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# TORSOS, SELFIES, AND BLANKS: Grindr as a Research Tool and a Field Site

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## ABSTRACT

In this era of technological dependency, we should reimagine how we engage with qualitative research. Because our tablets, mobile devices, and laptops are extensions of ourselves, qualitative researchers should consider forms of new media applications as critical research tools and valuable research field sites for qualitative research. Once we move qualitative research online, a plethora of questions and concerns regarding research ethics should be acknowledged and addressed. The aim of this paper is to outline how the queer social media application Grindr can be used as a research tool and a geographical research field site for qualitative research. I situate my discussion at the center of the realspace and cyberspace dualism. Grindr, as a legitimate research tool and geographical field site, reconfigures ontology, the notion of cityspace, and extends the notion of an archive and the practice of actively archiving. Thus, for qualitative research, Grindr should be conceived as a social media application for qualitative research in the context of LGBTQ studies, queer of color analysis, internet studies, as well as women, gender, and sexuality studies.

**Keywords:** Grindr; realspace; cyberspace; qualitative inquiry; research ethics

## INTRODUCTION

We now live in the “Cyber Era.” Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Grindr, Tinder, and other social media applications have become part of the daily lives of many people. What snailmail, speed dating, and blind dating once provided, these social media applications now provide—spaces outside of heavy surveillance. The primary difference is that in this “Cyber Era,” individuals are virtually connected to each other at any given time. We, as virtually connected social actors receive and disseminate information with the stroke of a finger. Cyberspace is a metaphor that describes an alternative dimension.<sup>1</sup> Also, cyberspace is an idea or a metaphor for a relational space that enacts politics and concerns.<sup>2</sup> Mark Graham writes, “the metaphor constrains, enables, and structures very distinct ways of imagining the interactions between people, information, code, and machines through digitized networks. These distinct imaginations, in turn, have real effects on how we enact politics and bring places into being.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, cyberspace is an alternative dimension or a digitized culture that is opposite of ‘physical space’ where people, codes, and machines are inter-related through an interface. In this digitized culture, spatial temporalities (read: time-space) are compressed through technological devices, such as the mobile phone, by making social life instantaneous and personal dispositions are non-physical. Cyberspace, moreover, is a virtual realm where personal freedoms, individual choices, and social relations are spatialized and policed differently from those in realspace.<sup>4</sup> Also, Cyberspace is a landscape becomes through an intelligible-physical system. From a Deuleuzian standpoint, cyberspace, like cityspace, is a site where feelings and thoughts converge.

Cyberspace and cityspace touch at the interface between the human and non-human subjects. Think he, she, they, sie, or hir touches the phone-application, Grindr. It is at this moment when both life-words (cyberspace and cityspace)—alongside sets of rhythms—affect the researcher and its subjects. Both affectual responses involve identifying the affect—a pre-personal, not-yet-identifiable happening and the search for connections through places (in this case, the connection between the city and cyberspaces).

This paper seeks to think through the following topics: (1) the process of doing qualitative research using queer social media applications as a primary research tool, (2) the practicality of performing qualitative

research on queer social media applications, and (3) the ethical implications involved when we move qualitative research to an online setting. This paper is not intended to solely describe queer social media applications, but rather, to legitimize queer social media applications, specifically Grindr, as a qualitative research tool and site. As a researcher who is interested in queer geographies, particularly the ways in which Black queer individuals conceive of spatial imaginaries, produce and utilize 'safe space' in urban environments, and in qualitative methods, I centralize Grindr as an important geographical field site for research projects. I consider Grindr to be a valuable research tool (and site), particularly for the researcher who is interested in individuals with alternative modes of self-representation. Grindr is also a valuable tool for the researcher who may not be savvy in the way they solicit interviewees. However, I do acknowledge, that there are a number of limitations of Grindr, ranging from user deception (due to an anticipation of being exposed/"outed") to capturing a small-percentage (sample) of queer interlocutors to supplement research agendas. The latter point, I believe, is rooted in the way that Grindr has been perceived—an application for insatiable sex operating under a guise of a dating application.

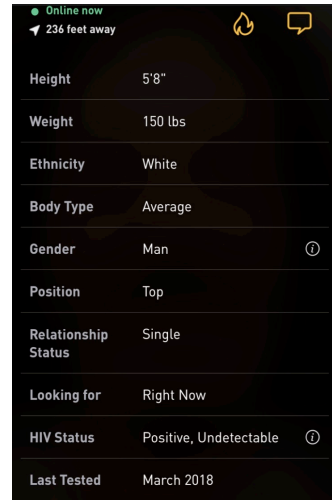
This paper is organized thematically. First, I will explain the purpose and functionality of Grindr. Following this, I will argue that Grindr becomes a research tool or even a research site, Lastly, this paper will provide a few ethical implications that should be acknowledged when using Grindr as a research tool and a research field site.

