performed In Grindr And Why?**

The themes presented in this study are all interrelated and each may explain partially why the other exists. From the general usage of the application, users are brought together virtually into a community, i.e. MSM individuals looking to connect with others like them, in order to interact. Because it is a virtual community with the end goal of users eventually meeting offline (for most participants), the accurate presentation of the user's identities plays an important role for interactions. On one hand, users have the flexibility of displaying what they wish to display because they are not tied to their corporeal selves, but due to the immediacy of offline interaction and their embodiment, the participants become once again tied to their physical self (i.e. because what matters
most in the Grindr community is how they look in their profile). But certain identity gaps appear between how the user sees himself, how he presents his Grindr identities, and how others interpret this enactment, which causes challenges for the user in terms of a ‘successful’ experience. This brings up difficulties as to how the user presents himself online to gain a positive experience, challenges which lead to how the user markets his online identity. Through researching and manipulating his identities, the user is able to create marketable identities that yield positive responses in the competitive marketplace-like community. But because the market is competitive and the value is placed on physical representation, the user experiences becoming an item for consumption and not finding meaningful connections. Because the user is then seen as more of a product than a person, paired with the hyper connectivity, instances of discrimination and rejection arise. Therefore with discrimination and rejection, the overall experience in the application for the participants becomes not very welcoming, especially if not fitting in to the dominant “archetype”.

The interrelatedness of the themes indicates several important factors about online communities and how they impact offline communities. The infrastructure of the community is key in how users are able to present their identities. Because Grindr offers somewhat of a limited profile, users may be making more assumptions about other users than they would if there were more space for expression of identity. Additionally, users respond to the community’s favorable, or dominant, identities. For some, this means replicating and marketing preferred profile identities to belong while for others it meant removing themselves completely from it. By applying a theoretical analysis to these themes through Online Identity Assembly Theory and Communications Theory of
Identity, we can better understand how these themes apply to how humans present and navigate their online identities.
Discussion

I begin this discussion with a return to the research question: what identities are being presented/performed and/or not presented and why? Most participants presented parts of their identities in two ways: in their profile and in how they interacted with other users. For most, pre-determined identity signifiers, such as age and race, were presented, as the application’s infrastructure would allow. Physical appearance, performed mainly through the photo (and lesser with physical statistics and text descriptions), played the largest role in terms of what the participants felt was the most important part of their identity, and consequently the most important information to know about other user. Since identity presentation through photos played a large role for user identity, the participants face decisions in how to best show themselves when assembling their online self. By looking back to Online Identity Assembly Theory, we can understand how users navigate through these decisions in Grindr.

How Identities Are Assembled in Grindr

Returning to Online Identity Assembly Theory (OIA), Tyma and Leonard argue “online identities cannot be understood as linear or stable” (2011, p. 2) but rather as in a continuous stage of assembly. Identities as a continuous stage of assembly corresponds to what Hall (1996) calls “identification,” described as a “process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality” (p. 3).
Therefore, as identities are assembled, whether offline or online, people vacillate between extremes in how they present themselves. This was certainly true for the participants in this research. As in the example of Skipper Warhawk, he found that he was able to change how he presented himself in Grindr easily depending on how he was feeling about himself and the reaction he sought (between the hypersexual to the ‘conservative’). Julian had a similar experience when he ‘preformed’ a white, muscular male but was able to change his profile back to reflect his mestizo self. These individuals had agency to change how they presented their identities in their profiles. Because of this, they were able to make what Tyma and Leonard (2011) refer to as “choices and rhetorically sensitive decisions… when constructing online identity” (p. 18). While other identity theories (e.g. Tajfel, 1974; Robinson and Tajfel, 1996; Lea, Spears, & deGroot, 2001; Butler, 1988) do not address individual agency, OIA shines light on how user agency plays a role in online assembly and performance.

