

Grindr: Surveying and Geolocating Sexiness

Kelsey Brannan
M.A. Candidate
Communication, Culture, & Technology
Georgetown University

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Preface

I would like to open by noting that this presentation about the online Grindr community is a fragment of the field of Gay and Lesbian studies that explores the way LGBTQ identified individuals use social media tools to seek pleasure, express their identity, and “meet” up at offline community events. My current thesis research, uses ethnographic methods, such as interviews and participant observation, to explore how visible, political and spatial factors specific to D.C. Metropolitan area, which include appearance, leadership, capital, gentrification, and competition, influence how female identified lesbian and queer leaders build diverse online and offline community spaces. Similarly to my current research, this talk seeks to unpack the invisible discursive sexual practices of Grindr’s “online” digital community, surveillance, capture, and censorship, and whether or not these sexual practices translate into the user’s physical bodily interactions.

What is Grindr?

Grindr, launched in 2009 by Nearby Buddy Finder, LLC, is the largest all male location-based social network application connecting over three million users in over 200 countries (“Grindr Surpasses Three Million Users,” 2011). The application, only available for mobile devices, runs a location-based software (LBS), which allows users to browse, find, and chat with other men that are in close proximity. While browsing, the user can view how many feet or miles the two people are from one another, the user’s sexual preference, age, height, and profile photo. After chatting in virtual space, users have the option to meet up in real space. Many people have criticized Grindr for its reputation for producing casual and promiscuous sexual habits within the gay community (Vernon, 2011), but Grindr’s business and its online presence continues to advertise its sexual and communal benefits.

Introduction

Social media technologies, like Grindr, are often popularly conceptualized as liberational tools for LGBTQ populations; tools that make the coming-out experience less hazardous by enabling people to find and meet up with others that are like minded in environments where it might be hard to connect (Alexander, 2002; Munt et al, 2002 Wasserlein & Sween, 2005). Social media has also been described as (re)creating a new form of distributed surveillance that occurs among people of equal status (Marwick, 2011). However, instead of focusing on the “liberatory” effects of social media apps on marginalized queer communities, this paper examines how dominant male-male desire in the D.C.

Metropolitan area, a social group that is often critiqued for marginalizing other queer identities, e.g. trans and queer-identified women, is repressed by Grindr's design and its form of distributed and computational surveillance. Following Foucault's concept of reverse discourse, political and visual resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, I pose the following question: how much power of resistance does Grindr give to male sexuality? Can one perform resistance and enact homosexual liberation within software that is designed to exclude and objectify male bodies? I also want to reiterate that this paper moves away from the concept of gay and towards the way software, like Grindr, imposes a prescribed meaning of what or should be defined as gay or not gay. Grindr has provided a platform that promotes gay visibility which has been historically been denied, but the representations of male bodies that are visualized (re)render homosexual desire according to surveillance practices, location based software, originally designed for the state. What happens when governmentality, a monitoring process that creates hegemonic regime based on self-normalization, becomes intertwined with one's sexual desire? Moreover, what happens to the shape and structure of surveillance when it is disbursed into a distributed social media network based on sexual desire? What surveying practices does the Grindr community encourage? If the app is designed to be a form of networked media to bring users together within a virtual world, which is connected to real-life physical spaces, then the public concern is that these digital and physical footprints left by the Grindr user, will either violate privacy or begin to replace real-life physical desire.

In this talk I unpack the discursive community of Grindr, one that is based on three security practices: social surveillance, censorship, and capture. These practices are the glue that hold the online community of Grindr together. After discussing each concept, I question whether or not this discursive community plays out in bodily interactions in real-time physical space.