### WHAT IS GRINDR?

Grindr is a social media application for individuals with various gender identities. As an analytic of the function of power, gender has been conceptualized in a functionalist, phenomenological, postmodern, and structural frames. In the functionalist frame, gender is depicted as a cultural construct devised to promote particular social functions.<sup>5</sup> A phenomenological account of gender "seeks to illuminate how gender operates in the life world."<sup>6</sup> A postmodern interpretation of gender comes from Judith Butler. A postmodern interpretation of gender argues that "gender must be understood, not as a noun, nor a set of attributes, but as a doing, a performative that constitutes the identity that it purports to be."<sup>7</sup> A structural analysis of gender—which is reductionist at

best—contends that “gender is a social practice that is more than a marking of the human body, it is a weaving of a structure of symbols which exaggerate and distort human potential.”<sup>8</sup> Together, gender identity is variant, evolves, and is co-constitutive of its inter-dependent social identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability. Grindr users can connect with other users within a certain radial distance (from two miles to fifty miles depending on whether the ‘free’ or ‘plus’ account is downloaded onto your smartphone). When connected, users can arrange for a casual date, a simple (or not so simple) conversation, or more. In terms of its layout, Grindr’s home screen shows a grid of pictures, representing the various profiles of users within a radial distance. Using the picture grid, users are able to tap a picture of another user, which brings up a profile. Each profile has a space to provide demographic information, such as age or race. Also, users can provide more descriptive information, such as height, weight, tribe (read group identity), pronouns, and HIV status.

The problem for researchers, however, is that some users do not provide demographic information, which could be used to solicit individuals within their target community, or a profile picture. Usually, though, users will upload selfies, pictures of their torsos, or no picture at all. There are, of course, ethical concerns that come along with relying solely on selfies, torsos, and blank Grindr profiles for research as will be discussed in the latter half of this paper.



Height	5'8"
Weight	150 lbs
Ethnicity	White
Body Type	Average
Gender	Man
Position	Top
Relationship Status	Single
Looking for	Right Now
HIV Status	Positive, Undetectable
Last Tested	March 2018

Figure 1: “Data”

Photo Credit: Ricardo J. Millhouse 2018

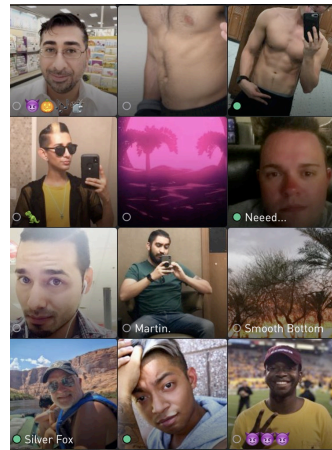


Figure 2: “Digital Landscape”

Photo Credit: Ricardo J. Millhouse 2018

Thinking more critically, Grindr is created out of conscious awareness of a need for a 'safe space' for representation and social interaction. Here, 'safe space' is a concept that is understood as a space where inhabitants of the safe space feel a sense of belonging relative to another space. In feminist and queer discourses, such as Christina B. Hanhardt,<sup>9</sup> 'safe space' is a physical and/or virtual space where one does not anticipate forms of resistance based on their sexuality but provides a potential for full self-representation. It is for this reason that Grindr is a vital research tool and a geographical research field site. Here, I am defining research tool as any device that allows for the recruitment of interlocutors. As a geographical research field site, researchers can visit Grindr as they would a physical location, such as Nashville, Tennessee; California's Bay Area; or the Caribbean, to extrapolate information that allows one to arrive at a meaning-making end of a specific research problem or question. So as researchers visit California's Bay Area to understand landscapes of migratory labor in California,<sup>10</sup> Nashville to understand geographies of Latino migration in the U.S. South,<sup>11</sup> or the Caribbean to understand the social construction of gender and how it is internalized and practiced,<sup>12</sup> cyberspaces, such as Grindr, lend themselves to do similar work.

What is important when considering Grindr as a research field site is to think through the politics of conscious awareness. To some, to be conscious is to be aware of some 'thing.' However, the politics of awareness is directly related to the politics of representation. For Joseph Levine, conscious awareness of some 'thing' entails some representation of it.<sup>13</sup> Besides how could one be aware of some 'thing' that is not represented? So if Grindr is a virtual and publically private space that allows for the full representation of queerness, then it is a space where the qualitative researcher can acknowledge, bracket, and interpret, the end to which certain social forces catalyze and sustain its creation and the forces that promote its fluidity, rather than fixity. This is to say that the qualitative researcher's sojourn into cyberspace similar to the way a researcher visits a physical location. In cyberspace, however, the researcher must pay close attention to what and/or who is represented/excluded.<sup>14</sup>

