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Eggplants and Peaches:  
Understanding Emoji Usage on Grindr

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Sociology

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by  
Emeka E. Moses  
May 2018

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Dr. Martha Copp, Chair  
Dr. Lindsey King  
Dr. Melissa Schrift

Keywords: coded language, Grindr, masculinity, identity, gender assumptions, online-  
interaction, homosexual

## ABSTRACT

Eggplants and Peaches: Understanding Emoji Usage on Grindr

by

Emeka E. Moses

This study focuses on how gay men communicate on the Grindr dating app. Prior research has been conducted on how gay men construct their online identities, however, few studies explore how gay men experience interactions online, negotiate their relationships with other men online, and perceive other users. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 20 men who use the Grindr app, a location-based dating app used by men who have sex with men. Additional data were collected by observing user profiles on the app, which is free and public. This comprehensive, qualitative study of gay men who use Grindr provides insights into identity construction, communication tactics, and users' feelings about their encounters on the app.

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## DEDICATION

My research is a dedication to the memory of two amazing men that impacted my life greatly. First, to my father, the late Henry Lee Moses Jr., for teaching me to stand up for my truths, and to always seek equality and never tolerate injustice. Second, to the late Lathan A. Leonard, for seeing something special in me, when I could not see it myself, and for pushing me to take the next step in my academic career.

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First and foremost I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Copp, Dr. King, and Dr. Schrift, for their support and feedback on my thesis and research. The entire faculty of the Sociology and Anthropology Department have been a constant source of unconditional support and extremely encouraging to me since I entered as an undergraduate in 2010. A special thank you to Dr. King for her guidance, and her support during my time at East Tennessee State University. I never would have made it this far without someone willing to keep me in line.

My time at ETSU has been punctuated by new experiences, emotional highs and lows, and several life changes. However, the friends that I have made since moving to East Tennessee, have been amazing and I am eternally grateful to them all for the encouragement and for being my sounding board at times.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my family back in West Tennessee. My mother and my aunts have always been there to listen or give advice, and I appreciate it more than they will ever know. My sisters have been my personal cheer section, and I am so grateful that they never let me give up even when I desperately wanted to.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in this research topic started as a result from two separate events, one was academic and the other personal. My family has always referred to me as the smart one. I found solace in reading and learning even as a small child. It was no surprise to them when I was accepted into the sociology graduate program at East Tennessee State University. During my second semester in the program, I was required to read Laud Humphreys' (1970) *Tea Room Trade*, a fascinating and controversial study of men's sexual encounters with other men in public restrooms. The restrooms which men called "tea rooms," were situated in parks, theaters, or department stores. Though it was well written, we examined Humphreys' work to critique his research tactics, which were covert and deceptive. His book serves as a warning about human subjects research ethics. However, *Tea Room Trade* is also important because it gives scholars a historical snapshot of men's anonymous sex. During one of our class discussions, I thought about how the practice of anonymous sexual encounters has changed due to our increased dependency on digital connectivity. I realized that Humphreys' "tea-room" was no longer restricted to public parks and department stores, but could now be found in another public domain, the internet.

The second event is not as funny or exciting, but in truth has most likely been the driving force behind why I wanted to study this topic. I identify as a black gay man. I reside in the southern Appalachian region of Upper East Tennessee. When I moved to this area, I sought to build relationships that would inevitably result in a life partner. Unfortunately, these relationships often ended due to infidelity. I would seek out guidance and condolence from my



peers. We often found ourselves asking the same question, “why?” Why was it hard for gay men to find and maintain monogamous relationships? Why did it seem so easy for my past partners to find new partners? My peers expressed frustration with partner selection on dating apps and how people advertise themselves online. I found that my past partners had in fact used these same dating apps to facilitate their acts of infidelity. Rather than allow disappointment to turn me against dating apps or the people who use them, I drew inspiration from my anthropological training in ethnography and decided to study just how men were using them.

On dating apps and other social media platforms, people communicate with words, images, and emoji; which are wildly popular symbols (Begun, Bolt, and Roth 2014). My peers made references to the eggplant emoji and overly eager smiley faces in their messages on apps such as Grindr. We would often mock the messages they described with savagery like a pack of ‘mean girls’ (from the 2004 film starring Lindsay Lohan), characterizing them as acts of desperation by men who sent them messages. Yet, I sometimes wondered if emoji were actually serving a purpose. Why was it so common to see the eggplant emoji in a message referencing the male anatomy or sex? According to Kaleigh Rogers (2015), the eggplant emoji is one of the top emoji used for sexual innuendo. People may select other phallic shaped foods to represent a penis in text messages; however, the eggplant has been used the most and reportedly most resembles a penis in the emoji lexicon (Rogers 2015).

On dating apps, some user profiles lack descriptive information. I have viewed blank profiles, profiles that are absent of any physical description such as age, height, and weight; which is referred to as a user’s statistics. Anonymity is utilized by many gay men on dating apps. However, I often wondered what their reasons were behind the anonymity. This questioning helped me outline exactly what I hoped to understand with my research.

My study seeks to understand:

- How men who have sex with men use coded language
- The practice of secrecy and anonymity in online communication
- Men's choices in how to present themselves and what they think is important to share or conceal
- Reasons why the emoji has become such a popular mode of communication online

To obtain a better understanding of these points, I planned to conduct a study of the Grindr app to explore these and other practices that may influence gay men's behaviors and understand how they communicate on social sites. I chose to use the Grindr app due in part to the popularity of the app among gay men. According to the Grindr website, "Grindr is the world's #1 FREE mobile social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people to connect."<sup>1</sup> In an online editorial about the top LGBT dating apps, Grindr was listed as number ten (Matthews 2017). The Grindr app allowed me access to the population I wanted to study as well as a visual framework that I could reference.