Grindr's Discursive Space: Surveillance, Capture, and Censorship

Of Other Spaces

In his essay "Of other spaces," Foucault (1986) argues that there are three external spaces we inhabit as human beings: (i) utopian spaces, spaces that occupy "no real place" on earth, but idealize society, (ii) real space, physical places in the world, and (iii) Heterotopian spaces, places of otherness that can either exist physically (outside the real space) or mentally. Grindr, is a perfect example of a heterotopia – as the users signify and occupy a physical place within a virtual field. It is also a space where gay men can enact their "otherness" in a private community. Grindr's mobility and LBS capabilities produces a networked media landscape. This landscape contains three distinct qualities: (i) visuality, the ability to be objectified, (ii) mobility, the pervasive use of media on an everyday basis, and (iii) digital footprints, marks, both digital and physical, of identity left online and offline (Coleman, 2011). This main risk lies in the prospect that as "the thing," that is the mobile devices, becomes more sensible, and the human subject, the subject of a network media (e.g. the Grindr user), is becoming more "thing-like" and reduced to another file that can be copied and distributed amongst the network (Coleman, 2011, p. 15). I apply Foucault's concept of heterotopic space to the design of the software, as well as to several online conversations with men I had on Grindr to explore how their desire and sexuality is (re)articulated in mobile software. I intend that this paper be a part of a larger cultural discussion of what the users of Grindr ultimately desire and how this desire is regulated and maintained by civilization's desire for control. How does surveillance, censorship, and capture play out in Grindr?

Surveillance

Alice Marwick (2011) in her article “The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life,” notes that social media alters three parts of the traditional surveillance structure “power, hierarchy, and reciprocity” (p.2). She notes that in the lateral structure of social media “power does not flow from the site to user, but between users and across networked interactions” (Marwick, 2011, p. 3). Also, following Foucault’s notion of Capillaries of Power, the hierarchy of surveillance takes place across a distributed networking of people, most of which who are at the same social status. In terms of reciprocity, social media produces a set of surveying expectations. A social media user is expected to reply or comment on another’s self-presentation online; this is a normal and expected practice of social surveillance. In Grindr, this would be the same as one following up on a conversation or a plan to “meet-up” in person.

Capture

Although Grindr has the same structure as Marwick’s notion of social surveillance, there is also the concern that the information about “gay” males online is subject to capture and violation of personal identifying information (PII). Phil Agre (1994) notes that capture is another form of privacy concern, in which computers can track activities in real time. Thus, the activities performed by humans across distributed networks can hold archived public histories. But More importantly, human user can capture the content online. Grindr will always be a public and not just public in the sense of public space, such as “Grinding” or searching for men at the bar, but public to anyone that has access to a mobile device. This is why Grindr has implemented harsh censorship laws to control what photos these individuals can put up on their profile.

Censorship

Since Grindr is popularly known as the ‘manhunt’ of social media apps, Apple Corporate, immediately sought to tame and censor visualizations of sex on the iPhone, as it was hampering Apple’s corporate image (Creelman, 2011). The censorship guidelines read, “no bare skin below the waistline...no images of sexual acts, either real or illustrated...no grabbing/holding or touching genitals or genital area” (“16 Grindr Profiles Now Banned,” 2011). These guidelines force users to be censored, maintained, and mapped alongside the world of public discourse.

Grindr has provided a platform for gay male visibility, that has been historically been denied, but the representations of male bodies that are visualized (re)render homosexual desire according to government-backed surveillance practices. Yet, the more interesting thing is that Apple’s guidelines have ultimately lead to an explosion of other forms of sexual discourse online. Grindr users not only use their bodies to express their sexual fantasies, but through their tagline blurbs as well. This explosion of extreme self-censorship or sexual fantasy has lead to other forms of popular capture. Anyone with an Apple iPhone can download Grindr and can take a screenshot of a profile on the mobile phone and post it to the web.

This is evident with the emergence of a Tumblr website, called Douchebags of Grindr, with the tagline, “all your douchebag needs from the profiles of Grindr Tumblr censors. Long live the public web” (“Douchebags of Grindr,” 2012). The website features screenshots of male profiles that were taken and (re)labeled to highlight the way the men enact governance on one another, by managing their profiles through identification and categorization (e.g. age, photo, location). For example, the site features “Polite Douche,” a guy who blatantly notes that he is only into white, and subtly boasts his success and “sexiness” in a polite, and “douchey” way. Then you get profiles like “Double Douche” who overtly display “20 years of hard training “7,300 gym sessions....get off ya fat as.” It is not just the

app creating the rules or censoring sex on Grindr, but the *users* and community of Grindr enacting self-censorship.