OIA serves as a roadmap to how the participants generally navigate the development and display of their Grindr identities. Tyma and Leonard (2011) describe the OIA process through five stages: genesis, articulation, culmination, appropriation, and transformation. In genesis, most of participants found out about the existence of the Grindr through existing offline social groups and developed the desire to join based on curiosity and wanting to connect with men for friendship, community and romance. Once they joined, the participants began to articulate and then culminate their online identities. The participants in my study articulated and culminated their identities in different ways. Some participants, like John, articulated everything the profile allowed, while others, like Derrick, chose to present only certain signifiers. These decisions are the first step in a long process of managing an online self. Based on lived experiences and their physical
self, the participants chose how to translate themselves into a digital self. Once the identities were culminated and became part of the Grindr community, OIA process states that the community appropriates the participants’ identities and in turns gives feedback on whether the identity is acceptable or not. In Grindr, this came in the form of positive and negative interactions (or lack there of) with other users. Generally, participants experienced validation of their presented identity when receiving positive messages while not receiving messages and negative messages prompted some users to reconsider their identity presentation. With this information, OIA argues that the user reconsiders and changes online identity and begins the transformation stage. At this stage, the user has the option to adhere to the community’s feedback, try something new, or disengage (Tyma and Leonard, 2011). For example, Nick reconsidered how he presented his weight based on others in the community. When he felt he was the outlier in the community he used agency and changed how it was presented to better fit the ‘norm’. On the other hand, those who did not ‘transform’ their identities to ‘fit in’, like Seth, chose to disengage and remove their self from the community, as OIA suggests.

The ‘transformation’ stage is particularly interesting because, unlike offline, online identities can quickly change at the users’ will. More importantly though, transformation is not a simple process where one can just change to whatever they desire. If we look to back to the embodiment literature, it brings to question how the persistence of embodiment even in online environments might restrict transformation process. The experiences of participants in this research demonstrate that through articulation and transformation, they can present and change their fluid online identities. However, OIA does not fully acknowledge how embodiment impacts users’ navigation through the transformation stage beyond choosing to adhere to valued community identities or not.
Embodiment Online And ‘Transformation’

As discussed, scholars advocate that people are embodied online (e.g. Argyle & Shields, 1996; Campbell, 2001 & 2004) and this argument was certainly valid for the participants in this research. On one hand, the participants described the importance of accurately presenting self due to the immediacy of meeting offline and the proximity, while on the other hand, their physical and lived experiences influence how well they perform the identities they chose to present. This is in opposition to theories of online disembodiment, where scholars such as Bruckman (1996), Reid (1996), and McRae (1997) argue that people are able to perform any identity online they wish. Further, going back to what the participants found as the most important part of their Grindr identity—their photo—it is evident that the physical representation of self transcends into the digital environment and serves as one example of users’ embodiment online. Mowlabocus (2010) found a similar trend when he found that those with a “face photo” are more valued (in Gaydar.com) because they are seen as ‘out’ and more as the real self. Although factors such as ‘outness’ did not appear in this research, the participants acknowledged that knowing what the other looked like was important in terms of wanting to interact. However, what the participant presents has deeper implications for how others will respond based on if the community values the identity presented.

The experience of online embodiment is affected by the overarching online community’s valued identities because, as OIA suggests, the community appropriates users’ identities and decides which identities are acceptable and not. In Grindr, it appeared that there was a higher value placed on identities that were in line with the stereotypical Adonis male. This is troublesome when the community rejects users based on not fitting this mold. At times, this rejection leaves the user with no options to
‘transform’ because he is always embodied and not able to perform an alternative identity effectively. For instance, when an online community values whiteness over other races, and therefore appropriates white bodies and rejects non-white bodies, how are people of color supposed to ‘transform’ in order to belong to the community as a valued member? This situation is in conflict with Grindr’s advertised purpose. Grindr advertises itself as a place for gay and bisexual men to meet other men but the actual experience of the participants suggests that the Grindr community’s identity is much narrower than generally just gay and bisexual men. That is to say, the Grindr community most highly values and validates those who present themselves as white, masculine, fit, and young. The participants that presented identities outside of this found that the Grindr community either directly or indirectly rejected their ‘other’ identities. Participants are tied to their corporeal selves, whether it is the experience of being from another country or that of a black man, hence leaving them with no options to actually change their identity to belong. This echoes back to broader societal norms around ethnocentrism and racism within the MSM community, where the communal ‘norm’ is white and Western (Han, 2007).

Rejection and Transformation

OIA suggests that those who experience rejection from the community would then ‘transform’ their profiles to better ‘fit in’ or disengage with the community. Participants in this research described performing both of these behaviors as a response to rejection. For some participants, like Seth, being rejected for not ‘fitting’ the Adonis stereotype and the inability to present an identity that fit this ‘norm’ influenced his decision to disengage. The inability to present an alternate self restricted him from transforming to the community’s more valued identities, and therefore left him with
disengagement as the only option. This is not to say that there is a need for users to be able to transform their identities to feel valued, but rather a commentary on the limitations they experience both online and offline regarding identity performance and not fitting in. While disengagement with the community was the case for some of my participants, others navigated rejection of their identities by transformation when possible.