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<sup>1</sup> "Contrary to being labeled a dating app, Grindr doesn't waste any time concerned with true compatibility or companionship. Instead, this app is all about accessibility and timeliness. It uses your phone's location-based services to match you with guys nearby — no wait time necessary," (Matthews 2017).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Online interaction amongst gay men has become an alternative to more common scenes such as gay bars, tearooms, and other gay destinations (Gudelunas 2012; Humphreys 1970; Miller 2015b). One particular gay dating app, Grindr, is quite popular. Studies of online interactions indicate that technology has impacted men's attitudes, behaviors, practices, and accessibility to potential partners.

Visual content is a critical component of everyday social media. Platforms may depend on visual content or a combination of text and images. Apps and user profiles often rely on visual presentation and provision of information (Highfield and Leaver 2016). More visual graphics, such as memes, GIFs (Graphics Interchange Formats)<sup>2</sup> and emoji abound in social media platforms. Highfield and Leaver found an increased reliance on visual imagery in social media, online sites, and mobile apps. Their methods were comprised solely of a content analysis of different social networking sites (SNS) and historical comparison of visual images in online applications. Historically (in terms of internet usage) even text heavy formats, such as emails and blogs, users employ visual imagery. People adopted textual imagery in place of words, such as the wink face created by using a semicolon followed by a closed parenthesis (;)) (Highfield and Leaver 2016). In the realm of visual content on social media, it is important understand how visual content directly correlates to how individuals choose to present themselves (Goffman 1959).

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<sup>2</sup> Graphics Interchange Formats (GIFs)- a format for image files that supports both static and animated images.

Highfield and Leaver noted the lack of research on visual imagery. Most research on social media platforms examines textual content, such as on Twitter, where the use of tweets and hashtags have become a social networking phenomenon (Weller et al. 2013). Yet, people regularly share visual images to such an extent that images, as much as, or perhaps more than text, are integral for self-presentation and fashioning online identities. Users employ snapshots, photos, and curated media (such as memes and emoji) to express emotions, sentiments, and innuendos on dating apps such as Tinder and Grindr (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2014).

Highfield and Leaver's analysis broadly covers the integration of visual forms used in social media. Most notably, they followed the use of the hashtag in Twitter feeds and how it could be used to track life events from birth to death (Highfield and Leaver 2016). For instance: (#baby and #ripgran) are examples that were reported in addition to other visual forms, such as memes and networking apps that have meme generators for users to customize memes to suit their tastes (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Yet, their mention of the emoji as a tool for visual communication was fleeting at best. However, there is no escaping emoji as a legitimately accepted form of communication on social applications (Begun et al. 2014).

The emoji, which is a Japanese term that means "picture word" (Begun et al. 2014), is a visual icon used to convey emotions, ideas, and themes on social media platforms. Since they were first conceived, 250 emoji have been added to the iPhone catalogue (Begun et al. 2014). And, on various platforms, approximately 2,666 emoji characters are available for users (Emojipedia FAQ, 2017). Yet the most compelling find by Begun et al. is that men use emoji more than women. Men and women communicate differently. Deborah Tannen's theory of gender-lects proposes that men and women have different types of speech. Women tend to engage in rapport talk which is geared towards building relationships and tries to reach

agreements. Whereas men tend to engage in report talk which is more competitive, less pro-social, and individualistic (Tannen 1990). Since emoji were initially created as a form of shorthand, it is understandable that men would use emoji more than women because of the ability of emoji to convey concise information with little effort. As part of their data collection efforts, the researchers conducted interviews with social media users and app developers. When confronted with the question as to why men are more likely to use emoji, Tinder (a mixed gender dating application) cofounder, Johnathan Badeen is quoted: “Pictures say things [men] don’t know how to say,” or don’t want to write out (Begun et al. 2014). Which gave rise to the assumption that the emoji has become a form of symbolism and alternative language for many. As Begun et al. suggested in their article title, “Sometimes, an eggplant is more than just an eggplant” (2014). That is a reference to the practice of using emoji to represent anatomical areas of the human body in a flirtatious and discreet way. This form of covert communication is a common practice on social media platforms, especially dating apps such as Grindr (Blackwell et al. 2014).

Visual imagery has been used to enhance communication in all forms of social networking sites (Weller et al. 2013). However, it is also used to create identities on dating apps such as Grindr. In addition to textual information, users rely on visual imagery such as photos, emoji characters, and GIFs. These visual imagery tactics make it easier for users to express themselves online and for others to see what they are looking for.

Online communities have made it easier to communicate with others without the constraints of geographic boundaries. However, Grindr works differently in the sense that it uses global positioning to allow for location-awareness of others on the app (Blackwell et al. 2014). Researchers have found that online communications, and more specifically location-awareness

apps, allowed men to find potential partners without the risk of outing themselves or having to travel to specific “gay” places (Blackwell et al. 2014; Campbell 2004). Early research focused on the internet as an independent space, separate from geography, which facilitated identity experimentation and online sexual encounters (Turkle 1995). Grindr has been studied by many researchers because of the popularity of the app as well as the behaviors that can be observed by users. Blackwell et al. also suggested that the Grindr app is a useful case study of location based real-time dating applications (LBRTD) (Blackwell et al. 2014). Blackwell’s study found strategies that people used to manage the challenges presented by the confluence of location awareness and online interaction. Blackwell et al. speculated that proximity awareness could negatively affect users’ actions as they try to manage their identities and self-image while maintaining a degree of invisibility. “The knowledge of a person’s exact geographic location and multiple intentions has the potential to cause tension, as people may not wish to be immediately identifiable to anybody nearby who downloads Grindr, and may not wish to be thought of as seeking sex on a mobile app” (Bumgarner 2013).

