Grindr culture: Intersectional and socio-sexual

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abstract

This research note is based on ethnographic work in the greater Copenhagen area on the socio-sexual networking app Grindr and on interviews with twelve recent immigrants who use this platform. As an online space primarily for gay men, Grindr is a unique subculture in which to conduct research about intersections of sexuality with other socio-cultural categories such as race and migration background, but also gender and ability. I find that user experiences with exclusion and discrimination relate to Grindr's interface, such as its drop-down menus, to the discourses circulated by Grindr users in profile texts, and to user-to-user interactions in private messages.

Introduction

The concept of intersectionality – as it arose from black feminist critique – emphasizes that discrimination on multiple axes (e.g. race and sex) can be synergistic: an individual does not merely experience the additive aspects of discriminations (e.g. racism plus sexism) but can feel a larger weight as these systems of power operate in various contexts (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality arose from critiques of patriarchy in African-American movements and of white supremacy in feminist movements. Hence, the concept has always acknowledged discrimination within repressed groups. Drawing from these critiques, this research note explores intersectionality within a space for primarily gay men: the online culture of Grindr, a networking app available exclusively on smartphones since its inception in 2009. In this note, I present empirical data from on-going research about how immigrants use and experience Grindr in the greater Copenhagen area.

Grindr facilitates communication between strangers in close proximity via public profiles and private chats and is an extension of the 'gay male digital culture' cultivated in chat rooms and on websites since the 1990s (Mowlabocus, 2010: 4) There are no algorithms to match users: instead, Grindr participants initiate contact with (or reject) each other based on one profile photo, about 50 words of text, some drop-down menus, and private chats. By centring on the user photo, Grindr's interface hyper-valuates visual self-presentations, which shapes an individual's experiences on the platform, especially when the user's body provides visible cues about a racial or cultural minority position, gender non-conformity, or disability.

In *LGBTQs: Media and culture in Europe* (Dhoest et al., 2017), my contributing chapter showed that especially those who are 'new in town' use Grindr to find not only sexual partners, but also friends, local information, housing, and even employment (Shield, 2017b). Yet, Grindr can also be a space where immigrants and people of colour experience racism and xenophobia (Shield, 2018). This analysis extends my work on race and migration status to look at other intersections, namely with gender and body norms. Moreover, this piece highlights the potential and novelty of conducting ethnographic research about intersectionality via online social media.

'Grindr culture', 'socio-sexual networking', and intersectionality

In 2010, scholar Sharif Mowlabocus published *Gaydar culture: Gay men, technology and embodiment in the digital age*, in which he explored gay male digital culture in terms of both the technological affordances of gay websites like Gaydar.uk (with real-time chatting and photo-swapping) and the ways users navigated these online spaces (i.e. modes of self-presentation and communication), often with the end-goal of physical interaction. In his final chapter, Mowlabocus looked ahead to a new development in gay men's online cruising: mobile-phone platforms. He introduced the reader to Grindr, a networking app that was only available on phones with geo-location technologies (GPS) and data/WiFi access (Mowlabocus, 2010). Little did Mowlabocus know that by 2014, Grindr would claim 'nearly 10 million users in over 192 countries' of whom over two million were 'daily active users' (Grindr, 2014); by 2017, Grindr reported that its three million daily active users averaged about an hour a day on the platform (Grindr, 2017).

I use the term 'Grindr culture' to build on Mowlabocus' analysis of gay men's digital culture, taking into consideration two major developments since 2010: the first is technological, namely the development and proliferation of smart mobile technologies; the second is social, and points to the popularization (or even

omnipresence) of social networking platforms. These developments contribute to the unique ways users navigate the social codes, patterns and behaviours – i.e. the communicative 'culture' (Deuze, 2006; van Dijk, 2013) – of apps like Grindr.

Notwithstanding these technological and social developments since 2010, there are also continuities between 'Grindr culture' and the web-based gay cultures that developed in the mid-1990s. For example, there is value attached to the identifiable profile picture or 'face pic', which Mowlabocus noted was synonymous with authenticity, openness about one's sexuality, and even investment in the (imagined) community (Mowlabocus, 2010). Another continuity stretches further back to the classified ads that gay men and lesbians printed in periodicals in the 1960s-1980s: Grindr profiles communicate not only about sex and dating, but also about friendship, logistical support with housing and employment, and local information (Shield, 2017a). The diversity of desires expressed by those with (somewhat) shared sexual interests represents a unique networking culture, best described as 'socio-sexual'.