As social scientists, we are interested in how social actors organize themselves or are forcefully organized due to logics of colonialism that naturalizes patriarchy and homonormativity, to name one example, and participate in their political, cultural, and socially virtual environments. For those interested in the ways in which sexuality—a complex

and seemingly hierarchical category and field of knowledge—is contested and/or negotiated, Grindr, as well as other online social media applications, yields complex questions about race, class, ethnicity, gender, performativity, sexuality, and spatiality. For instance, (1) how is Grindr produced from the white gaze? (2) what are some limitations regarding representation and, say, Black sexuality when considering the first question. There are three reasons for this. First, Grindr provides a virtual space for queer users to have meaningful conversations with other users. In this sense, physical safe spaces for queer spatiality and identity formation would be bars, dance clubs, or underground house and Ballroom scenes. Depending on the individual, moreover, a Grindr conversation may end with an anticipation of a casual date, a platonic friend, or even a proposition for casual sex. Second, Grindr provides a private space for queer men (as well as some transitioning men or women) to express their sexuality, without anticipation of threats of anti-gay violence in the form of harassment or physical assaults as are all too common in realspace.<sup>15</sup> Third, Grindr provides a medium for queer social media users to publicize current community events and sexual health narratives. Therefore, Grindr is a virtual space, ‘safe, and private space providing users with the opportunity to do all they intend to do within reason.<sup>16</sup>

### USING GRINDR AS A RESEARCH FIELD SITE

As a research field site, Grindr re-configures the spatialization of the social, cityspace, and extends the notion of ontology. I conceptualize cityspace as a physical landscape, characterized by movement between that which is non-human and human. Furthermore, cityspace is a landscape of becomings, primarily because cityspace is action oriented. and a site of micro and macro-social processes which are cloaked in institutional power. Grindr is an alternative medium through which social relations, collective memories, subjectivities, and nostalgia for queer imaginaries are garnered, constructed, and situated within the cyberworld—a seemingly public space. For qualitative researchers, this reconfiguration possibly ushers in a debate that they so desire to take up—a discussion of the meaning with reconfiguration. Therefore, this inevitably raises the notion of ontology since it involves some understanding of what is inherent and important in this alternative spatialization of the social and cityspace represented by Grindr.

By definition, ontology refers to claims regarding the nature and structure of being.<sup>17</sup> To put this differently, ontology is a way of being. For Howard Williams, ontologies are theories of what actually exists.<sup>18</sup> To borrow from Chandrasekaran et al., “the term ontology is sometimes used to refer to a body of knowledge describing some domain, typically the world we live in, using representation vocabulary.”<sup>19</sup> What this means is that ontology allows for a way to understand and represent an aspect of a certain domain or concept. In the context of Grindr, ontology, as a theory of what exists, can be used to frame the social interactions unfolding within this particular domain and clear up any “fuzziness.” Here fuzziness is an ontological claim about the real world.<sup>20</sup> The claim that fuzziness makes about the real world is that binaristic data is illusionary. So, Grindr, a research site, internalizes social interactions that forces qualitative researchers to extend ontology. In this regard, because qualitative researchers are concerned with the *meaning* of concepts or ideas, they must propose ontological claims about a concept or domain, which involve some presentation of attributes or characteristics.<sup>21</sup> In the context of Grindr, for example, one might ask, “What distinguishes ‘safe space’ from another space?” A qualitative researcher is interested in semantics in order to clear up any fuzziness—an ontological claim—about the concept and production of ‘safe space’ through the act of *going* and *being* in cyberspace. Thereby referencing its spatiality—in the discursive and material registers—or even its fluidity. In other words, ontological claims do what dictionaries and encyclopedias both do—they classify and explain data in palpable terms.<sup>22</sup> For the qualitative researcher interested in the *details* of online cityspace, such as Grindr, one might ask, “What are some aspects of cityspace?” The qualitative researcher will provide an ontological claim that is rooted in a definition that may or may not overcomplicate the concept using, to some degree, semantics.

To further this point, William Swartout and Austin Tate contend that there are different ontologies.<sup>23</sup> These different ontologies are important because they describe social life and processes within specific domains. For example, Swartout and Tate say, “a medical ontology might contain definitions for terms such as ‘leukemia’ or ‘terminal illness’, but it would not contain assertions that a particular patient had some disease, although a knowledge base might.”<sup>24</sup> Considering this example, there is also a Grindr ontology where assertions are not made about particular users, but definitions are developed such as “New Bohemian” to describe

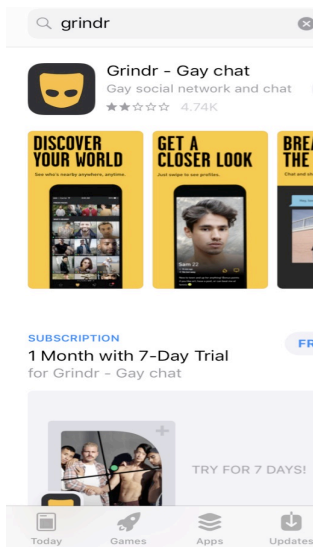


a *type* of Grindr user. To borrow from Chandrasekaran et al. once more, “we can use the terms provided by the domain ontology to assert specific propositions about a domain or situation in a domain.”<sup>25</sup> I would take this assertion further to add that terms use as “New Bohemian” describes a user/social actor within a particular domain, namely Grindr in this context. Ontology then becomes a medium through which a concept unfolds using a particular set of terms. This is important because the terms used to describe phenomena in realspace may be vastly different than those used to describe phenomena in the domain of cyberspace, in this case Grindr. For instance, when the social is resituated in cyberspace through Grindr, an application created out of a need for a ‘safe space’ may in fact use terms and/or categories on the application that make social and political comments about gender performativity in the real world (i.e. masculine, feminine, versatile top, versatile bottom, bottom, or strict top). Also, ontology may be adopted or developed to represent facts, beliefs, phenomena, categories, or assumptions about what *might* exist in a domain or world.