Grindr, in spite of being a social networking site, presents limitations in the fact that it is location based and operates on a grid of nearby locale (Blackwell et al. 2014). Once a user signs in, they see a grid view of profiles that are near them in a descending order, from closest location to the farthest. Once they select a profile to communicate with, users can engage in private chat-messaging with other users; they may opt to share more information through direct text content or through visual imagery. This presents a co-situation of goals and spaces (Blackwell et al. 2014), where the user has to mediate between their desired outcome from online interaction and their level of comfort with online visibility. In other words, they must gauge how much they are

willing to share about themselves to gain gratification, or, as Humphreys (1970) termed it, a *payoff*.

In many societies, homosexuality has been stigmatized and is often viewed as a form of deviant behavior. Men who participated, whether openly or covertly, in the homosexual subculture, were subject to discrimination and even municipal sanctions. Laud Humphreys' work, *Tearoom Trade*, analyzes the methods that men who have sex with men employ in order to find potential partners and initiate sexual contact in public places (Humphreys 1970). Yet, where Humphreys followed men having sexual contact in public places, other research has shown how digital communication has impacted that particular behavior. Not only have social networking platforms aided in the payoff phase of men having sex with men, but they have helped reinforce masculinities and heteronormative ideas among men who have sex with men. For example, in his research among rural, straight-identifying men who used social media platforms to initiate sex with other straight-identifying men, Tony Silva surmised: "By choosing these partners and having this type of sex, the participants normalized and authenticated their sexual encounters as straight and normatively masculine" and avoided being perceived as homosexual (Silva 2017).

Researchers have suggested that social networking sites have created a safer environment for men who have sex with men. Yet, for many men, coming out may simply not be an option (Crabtree and Rodden 2008). Grindr accommodates men who may fall into this category. The app is constructed to provide an increasing degree of anonymity to those who don't want to be "outed" (Gudelunas 2012). Some users report never revealing their actual faces in order to conceal their identities in their respective home regions (Blackwell et al. 2014). However, these same users admit to revealing their faces when out of town or visiting remote geographical areas where they are strangers. These types of observations suggest the conditions under which users

are more willing to present rather than hide themselves (Goffman 1959) to achieve a pay-off (Humphreys 1970)--whether it be sexual gratification or acquiring new friends. The interesting part is that social networking sites, like Grindr, serve as both private and public realms (Blackwell et al. 2014) depending on the amount of information users are willing to reveal (Goffman 1963). Just as people may try to present their “best” selves in social interactions, many online users admit to constructing identities that are exaggerated versions of themselves (Campbell 2004).

The practice of online identity construction can be interpreted as a form of marketing oneself. Big name companies such as Pepsi, Toyota, and Kellogg have incorporated emoji as a marketing tool (Wohl 2016). Likewise, men use emoji to market themselves to a specific audience on the Grindr app. Emoji allow men to express themselves to those who understand the implied definitions of certain emoji characters. This in turn has the propensity to reinforce certain attitudes of hyper-sexuality and hyper-masculinity (Reynolds 2015) in the virtual realm.

Visual imagery in social media can augment qualities that individuals want to promote when interacting with others. Men using Grindr report a need to present themselves as hyper-sexualized and hyper-masculine in order to gain the maximum exposure to potential partners (Groves et al. 2014). One respondent stated that the age of 25 was Grindr death (Blackwell et al. 2014). In this context, research suggests the idea that youthfulness and hyper-sexuality are contributing factors in identity construction (Humphreys 1970). However, using visual imagery also serves to reinforce such stereotypes regarding masculinity and sexuality which can have a negative impact on Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) people collectively.

The integration of more visual imagery into how we communicate on social media has opened opportunities for more creative uses of visual imagery. The rapid spread of technology



has changed the way that people utilize it. Beyond emoji, self-pornography has taken the place of older forms of adult entertainment such as adult theaters (Penny 2014). This phenomenon, especially in the context of social media or social networking sites, has been found to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of narcissism and fetish consumption of homosexual markets (Penny 2014). Men who have sex with men have been found to utilize visual imagery more than their heterosexual counterparts in terms of searching for instant sexual gratification (Turkle 1995).

Some studies have suggested that many men participate in using dating apps because of the gaming aspect of convincing others to reveal themselves (Tziallas 2015). In this way, social media offers a stage where visual imagery becomes the payoff or prize for seducing or coercing others (Jones 2005; Tziallas 2015). This type of behavior implies that the younger generation of men who have sex with men are a commodity so fully integrated into the online world that they can easily be manipulated or controlled by the swipe of a finger and a few strokes on a screen (Tziallas 2015).

With more research surrounding the usage patterns and behaviors of men who have sex with men on dating apps, health professionals have sought to understand how technology impacts health concerns such as HIV transmission and infection rates among gay men (Miller 2015b). Social networking sites have provided access to target populations for many HIV/AIDS research organizations. Social networking sites and online advertising organizations benefit researchers by allowing them access to hard to reach populations (Curtis 2014). Health concerns are only a small portion of behavior patterns among men who have sex with men. There is an abundance of literature on HIV/AIDS issues and sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission within the LGBT demographic. In fact, I had difficulty finding information that

focused solely on attitudes and experiences of men who have sex with men without the stigma of STI transmissions being a core part of the study.

