Intimacy collapse: Temporality, pleasure, and embodiment in gay hook-up app use
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Abstract
This article maps key tensions in contemporary, mediatized gay male sexual culture by focusing on hook-up app use. Based on data generated through a situated and visual interview technique, the paper gathers experiences from hook-up app users in the U.K. Concerned with how understandings and usage of hook-up apps are bound up with normative evaluations of their ability to produce “good” intimacy, I suggest integrating analysis of practice and infrastructural capacities with critical intimacy theory. This is captured in the concept of intimacy collapse of which I examine three types: one between immediacy and foresight, another between organic and representational pleasure objects, and a third between personal and social acts of looking. The analysis demonstrates that intimacy collapses in hook-up apps produce new (in)visibilities, anxieties and opportunities that are distributed unevenly across the disparate online cultures and identities that make up gay culture.

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Introduction
This article looks at gay men’s use of hook-up apps, that is, mobile communication services that, by organizing the user interface in accordance with relative user proximity, facilitate and foreground sexually intimate meetings. Apps like Grindr and Scruff build on network connectivity and “make use of these capacities to facilitate sexual and social encounters between men” [1]. They draw on standard repertoires of mobile chat and social media profiles, but extend them by making the relative user proximity an organizing principle for what user profiles the interface at any given moment and place makes visible. Historically, hook-up apps ascend from a string of “cruising” technologies. Cruising is “the active search for a potential sexual anonymous partner in different public settings” [2] with the historical development in media technologies changing what a public setting might be. What marks hook-up app-based cruising is the non-synchronicity of chat and picture exchange; its view to real-time exchanges of glances and bodily fluids by organizing user profiles according to location; being able to negotiate degrees of anonymity through profile work; and the location of desire objects,
people and representations by scrolling over profiles or using the search functionality (for more on digital cruising, see Mowlabocus, 2010).

In Jansson’s (2013) mediatization framework we may think of hook-up apps as giving “texture” to gay socio-sexual space: it gives texture to “perceived space” space by saturating life in such a way that it feels indispensable, to “conceived space” as the forms of communicating as well as visual erotic culture become central code patterns for a gay sexual vocabulary; and finally to “lived space” as hook-up app use becomes weaved into many parts of life, such as finding friends and lovers, but also traveling, sexting, and killing time.

Gay culture is invested in technologies and imaginaries of socio-sexual visibilities, of categorising and making material and thus visible those ephemeral desires that pertain to gay identity and sexual practice. While hook-up apps are prominent if not dominant infrastructures through which contemporary gay sexual sociability is mediatized, its socio-technical roots and predecessors continue to work on such sociabilities. This work happens in large part through the continued operation of imaginaries about what being gay means and how it is practiced, imaginaries that are tied up with the capabilities and repertoires of those using parks, bars, and saunas, but also newspaper classifieds, landline phones, and web services. While any site and its repertoires require specific kinds of work and expertise, looking to media history, practices attuned to “physical”, non-mediated locations tend to linger and be higher valued than its mediated counterparts. Somewhat paradoxically though, new and emerging media tend to be imagined as doing away with such work altogether. One participant provides a succinct instance of this as he reflects on how hook-up apps might be fulfilling the fantasy of having “gaydar”:

We used to talk about having a gaydar: “Wouldn’t it be fun to just go into a bar and just work [it] out?” You could have this kind of sixth sense of working [out] who might be [gay]. Now, actually, you do have that sixth sense. (research participant)

In digitization of this imaginary, the technological materiality opens up new experimental possibilities of what can be “sensed”, more specifically, by expanding the range of what it means to be proximate, near, within sight. Crucially in this technological imaginary such the sensing has seemingly been automated which minimizes the risk of failure or exposure by having to do the work of flirting, looking with intent. This imaginary of expanded phenomenological experience has a “phantasmagorical” (Jansson, 2002) presence in the social world in that it informs how we are able to take up hook-up apps. This explains why normative evaluations stick to hook-up apps as infrastructures — they are either lauded for their liberating potential or judged for their toxicity to the human spirit. Prominent terms in popular discourse are that those of “hook-up culture” and the idea of the onset of a “dating apocalypse” (Sales, 2015; Singal, 2015). They all configure a space of (dis)opportunity, of usage and feeling, and as such define the particularities of contemporary sexual sociability. This article acknowledges the world-making effects of such imaginaries, while arguing that hook-up apps’ experiential configuration must also take into account the ways different forms of intimacy is valued in society.

For the production of intimacy between non-straight people, hook-up apps and preceding mediation technologies have long been indispensable socio-sexual infrastructures. With this history in mind, the purpose of this article is to add to our understanding of queer sexual sociability’s dynamical and often messy relationship to technology. What happens when sexual sociability is filtered through hook-up apps? How do norms, practices, discourses and affects emerge, align and clash? Like any culture, variability, tensions, and contradictions are abound, and it is some of this multiplicity that this article describes and suggests a framework for making sense of. The framework is configured so as to avoid defaulting to technological determinism, while acknowledging the gendered and sexual structures that hook-up apps engage with.