'Socio-sexual networking' here refers to the process of interpersonal communication among those open to forming erotic, platonic, and practical connections, sometimes simultaneously. While in anthropology and zoology, 'socio-sexual' refers to sexual activity outside of a committed relationship, I use it to emphasize the sociable and socio-cultural aspects of sexual cultures. Since its launch, Grindr has claimed in its promontional materials to be a 'social network', and thus has distanced itself from established hook-up (sex) websites, even as it attracted members from these sites. Grindr's interface is not explicitly sexual: Grindr vets all profile photos, prohibiting those showing underwear or less; and it even censors profile texts, prohibiting certain sex-related keywords. The 'looking for' drop-down menu only includes the suggestive 'right now', alongside friendship, dating, networking, chat, and relationship, but most users understand this as a euphemism for sex. Scholarly attention to Grindr and related platforms – which often focuses on public health concerns like HIV/AIDS transmission – tend to emphasize only this sexual component of gay networking (e.g. Grov et al., 2014). In contrast, this piece treats Grindr users' semi-public profiles and private exchanges as valuable sites for understanding not only sexuality, but also social cultures of a primarily gay space.

Lisa Nakamura has been a leading scholar in applying Crenshaw's theories of intersectionality to online interfaces and subcultures. Her early critique of racial drop-down menus on online profiles (Nakamura, 2002) remains relevant to many socio-sexual networking platforms today, including Grindr. Nakamura has also analysed how negative racial and sexual stereotypes as well as racist and sexist discourses have saturated online gaming sub-cultures (Nakamura, 2011; 2014),

both via users' communications and through the limited, racialized and sexualised avatars available on platforms. Nakamura's work inspired subsequent research on race in gay men's digital spaces, including Andil Gosine's auto-ethnographic reflections on identity tourism in gay chat rooms (2007) and Shaka McGlotten's work on 'racial injury, including ordinary microaggressions as well as overt structural forms of racism' in gay male digital cultures (2013: 66). I expand on the work of Nakamura, Gosine, and McGlotten by applying theories of online intersectionality to a Nordic context – where race is often discussed in tandem with immigration (Eide and Nikunen, 2010) – and with sensitivity to transgender and other marginalized Grindr users.

Methods

My on-going online fieldwork engages with Annette Markham's conceptions of social media ethnography, which adapts traditional concepts from anthropology – the field, the collection of field notes, researcher participation and self-reflection – to an online context (Markham, 2013). I engaged in participant observation within the semi-bounded field of Grindr in the greater Copenhagen area by reading and cataloguing profiles, and by communicating with the users on the platform. Grindr displays only the closest users in one's immediate vicinity, ranked by distance. In order to diversify the profiles included in my field notes, I gathered profiles from various locations in the greater Copenhagen area, including Malmö (Sweden), a city that is not traditionally defined within the greater Copenhagen area but which has many residents who commute to Copenhagen for work, as well as for participation in Copenhagen's gay and queer subcultures.

Empirical material also comes from twelve semi-structured interviews with recent immigrants to the greater Copenhagen area, most of whom responded to my researcher profile on Grindr in which I identified myself as a gay PhD student from New York City looking to speak to those who were new in town about their experiences on Grindr. All interviewees used Grindr after moving to Scandinavia, and many had used Grindr in their countries of origin, including countries where homosexuality is illegal (Shield, 2017b).

Interviewees arrived in the greater Copenhagen area after 2010; their countries of origin were China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, another Arab country, and another unspecified Asian country.[1] Names have been changed for confidentiality concerns. Interviewees were in their 20s-40s, and had residence permits based on

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[1]   The first one is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country; the interviewees asked that I did not specify more.

employment, university affiliation, asylum, family reunification, or green cards, though legal residence was not a requirement to participate in the research. About half of the interviews were conducted in a café in Copenhagen, the other half via Skype, and one at an interviewee's private residence due to privacy concerns. I asked about uses of and experiences on Grindr in Scandinavia, with specific attention to offline social networks and experiences with race-based discrimination.

My insider status as a gay-identified, 32-year-old, non-European immigrant and Grindr user facilitated open dialogue with my interviewees. To the Arabic speakers, I ingratiated myself with some Arabic, a language that I studied for five years in the United States. Despite not looking stereotypically Scandinavian, I have certain physical features (e.g. green eyes) and an Anglophone name, which mean that I am categorised as white more readily than my interviewees. Thus I also had an outsider status with regard to some conversations about experiences with racism and xenophobia, and also with regard to my emigration from a wealthy Western country. I am aware that ethnographic work within a field to which one is closely connected, especially sex-related, can result in a researcher sympathising too closely with one's informants (Markham, 2013; Sundén, 2012); yet, I sought to remain critical in my analyses of the transcribed interviews.