The current literature surrounding the use of visual imagery in social networking follows the rapid changes that have taken place within social media over the past couple of decades. The internet has grown exponentially from a textual realm with banners and stationary pictures, to a digital realm resplendent with GIFs, memes, and other pictorial representations (Eppkin 2014). Yet, the above literature has not explained social patterns for homosexual populations such as usage trends, behaviors, and the overwhelming variety of social applications aimed specifically at men who have sex with men. The current literature sufficiently covers behaviors associated with using social media and dating apps, but little is revealed about how and why men use these different and popular modes of communication (such as emoji) in order to enhance their communications with others. Therefore, the focus of my research is to understand emoji as a social mechanism for men to establish relationships and seek potential partners. In addition to this, I hope to learn how men have attached meanings to emoji characters and what part they may play in online language.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

In order to understand how coded language was potentially being used on the gay dating app Grindr, I collected two sources of data: text-based interviews and publicly available Grindr profiles. My first wave of data collection consisted of interviews from 20 men who used the Grindr app. My initial plan was to create a profile with the screen name, "Thesis Research," and the chat or message function on the app would serve as my medium for conducting interviews. Despite being able to provide Grindr and ETSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) with examples of similar research using the app as a tool to conduct interviews (Castaneda 2015; Miller 2015; Tziallas 2015), my original research protocol was rejected by Grindr's legal advisor. Despite there being no risk to participants who used this free and public site, the IRB required that I gain written permission from Grindr to ask non-sensitive questions from a small sample size of individuals.<sup>3</sup> Despite similar research precedents, Grindr representatives insisted that the privacy of their users was paramount and would not grant written consent for my study. Instead they offered me the opportunity to advertise my study initially for the sum of \$2,500.00. After soliciting the guidance of my committee chair who argued that such costs were prohibitive and unreasonable, they countered with an offer to advertise my research during a single 24-hour period for the affordable cost of \$212.00.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The requirements of the IRB delayed data collection for the project. Though the protocol is in place to protect human subjects in social research, their stipulations proved to be an unnecessary hindrance to this qualitative study. For a small-scale project that posed no threat to participants and collected no identifying information from consenting, volunteer participants, the IRB approval process was both time consuming and frustrating.

<sup>4</sup> Grindr, as an entity, claims that the privacy of its users is paramount. Even after providing them with a copy of my protocol, they refused to grant me permission to ask interview questions on the app. However, their reasons behind it were purely economic. The suggestion to contact their marketing department shows that this social

After this disappointing setback, I revised my IRB protocol to collect a convenience (snowball) sample, which was approved. I am acquainted with individuals who identify as gay men and who use the Grindr app. I solicited their voluntary assistance to invite other users to participate in my study. In an attempt to avoid any bias in my sample, I asked two acquaintances to participate in the study, and from those two individuals, I was able to gather the 20 participants whom I needed for the interview phase.

The interview was conducted through text messages. Respondents voluntarily contacted me on my personal cell phone. Once respondents contacted me regarding participation, I verified that they were 18 years of age or older, were men, and were users of the Grindr app. Then I sent them a web link to my informed consent document and an explanation of the nature of the interviews. After reading the consent form and agreeing to voluntarily participate, I began asking respondents open-ended questions (via texts) regarding their feelings and experiences on the Grindr app.<sup>5</sup> I supplemented my interview questions with the use of probe questions in order to get a fuller explanation of users' attitudes toward the app in general and about other users on the app. After the interviews were conducted, I coded them for commonalities and any emergent themes I could find.

The second phase of data collection was a content analysis of the Grindr app. I signed up on the free and public app in order to look at the publicly available profiles. I collected online user profiles with screenshots at various observation times. I viewed the profiles of men who signed up on the free and public app three times a day for three consecutive days for one hour

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media corporation had no interest in facilitating pure social research without some form of monetary gain. This marketing offer contradicted Grindr's claim to be concerned only with protecting users; they seemed concerned that "research" might diminish men's enthusiasm for making "friendships" online.

<sup>5</sup> To see the interview questions, please refer to the Appendix.

blocks at: 9:00 am, 2:00 pm, and 10:00 pm Eastern Standard Times. The viewing range of this location-based app was approximately a 30-mile radius of Johnson City, which encompasses the greater Tri-cities region of Upper East Tennessee. With the free version of the app, users are limited to viewing a total of 130 public profiles when the app is open. There was some variance in the profiles I viewed that included users in border areas of North Carolina and Virginia. This occurred due to the finite number of profiles that can be viewed on the app. Users logging on to the free app can always see the same quantity of profiles, but the profiles viewed are only users who are logged in at that time. Based on what interviewees reported to me, I coded the emoji that were being used and other visual information from the public profiles. I was trying to gain a better understanding of how emoji usage was used to communicate desires or information.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

My aim in this project was to understand the perspective of men who used the Grindr app. I wanted to analyze men's coded language to communicate with other men. However, to my surprise, coded language as a protective factor proved elusive. I assumed men would employ emoji characters to circumvent traditional communication methods. I must admit I was wrong. Instead, I discovered a treasure trove of other sociological concepts. Through my interviews and analysis of patterns in anonymous user profiles, I found that men reinforced a number of stereotypes, particularly those that hypersexualized gay men and denigrated signs of effeminacy in others.

Through interviews I identified two types of Grindr users: relationship seekers and sexual gratification seekers. Eight men described accessing Grindr in hopes of establishing a relationship (e.g. long-term) with another man. The other 12 men in my sample reported using the app to find prospects for sexual encounters rather than long-term relationships.

