

# QUEERING RESEARCH ON DATING/HOOK-UP APPS: ETHICS FOR SEX POSITIVE RESEARCH

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## DATA STORY

A lot had happened since Jamie saw Luke last. Jamie had moved from Ohio to North Carolina to assume his role as the organist and music director of First Methodist Church. He had also come out of the closet, divorced his wife, moved into a new home, dated a man, and slept with many more. Unlike his contemporaries, he had never been to a gay bar, and he had met all of his sexual partners (which were many) online using dating and hook-up apps like Grindr or Scruff. Luke knew very little about Jamie's life changes but had reached out to see if he might come for a visit. Luke had been a good friend, chorale colleague and as an out gay man, someone Jamie both admired and desired. Would his attraction be evident? Could this be the love he so desired? His hands were clammy and slipped from the steering wheel as he thought about the possibilities. How would Jamie tell Luke he was also gay? Would Luke be surprised, or would he nod affirmingly as so many of his friends had? His stomach did a bit of a double turn as he repositioned his hands on the wheel to pick up Luke at the airport. The two fell into easy conversation, reminiscent of old friends who have spent little time apart.

The ride home offered more time to reacquaint themselves with one another, but Jamie remained on the tricky precipice of coming out to Luke. Once back at Jamie's home, they engaged in the usual hospitality rituals where Jamie gave a tour of his home, showed Luke to his room and then opened a bottle of only the finest Cupcake Red Blend and they both nestled onto the couch to continue their conversations. Those chats lingered longer than imagined, but eventually the yawns let them both know that the night should come to an end...or should it?

After retreating to their respective rooms, Jamie decided to open Grindr and do some participant recruitment for his graduate assistantship. In that role he was to recruit and interview 5 other gay men about their "dating app" use. As Jamie looked down as the app loaded and noticed his closest connection was merely feet away. What!?!?! He quickly closed it down. He started to breath heavy and panic. On the other side of the wall, Luke messaged, "hey, visiting here, but you are really close, shall we chat?"

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Geo Social Networking Applications (GSNAs) are a significant part of the mobile application infrastructure, with hundreds of millions of downloads and billions of touches per year across a huge array of applications. These apps vary widely in their offerings, from the broad and well known (e.g. Tinder/ Grindr), to the niche and highly specific. Given their massive popularity, and their implications on dating, sexual identity, and gender performativity, GSNAs are important cultural signifiers and locations for research. Meeting users (and potential participants) could be as simple as logging on. However, while their designs might facilitate initial connection to potential participants, very important ethical and methodological considerations should guide our engagement. In particular, since these apps are designed in specific ways to facilitate inter-user engagement, using them for research opens up a number of considerations about our relationships with our participants, as well as how we might ensure we are producing inclusive research, respectful of our participants needs, wants, and desires. This poster focuses on the issue of participant/research assistant sexual entanglement, and we use that issue to highlight some of the ethical and methodological considerations we suggest to strengthen the Appnography methodology.

## METHODOLOGY

Our theorizing emerges from our ongoing empirical research on how GSNAs are transforming gender identities and sexual social practices for adults. The larger project consisted of 55 narrative interviews with GSNA users across a spectrum of gender identity and sexual orientation. For this study we matched (as best as was possible) interviewer and participant gender and sexual orientation, as shared identity positions can produce more insider knowledge (Johnson et al., 2018) about GSNAs.

## RESEARCHER CONSIDERATIONS

As described in the introductory vignette, this research resulted in some unanticipated co-mingling of researchers and participants. These were the result of a methodological decision to match sexual identities between researchers and participants; a decision we hoped would serve to limit perceived power differentials given potential homophobia and heterosexism participants might have experienced

in the past. Also, we hoped to generate more fulsome data by having researcher/participant shared experience, particularly among those who identify with minority sexual identities. In the RA follow-up interviews, those RAs who had similar app experiences to the lead researcher conducting those interviews (a white, gay man), had longer and more thorough interviews than other RAs. Straight RAs who interviewed straight participants reported no sexual encounters with participants as a result of the research.

These real and potential sexual encounters between our RAs and participants poses many ethical and methodological questions for using GSNAs as recruiting tools, both within queer contexts, and more broadly in large studies. Some of our queer graduate student research assistants pursued short-term romantic and sexual relationships with our participants after the interview. This is because this matching process produced scenarios in which, for example, a gay male research assistant would have a relatively intimate conversation about sex with a gay male participant. Given that our participants were often recruited using GSNAs, this blurred the boundaries between interview and date. We suggest closely examinig:

**Researcher Familiarity** – How familiar the researcher is with the app in question is important, as the insider knowledge provided by regular use may be an asset. However, the researcher as new user or non-user may provide different kinds of entrée into app research.

**Recruitment** – the mode and location(s) of participant recruitment are important considerations as they affect the potential outcomes of the research. If a gay male researcher recruits men he matches with on Grindr, there are implications beyond a simple research encounter.

The researcher considerations in particular, reflect ways that the Appnography methodological approach lacked foresight and attention to the messiness of research on human relationships, and the deep embeddedness of researcher identity in the research process, progress, and outcomes. In research assistant debriefing and data analysis, it became clear that the intersections between sex, sexuality, and in-depth discussions about GSNA use had complicated and unexpected outcomes, including sexual encounters between research assistants and participants after the research was (technically) complete. This poster includes brief notes about the proposed revisions to Appnographic research focusing specifically on researcher considerations.

*"I interviewed him in my apartment. And again, it was sort of... so I kind of just stood there, and there was a moment of silence between us. And then he just grabbed me and started kissing me... and I had sex. And I was surprised by that, a little bit. I hadn't been prepared for how powerful the connection between me and the interviewees would be after I'd listened to them sort of expose their lives in that way, and really, really be vulnerable in opening up to me."*

-- Matt, gay male research assistants



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