I conduct fieldwork with respect to many of the suggestions outlined in the Association of Internet Research's 'Ethical Decision Making' guidelines (Markham and Buchanan, 2015); for example, although the data from Grindr is freely available to all with a smartphone, I acknowledge that most Grindr users expect discretion and privacy, and thus I avoid personally identifiable information. Direct quotations from profile texts cannot be readily linked to individual profiles, since Grindr texts are not searchable on web-based engines like Google. In this piece, I also quote four Grindr users whom I chatted with informally via private message; in all cases, I received permission to quote the users.

Results

Grindr culture: Intersections with race

Grindr has since 2009 brought attention to race as a central feature of the online profile by encouraging users to identify with one of nine labels from the 'ethnicity' drop-down menu: Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, South Asian, and Other. Just over half of all Grindr users in Copenhagen select from this menu (of whom about 85% choose white, and about 15% choose

something other than white[2]). Those who pay for Grindr Xtra can even filter their possible matches according to this drop-down menu.

Şenol, who is originally from Turkey, felt that the 'ethnicity' menu contributes to racist discourses on Grindr, such as profile texts that announce 'Sorry, no Asians'. Racial-sexual exclusions are central to many of the experiences of people of colour on Grindr; as Şenol expanded, 'Racism in the gay community is quite visible, and people get away with it because they say it's a preference, which I disagree'. Caleb, who is originally from China, said he confronts Grindr users who make anti-Asian statements on their profiles: 'I want people to think about it,' he began. He felt that many white Scandinavians hold racial-sexual preferences, 'Even though some don't write it on their profiles'.

On the other hand, racial-sexual fetishes (e.g. 'I'm into Asians') can also be problematic. Yusuf, who identifies as black, referred to users' exotification of his blackness as 'sugar-coated racism'. He mentioned discomfort with users who 'address me as a piece of chocolate,' or who 'talk to me in plural, like "Black guys are so hot"'.

Grindr users of colour and/or with immigration background also receive periodic insults directed at their race, nationality, or religion. To give an extreme example, one Arab interviewee received a message from a white Scandinavian who wrote, 'F*ck [your Arab country], f*ck Islam, and f*ck you'. Interviewees tended to downplay the culprits of these messages as bad apples. But in the context of Europe's turbulent political discourses about immigration, statements like these can be seen as a form of 'entitlement racism,' whereby aggressors justify their hate speech as merely 'speaking one's mind' (Essed, 2013; see also Essed and Muhr, this issue).

Recent research shows that Scandinavian-born people of colour frequently receive questions about their origins, which suggests that many white Scandinavians still conflate Scandinavian nationality and culture with whiteness, and vice versa (Mulinari, 2017). On Grindr, I engaged in an informal chat with a Dane with Iraqi background, who told me about an incident on Grindr when a white Dane had told him to piss off to 'your country'. Thus even Danish-born people of colour experience xenophobia through racism and Islamophobia.

Intersections with gender

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[2]   This statistic is based on over 5000 pieces of data (though not 5000 unique profiles) collected at eight intervals over five days in December 2016 and March 2017 of profiles logged into Copenhagen city center and its immediate surroundings.

Christina, who identifies as a transgender woman and who is originally from Asia, said that she commonly experiences on Grindr that users assume that she is a sex worker.[3] Christina believed that Danes mistook her for a sex worker because they perceived her to be from Thailand or Cambodia, two countries that she felt Danes associated with sex tourism or prostitution. Yet although Christina attributed Grindr users' stereotypes about her foremost to her race/migration status, one cannot untie her negative experiences on Grindr from sexism and transphobia. Christina's experiences suggests that Grindr users hold a constellation of stereotypes about transgender women, Asian immigrants, and sexual-economic opportunism.

As a platform, Grindr remains ambivalent about the presence of transgender people. Grindr's 2017 promotional materials still described the app as an 'all-male mobile social network' that used location technology to 'connect men with other men' in their area, and all of the models in the promotional materials presented as male (Grindr, 2017).[4] But transgender men also face prejudice and exclusion on the app, as trans activist Niels Jansen shared during a Copenhagen Pride panel:

> I've had profiles on all of the apps: Grindr, Scruff, Hornet... and [what I learned is that] nobody will write to you [if you're a trans man]... I figured, "Okay, maybe it's my profile picture... Maybe I need to write a great profile text, so that people can see that I'm funny and smart... Maybe I need to lose weight.... Maybe I'm too old"... [But] in my experience, you can't be too diferent. (Grindr and Sex Culture, 2017: n.p.)