This censorship underscores the power of Grindr; men do not go on Grindr to necessarily find sex or a potential relationship, but to gain pleasure based on their own self-censorship – that is, the way they appear or are signified to other Grindr users. Foucault calls this a discursive censoring mechanism or a hide/seek game. Foucault states that sexuality is not repressed in Western society, but is magnified by public discourse, leading to various forms of pleasurable perversion (Foucault, 1990). Grindr is one way in which modern man sees this “visible,” albeit both privately (Grinding at home) and publicly (Grinding at the bar), explosion of unorthodox and/or queer sexual discourse online (Foucault, 1990). As a result of this censorship, they gain power and pleasure by performing discursive acts of sexuality for the Grindr community which is based on social surveillance, censorship, and capture.

Translation to Physical Space

But the question is does this play out in offline bodily interactions? Do the exclusive taglines represent one’s real sexual being? A Grindr user said, “‘But do you want to know the funny thing? The best nights you can have on Grindr are the nights when you stay in’” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 19, 2011). Thus, for some, sex and the bodily meetup is not the ultimate goal, but the pleasure and power created through self-censorship. After all, what Grindr user would actually display the following tag-line, ‘All I do is sit on Grindr and I have no intention to meet any of you.’ This would destroy the non-physical pleasure that emerges from Grindr’s discursive online space. The humorous display of censored “douche” profiles” not only underscores the way that the Grindr subjects users to “capture,” and potentially violating one’s sexual privacy, but it also underscores the larger question about whether or not the discursive desire inscribed on the profile screen is actually what one desires.

Grindr was originally designed to be an altruistic space, a space for men to outreach to a local community of males, with similar interests or desires. But the the combination of surveillance, censorship, and capture that makes up the online world produces an explosion of desire that does not necessarily translate into the offline world. Thus, Grindr sets up the individual to (re)imagine his or her individual desires to appeal to the desires and regulations set by social surveillance: the power, hierarchy, and reciprocity of the online Grindr community.

Conclusion

If Grindr is becoming the world of gay sex, what does that say about homosexuality and bodily interactions in real life? According to Joel Simkhai , the question comes down to loneliness and a desire to be recognized and feel like a part of a community. He states, “I think every gay man starts asking it, from the moment he realizes he’s gay. You are somewhere and it’s: ‘Who else, here, right now, is gay? *Who?*’ You are looking around, you are constantly wondering. Because coming out is a lonely process” (Vernon, 2011, p. 3). The visual objectification of male bodies, however, has turned Grindr into less of a community and more into a group of users regulated by social surveillance, capture and self-censorship.

Until recently (within the past two months), however, Grindr has started to rethink its implications on the individual within the community. If I did not think that social media could be an more intertwined with my academic questions and scholarly pursuits - twitter confirmed it. On Wednesday

evening of this week (April 11, 2012), I was checking my tweets on Twitter and noticed that @TheorizingTheWeb tweeted me, "That is what I figured" - in reference to adding my twitter handle to the conference program (as I am fairly new to Twitter). But as I looked just below this post, Grindr (who I also follow) tweeted "Now live our new weekly series Grindrphiles from our friends @BYGAYS + writer @XanderMayfiar. Insightful and Hilarious." ("@KelsBran Twitter," 2012). I clicked on the @Grindr's link and it brought me to a blog post by Alexander Mayfair (Local DCer). He notes, "Grindr. It's not only become an integral part of the gay community, but it's also an object of intense fascination for the straight community." ("Brightest Young Things," 2012). Mayfair's straight friend asked him: "What if you started interviewing guys off Grindr?" And so he did, and now there are nine "GrindrPhiles" posted on the Brightest Young Things Website featuring men behind the Grindr profiles in the D.C. Metropolitan area. Mayfair notes, "You know, it could be a really great way of highlighting guys in the District. 'Get to know your community' type of thing." It now seems as though the Grindr community is trying to (re)conceptualize the community through personal interviews in an attempt to bring a "personality" to the profiles. This idea of getting to know the guy behind the self-censored tagline opens up further research. What happens when Grindr attempts to turn the discourse of surveillance, censorship, and self-surveillance to the public? How will people react? How will this change the way people self-censor? All food for thought to conclude on, thank you.

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