Tyma and Leonard (2011) point out that users know themselves along the continuum of individual to social identities, and therefore are able to select the parts of their identities that best fit the situation. These presentation decisions are based on how he views himself and in turn chooses to enact these identities in order to get the best response from others. The interaction with others and how the user presents himself is a key part of the transformation stage of OIA. How the user sees himself, how he presents that online self, and how the user understands how others see these presentations online relate to the four identity frames of Communications Theory of Identity (CTI). CTI provides a perspective to understand how enactment (identity presentation) and relational frames interact. At times, how one enacts the self and how others relate to that enactment do not match up. When this happens, the individual experiences an identity gap between their enactment and relational frames (Jung and Hecht, 2004).

**Identity Gaps Online**

Looking back to Jung and Hecht’s identity gaps, how the participants enacted their identities and then related and interpreted it with others seemed to be important to the overall experience on Grindr since the main goal was to interact with new people. Gaps between other frames, such as personal-enactment and personal-communal did
not seem as relevant regarding identity experience in Grindr because the main focus of usage was relating to others and enacting themselves. For clarification, in CTI, an identity gap is a perceived inconsistency between two different frames of identity (Jung and Hecht, 2004). For this study, the gap between the enacted-relational identities played an important role as the presentation of an online self is the enactment frame, while the purpose of enacting an online identity is to interact with others (i.e. the relational frame).

**The Enactment-Relational Gaps Online**

The enactment-relational gap refers to a difference between a person’s perception of his or her presented self and the individual’s recognition of how another person views the presented self (Jung, 2011). This self-presentation is goal-oriented behavior of attaining interactions and reaction from other users (Labrecque et al, 2010). Typically, the goal of self-presentation is to create desired public images in social contexts (Schlenker, 2003) and receive approval from the social group. Jung (2013) contends, “failing to gain the reassurance or the reinforcement of self-presentation can be a source of an enacted-relational identity gap” (p. 166). In Grindr, the reassurance is gained through positive messages and interactions, and the lack of this reassurance creates disconcertion for many of the participants. Jung (2013) found that people “seek consistency between their presented selves (enacted identities) and perceptions of others’ evaluations of the presented selves” (p.177). This played a role for the participants in this research when in came to the difficulties in presenting a self that was desired by others. For example, in Ben’s case, he found that others interpreted him as feminine even though he did not think he was presenting himself that way. This resulted in rejection for him (albeit, an amplified version due to the large number of rejections in a
short amount of time). For Ben, and some other users, this experience left him feeling depressed and lowered his self-esteem. Jung (2013) found similar issues when looking at identity gaps and its correlation with depressive symptoms in people. This is particularly interesting because identity gaps in an online medium have not been widely researched, but the concept appears to have similar impacts to offline identity gaps. I would argue this is due to the online embodiment of users, which creates similar situations both online and offline.

Furthering this idea, many of the frustrations the participants shared regarded the gaps between their enactment and relational frames. For example, several participants had joined Grindr for friendships only. They found shortly after joining that others saw them only as a sexual prospect. In order to mitigate this relational reaction, they changed their profiles to reflect that they explicitly only sought friendship. However, this change did not yield the response they hoped because they still were propositioned regardless of the presentation in their profile. This experience, where the participant enacted what he sought, and its relation to the hypersexual response demonstrates the enactment-relational gap. The participant performs as only seeking friendships but there is a disconnection, which prompts the other users to react otherwise. An explanation for this phenomenon may be related to the limited ability to enact oneself in the application (i.e. short profiles) combined with the stereotype for the main usage of location-based application for gay men (i.e. hooking-up). These two factors combine to cause a gap between how others view the user and what the user really desires from usage of the application. Furthering these gaps between enactment and relational frames online, users make assumptions of others based on only limited information presented, while identities are often much more complex. For example, Ethan mentioned how he felt like
people automatically assumed he was not worth talking to based on their limited perception his profile, while he felt he had more to offer but was not able to deliver that in his profile due to limitations in how he could present himself (i.e. his interests, education, etc.). This caused him, as Jung and Hecht (2004) would explain it, to ‘alter his enacted identity’ for a different communication outcome, meaning he changed his presentation by removing everything so he could choose with whom he interacted.

