

# How do same-sex hook-up applications impact users' construction of self and sexual identity?

## Introduction

Previous research into sex and love has demonstrated a clear heteronormative bias, where behaviours that do not conform to heterosexual norms are deemed 'deficient' (Thorne et al, 2018). Consequently, the use of online hook-up applications such as Grindr have become a fundamental aspect of the gay community, allowing for private sexual liaisons. These platforms enable one to present an idealistic representation of the self that is typically repressed offline due to fear of judgement and stigmatisation from others.

Risks associated with unprotected anal sex are prevalent among the gay community. Men who have sex with men comprised more than half of all new HIV diagnoses in the US (Whitfield et al, 2017), whilst many men reported a deeper connection to their partner through skin-to-skin genital contact (Verduzco, 2014). This encourages research to identify why men continue to engage in these sexual behaviours despite awareness of risks, in order to provide future implications for reducing the risk of HIV among gay men.

The current research explores the psychological impact gay hook-up platforms have on a person's self and sexual identity, by examining the ways in which Grindr is used and the ways the users manage the risks of casual sex.

## Method

Eight participants (aged 19-37) were interviewed about their experiences of consensual same-sex hook-ups initiated online. Interview's employed Wengraf's (2001) 'sub-session interview' structure, comprising of an opening question regarding one's first encounter with an individual online, followed by 26 theoretical-based questions. **Transcripts of interviews were inductively analysed through the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), culminating in a list of themes and sub-themes related to the research area being explored.**

## Results

Following thematic analysis of interviews, four major themes were identified, presented in *Figure 1* below.

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>Cultural and generational shifts in dating and hook-ups</b>	A) Rise of technology B) Societal acceptance of homosexuality and non-monogamous relations
<b>Interconnected self</b>	A) Greater self-acceptance B) Impact on self-esteem and confidence C) Perpetuation of harmful stereotypes/stigmas and societal issues
<b>Concealed self</b>	A) Exaggeration of self B) Feeling like a separate entity
<b>Risks associated with casual hook-ups</b>	A) Awareness of risks B) Unhealthy addiction to app C) Current interventions

*Figure 1: Table displaying themes and sub-themes identified during thematic analysis of interviews.*

## Discussion

- The use of Grindr was found to have conflicting effects on one's self-esteem and level of confidence. Increased attention from other users culminated in enhanced self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, whilst being rejected or ignored negatively impacted self-esteem. These conflicting impacts emphasise the discordant effects these applications can have on one's psyche and reflect the complexity of Grindr usage, due to increasing one's self-esteem but also stripping it away.
- The self-concealment of Grindr users was apparent throughout interviews. Participants expressed how desirable aspects of the self were exaggerated to increase the likelihood of initiating a hook-up, whilst some users articulated construction of an entirely separate, 'sexualised' identity when using Grindr. This demonstrates how Grindr is used as a platform for one to create an idealistic 'possible self' that is typically repressed outside of the app, and how one can express their 'concealed' sexual identity when online.
- Participants expressed how unhealthy usage of Grindr through the applications ease-of-use and engaging in excessive hook-ups made them more vulnerable to addiction to these platforms, and consequently affected relationships outside of the app. Findings highlighted users' vulnerability to addiction, due to persistently seeking sexual gratification from other men in an attempt to increase self-esteem.
- Findings demonstrated the rationalisation behind engaging in unprotected anal sex, despite awareness of risks. It was evident that due to increased sexual pleasure and feelings of sexual liberation, more men were willing to engage in high-risk behaviours, disregarding the risks to their sexual health as well as risks to others. Furthermore, current interventions promoting sexual health and the importance of being regularly tested on Grindr were revealed to be relatively ineffective due to irregularity and falsifiability.

## Conclusion

- This research highlighted how excessive usage of gay hook-up applications can have conflicting impacts on one's self-esteem and contextualised why some users may be more vulnerable to unhealthy addiction to these platforms than others.
- Many gay men do not feel free to express their sexual identity without fear of discrimination or judgement, causing this identity to be repressed and a separate 'sexualised' identity to be constructed when online.
- Findings emphasise the need for further evaluation of current sexual health interventions and greater acceptance of one's self and others whilst using hook-up apps.

## References

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