Following Chandrasekaran, et al., ontology provides, to some degree, “propositional attitudes”<sup>26</sup> to describe phenomena that *might* exist in a domain or the world. Most notably, in a geographical sense, this perspective is applied to realspace. For clarity, to describe activities within the domain of cyberspace, specifically Grindr, a new or reconfigured vocabulary system must be generated to represent what (or who) is seen (or note seen) on Grindr. To reiterate, this vocabulary system is what I identify as the Grindr ontology. This ontology uses terms to describe gender performativity, which describes what exists on Grindr. This is to say that Grindr ontology is seemingly different from ontology for realspace. The reason is that there are different vocabulary systems and terms used to describe phenomena in realspace and cyberspace. One main reason is that the social is reconfigured or re-spatialized to be on a mobile device. On the mobile device there are inherent actions, assumptions, and/or facts that are not understandable when descriptive terms in realspace are used. Therefore, ontology (a theory of what exists) is shifted when we enter into cyberspace.

As a social media application, Grindr allows its users to connect and engage in meaningful (or not so meaningful) conversations. After an individual downloads Grindr to his, her smartphone, he, she, they, sie, or hir can connect and converse with other online users.<sup>27</sup> Users can share

and exchange information, send messages, and/or photos with one or multiple users. Data can be shared rapidly and constantly in cyberspace through private messaging, uploading display pictures, or updating profile information. Therefore, as a research field site, Grindr reconfigures the social in terms of spatialization. The social is materialized through digital objects, namely the smartphone. Contemporary sociality or social relations on Grindr are organized through an interface of a material object—the smartphone. Michael Zook et al., for example, describes the changing patterns of mobility and social interaction via new media as flocking.<sup>28</sup> What Zook means by this is that digital geographies provide geographers with “dynamic maps of dynamic human processes”<sup>29</sup> by extracting digital data through spatialization. What this means is that digital geographies challenge notions of privacy since private and state entities become increasingly embedded in digital geographies.



Example 3: “Downloading”  
Photo Credit: Ricardo J.  
Millhouse 2018

For demonstrative purposes, I will borrow from Ruppert, Law and Savage who place Twitter at the center of my methodological conversation concerning Grindr.<sup>30</sup> They suggest that social networking sites, blogs, and wikis complicate what an online and offline world looks like in practice. Ruppert, Law, & Savage assert, “From social networking sites, search engines, blogs, wikis to online purchasing, e-Government and open data, all of these can be understood as modes of instantiating social relations and ‘making up’ individuals and collectivities in ways that also blur the boundaries between online and offline worlds.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, social networking applications, like Grindr, reimagine

what the social is and the space that allows daily activities to unfold by noticing that social interactions and full self-representations are made apparent through a digital medium. To put this differently, the social (as a collective), social relations (as a process), and the small-scale (individual) lives that make up the social are materialized—made apparent or visible—through Grindr. This is all to say that the materialization of

social relations is partially housed in a particular social world (Grindr) or domain (cyberspace) and are increasingly abstract. It is in the domain of cyberspace that social relations and lives are socially reproduced similarly to those in realspace. Interestingly, as cyber-social worlds are socially reproduced, they are, arguably, not policed as frequently and harshly in the realspace. One reason is that policing in cyberspace is a questionable practice since there are lingering questions regarding what represents public or private information. Therefore, the practice of shaming or trolling may become apparent. In other words, since the social is in an abstract form in cyberspace, modes of policing this abstractness are disjointed. For instance, Laura Huey, argues that policing in cyberspace is inherently difficult.<sup>32</sup> Huey goes on to say that public policing has not adopted modes of policing in cyberspace because cyberspace is perceived to be abstract and non-physical.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, as a research field site, Grindr extends critical ethnography as it is a living archive—a site which continues to evolve and expand as users send data to one another—to an innovative level to understand how the substantive category of sexuality is constructed and enacted online or offline. Grindr also allows one to understand how gender is performed or made fluid. To see how, we must turn and acknowledge the ways in which ethnography has been performed traditionally.