In order to address these issues, the article first maps out some key tensions in hook-up app studies, both the early and contemporary works that have been influential for the theoretical foundations and analytical interests of the field. Then I present in more detail the hook-up apps in question, the research data and the methods by which they have been produced and analyzed. From there I continue to define the concept of ‘intimacy collapse’ and describe how it integrates digital infrastructural analysis with critical understandings of intimacy.
Before concluding I present and discuss the analytical findings, organized around the three intimacy collapses of temporal, body, and gaze constructs.

**Tensions in queer hook-up app sociability**

The field of hook-up app studies is at its core attuned to tensions and contradictions in queer culture, which springs from the fact that it was pioneered and, in some respects, continues to be dominated by scholars working with queer populations and critical theory. Thus its sociological accounts of these mediated cultures are often oriented to complex processes of identification, embodiment, sexuality, privilege and marginalization. This is true for early work that details the text based gay and lesbian (sexual) sociabilities emerging from dedicated Web sites and online fora (Correll, 1995; Campbell, 2004) to Mowlabocus’ (2010) seminal book *Gaydar culture* that through historical, geographical, and sociological interventions in the cultures forming around the gay dating sites that at the time were culturally dominant, as well as the emerging mobile dating or hook-up app Grindr that would soon come to be the blueprint of gay digital infrastructure. Correll’s ethnography of an online “lesbian bar” shows how lesbian sociability may in fact emerge online but do so through codes of spatiality and social conduct taken from the physical bar scene. Campbell’s detailing of online gay bodybuilder attends to how desire operates on and through digital bodies that are produced in accordance with gay sexual sociabilities, and that digital materiality offers a space for exploration that may queer established notions intimacy, desirability, but also depend on existing hierarchies of value. Finally, a key aspect of Mowlabocus’ work is showing how the shift to digital infrastructures may both open up new opportunities queer people who through racialization and class are marginalized several times over, while also reproducing existing inequalities.

Since then several other tensions in hook-up app sociability and culture have been identified. One tendency in the literature deals with on the one hand the expanded sexual exploration that come with the anonymity and locational technology of hook-up apps, and on the other hand the heightened risk of abuse of such a “data culture” (Albury, *et al.*, 2017). On the one hand in a study of diasporic gay men in Belgium Dhoest and Szulc (2016) show how hook-up apps offer a relatively safe environment for queer immigrants in Belgium to explore their identity and enter into gay sexual culture. On the other hand, there are of course risks involved in using hook-up apps, not least for those who cannot afford to be fully out, or who in other ways live precariously. Location technology and poor data security by companies such as Grindr leads to hacking and leaks that expose users, users that due to the “lock-in” dynamic of mediatization do not have many other alternative infrastructures to pivot to.

Another tension is that between hook-up apps as less regulated spaces for free expression, and on the other hand the interests and power dynamics that are structurally embedded in these services. In a study of same sex-attracted young people in Australia, Byron and Albury (2018) identify the general experience that entering into hook-up app sex cultures is unguided, unregulated and unpredictable, prompting the users to formulate their own ethos and guiding principles. While a participant finds that for picture exchange on hook-up apps there “...are literally no rules when it comes to these things” the group interviews reveal that they in fact operate with clear personal rules [3]. This tension is also seen in the multiple ways that hook-up app sexting is talked about: As expected, an “ordinary” practice of care, and a signpost for the intensification of an intimate relationship. But it is also potentially exploitative, precarious, a mode of sexual harassment, rubbing up against legal frameworks. Contrary to the notion that hook-up apps feel like unregulated spaces, it has been shown that gay “tribalism” (Clay, 2018) is reproduced and remixed through the interface categorial options for identification of self and sexual orientation. However Duguay (2020) shows how the explicitly prescribed uses embedded in these digital environments are countered by “off-label” use. Off-label use calls attention to the ways the interests of infrastructure owners materialize, and how that provides a starting point for what de Certeau (1984) calls ‘tactical navigation’. Thus, designer intentions, service description and marketing, and user uptake and practice do not align, but form dynamic, unstable and often contentious relationships.