In all, the largest disconnection that the enactment-relational gap caused all participants was regarding their ability to connect with others for community and friendship. As per the usage of the application, all 10 participants disclosed a desire to make friends and to connect with other gay men, however the reality of the application did not yield this outcome. I argue that this was due to the gaps between to the enactment frame and the relational frame, meaning that users are not able to present themselves online so that others interpret them in a way to form a meaningful interaction. That is to say, users are not able to present themselves in a way that yields many meaningful relationships. An explanation for this may be similar to research on other online dating sites, where the information enacted is not necessarily what is important in terms of meaningful experiences (Frost et al, 2008). That is to say, knowing what someone’s income or physical appearance only plays a small part in understanding the overall identity of the ‘Other’ and forming a meaningful communication outcome.

**Navigating The Challenges Of Self-Presentation, Gaps And Embodiment**

Thus far this research has described how the participants experienced their Grindr identity through assembling pieces of themselves in their profile. Considering everyone as embodied, even when online, the idea that online identity is free and allows
you to “be who you want to be” does not stand up to research in the digital world. Embodiment contributes largely to how one presents the online self. Depending on how the identity is shown through the profile, people will react either positively or negatively. The negative reactions in particular can be a result of presenting a non-valued identity or gaps between the enactment and relational frames, which can cause the user to transform his identities (if he can) in order to gain a better response or disengage with the community. At times the failure to transform their profiles and receive a more positive reaction from the community cause users to suffer emotional stress from the inconsistency of enacted self and others’ reactions. However, in spite of these difficulties, I found that participants in this study utilized techniques to present themselves ‘better’ in order to overcome these challenges.

**Identity Branding And Marketing Online**

I use the concept of ‘branding,’ and in particular, self-branding, to understand how the participants choose to present their online identities. The concept of self-branding entails capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (Kaputa, 2005; Schwabel, 2009), similar to how products are promoted and marketed for sales. Researchers cite the most common place for self-branding is on social media (Labrecque, Markos, and Milne, 2010). Labrecque et al (2010) look at self-branding online and conclude that when it comes to brand positioning (how a user decides to market self-brand), they enacted themselves in a way to appeal to the target audience. That is to say, users make identity disclosure decisions that are mostly reflective of the intended messages to the target audience. This was evident for the participants that changed their identities based on the intended interaction (i.e. looking
for friends versus romance or wanting more messages). Initially, with little or no experience in the application, the participants did not know how to market themselves when articulating their identities. Therefore, they had to guess what would be marketable to the target audience—or as Zinkhan et al (2003) would call “naïve marketing”. Naïve marketing is when a person is able to market him or herself without formal research or knowledge but rather guess what will work for the intended audience (Zinkhan et al, 2003). Ben provided a good example of naïve marketing when he mentioned trying different identity disclosures in his profile in order to get a better response from more mature users. As the participants gained more experience in the community, they were able to adjust their identity to better market the self. Labrecque et al (2010) suggest that users go through a process called brand image assessment, where participants use their own experience and feedback from audience to determine whether they had achieved their branding goals, which echoes the articulation and transformation stages of OIA. When they do not achieve the goal, they experience insufficient branding where they feel pressure to change and conform, i.e. transform their identities.

Though using different terminology (i.e. audience vs. community), ‘better marketing’ online identities is in agreement with the appropriation and transformation processes of OIA because the users choose to change their identities in order to get a better response from the audience/community. Furthermore, by presenting their ‘best selves’ participants felt they received better reactions from the community. However, many others are doing the same thing, which makes for a competitive market because there are so many opportunities to meet others nearby. Therefore, in order to attain the
valued interaction with others, the participants altered their self-presentation to better address the audience.

**Gaining Capital In The Market**

Social networking sites like Grindr are interesting because they utilize communication in a different fashion than other forms of media. As Schwartz (2010) explains, this is due to the goal of communicating with “strangers with the intention of turning them into friends (in one sense or the other)” (p. 174). In order to attain the goal of transitioning online strangers in to friends, Schwarz (2010) looked at corporal capital, which she argues is carried through posted online photos. She found that photos “play a major social role in the exchange process between different sorts of capital” for Israeli teens in her study (2010, p. 166). Further, her study pointed to how photos were strategically used to gain capital. The participants in my study shared a similar experience when it came to their photos. Referring back to the importance of presentation of the physical self, participants with ‘good’ photos held more capital and therefore were more successful with connecting with others. An example of this was the fact that photos were the most cited signifier that participants updated in the transformation stage. For instance, Alejandro mentioned that he would change his photo to one that was getting more messages (i.e. traffic), therefore using marketing techniques to gain more social capital.