Traditional ethnography, as a qualitative research method, is performed to observe, understand, and describe social practices of a particular cultural group in a particular or absolute space.<sup>34</sup> To this end, the ethnographic researcher can better understand the cultural actors within the researched culture. Traditionally, ethnographic research, within the field of anthropology at least, was done with the intention to understand other cultures, but the result was the exotification and/or othering of nations, people, and their respective culture(s) that were isolated from Western civilization.<sup>35</sup>

Ethnographic studies suggest that the positionality of the researcher is highly important to the ways in which the research study will be conceptualized, framed, and executed. According to Michelle Byrne, the position of the qualitative researcher can be understood as either *etic* or *emic*.<sup>36</sup> The *etic* researcher, by definition, is one who is an outsider. What this means is that the researcher's assumptions and interpretations of a particular study is uninformed by previous immersion in the culture or

people under study. The emic researcher is an insider. This means that the researcher has prior knowledge and experience with the culture or people under study. Nonetheless, ethnography, whether from a classical, systemic, interpretive/hermeneutic, or critical perspective, allows the researcher to understand social and cultural practices and social processes at varying scales.<sup>37</sup> While I contend that ethnography has historically been performed using an insider/outsider dynamic, a critical and distant engagement with the subject, or even a close observation of the “other,” it is crucial to think of ethnography in an online setting because Grindr is a treasure trove of data.

If we are to think of Grindr as a research field site, a researcher (etic or emic) can adapt traditional field methods to an online setting to answer several research questions, such as:

1. In what ways is Black queer social space reconfigured when Grindr is called into question?
2. In what ways does the virtual landscape of race and sexuality differ or overlap with these landscapes in realspace?
3. To what degree does virtual cityspace become understood when we centralize tools or interfaces, such as Grindr?
4. What can be said about the ‘type’ or backgrounds of virtual queer men using Grindr?
5. What can be said about queer gender categories, and how does this categorization impact queer life?
6. How much, if at all, does one’s socio-political expression differ in realspace versus virtual cityspace/cyberspace?
7. How can Grindr be used to understand paradoxes in the practice or discourse around ‘safe space’?
8. How does race/class affect sex, intimacy, and emotional work in ‘safe spaces’?

Although the aforementioned research questions are only examples, they suggest some of the ways in which Grindr can become a research field site (and virtual archive) for ethnographic study.

According to Tim Cresswell, “archives are sites where it is possible to read against the grain and find unofficial stories in the absences and unintended presences”.<sup>38</sup> To put this differently, an archive is a site where one can learn about past events or instances by asking questions, highlighting gaps, and finding a way to connect said gaps. Thinking critically about what constitutes an archive, one can understand Grindr to be a

cyber-archive in a sense. As a living archive, Grindr, much like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, houses photographs, messages, and other information that have been accumulated from past interactions, uploads, or messages. For instance, one can log into Facebook and post photographs, send messages with other users, and post comments on different issues or photographs. In doing so, users create a so-called “social footprint” that can be easily tracked by users later. In other words, Facebook users are actively archiving data. The same can be said about Grindr. As a living archive, Grindr users can post and/or send photos and messages that can be saved for future reference. Taking this further, Hayden Lorimer understands active archiving to be a formation of (geographical) knowledge “that exists between constellations of events, sites, and people”.<sup>39</sup> What this means is that an archive is developed through the accumulation of cultural, political, or personal objects. One can even go so far as to argue that an archive becomes official through repeated visitation of said archive. However, the issue of value is a large factor in the development of an archive, a rarified space. What gets accepted into a designated archive is a highly talked about issue around *value*.

For an archive to exist, papers, documents, and artifacts must be collected. For Cresswell, the act of collecting is actually an act of valuing.<sup>40</sup> Cresswell argues, “from an infinite array of things, people choose an infinitely small selection and by doing so inscribe them with value. Sometimes that value may be entirely personal and at other times, if the person is an archivist for instance, a regime of value may be shared”.<sup>41</sup> To name one example, an individual who collects stamps—a philatelist—may collect a wide array of stamps but place a lower value on those that are easily found by the public elsewhere. For those stamps that are rare or deeply personal, say a transformative or historical figure, the philatelist may place a higher value on the stamp. So, the politics of archiving, specifically in realspace, involves some degree of collecting and valuing. However, the politics of archiving, which is an active process in cyberspace, does not involve collecting and valuing for the purpose of monetary gain in most cases.

Archiving in cyberspace, specifically on Grindr, is an active process. Once users send photos, messages, or other data to one another, those documents are saved onto the Grindr application and become the property of the Grindr, LLC. Taking this issue further, the practice of collecting photographs or messages is not necessarily a conscious effort

done by Grindr users. In other words, it is what is expected of Grindr users. Since this is the case, Grindr users keep messages and photographs of other users that they wish to remain in contact with and have clear documentation of their correspondents in the form of messages or photographs. Most times, that collecting in a formal archive (in realspace) is for the purpose of adding value to said archive and monetary gain of the contributor.<sup>42</sup> However, in cyberspace, particularly on Grindr, collecting photographs or messages of other users is for the purpose of remaining in contact. Value, moreover, simply comes from the value of the user not for the purpose of monetary gain, but actually a non-monetary gain in the form of a personal or emotional connection. After downloading the mobile application, the qualitative researcher gains access to a rich geographical field site where he, she, they, sie, or hir becomes a contributor as well as a curator of the new archive Grindr. This archive, might I add, serves an understanding of a particular set of social relations and social world that exist in cyberspace and tells the qualitative researcher a great deal about the ways in which gay men are spatialized and can be analyzed.