As Jansen felt that most socio-sexual app users rejected conversation with him, he eventually stopped using these platforms altogether. But he was idealistic that Grindr users might learn to examine their preconceived notions about trans men, and to consider why they had been 'conditioned to think of a man [only] in certain terms' (*ibid*).

Despite Grindr's apparent obliviousness to trans women in its promotional materials through 2017, Grindr took one step to challenge users' perceptions of gender within Grindr culture by adding the 'Trans' drop-down-menu option in 2013. In the greater Copenhagen area, mostly transgender women utilize this menu option, as well as some trans men and some cisgender men who are interested in meeting trans people. Yet the 'Trans' drop-down option is located in an awkward location within Grindr's 'Tribe' menu, which includes arbitrary

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3   Although self-promoted sex work is legal in Denmark, Grindr will delete profiles that make reference to transactional sex, including massages.

4   During the final edits of this note (December 2017), Grindr added drop-down menus for diverse gender identities and pronouns; future research could examine how these menus changed transgender and non-binary users' experiences on the platform.

identifications like 'Twink' (often for young, smooth men), 'Jock,' or 'Leather'. Including 'Trans' in this list gives the impression that trans identities are fleeting, or that trans people are fetishes. Nevertheless, this trivial menu heightens awareness about sex/gender diversity within Grindr culture, by creating an official way for trans-identified people to come out.

Sexist prejudice affects not only transgender Grindr users, but also cisgender male users who are perceived to be feminine. On Grindr in Copenhagen, many gay men self-describe as masculine and/or communicate a preference for masculine men: 'Only into masculine and muscular,' wrote one user; 'I like guys! Not "girls"! Be masculine!' proclaimed another; 'only looking for masculine tops' a third user wrote, reiterating later that he was 'turned on by masculinity'. Newcomers also contribute to these discourses: a Middle Eastern immigrant in Malmö declared 'no fat n femininboys plz' in his profile.

These statements treat masculinity as natural or essential, and not as a social construction. As a scholarly field, masculinity studies (e.g. Connell, 1992; Kimmel et al., 2000) arose out of queer insights into gender as performative and intersectional (Butler, 1990). So it is somewhat ironic that this rejection of men's femininity remains so visible in a queer environment. Perceptions and definitions of femininity can also relate to race, as David Eng (2001) theorized regarding the 'racial castration' of Asian men in (homo)sexual cultures.

Intersections with body norms

'It's not just racism flourishing on Grindr', a white Danish user wrote me one afternoon. 'There is also audism and ableism'. I received this message from Carl on my researcher profile in 2017 after I had changed my headline to 'race and racism' in order to recruit interviewees to speak specifically about the topic. Chatting informally on the platform, Carl wrote that some guys stopped writing to him after they realized he was deaf, but that he 'didn't really care'. He clarified that although he was 'very open' about being deaf – it was written on his profile, and he reiterates it in private messages – some of his friends 'avoid using the words Deaf or Sign Language in their profiles' out of fear of being excluded.

Assumptions about abilities and healthy bodies circulate on the platform. One crosses profiles that proclaim brusquely 'no fats', yet others imply this exclusion when they request men who are 'in shape' or 'fit'. The Grindr interface encourages users to identify with a 'body type', and to consider the difference between a 'toned' and a 'muscular' body, between a 'stocky' and a 'large' body, or what an 'average' body looks like. Height and weight drop-down menus present a range that

excludes some people with pituitary or genetic irregularities. Promotional materials focus on men with low body fat.

Grindr brought attention to HIV status first in 2013, when the new 'Tribe' drop-down menu included an option for 'Poz' (or HIV-positive) people; then in 2016, Grindr added drop-down-menus for 'HIV status' and 'last tested date'. Highlighting HIV status could be justified as a public health concern, but one could also argue that it stigmatizes HIV-positive users on Grindr (who are already targets of aggressive messages, like the profile of one Copenhagen-based user who proclaimed 'No infected b*tches please'). Yet Grindr also counteracts some of this stigma of infection by providing HIV-positive people with two options – 'positive' and 'positive, undetectable' – alongside links to definitions of 'undetectable' and information about the low probability of HIV transmission for many people living with the virus.