#### **Relationship Seekers**

Relationship seekers stated that searching for a deep and meaningful connection with another man motivated their decision to join Grindr. Relationship seekers reported a low occurrence of casual sex encounters through the Grindr app. They desired companionship, intimacy, and emotional investment from potential partners.

Relationship seekers said they sought what many people define as conventional "dating" behavior: conversation, willingness to communicate, public dates, hopes for emotional stability,

and expectations for future commitment. All of these respondents expressed similar grievances about using the Grindr app. Their expectations were rarely met. They developed a sense of ambivalence towards the app and other users. Many of their responses carried a sense of defeat about finding a partner willing to engage in a serious relationship. Such was the case with Joshua, a respondent in his mid-twenties.<sup>6</sup> When I asked him, “What are you looking for when you use the Grindr app?” he responded:

J: I was looking for a friendship or real companionship. I like to have a good time. It would be nice if I found people that liked to have a good time too.

**EM: Real companionship? Could you tell me what you mean by that?**

J: Yes, I like to make friends, but I think I’m at that point in life where I want companionship. A partner. Someone to share life with or at least try.

**EM: How have Grindr and similar apps made it more difficult to connect with people?**

J: Well, for me, the number of available people has lowered the quality of people. No one is willing to put in the effort on the app.

**EM: Put in effort for what exactly?**

J: Anything. It seems that all the guys on grindr want to do is meet, get off, and move on to the next one.

I asked all men if they avoided certain profiles on Grindr. The responses from relationship seekers shared similarities. They noted several red flags or warning signs in other profiles that, to them, indicated men with unsuitable interests. Relationship seekers did not trust or communicate with profiles that stated the user was in an open relationship, looking, or “NSA” (no strings attached). Open relationship status meant that the other user identified as being in a committed relationship, but there was an understanding or agreement to pursue sexual relations outside their respective relationship. NSA profiles are those where the user is advertising no strings attached sexual encounters. The profiles that said “looking” meant that the user was

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<sup>6</sup> All interviewees’ names are pseudonyms.

actively seeking a sexual encounter at that very moment. To relationships seekers, these identifiers reinforced the same thing: That the users were not interested in any emotional or long-term connection, but sexual gratification only. This contradicted relationship seekers' aims.

Relationship seekers also eschewed “partying.” When users see the word partying or party and the “T” is capitalized, it indicates drug usage. More specifically, it indicates designer drugs or methamphetamines, which are often called “ice” or “Tina.” These drugs intensify physical sensations by flooding the nervous system with endorphins (NIH 2013). However, these drugs lower people's inhibitions, which means that they may indulge in risky behaviors despite the negative consequences.

Blank profiles or profiles devoid of information, such as no profile pictures were also something the relationship seekers said they avoided. They distrusted the anonymity associated with blank profiles. Even though the app helps men find each other, some users may still feel that their status, position of employment, or their familial associations restrict them from being an out individual. To relationship seekers, secrecy and being closeted directly opposes what they desire in a partner.

I asked all interviewees what emoji, if any, they incorporate in their profiles. Out of the eight individuals that I identified as relationship seekers, only three described using emoji characters in their profiles. The emoji characters they use are smiley faces, zodiac characters, and novelties (e.g. food, beer and other beverages, sun and moon, etc.). Their emoji choices seem to reflect activities one would expect to encounter on a conventional date; a certain disposition such as happy, flirty, or affectionate; and they can often reveal ideas or traits that are important to the user. These emoji characters convey a sense of identity in some cases. One respondent, Ralph, has a birthday in August. His zodiac is Leo, so his profile has the Leo zodiac



character. To him, being a Leo (colloquially known as being outgoing) is a relevant characteristic. Whether a potential partner is interested in astrology is not important. What is important is that for Ralph, identifying as a Leo is something worth advertising. This is information that he uses to define himself, therefore it is information that may aid his effort to advertise himself as someone worth getting to know and establishing a relationship with.

### **Sexual Gratification Seekers**

Twelve interviewees fit the category of sexual gratification seekers. Sexual gratification seekers reported using the app to establish sexual encounters with other men. This did not preclude forming friendships with other users. However, they expressed less inclination to pursue romantic relationships.

Sexual gratification seekers reported being primarily driven by the desire to have sex without emotional attachment. They have several sex partners and described fewer inhibitions when stating their desires on the app. They seek to satisfy physical and carnal urges as opposed to emotional ones. Of the twelve I identified as sexual gratification seekers, only three reported using emoji characters in their profiles. The characters they used were widely variable. One respondent, Gerard, reported using imagery such as the fleur-de-lis, the American flag, and a little purple devil face. Gerard is effectively advertising himself with the emoji icons. He explained what these emoji characters mean to him and therefore why he chose these to put on his profile. He is a native of New Orleans, so the fleur-de-lis represents his French Cajun heritage. He works in a government position which offers an abundance of international travel opportunities. Therefore, he uses the American flag to advertise his nationality. Lastly, he self-reportedly has a dark side, so the purple devil emoji is meant to be flirty and enticing. Essentially, he is saying that he is “kinky” or sexually exploratory.

Such was the case with another sexual gratification seeker. Roger styled himself as the “steel cowboy.” He advertised this with cow and bull emoji on his profile. Roger was an example of the extreme end of the spectrum between relationship seekers and sexual gratification seekers. When asked why he initially signed up for Grindr, Roger’s response was, “I needed a new boy.” In this context, a boy is a younger sexual partner who is often viewed as property or a “play” mate. Sexual gratification seekers often use the word play to express consensual, non-committal sex. Roger is approximately in his mid-fifties, he is a self-proclaimed cowboy living in a rural environment most of his life. He uses the emoji to advertise this. However, he is also advertising a stereotype. He wants to be seen as a man’s man. The rugged look of jeans and boots insinuates a hard worker and someone who doesn’t mind getting dirty. The screen name steel cowboy sets a tone of toughness, emotional distance, or everything that a rural man in the south is stereotypically supposed to be. He also describes his desire to have several boys as sexual partners. Here, I observed that his reported behavior reinforced the notion that gay men are hypersexualized and overtly promiscuous in nature.