**Impacts Of The Competitive Market**

By marketing the self, people get better responses from the community because they are presenting only the “best” parts of themselves. However, the competitive nature of sites like Grindr, creates an interesting paradox for the participants. Zinkhan et al
(2004) found that as the number of people attempting web-based chatting increases over time, a situation is created where there is more competition to meet new chatting partners. This makes it more difficult for people to chat, despite there being a higher number of people chatting. The participants’ experience in this research indicates a similar phenomenon is occurring in Grindr. Where historically MSM individuals were limited in their places to meet (physically), the application now offers a shift that allows MSM individuals better access to others nearby. However, the participants’ experiences contradict the assumption that better access to more men yields more meaningful interaction. In this regard, beyond merely being accepted into the online community, users are now faced with presenting an even more idealized profile in order to gain more capital to yield more interaction. This idea of a competitive market leads to what I see as the commodification of the user in Grindr.

**Commodifying The User**

Some researchers have made the metaphor of online dating as ‘window shopping’ or “relationshopping” (Ulick and Wodtke, 2005; Heino et al, 2010) where users browse through screens full of pictures and data like one would with windows at the shopping mall. This brings into question how others are perceived within sites designed for romantic encounters. Frost et al (2008) found that online daters overall are unhappy with their experience online due in part to a crucial mismatch between the experience of online and offline dating. That is to say, expectations with what is presented online do not match the reality of offline interaction—but if we all present idealized versions of ourselves online, how are we to compete with that offline? Frost et al (2008) look specifically at information dating sites ask to disclose and how it is not necessarily telling in terms of offline chemistry. For example, they found that when they replicated an
offline-style date (a trip to a museum) in an online context, the user was much more satisfied than the traditional online facilitated dates. They attribute this to online daters seeing people as the “ultimate experience good” rather than objective qualities, like income and height (2008). Similarly, the participants in this research expressed feeling commodified at times when their interaction was solely based on what they had to offer the other (whether that be a one-night stand or their soul mate). Ethan echoed this sentiment with frustration that others were only interested in sexual encounters by treating him as a form of ‘interactive porn’.
Conclusion

With a community that resembles a competitive marketplace, the participants of my study present their ‘best selves’ based on their lived experiences from the offline world (that is, what they perceive to be their best traits—i.e. naïve marketing) and then adjust once they get feedback from the community. The feedback they receive from the community has diverse outcomes. In some cases, the user sees it as an opportunity to change how he presents himself for more positive feedback (in the case of photo updating) whereas at other times, forms of feedback may have adverse influences resulting in emotional consequences, like depression, for the participants. Overall, users deal with the issues from online embodiment, identity gaps, and transformation through marketing their ‘best self’ based on self-evaluation and audience feedback. However, it is important to remember that not all users exhibit this behavior. In the cases where they are unable to present their ‘idealized self’ in the community, or where better marketing themselves does not yield a positive response, users disengage with the application. The idea and research behind marketing and branding the self online comes from literature that looks at online dating applications, which in many ways is reflective of the main desired outcome users hope to accomplish with Grindr.

Implications

Fitting this in to a larger theoretical framework, my study serves as a connecting point between identity gaps, online embodiment, and OIA, where embodiment and
identity gaps impact how the user navigates their online identity assembly. Where communication is never perfect and identities gaps form, OIA can be seen as a way that people may negotiate the challenges when constructing an online self. With OIA, the ‘transformation’ stage intersects with how the participant tries to close the gap between their enactment frame and their relational frame. In particular, the transformation stage addresses one way in which users try to close the gap between those frames—by changing what they present to be in more line with how they want other users to see them. This adds to the literature around CTI, where CTI does not address how users mitigate the identity gaps.

Further, these interviews give insights on some of the difficulties users may experience when presenting their selves online. Users coped with these difficulties by attempting to market their identities in order to better meet their goals and interact with more people in the online community. This brings to light some of the difficulties users face when trying to form interpersonal connections online and how their identity greatly impacts this experience. This is particularly impactful for the MSM community because of the importance of virtual spaces for communication with others like them (Shaw, 1997). It also addresses aspects of discrimination and how users of these applications can at times feel more marginalized and discriminated against by other users.