In light of my previous points, Grindr reconfigures cityspace. Cityspace, according to Paul Simpson is a public space where performance and social relations both become less mutually exclusive processes.<sup>43</sup> Instead, in cityspace, performance and social relations are how social actors make very real (and sensed) interventions and comments in the physical or virtual world. What this means is that cityspace, as well as landscape, impacts the lives of those encapsulated in it. Taking this point further, Don Mitchell argues that landscape is power.<sup>44</sup> Although he is referencing realspace, I argue that cyberspace, as a landscape, is power as well. Landscape, in realspace, shapes social processes and relations to a great degree. For example, the landscape of Manhattan in the mid-1990s shaped the ways in which queer individuals interacted with one another because queer institutions were closed and situated elsewhere as part of large-scale redevelopment projects and zoning laws that marked the decade.<sup>45</sup> Landscape allows for social processes and interactions to unfold. Landscape, in cyberspace, is shaped by users who have been shaped and impacted by the landscapes in realspace. Therefore, by extension, landscape both in realspace and cyberspace shapes social relations and processes. In light of these points, it should be noted that Grindr

reconfigures cityspace from its traditional conceptualization because the social and social relations are centralized onto a digital medium.

### USING GRINDR AS A RESEARCH TOOL

Grindr is a valuable research tool to understand human behavior and identity. For instance, Grindr can be used to interrogate a hierarchization of the male body, understand negotiations of masculine or feminine performances, among other broad academic concerns related to sex, sexuality, and gender performativity. The way one can do this is by taking note of the following: (1) the types of pictures a user uploads or sends through a private message, (2) the public narrative a user includes on his profile, and/or (3) noting what is *not* included on a user's profile. Dydia DeLyser, Rebecca Sheehan, and Andrew Curtis claim that eBay "offers a source, a means, and perhaps even a 'field' for research"<sup>46</sup> and its research potential should be discerned, I contend that the research potential of Grindr should be realized by geographers interested in queer geographies and broadly, cyberspace. Although new media applications, such as eBay or Grindr are indeed geographical research field sites, online research ethics are still in its infancy. It is important to note that eBay and Grindr both were developed to resituate modes of exchange whether it is goods or communication to a central site. To this end, the aim of the following section is to propose some valuable suggestions to the questions regarding research ethics. Research ethics, might I add, help to frame the ethical responses of online researchers, which come in two positions: deontological and consequentialist.

A deontological position is a research decision that is "rule following."<sup>47</sup> These formal rules, in my opinion, shape the behavior of the researcher as well as the participant. According to Thomas,<sup>48</sup> there are two types of deontological positions: "act-deontological" and "rule-deontological." An act-deontological position or research decision is based on a particular value of judgment that allows the researcher to productively and effectively rectify a certain situation. A rule-deontological position, on the other hand, is a research decision grounded in a universal rule of ethics, such as "thou shalt not lie."<sup>49</sup> A deontological research decision places an informed consent form at the forefront of any research project. By contrast, a consequentialist research decision "operates from the premise that ethical behavior should be determined by the consequences

of an act.”<sup>50</sup> An example of a consequentialist position on deception comes from the journal *Information Society*. Berry says a consequentialist position is:

When researchers justify gaining access to “deviant” research settings by deception on the basis that their work contributes to the public good. Online researchers might justify this deception by stating that it is the only way to obtain information on an important issue.<sup>51</sup>

A consequentialist justifies deception and considers it ethically sound when it is for the sake of extracting valuable information for the advancement of society.

When considering Grindr as a research tool, there are three questions regarding research ethics that should be considered prior to developing a research design. First, to what extent is the research participant or interlocutor being deceptive online? This question comes in response to Grindr users who create accounts using false information. For descriptive purposes, I will refer to this type of Grindr user as the “misleading participant.” The misleading participant creates a Grindr account using a false name (or alias), provides a false age, and/or uses a false picture in his or her profile. When false information is used to create a Grindr account, not only will the Grindr user find himself in the middle of a copyright issue or battling an identity theft penalty, but the research involving a misleading participant discredits any aggregated data. For instance, if a Grindr chooses to upload a false ‘selfie’, a true (or false) torso, or no picture at all to their profile, the researcher should note that this Grindr user has the potential to be misleading. There is some chance that the integrity of the research project will be compromised should the researcher solicit this type of Grindr user (a misleading participant) for an online interview. To put this differently, the researcher-interlocutor relationship, which is the basis of any qualitative research project, has been built from false information. So how does one overcome online deception considering *real* identity is assumed to be explicit rather than implicit?