Looking at hook-up app mediated sexual sociabilities from a phenomenological perspective Stempfhuber and
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Liegl (2016) investigate what these apps’ geolocative focus mean on an embodied level. They find that the user’s physical movements inform the interface and vice versa, which alters the user’s sense of and reaction to physical proximity, ultimately creating new body-technology hybrids from which intimacy is practiced and felt. Their intricate tracings of the social interactions as they related to physical and digital space make it clear that location-based services like Grindr intensify the role of digital media in the “renegotiation of what it means to ‘be with’ someone else or be co-present” [4]. As such, neither notions of physical closeness or social intimacy are stable but emerge in engagements with people and technology. This then leads to sometimes contested and conflicting mediated interactions that to one person is felt as close, whereas another might experience it as distanced. Similarly, then Blackwell, et al. (2014) interrogate how the centering of location in hook-up apps can sustain a range of practices for becoming more or less present and visible. Thus, Grindr blurs the

... distinctions between people who are fully present in an identifiable way and those who are merely lurking or “peeking” to see who is inside, in that all of them are co-situated without regard for how much information they share. [5]

Information sharing is asymmetrical creating possibilities for lurker practice. For users in non-monogamous relationships Møller and Nebeling Petersen (2017) find that mediated incidental visibilities such as the “green light” may collapse contexts among partners. These are then domesticated according to the scripts of intimacy that govern their relationship, into practices of either pleasure or conflict.

Another tension in hook-up app based sexual sociality is the ways that the communicative affordances serve as invitations for describing and disclosing bodily features, identifications, and sexual preferences, and to expect the same from others. On the one hand, this might generate awareness of the multiplicity and difference of app users, creating space for desire and identity to be informed by new horizons of possibility. On the other hand, the interfacial stabilization of identity categories might reinforce existing inequalities or produce new ones. McGlotten (2013) provides a crucial look into how drop-down menus indicating “race” and “ethnicity”, as well as the ability to write about what you’re “looking for” on your profile, are all instrumental for the proliferation of the racist discourse that operate in the depoliticized language of sexual “preference”. In terms of sexual health, then apps like Grindr and Scruff offer disclosure options meant to facilitate knowledge exchange that limits the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted infections. While this is clearly a well-intentioned and useful infrastructure, it also calls into question whether it exasperates or alleviates stigma around these matters (Race, 2010; Møller and Ledin, 2021).

Overall, the field of queer hook-up app studies is deeply material, critically oriented, with an increasing attention to intersectional analysis, whether it be economical, social or political. Informed by this history and project, the article proposes three categorical tensions key to understanding hook-up app mediated sexual sociabilities. Importantly the article does not claim ownership of these categories but rather as productive cuts through the literature. As such, while I in the analysis offer up examples from my own research these are infused with findings and perspective from across the field of queer hook-up app studies.

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**Data and method**

Hook-up apps are smartphone based social media that are distinguished by the fact that they make the relative user proximity an organizing principle for what user profiles the interface at any given moment and place makes visible. The “favoriting” affordance allows users to add nearby or other users displayed in the “grid” of user profiles to a favorite list which is accessible at all time, no matter the relative distance between users. At the time of data collection, Grindr’s design did not offer any datafied visibility of who had accessed one’s profile [6]. This has since evolved so that it now gives some reciprocal visibility by offering users a view of who have looked at their profile (playing catch-up with other services like Scruff).
This article draws on ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with users of the dating and hook-up apps Grindr and Scruff, the at the time dominating hook-up apps in the region. These are part of a larger data corpus consisting of 20 interviews, 16 of which utilize ‘media go-alongs’ (Jørgensen, 2016), that is:

... an interview situation in which the researcher together with the participant look at, navigate and talk about the latter’s personal media. Categorizations of materialities and researcher discourse frame the understandings of and routing into the media environment. [2]

All participants signed consent forms. The cited participants lived in London and Brighton (United Kingdom). The interviews typically lasted one hour but ranged in duration between 30 and 90 minutes. They were transcribed, then accumulated and coded in Atlas.TI. Most participant recruitment was conducted via my personal profile on Scruff, an app which is marketed as “… the dating, travel, and social networking app of choice for a community of more than 10+ million gay, bi, and curious guys worldwide” [8]. I myself am a long time user of the app which informs the direct way that recruitment is handled. As my research interests began to take shape, the profile text was updated to reflect this. In the verbal-visual tours, only Grindr and Scruff were used although other services were mentioned. Throughout all of the interviews from which this sample was drawn, the following services were mentioned: Jack’d, Manhunt, Growlr, and Tinder apps; the Planetromeo.com, Gaydar.net, Gay.com, and Fabswingers.com Web sites; and Skype, ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger chat services.

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**Intimacy collapse**

Hook-up apps as intimate infrastructure work on established modes of intimate engagement and are important parts of the ways contemporary intimacy culture is changing. We may ask how hook-up app infrastructures support, disturb, intensity, make difficult, etc., practices of intimacy. This section insists on the value of integrating the socio-technical attention captured in literature on “context collapse”, with the critical examination of the role intimacy norms play in the consolidation of power through Othering processes. To do so I propose the concept of “intimacy collapse”.