Intersectional anti-discrimination

Users also challenge or reject discrimination, often on intersectional lines, in the greater Copenhagen area's Grindr culture. One white Dane – who I learned via private message was a university student in sociology – wrote in his profile text: 'Ageism, fat shaming, racism and discrimination against feminine boys = go away!' (Shield, 2017b: 256). Interestingly, he was not an immediate target for any of these forms of discrimination (as he self-described through drop-down menus as a 27-year-old 'white' 'toned' 'jock'). But he was aware that various forms of discrimination permeated on Grindr and elsewhere in Denmark, and thus he sought to bring attention to the subculture's exclusionary discourses about age, body type, race, and gender.

After this conversation, I came across the profile of another white Dane in his mid-20s whose profile headline read: 'Relaxed, funny, smart. Feminism, anti-racism, love'. I sent a private message to him, and after an initial compliment on his profile text, asked: 'Is it safe to bet that you are a student of sociology or cultural studies?' 'Not at all', he responded. 'I'm a tour guide ☺'. I told him that I had assumed it was only people with personal, academic, or work-related connections to racism and xenophobia who would challenge these systems of power on Grindr; he replied that he was evidence that these discourses circulated also in other Danish circles. He hoped his text would have a ripple effect on Grindr, as he ruminated, 'I do hope I'm setting an example' for others to self-reflect on their assumptions about race or gender. Several months later, I spotted his profile again, this time with the

message 'Internalized homophobia is not hot. Neither is racism. Feminism [is] a plus'[5].

Concluding comments

The empirical data are examples of how individual experiences within a mostly gay subculture vary tremendously based on race, migration background, sex, gender, ability, size, and HIV status, among other factors. Through interviews and informal chats, I collected numerous examples of Grindr users who felt that their ability to connect with other users – whether for sex or other ends – was limited because of their position as a minority within the Grindr culture of the greater Copenhagen area.

The empirical data were collected from 2015-2017, yet should not be considered as static: discourses on Grindr change over time. In 2015, for example, I noted that one white Dane wanted to meet a 'sane, masculine, *white*' man in his 20s-30s; by 2016, he had amended his announcement, and sought 'sane, masculine, *western*' man; and by 2017, he had removed any reference to race/ethnicity altogether[6]. The self-editing is not proof that the user broadened his search criteria, but it does suggest that he changed his profile in relation to conversations he had about race or after observing anti-discrimination discourses on other Grindr users' profiles. His continued references to sanity and masculinity echo other dominant discourses on Grindr, but these too could change with time.

The data detailed in this research note looks at the greater Copenhagen area, but does not specify the experiences of users at precise locations within this metropolitan area. Mowlabocus' early research on Grindr pointed to its radical potential for taking cruising back to the streets, as he wrote that Grindr could 'reintegrate gay men back into public space' (2010: 195). Yet, Grindr's geo-locative technology also reinforces geographic boundaries, hindering communication across borders, be they international, rural/urban, or even intra-urban. Users based in or with access to high-congestion areas will see more variation in the online culture than users with limited mobility who are based in quiet areas. When web-based digital cruising predominated (i.e. circa mid-1990s-2010 or so), users' physical locations did not limit their ability to view profiles in distant areas. A user in rural Jutland could change his location manually to Copenhagen to cruise

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5   Newcomers can also challenge discrimination on Grindr; one Native-American-identified tourist in December 2016 wrote that he sought 'body positive, inclusive, non racist, HIV indifferent, equality-embracing, non judgemental, good people.'

6   Emphasis added.

Denmark's capital virtually; even a user in Poland could switch his location to Copenhagen in anticipation of upcoming travel or migration (Boston, 2015). However, geo-locative smartphone apps can reproduce urban divisions in a virtual space; these divisions can relate to geography, socio-economic class, and/or racial and migrant communities. Future research could thus consider how a geo-locative, mobile device might exacerbate not only a user's geographical position, but also the user's socio-economic position.

Within Grindr culture, a user's (often) gay or queer identity intersects with a variety of other identities, which influences the user experience. Identities and differences are reinforced through the platform's interface, such as through drop-down menus, and through the circulation of user discourses that reveal personal prejudices. Yet this research also highlights that users define and reject discrimination within Grindr culture, undermining hierarchies and promoting diversity. As a study of the dynamics of social media, this research considers the ever-developing technological affordances of online platforms, the unique subcultures created by users of these platforms, and the feedback loops connecting the technological and the social aspects of the platform, especially with regard to their reification or challenging of various systems of power.

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