Roger’s interview was highly intriguing because his responses coincided with so many stereotypes and presumptions about gay men’s sexual proclivities. Roger’s use of emoji and how he describes his behaviors are attempts at creating a powerful virtual self (Schwalbe et al. 2000) and at reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). By calling forth these manhood acts (having multiple sexual partners; the references to his rugged cowboy nature), Roger reproduces an exaggerated characterization of masculinity and manhood (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Just as with relationship seekers, sexual gratification seekers have red flags or things that they avoid on Grindr as well. I found that the majority of sexual gratification seekers fell into

the category of avoiding intimacy. When I say avoiding, I mean that the idea of intimacy or romance, in the sense of softness and affection, was something that they described as unwarranted and not to be indulged in. Yet, there were some sexual gratification seekers who did not necessarily shy away from affection and intimacy (kissing, holding, hugging, etc.). They reported that they did not withhold these acts from any of their sexual partners. For these sexual gratification seekers, intimacy could be experienced without emotional attachment.

Even though they sometimes withheld their own identities (by not using profile pictures with their faces or other identifying information), a portion of the sexual gratification seekers expressed feeling turned off by profiles with blank pictures. It seems that anonymity, again, is something they approached with skepticism or hesitancy. Users in both categories could not read enough into anonymous users' identities or motives. The reluctance to let one's image be shown can cause other users to distrust them and any intentions they express.

When I compared my data from both categories of men, I found that all of the users reported that Grindr had not impacted their daily lives. However, in some situations, their responses seemed to suggest the opposite. Many users reported actively looking through profiles for approximately one to two hours in the evenings. Yet, they also admitted constantly having the app open throughout the day. Ultimately, I see this as an example of how we have allowed technology and smart devices to become so fully integrated in our lives that we fail to see how dependent we are on them and how our lives have changed. When I asked, "how have Grindr and similar apps made it easier to connect with people?" Jabari responded with this, "You no longer have to be face to face to meet guys. You can connect with people while you are at home, or running errands, while you shop or at any time you get online."

## Communicating With Emoji

One clear area where people have altered their communication habits concern emoji. Of the entire sample of 20 men, only six interviewees reported using emoji in their profile construction. Those six were all above the age of 33. Yet, all the interviewees described emoji usage and emoji characters as something insignificant. Using emoji had more to do with tastes or functionality and less to do with sending coded signals.

I decided to investigate this question of emoji use by logging onto Grindr's free/public version of the app to observe profiles at various times and code any patterns. I found several profiles that used emoji in their screen names. There were several with arrows that either pointed up, down, or both up and down. According to the information gathered from interviews, these symbols indicate the preferred or desired sexual position of being a top (the penetrator), a bottom (the penetrated), or versatile (comfortable with either role or position). The emoji characters on a larger scale may not be seen as coded language, however defining them could be. These shared definitions are part of a shared subculture. To the average heterosexual individual, the arrows may simply imply direction. However, as I see those arrows used on Grindr, it implies a sexual act. Largely, emoji could be viewed as a form of open shorthand. Grindr limits screen names to 15 characters in length. So, it is easier to use arrows to put the information out there for potential partners, than it would be to spell the actual words. Yet, this shorthand still seems to be a way of advertising. Just as with any advertising endeavor, screen names matter. They matter in the sense that a screen name could be the difference in the amount of traffic (other users clicking the profile picture) that a user's profile may receive. In this online environment, users are advertising themselves in terms of what they desire as well as what they are capable of. It seems that the emoji characters are in many ways that little bit of glitter and

glam that make advertising pop. There are some emoji objects that have sexual meanings attached to them, such as the eggplant and its reference to a well-endowed male, or the peach and its attached meaning of fuller rump or backside. However, the entire sample of interviewees denied needing to be told what those particular emoji mean. It is understood or they use context to understand the meaning of characters. Only one respondent reported a story of having a conversation in which he replied with the poop emoji when asked, “how are you feeling?” He was saying that he felt like crap. However, in response to his answer the person said, “that sounds great!” because they understood that particular character to resemble ice-cream. This was the only instance given where there was a misinterpretation of an emoji character. Of those who reported that they used emoji characters, they unanimously responded that the characters were easy to understand, and were helpful in expressing ideas and emotions. It would seem that Grindr’s character limits curtail the need to use words in profile screen names, and thusly are encouraging users to use this form of short hand.

During the three consecutive days of viewing profiles, I noticed that the same men were logged on during the same times each day. My sample size never increased above the initial 130 observed profiles as far as different users. Of the 130 profiles I viewed at 9:30am, 59 had profile pictures (i.e. photos with a man’s head/face) of themselves or at least of a man.<sup>7</sup> Eleven profiles had body images (torso, arms, legs) without heads, 17 consisted of non-human images (cartoons, backgrounds, abstract), and 43 were blank. When I looked at the screen names, 22 out of 75 visible screennames<sup>8</sup> used emoji in the actual screen name. What was surprising is that I was able to identify that seven of those were sex related emoji when I put them in the context of what

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<sup>7</sup> Some men have been known to use images of other men. This may be with or without the other man’s knowledge or consent.

<sup>8</sup> Screennames are not required to be visible or active on the app; they are optional.

respondents reported. Two of the profiles used screennames that had emoji that suggested drugs and marijuana use.