Expanding previous work on ‘context collapse’, Marwick and boyd write:

... people vary the way they communicate with others based on context and audience (Goffman, 1959), technologies that make it difficult to understand or regulate boundaries often make managing privacy more difficult. When social technologies cause a collision of information norms — or “context collapse” — people experience them as privacy violations. [9]

Here Marwick and boyd bring out some tensions in contemporary communication culture: First, that while audiences are growing and the ability through affordances of various services you are able to tailor and target your communication, many people experience a loss of control and do not sufficiently understand the intensions and purposes of what they observe online. Because a few platforms service a plethora of communities and purposes, and do so transnationally, the ability to judge the extent of one’s audience may suffer. Secondly, and as a consequence, the decoding of received messages becomes difficult, as you cannot assume the sender has full control over, or understands, to whom the message goes. Thirdly, while universal notions of privacy, democracy, and norms of social engagement still are used and thus analytically useful, they are less and less predictivive for how we understand and live with digital media. So for example, what is considered private, and a threat to it, is highly contingent. Context collapse is thus not uniform across user groups, neither is the work done to keep contexts from collapsing, and to reestablish a sense of control. Context collapse analysis is very useful for understanding queer digital life and culture because it integrates
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analysis of material circumstances and possibilities with the variance in how media users understand and value these media. Marwick and boyd use it to shed light on less privileged media users, namely youth and queer people. However, while it is concerned with the production of private and public space, it remains mostly concerned with shifts in generational changes in experiences of these, and not the societal structures that produce and privilege certain forms of closeness. It is with this inattention in mind that I turn to Berlant’s work on intimacy (central works are Berlant, 1998; Berlant and Warner, 1998) as a way to critically approach the productions of private and public realms.

To Berlant, ‘intimacy’ not only describes an interpersonal dynamic of communication which makes the individuals feel understood, appreciated, and cared for by each other (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007). Neither is it merely a specific social and sexual construct. Rather, intimacy describes an affective orientation towards certain constructs of privacy, and simultaneously makes other (sexual) practices non-intimate and problematic by making them contradictory to hegemonic notions of privacy. On the precarious world-building which intimacy gives direction to, Berlant writes:

... it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress “a life” seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability.

The tension between intimate possibilities and failures is inherent to intimacy. This allows a reading of context collapse to be a moment that makes apparent both the investments in certain types of mediated intimacy, and the constant and latent failures of these, which then requires work to maintain a sense of intimacy containment and control.

I suggest the term ‘intimacy collapse’ to describe how context collapses require users of technology to work to maintain their senses of intimacy. Intimacy collapse occurs in techno-experiential landscapes in which multiple norms of intimacy are practiced and signaled through both affordance management and discourse. Intimacy collapse describes both the collisions of intimacies and the strategies put in place to contain the collapse’s affective and social impact. With this concept I approach the ways media bring together people who both operate with different ideas of what makes “good intimacy” and who are looking to the media to achieve different intimacy practices. Media environments are then navigated in order to achieve this, which entails ‘intimacy collapses’, moments during which such navigation fails. These moments may then destabilize some or all of the senses of intimacy involved. In other words, the moments may reveal the interplay between norms of good public/private spheres and the practices through which they are sought separated.

Crucially, intimacy collapse goes beyond registering differences in expectations of what intimacy script a situation or encounter should operate with; based on Berlant the concept should be used to interrogate how an encounter emerges as a failed intimacy, and consequently, how people and technology is made responsible for such failure. It is the normative structures embedded in the understanding of the encounter that make these intimacy collapses emerge as failures, which in turn makes these collapses instructive for understanding how intimate normativity shape how we practice and interpret our technologically mediated lives.

It is from this analytical perspective of intimacy collapse that I suggest three tensions in hook-up app use in which different notions of intimacy collapse.

Findings

**Collapsing immediacy and foresight**

Hook-up apps are built around the ability to easily locate and contact nearby users, a feature that promotes the
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Idea that hook-up apps facilitate physical meeting among potential relative strangers much better than other techniques and technologies. As with any technology however it is inseparable from the cultured appropriation, which may modulate or even run counter to the interaction that was designed for. In this modulation two temporal orientations collapse, those of immediacy and foresight. Many of my participants described how they would bypass the intended usage of seeking immediate encounters with those available in the nearby grid. Instead they would use ‘save-for-later’ techniques that through interfacial labour would make more profiles accessible to them at a later time. Mostly this was achieved by using the ‘favorite’ function to bookmark profiles found in the nearby grid which would then make them retrievable later, even when the users are not nearby each other. Another method to save-for-later that was mentioned was by starting a chat, which would have the profile appear in the messaging history.