**Limitations**

Although my recruitment strategy strived to obtain a diverse population of respondents, representative of the actual population in Grindr, the sample size was limited to ten participants mostly from the Denver area. Therefore, my conclusions are very much in a geographic context and cannot be considered applicable to all Grindr
communities. In order to address this, it would be interesting to expand the study to other locations to gain more diversity of identities and experiences.

**Future Studies**

Since Grindr functions off of geographic locations, the community’s make-up will change depending on the physical location. It would be worthwhile to expand the study to see how users in other cities and countries experience their identities and how geographic location serves as a variable. This prompts the question of perceived community’s idealized identity changing with geographic location. Some clues to this come from my participants who commented on how their experience changed depending on the make-up of the city (i.e. larger and more diverse cities were more accepting of various identities). Additionally, questions surrounding how power structures, such as the usage of the English language, impact the enacted identities of users could provide insight in to hegemony of Western identities and its association with LGBT identities.

From a different theoretical sense, it would be worthwhile to look at the study through a queer theory lens and see how the online medium may be different from the offline MSM scenes, such as in gay clubs and bars. It could also look at questions around how people respond differently to criticism in person versus online. For example, are people more blunt online or offline? An additional follow up study could look specifically at users who exhibit discriminatory behavior in the application and how that may differ in how they behave offline.
Final Thoughts

For the participants in my study, finding community and identity through communication with others online, through mediums like Grindr, is not that easy. For some, it sounds more like online interaction might be, as Kraut et al (1998) argue, “causing people to become socially isolated and cut off from genuine social relationships, as they hunker alone over their terminals or communicate with anonymous strangers through a socially impoverished mediums” (p. 1017). The fact that all the participants reported that they did not feel that Grindr presented a welcoming environment, as well as reporting general frustrations with finding meaningful connections, leads me to believe this may be the case. Interestingly though, most participants continued usage due to no better alternative options. Because of this, there is a need for a critical discussion surrounding the lack of online community formation mediums for the MSM community.
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Appendix

Interview questions

I am going to quickly ask a few general questions, to get a sense of your background

- How old are you?
- Can you tell me a little bit about where you are from?
- What kind of work do you do?
- What level of education have you attained?
- What kind of mobile device do you use? For how long?
- With what gender do you identify with?
- What is your sexual orientation?

Now I’d like to ask about MSM identity:

- With what race/ethnicity do you identify?
- How do you feel your race/ethnicity impacts your sexual orientation? Or does it?
- What do you think is the ideal body type for a man?
- In terms of your thoughts on body image, what is most important to you? What is least important?
- How does your age impact you sexual orientation?
- How has HIV/AIDS impacted your life?
- What does being masculine mean to you? On the other hand, what does being feminine mean to you?
And now, I’d like to shift gears and talk a little about identity online:

- What geo-social networking applications do you use? (offer to explain terminology first)
- Which was your first one?
- How long have you used apps like Grindr?
- How did you first find out about apps like Grindr?
- How has the usage of apps like Grindr impacted your life? In what ways?
- Can you remember back to when your first joined Grindr, what sort of expectations did you have for the app?
- How have the expectations changed?
- How often do you use apps like Grindr?
- When you created your first profile, what sort of information did you choose to disclose?
- Were there any particular things that you chose not to disclose? If so, why?
- How often do you update/change your profile on apps like Grindr?
- What makes you decide to update/change your profile?

Now going back to MSM identity, I’d like to talk about how it intersects with your online identity:

- How meaningful are your interactions with other users?
- On average, how many people have you connected with on apps like Grindr in the past year?
- Out of all your connections with other users, how often do you meet face to face?
- When/if you meet someone face to face, do you ever feel that he is different in
person? If so, how so?

- When you initiate conversation with other users, do you ever not get a response? If so, why do you think that is?

- On the other hand, do you ever not respond to other users? If so, why do you choose not to respond?

- Do you ever see user profiles that you find offensive? If so, what sort of things have you seen?

- When viewing others’ profiles, what is most valuable for you to know about the user? What least valuable?

- If you have seen users’ apps that (insert)… how do you interpret that? Do you find value in knowing that?
  - Indicate masculine
  - Indicate HIV positive
  - Indicate fitness
  - Indicate age

- How do you interpret others profiles that explicitly state their preferences (or rejection) of whom they wish to interact with?

- Have you ever felt discriminated against by others users of apps like Grindr? If so, could you elaborate on that experience?

- Do you think others are discriminated against on apps like Grindr? If so, how?

- As a user do you feel that Grindr is a welcoming or inclusive app? Why?