Lowering the risk of online deception, I argue, comes in two parts. First, sending an informed consent form to a potential research participant helps confirm one’s research eligibility, such as age.<sup>52</sup> As a deontological research decision, an informed consent form can be sent to a Grindr research participant in the form of a private message. Then,



the informed consent form can be saved, printed, and signed by the potential research participant. Signed informed consent forms, in cyberspace, much like those in realspace, give permission to the researcher to use any information from the research study and outlines the ways in which private or confidential information will be collected and stored by the researcher. According to the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, informed consent forms include the following elements:<sup>53</sup>

- A statement that expresses that the study involves research
- A statement that outlines the purpose and duration of the research
- A description of the research procedures
- A statement that explicitly states any risk factors and benefits to the research participant
- A statement that guarantees confidentiality
- A statement expressing that participation is, in fact, voluntary

Although an informed consent form and its statements are approved by an institutional review board (IRB), they assist in soliciting reliable research participants.

A second way to lower the risk of online deception is by asking verifying questions. In other words, if a researcher suspects online deception from a Grindr user whose profile is not much more than a torso or a blank, the researcher can ask questions. Following this consequentialist research position allows the researcher to overlook the ambiguous Grindr profile and focus on the value of the information that he, she, they, sie, or hir can extract for his or her research project. Therefore, both informed consent forms and asking mundane questions ensure that an online research participant is more forthcoming when disclosing personal experiences and identity markers. So how should informed consent be evaluated online?

As previously mentioned, informed consent forms can be sent online through e-mail. When using Grindr, informed consent forms can be sent through a private message to one or more users. As a private message, Grindr users can read the purpose, significance, benefits, and risks of the research project. To ensure that the research criteria for the study are met by a potential participant, I suggest that both the research participant and the researcher discuss the purpose, significance, and expectations of the research in-depth.

This is to say that both the researcher and the research participant should engage in a phone conversation that not only introduces the potential participant to the research project, but the researcher will have a chance to verify any information regarding the potential participant. In other words, the researcher can ask questions associated with the Grindr user's profile. The primary reason for this suggestion is to minimize any chance of participant deception during the research as well as maintain its integrity. Madge supports this suggestion to a certain degree by stating,

It has been suggested that gaining informed consent online can be more problematic than for onsite research because it is potentially easier for participants to deceive the researcher. . .in the virtual anonymous realm, how can the researcher verify the participant's identity?<sup>54</sup>

Though Madge supports my first suggestion, she poses a pertinent and complex question for research that requires anonymity of the online research participant.<sup>55</sup> Even though the answer will not be given in this paper, one response to Madge's question is that the researcher should be commonsensical when it comes to any hints of deception.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, when a Grindr user or any online research participant commits to a research project, the researcher should recognize any inconsistent or questionable information provided by the virtual participant. To this end, the researcher should cease any further contact with the misleading participant using netiquette.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the issue of deception, using Grindr as a research tool raises questions about what is considered public or private information in cyberspace. To borrow again from Madge:

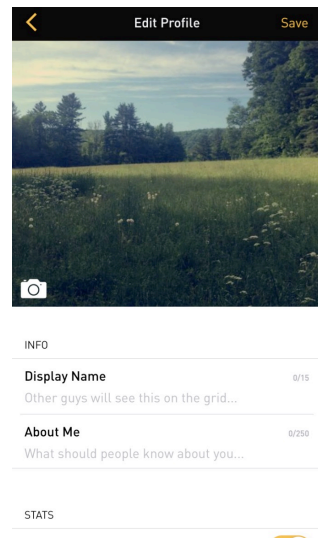
On the Internet there is no clear agreement about what is public and what is private in 'conception, experience, label or substance' (Waskul and Douglass, 1996, quoted by Bruckman, 2004). For example, is a researcher ethically justified in using publicly available information as data for a research project, even if this was provided by the Internet user for private consumption?<sup>58</sup>

In light of this claim, what is considered public or private information should be discussed between the researcher and research participant virtually or in-person. To further this point, Grindr is a free mobile application allowing users to describe themselves in a certain amount of words for other Grindr users to read. So, anyone with access to a Smartphone can download Grindr and read very personal and intimate

descriptions of nearby users. To complicate matters, Grindr users can also copy profile information from any Grindr user's profile by using a Smartphone's 'screenshot' option. That being the case, how do both the researcher and the online research participant understand private or public correspondence in cyberspace? Second, in cyberspace, there is always the risk of someone observing, recording, copying, or quoting other's words and/or pictures (face or torso) without consent. As Robert Jones (1994) contends, consumers (read: users) can never really be sure who has access to their information. As an example, most Facebook users post pictures and updates regularly. Now, the information that is viewable should be regarded as public information, since a Facebook or Grindr user willingly uploaded information for others to view and comment on.

Anyone with a Grindr account can view and post pictures for others to view. According to Niel Granitz and James C. Ward, anyone can "lurk" and peruse information without being identified.<sup>59</sup> So, any information that is viewable to others should be regarded as public. This is to say that public information is viewable information, while information sent privately should be regarded as just that—private.