This is an example of what Licoppe, et al. (2017) describe as “fishing”. When fishing users strategically open hook-up app when they are on the move, making themselves visible to a broader range of users, and enabling themselves to “catch” users outside their local “pond”, with the purpose of being able to contact them later on. This practice does not use the locational technology to create immediate physical or even digital encounters, in fact it “games” these by tactically navigating the app infrastructure in order to achieve goals that it does not immediately support, namely that of planning socio-sexual activity. In fishing, searching for here-and-now bodily encounters becomes entangled with the planning for future bodily encounters. On the one hand the nearby feature foregrounds visibilities of gay men who are close-by right now and thus easy to get to. Moreover, the narrative of “instant sex” is supported by the ability to mark yourself as looking for “Right Now” or “Random Play/NSA” (acronym for “no strings attached”) on both Grindr and Scruff (see Figure 1).
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The research participants describe how they indeed both use the apps for here-and-now ‘instant sex’ as well as fishing, save-for-later planning of sexual activity. For users in densely populated areas the immediacy of bodily meetings which the ‘nearby’ affordance enables is indeed a strongly represented practice among my participants. As one participant notes about the abundance of possibilities: “if you want sex, just say it”. This hints at an economic and direct way of talking, a mode that Licoppe, et al. (2016) identify as widespread on Grindr. This aim to change the sociability of digital communication into consumptive and impersonal cruising behavior. This “speech community” is designed to fulfill the here-and-now promise of the locational affordance of hook-up apps.

While this also emerges as a tendency in my data, other kinds of work were done to become available to not quite here-and-now sexual encounters. My participants were generally more invested in the save-for-later planning practice than the potential for what several describe as “instant gratification”. The digitization of gay
sexual sociability merges the asynchronous potentials found in well-established socio-technical practice of
classifieds, with that of synchronous encounters of outdoors cruising and saunas. While these modes of
immediacy and foresight or planning were never entirely separate, in hook-up apps mediated sexual cultures
they become entangled and codependent in new ways: hook-up apps allow for on-going “curation” of potential
sex partners, and indeed requires such work for the user to be able to cruise successfully. One participant’s
description gets to the processual and practical nature of becoming available for immediate sex:

So I got all these messages now. This one I liked. When I see
someone I like I’d rather put a star on them, because you know
it’s a sex app, so when you’re horny last minute you always want
to have your list of favorites just in case. See who’s online right
now, get straight to the point, you don’t have to look for someone
you like ... So I don’t even have to chat with him that much.

To become available for here-and-now sexual encounters they use the favoriting affordance (“put a star on
them”) to maintain a list of potential partners. This planning activity allows them, when “horny”, to minimize
the time and effort it takes to find someone interested. Cruising on hook-up apps requires a lot of negotiation,
and for the “horny” moment not to get lost in planning, users try to time-shift such negotiation work.

Though planning work aims to make you available for immediate sex, several participants reported feeling this
very work could also get in the way of sexual encounters. Several noted how they had never met most of their
‘favorites’. This adds an important nuance to “fishing”, in that the initial intention of the practice might be
eclipsed by a reality markedly less sexy. As such, some participants emphasize how little sex their fishing
work actually leads to, and how the practice might disturb moments of intimacy. In this telling story, a
participant wakes up with a guy he has spent the night with:

... this is when, he didn’t know that I was awake, but I was
looking at him. I remember looking at him, he was waking up, he
... just subconsciously grabs [his] phone, looks at what time it is,
and then the very first thing, he checks Grindr. And then right
after he would check Instagram, he would check his Facebook ...
and I remember I ... And you can tell he ... didn’t mean to check
Grindr to make me feel like, “I’m not with you,” in a sense,
because he was sleeping over ... But it was just his habit.

His story illustrates how planning for sex has become a habitual part of everyday media repertoire practices of
staying connected to various (social) media. To the participant’s bedfellow, the act of checking Grindr has
become so habitual that he is not thinking about what intentions it might signify. At the same time, from the
participant’s point of view, it does very much call into question the sincerity of the sex partner, as the act of
looking on hook-up apps seems like him moving away from the intimate situation, orienting himself towards
another horizon of possibility. The simultaneous high and low symbolic charge of “checking Grindr” collapses
in that moment, destabilizing a sense of shared understanding, and requires negotiation and discussion to
reconstruct their shared sense of intimacy.