In comparison, when I looked at the app during the 10:00pm block, the number of profiles with actual face pictures was 76. Eleven had torso or body image pictures, and 12 with non-human profile pictures, and 31 were blank. Emoji characters in screen names were in 77 profiles. Of the 77 emoji users, 51 had sex related emoji characters. This is interesting because the majority of my respondents denied using or having any interest in emoji characters. However, a significant portion of users actually used emoji characters. There is definitely a difference between morning users and evening users, which I have identified as a prime time for using the app.

The combinations in the types of emoji used in the screen names suggest that there is a degree of blurriness about users' intentions. There is no definitive line that separates online users into neat categories. For instance, four profiles collectively used the "eyes" emoji. This emoji indicates that the user is actively "looking" for an encounter. One user profile contained the "eyes" as well as the "eggplant" emoji. The user is actively seeking an encounter with a well-endowed man. Yet, one user profile contained the "eyes" emoji followed by the letters LTR (Long Term Relationship). This particular user would clearly fall into the relationship seeker category and is signaling that he is actively searching for a long term, committed relationship. There were 12 additional profiles that contained novelty emoji characters. When looking at the characters used (e.g. coffee, tea, sunshine) on their own merit, I would categorize these profiles as relationship seekers. That is not to say that sexual gratification seekers would not use novelty emoji, but based on participant responses and what I observed in the screen shots, the novelty emoji indicate things that lie outside of sexual gratification. As far I have

found, a teacup emoji or weather emoji does not seem to imply sex whatsoever. However, a certain level of dichotomy exists within those profiles. For example, Roger's profile contains cow and bull emoji. Based on their own merit, these could be inferred simply as rural or country. Yet, based on Roger's feedback, the cow and bull emoji represent breeding as in a stud bull. The emoji may suggest a desire to grab a drink or contain recreational cues (3 profiles contained cars and planes that suggests either a fondness for cars, flying, travel or a willingness to travel), but many of these profiles lacked facial pictures. When profiles lacked facial pictures or contained sexually suggestive images such as torsos or a man's feet, I was inclined to categorize them as sexual gratification seekers.

### **Tribe Membership and Othering**

The tribe membership question I asked was interesting to analyze. Grindr tribes are groups that members can join. Users can join based on certain ideas, tastes, fetishes, or personal identifiers such as body types: bears, otters, or twinkles. Tribes also serve as a platform to further advertise one's self such as a daddy, slave, or some other desirable gay archetype; "Identities are the meanings one attributes to oneself as an object" (Burke and Tully 1977:883). These groups generally describe either how you identify yourself or what you desire in a partner. For example, bears are men who are hairy and usually maintain a larger build. Otters are men who are medium to small build, but are also hairy. Twinks are usually young (under the age of 24) and have a thin or small build and have very little or no body or facial hair. These identifiers or labels refer to physical make up. There are other groups such as leather, which means that those men enjoy a fetish lifestyle that is centered around leather products and leather clothing. Whether it be leather or bears, or cubs (typically younger and stockier guys), these Grindr tribes form a

platform of inclusion. Tribes provide users a network of likeminded individuals and can be an anchor for them (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

While tribes can effectively bring together a group of like-minded men, they can also reinforce othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000). By categorizing and labeling smaller subsets of homosexual men, these identifiers or tribes can segregate users and subject them to ranking. One interviewer, August, was identified as a sexual gratification seeker. He described his disgust at the amount of othering that occurs on Grindr. When I conducted the interview with him, these were his responses:

**Did anything surprise you?**

Yeah, just how many guys there were to choose from. That and how much racism there was on there.

**Racism?**

Yeah, there were so many profiles that said things like, no blacks, fats, or Asians. I'm like, WTF? You can't be serious.

In his response, there was certainly an issue of racial bias that he addressed. However, I also found instances of “no fems” comments in profiles, which illustrate how men use this platform under binary gender assumptions, which employ misogyny to maintain male privilege and exclusiveness and police the boundaries between and within groups (Frye 1983). “No fems” means that the user does not desire involvement with effeminate men or men who exhibit feminine qualities. Misogyny allows some users to distance themselves from the stereotype that being gay = effeminate.

While analyzing information I collected during the content analysis phase, I noted that several profiles exhibited hyper-masculine connotations. I am not suggesting that effeminate men abstain from the app. In fact, there are transgender individuals (specifically biological males



that identify as female) also use the app, but most profiles in this region were either blank or showed profile pictures of overtly masculine identities. Bearded men without shirts, lots of outdoor poses, even table settings of dinner with a beer always in the frame of the picture. Though drinks have no gender, it is commonly assumed that men tend to drink beer. The app itself seemed to be devoid of feminized things. The dominant colors used to create the app are orange and black. We have been conditioned to view these “strong” colors as non-feminine. Lastly, the name of the app, "Grindr," implies a central focus on manly sex, not on intimacy or relationship-building, as "e-harmony" or "match.com" imply. The app’s construction thus plays a part in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### **Discussion**

My quest to understand how gay men use emoji in Grindr forced me to look at the larger context of communication. Across all social media platforms and text communications, emoji have simply become an integrated part of communicating. Emoji are comparable to using the word “like” in speaking among peers. Most people do not realize how often they use the word. I believe that the similar ubiquity (and convenience) of emoji make them mundane. Men did not seem to employ emoji as a new secret language; instead emoji offer a shorthand for more open communication. The respondents who gave more information about using emoji unanimously stated that emoji just make it easier and simpler to express different ideas or feelings.