Following my previous points, any information on a Grindr user's profile page is accessible by individuals with Smartphone access. Information on Grindr is made publicly-private and privately-public by the user. For clarity, Waskul and Douglass uses the terms "publicly-private" and "privately-public" to demonstrate how cyberspace will not easily fit into existing spatial metaphors.<sup>60</sup> Following this point, Bassett and O'Riordan believe that the lack of applicability of a private sphere implies that all discourse lies *de facto* in the public sphere.<sup>61</sup> All things considered, any information housed on Grindr's platform is public information. However, any correspondence between the researcher and the online research participant can only be done through the "private message" option on Grindr. The "private message" option allows two



Example 4: "Editing"  
Photo Credit: Ricardo J.  
Millhouse 2018

users to speak one-on-one. Yet any or all messages sent through the “private message” option can be secretly copied and pasted elsewhere, such as a personal e-mail, another mobile social networking application, or a text message. In addition, any or all photos sent through the “private message” option can be saved to the receiving Grindr user’s phone. In this case, the receiver can later exchange the images with anyone for social gain or what Jessica Ringrose, Laura Harvey, Rosalind Gill, and Sonia Livingstone call “ratings.”<sup>62</sup> In this regard, there should be consensus reached by constant deliberation between the researcher and individual participants regarding what is considered private or public information. This way, the confidentiality of research participants (online or offline) is better safeguarded. Nonetheless, the public and private binary cannot be sufficiently clarified without deliberating over participant confidentiality on Grindr. From a deontological position—“rule following”—some distinction between public and private information should be outlined in a formal research guideline, namely in the informed consent.

A third ethical concern regarding Grindr as a research tool pertains to data security and subject confidentiality. To put this differently, how will the confidentiality of an online research participant be assured if the Smartphone with an active Grindr profile is lost or stolen? Like all social scientists, geographers using new media, such as Grindr, as a research tool must acknowledge and obey any requests for anonymity. Therefore, preemptive actions must be taken to protect any saved research data, like the researcher’s Grindr username and password, which grants access to an extensive message history. As Madge suggests, data security can be improved if web-based questionnaires were developed, rather than relying on e-mail questionnaires.<sup>63</sup> If questionnaires, photos, and other research information are saved onto Grindr, the information is secure. The reason is that to log into Grindr, one must know the e-mail address (username) and password associated with the account. So, to access any research materials, a username and password are required. In this regard, Grindr is similar to what is known as a “cloud.” If we think of Grindr as a “cloud,” one can surmise that research data will be protected as long as the e-mail address and password that is associated with the account are protected.

However, if the online research participant demands to remain anonymous, Madge claims that the researcher should upload the research questionnaire or interview questions to a computer using e-mail encryption, if is legal.<sup>64</sup> While the suggestions put forth by Madge are highly

valuable, they imply a need for a computer.<sup>65</sup> So, how are data security and anonymity assured if the only means of communicating is through a Smartphone application, like Grindr? I have four suggestions for the researcher:

1. Upon completing each message exchange, delete any direct messages from the online anonymous research participant
2. Sign out of the Grindr application after completing a conversation
3. Remember to write detailed notes on each message exchange, which could be coded later
4. Keep all notes and coding information in a secure location, perhaps the “cloud.”

Finally, using Grindr as a research tool raises an additional ethical concern that is directed toward an emic researcher. Grindr was developed as an application for queer individuals to connect with one another. For the emic researcher who uses Grindr regularly, he (or she) must be mindful of the time when Grindr is being used as a tool for qualitative research or an application for leisure. In other words, the researcher may or may not be a Grindr user. If he (or she) is an active Grindr user outside research purposes, the researcher must adopt a deontological research position or follow netiquette to decide when and how to conduct himself as a researcher who considers Grindr to be a research tool and a geographical field site. This is to say that a researcher who is also a Grindr user must code-switch between researcher and Grindr user to avoid any actions that can destroy the credibility of one’s research project.<sup>66</sup>

In this so-called “Cyber Era,” we are connected through material devices, namely cellphones. As a geographer interested in Black queer navigation and qualitative research methods, I have discussed the ways in which the queer social media application Grindr can be a geographical field site and a tool for qualitative research. As a geographical field site, Grindr reconfigures the social, cityspace, as well as ontology. In so doing, it extends the notion of an archive and the practice of actively archiving. As a research tool, Grindr is capable of soliciting reliable online research participants insofar as online research ethics are acknowledged and addressed. Also, Grindr, as a research tool, allows the qualitative researcher to map what may be conceived to be a ‘safe space’ for each user noting demographic data. All things considered, I consider Grindr to be a legitimate new media device for qualitative research and a field site that assists

a researcher in understanding the fluidity of gender and sexuality more intricately. Grindr also allows the qualitative researcher to understand queer ontologies, the production of 'safe space' and for whom virtual 'safe spaces' are carved out for.

## NOTES

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11. see Jamie Winders 2011, 2012.
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