Collapsing organic and representational pleasure objects

Hook-up apps facilitate sexual, bodily encounters. At the same time, many participants report that they to a
larger degree use the apps for ‘sexting’, that is, sending “sexual images and sometimes sexual texts via cell

Like the sexual technologies before it, hook-up apps reconfigure the flows between the somatic and the virtual,
that is material bodies and their faculties on the one hand, and virtual bodies that emerge through media texts
and representations. Hook-up apps in their materiality support both orientations towards what can be called
more organic intimacy and that of more attuned to what we may call representational intimacy. Beyond being
material and social facts, these intimacies are also normative. The organic intimacy script places bodily
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Encounters as the meaningful way to have sexual encounters, placing textual encounters that do not lead to bodily meetings outside the intimate sphere. On the other hand, representational intimacy implicitly values features of mediated culture: asynchronicity, radical performativity, and the ways this erotic mode is available to different publics. Campbell’s (2004) study of sexual chat on online gay bodybuilding forums deeply explores what kinds of pleasure can be had when the somatic body of one’s counterparts are made invisible. He found that within these spaces, textual bodies become objects of desire, and the ability to perform these bodies decides your desirability. Consequently, the material or “real” bodies of the others are not of immediate concern in this particular sexual practice. In terms of hook-up several works have highlighted that many interactions and exchanges are as much to be understood as pornographic producers of erotic charge as social and communicative (Mowlabocus, 2010; Tziallas, 2015).

In Grindr and Scruff the choices of what you are “looking for” are very similar (see Figure 1): You can mark yourself as looking for “relationship” and/or “dates”, which points toward future bodily meeting. By contrast, you can be looking for “chat” which takes place wholly online. The categories “networking” and “friends” are somewhat unclear as to which intimacy norm they adhere to. The “right now” and “Random Play/NSA” categories mark the user as looking for here-and-now sex, but it is entirely up to interpretation if it includes either organic or representational sexual intimacies, or both. As such, in the current mediatization of cruising, there is a material opening which supports the “seeping” of both intimacies into each other.

Participants tend to highlight the repeated failures of sexual negotiation, with one participant expressing the sense of disconnect between self-categorization and actual agenda like this: “Often you’ll get people who write ‘looking for nothing’ or something but they’re actually very much looking for a quick fuck”. This leads to a widely shared understanding of hook-up app users as being “flaky”, not true to their stated intentions. This normative term highlights frustration with the lack of opacity in other users’ intent. Sexting can formally be hard to distinguish from interactions aiming to evaluate your own as well as the other user’s desires. This then constitutes a collapse of intimacies leaving the user hard at work to excavate the motives of others. Such opacity makes it easier to switch intimacy scripts midway, further intensifying the sense of intimacy collapse. As the following participant narrative shows, such collapse is not only a disabling disturbance, but also enables desire practice queering both intimacy positions:

Sometimes it was just about the chase, so getting to the stage where you feel like, “I could go around for sex now but I’m not going to.” I think that’s a really interesting thing because for me often, the chase of getting to that stage of, “Oh right, do you want to come around now?” or “are we ready?” and I would choose not to. That gave me enough fulfillment than actually going for sex with somebody ... I didn’t feel overwhelmed, I was in control.

The “chase” or “chasing”, then, is the normative flipside to being flaky, bringing to our attention how hook-up app interactions may draw sexual tension from the prospect of physical sexual meeting, but then withdraw from the actualization of embodied intimacy. Chasing is a way to “get off”, to be sexually fulfilled, without ever touching any bodies. As another participant says:

I mean ultimately, the goal in the app is the distraction (...) It’s not hooking up (...) And then as soon as it gets a bit serious and they want to start hooking up, then you start being flaky (...) I start retreating and being, “Oh, I’m busy. I’ve got to go out” or “My flat mate is coming home” and making up stories like that when I live on my own.

The participant uses the representational intimacy to confine cruising to the mediated interface, and to play on its erotic potentials. These interactions are easily contained within the hook-up app and can thus be activated and terminated for distractive purposes. When other users start implying a physical meeting, this domain of
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Intimacy is disturbed, and the participant uses discursive strategies (“Oh, I’m busy”) to make that horizon of possibilities improbable.

Interestingly, the derogatory and diagnostic term “flaky”, which is typically used by those utilizing the representational script to mark a sort of communal failure of intimacy, is here reappropriated to signify that it is not simply a failure of individual or communal mediated sex culture, but an appropriate and useful strategy. As one participant puts it: “you get chased or you do the chasing ... that’s why you flake out, because you’d just be left feeling more empty if you did that”. This reversal of the expectations of what a “purely physical” meeting is signifies how controlling interactions in accordance to representational intimacy scripts minimizes risks of feeling “empty” after having impersonal sex.

Further, the collapse of organic and representational intimacies allows for online interactions to be sexually charged with the promise of a bodily encounter, while remaining safer and digitally manageable. The collapse of intimacies frustrates some cruisers on hook-up apps while others may find that uncertainty supports their preference for representational intimacy.

This preference may also be tied up with the feeling of loneliness. Bodily encounters may simply be too overwhelming for someone in a precarious emotional situation. Sometimes not to be seen but simply to look amounts to a manageable amount of intimacy a person that might feel at odds with a given perceived community’s hierarchies of desirability. One participant states doing such lurking means: “I was just trying to make myself feel better ... that there’s other people out there”. Many queer people face oppressive social environments and for them such flaky behavior may enable access to sexual intimacies that were otherwise unattainable.