Men in both categories (relationship seekers and sexual gratification seekers), who described the ways in which they used emoji, share a common goal. The emoji characters are used to advertise their virtual selves (Penny 2014; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Roger and Ralph, respectively, utilized the convenience of emoji characters to express what they feel are desirable characteristics of themselves, as do others that use emoji on the app. Yet, it is much more than simple advertisement they wish to achieve. In my analysis of interviews and screenshots, I found that men’s online identity construction is largely achieved by exaggerating what is deemed our most desirable attributes (Miller 2015b). This is in direct relation to Goffman’s work on presentation of self (Goffman 1959). In the virtual realm of social networking, it is paramount that users present themselves in a way that garners immediate attention from other users. In the absence of a face to face exchange, users augment their respective demeanors with both acute focus and exaggeration. In essence, the goal is to make

yourself stand out in the online crowd. However, based on what attributes users choose to advertise, they can do far more than make a person stand out. They can also reinforce ideas of segregation.

My analysis of tribe membership along with August's recounting of anti-feminist and anti-minority sentiments he experienced online, points out how mainstream ideas regarding social hierarchy are further perpetuated by labeling within the gay male community. I too, being a young gay man in the age of online dating, have experienced both rejections and classification based on looks or what others perceive to be desirable qualities. However, labeling has both positive and negative consequences.

Homosexuality goes against the heterosexist norm. By not conforming to gender expectations, gay men often suffer from the broader society. Yet, because of heterosexism, many gay men attempt to mitigate their sexual orientation with society's gender expectations (Pharr 2007). For me, my ethnicity and sexual orientation make me a commodity for some and a discreet indulgence for others. I become not a potential partner, but an example of the exotic and savage nature of a black man. In a sense, I become a thing that is to be experienced and coveted, but rarely viewed as an equal. For some of the respondents, it essentially becomes a power play. Who is dominant? Who is the alpha? Who is the true definition of a man? When gay men not only participate in, but celebrate hyper-sexuality, these manhood acts (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) reinforce the notion that the world must be heterosexual and therefore power and privilege belong to men (Pharr 2007).

From a heterosexist perspective, gay men are perceived in mainstream society as having given up their masculine status to be attracted to other men. They are then equated with women and with femininity (Frye 1983; Kleinman n.d.). Advocacy groups such as the Human Rights

Campaign and Lambda Legal Fund share their message of “equality for all,” suggesting that gay men are much more tolerant of themselves and other social groups. However, my sample of men who use Grindr suggests that many still hold heterosexist and homophobic beliefs in line with mainstream society. When gay men express misogyny and mock other queer men to claim conventional manhood or feel “manly,” they engage in “defensive othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000). They identify with the dominant group, to which they belong--male--and reinforce sexist and heterosexist beliefs as they disidentify with gender-nonconforming gay men.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth mentioning an inevitable and obvious outcome of social media and dating apps is the ability of private corporations to capitalize on something as mundane as communication or person to person interactions. Previous research has addressed the “business” of homosexual culture (Gudelunas 2012; Jones 2001). From the perspective of the men in my sample, Grindr is a convenient and user friendly medium that can help users seek out connections with other gay men. Regardless of their motives, users can easily find and interact with a variety of individuals. Grindr, as a social media corporation, claims that their business is based on helping gay men connect with other gay men in an easy and safe fashion. However, Grindr has simply found a way to monetize human sexuality. I am not implying that Grindr is selling sex. Instead, I am simply pointing out Grindr, through their marketing ploys, manages to capitalize considerably on the idea of possible sexual and romantic encounters between men.

Homosexual culture has proven to be more fluid than I thought. Previous literature has attempted to define and categorize the tactics that gay men use to achieve connections. My attempts at uncovering covert communication tactics were quickly laid to rest. In a virtual sea of smiley faces, devilish grins, and the ever-exhilarating pursuit of the illustrious eggplant, gay men

on Grindr are simply being normal. I found no evidence of coded language usage on the Grindr app from interviews, nor from a content analysis. What I did find is a startling parallel to dominant culture.

We find that human sexuality is much more fluid than previous assumptions (Pharr 2007; Humphreys 1970). Therefore, it is my conclusion that gay male culture is merely a mirror of the larger dominant culture. There are instances of dominance and subjugation, power and authority, racism and sexism; all of the issues that arise from a traditional patriarchal society can be found in the sub-culture of gay men on dating apps.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

1. How did you decide to signup for Grindr?
2. What was your first impression of the Grindr app?
3. Did anything surprise you?
4. What are you looking for when you use the Grindr app?
5. What do you try to avoid on Grindr?
6. Before Grindr, how did you seek out potential partners?
7. How have Grindr and similar apps made it easier to connect with people?
8. How have Grindr and similar apps made it more difficult to connect with people?
9. Tell me how you decided to construct your profile...
10. What do you think about the profiles other men create?
11. What's good for them to say? Bad?
12. What emoji should they avoid?
13. I see you have emoji characters in your screen name; what do those particular characters mean to you?
14. How did you find out what they mean?
15. Do you ever attach your own meaning to emoji? If so could you explain?
16. How do emoji help you communicate with others?
17. Has there ever been a time where you or someone you communicate with misinterpreted an emoji character? Tell me about it.
18. How much time do you spend on Grindr during the average week?
19. Do you belong to any of the Grindr tribes? Which ones?
20. How do you communicate your desires with potential partners on Grindr?
21. Have your desires or 'tastes' changed during your time on Grindr?
22. Tell me about your worst encounter with someone on Grindr.
23. Tell me how you decided to construct your profile?
24. Has Grindr impacted your day to day life?
25. Is there anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask?

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