Similarly, people in “closed” relationships might for various reasons want to act out erotic pleasures that walk the line or transgress on the rules governing the relationship. Having erotic encounters online may soften the risks of destabilization that erotic transgression involves. One partnered participant explains that “you always find people hot outside of your relationship so perhaps that’s my way of fulfilling that”. In this context, the collapse of different intimacies is not merely a disturbance which must be corrected or contained; it serves as a resource for men in not entirely monogamous relationships to find and feel sexual pleasures and thus disseminate the sexual frustration the monogamous intimacy script may cause them.

Hook-up app mediated sexual culture exists in the tension between organic and representational intimacies which both energizes interactions and is a source of contestation. What is not-quite-intimate behavior from one point of view may be relationally meaningful, and even empowering, from another.

**Collapsing personal and social acts of looking**

The sexual cultures related to hook-up app use have long been understood as digital forms cruising (Mowlabocus, 2010). Cruising is in one way a rather solitary practice of movement and looking that seeks to find or generate desire in others. At the same time, it transcends the category of practice as its significance as a gay cultural touchstone around which identity formation and cultural belonging evolves. In phenomenological terms, hook-up app use is part of a history of cultures of moving and looking that make gay sexual encounters possible. The ways it reconfigures embodied gay cultural practice may then folded into personal biographies of mediated experience. One participant expresses this affective, historical orientation to technology very clearly:

> I miss the days when we didn’t have these technologies, when looking became much more a part of how we interacted. Like, walking down the street and catching someone’s eye, and then turning back and looking.

In this very feeling account, the lonesome and ‘private’ exchange of gazes is folded into a sense of a ‘gay public’. The participant experiences that gay sociability broadly speaking before hook-up apps came to dominate were dependent on the accumulation of bodily capacities that made queer recognition possible all the while building a sensuous and pleasurable connection to the body. In his account this is somewhat lost with such signaling and capacity-building moving online. The asynchronicity of this new materiality may be what
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animates this narrative and experience. Thus in hook-up apps, because interactional cues are less prominent, the (digital) gaze feels more like a unidirectional act of navigating at the profile of a user, than an human interaction [12].

At the same time, the profile-based operation afforded by hook-up apps make it impossible for the looked-upon to be sure of the identity of those accessing their profiles. It may even be that several people are using one profile to look at other profiles. The material opening towards “social gazing” is not merely a theoretical possibility, but something I find is a widespread practice among the participants. The following story represents a recurring scenario of social hook-up app use as gay male bonding:

You’re at a bar ... they’ll open the app ... usually what happens is, somebody will go: “Oh, look at him. He’s kind of hot” and then you show each other who you found ... you need to keep up with the Jones’ ... It’s like one-upmanship or just entertainment ... that’s just how it is now.

Social use is mostly not problematized. In fact, several note the good feeling it gives them, and how it ties them into their gay friend group. Approaching this from a unified (and heteronormative) idea of “good” public/private separation would simply lose sight of the fact that social acts of looking are meaningful and largely unproblematized by the group that both cast and are subject to such gazes. To them, the collapse of public and private not only is not of concern; in a way it does not exist, as these categories are not invoked in this particular situation.

The collapse is useful in other ways too. It allows for a sense of safety when online cruising leads to embodied sexual encounters. When one participant prepares to go meet a stranger for sex, he collects identifying data of his potential sexual partner, such as pictures, phone numbers, and addresses. When departing, he says, “I’ll send the whole dossier to [my friend] and tell him, ‘I’m going to meet this guy. I’m going there now. If you don’t hear from me in about three hours, you know where I am’”. Screenshots distributed in other messaging apps thus enable the construction of transmedially shared gazes that through a partial deprivatization makes intimate encounters with strangers feel possible and safe.

In contemporary group sex events social acts of looking may also in part be mediated. Sharing a screen to look at dating or hook-up app profiles is a significant method for building erotic tension together, and for the negotiation of who might be invited to participate (Race, 2015). Thus, hook-up apps reconfigure what range of bodies is accessible at any given moment, in turn producing new ways of looking, which take advantage of the asynchronous, screen- and profile-based affordances. As an example, a participant in my study explains how at sex parties, or “chill-outs” as they are called in the British context, “it’s become so common [that] some people just grab your phone or stand behind you”. This communal browsing is made possible within this particular intimacy script. The script reflects practices of companionship not operating with heteronormative distinctions between “friend” and “lover”, but in which “collective activities and expansive relations are a distinctive feature of this constellation of practices, and may be regarded as an immanent attribute of this sexual culture” [13].

Finally, social looking on hook-up apps not only serves as a bonding mechanism in gay male friendships, or as a method for keeping sex parties going, but is also part of non-monogamous relationships. With seven out of 18 participants being in relationships in which sex is had with “outsiders” I find that social use marks their practice in a number of ways. As written about extensively elsewhere (Møller and Nebeling Petersen, 2017), some partnerships use a monogamous intimacy script and require sex to be had in ways that makes it “unintimate” and unthreatening to the partners. Other partnerships use a non-monogamous intimacy script that requires them to place the sexual encounter within the shared emotional space of the relationship.

In the context of open relationships using a non-monogamous intimacy script, a collapse of private and social gazes is not only a circumstance, but a necessity. As one participant explains about his partner:

And as far as my relationship with [him], if he’s actually talking
to someone, he will show me everything and ... If I’m not happy about some of the conversation, I will tell him so ... [he] loves chatting ... I tend to be probably the voice of reason.

To them looking for sexual partners is a task of the home and delegated to just one. Their social hook-up app use is less about the shared practices of looking, and more a tool for easing the almost administrative task of finding sexual partners. As such while one partner might be the only hook-up app user, such use is structured in accordance with scripts that are supposed to organize the shared sense of emotional intimacy.

In the context of open relationships, and using a monogamous intimacy script, social acts of looking can be much more contested and destabilizing. This can apply to partners who operate with disparate sexual spheres. Consider the following situation, in which a hook-up app message triggers a sound notification on the participant’s phone, which his partner then hears:

> It’s not [on] silent and you switch it on and you get that “bing”, that very unique sound that he [the partner] has heard many times. There have been situations where I’m like: “Hmm, he’s hot. Why don’t we look at him?”, or “He would be your type” or “He would be my type.” But ... I don’t want to see his messages.

The sound notification collapses the otherwise contained cruising practice into a situation between the partners governed by monogamous intimacy. This then requires negotiation work to contain it. It may either be redirected into a shared practice (“why don’t we look at him?”) or through playful work be placed in either one of their separate extra dyadic sexual spheres. The shared act of looking must be handled in very specific ways for its destabilizing force to be disseminated.

The material affordances of hook-up apps support shared acts of looking, which makes it mostly impossible to be sure who and how many are looking at your profile. To the participants this collapse of sightlines is not understood as particularly problematic, underlining how the practice operates outside traditional norms of what is public and private. Instead the collapse provides opportunities for gay friendship bonding, making cruising safer, and for men having group sex to negotiate the invitation of other men. In non-monogamous relationships social use can be supportive or destabilizing, depending on the intimacy script that governs the relationship.

**Conclusion: How norms of intimacy shape hook-up app use**

Hook-up app use is historically contingent upon practices that emerged in relationship the technological infrastructures available and prominent at the time. At the same time to understand hook-up app use, or any technology that mediated intimate encounters, it is key that we understand which intimacy scripts are being mobilized to organize practice and to evaluate other users and the larger sexual cultures. These scripts not only reflect social normativities but instantiate the distinctions between public and private that make some intimate lives and practices “count” more than others. This article proposes intimacy collapse as an analytical strategy for integrating analysis of what intimacies hook-up apps infrastructures make possible and privileges, with critical attention to the (hetero)normativities that give value to these mediated intimate encounters. I have argued that the specific opacities of hook-up apps materiality produce at least three general intimacy collapses: of immediacy and foresight, representational and organic pleasure objects, and personal and social acts of looking.

While the three intimacy collapses are meant to describe overall conditions of participating in hook-up apps mediated sexual cultures, the collapses may play out differently depending on the relative less privilege of the specific intersection of body, identity, class, and geographical territory that the hook-up app user inhabits. The intimacy collapses in hook-up apps produce new (in) visibilities, anxieties and opportunities that are distributed unevenly across the disparate online cultures and identities that, for lack of a better word, make up gay culture.
The intimacy collapses then serve as the battleground at which people seek to carve out a space for them to become sexual and sexualized subjects.

**About the author**

Kristian Møller (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor at Roskilde University. He researches digital, chemical and sexual aspects of LGBTQ intimacy. He has published on reproduction of HIV stigma in dating/hook-up apps, the mediated negotiation of non-monogamous relationships, sexualized drug use on video conferencing services like Zoom, the algorithmic production of porn genres and sexual publics, as well as digital mobile ethnography and ethics.

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**Notes**

1. Race, 2015, p. 254.


12. Looking at profiles on Grindr has evolved from being unidirectional and untraceable by the looked-upon person, to offering an increasing degree of reciprocal visibility by offering users a view of who have looked at their profile. Other apps like Scruff have offered this for longer. This makes “profile surfing” a more dynamical act of looking. In practice, messaging or sending “woofs” (the equivalent of a Facebook “poke”) are used to invite exchanges of digital glances.


**References**


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