

Rural conceptions of queer-intended space and place: the physical, virtual, and relational  
structures of grindr and scruff

by

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## **Abstract**

Discussions of space and place are essential to many researchers who assert that space and place are integral in shaping how individuals experience the social world. In early work, space was often treated as a physical location without connections to or for human actors, and place is defined as a location that does have connections to, or is for, human actors (Cloke et al 1991; Seamon & Sowers 2008; Selten & van der Zandt; Tuan 1977). Understandings of space and place have expanded past a singular definition regarding the physical to include cyberspace- a virtual space and place. Furthermore, scholarship in queer geography has indicated that queerness provides important insights into how people experience and create space and place. My study examines the question: How do rural users of queer-intended location based social networking (LBSN) apps conceptualize space and place? I interviewed 11 rural users of the apps Grindr and SCRUFF. I used a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews conducted over the messaging functions of the apps. I asked 5 general and cryptic questions regarding space and place to see how users would interpret them. I then followed their narratives to understand their conceptions of space and place; many of which I did not anticipate. My following thesis is a full report of the results garnered with my study. Ultimately, this study shows that allowing, potentially, queer folx to identify their own conceptions of space and place shows richer conceptions of space and place than have been identified in previous literature. Space and place take on various connotations respective to the user, and rural users of these queer-intended LBSN apps discuss how Grindr and SCRUFF are spaces and places that serve different users and have contingency to physical geography.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Discussions of space and place are essential to many researchers who assert that space and place are integral in shaping how individuals experience the social world. In early work, space was often treated as a physical location without connections to or for human actors, and place is defined as a location that does have connections to, or is for, human actors (Cloke et al 1991; Seamon & Sowers 2008; Selten & van der Zandt; Tuan 1977). Understandings of space and place have expanded past a singular definition regarding the physical to include cyberspace- a virtual space and place. Furthermore, scholarship in queer geography has indicated that queerness provides important insights into how people experience and create space and place. My study examines the question: How do rural users of queer-intended location based social networking (LBSN) apps conceptualize space and place? I interviewed 11 rural users of the apps Grindr and SCRUFF. I used a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews conducted over the messaging functions of the apps. I asked 5 general and cryptic questions regarding space and place to see how users would interpret them. I then followed their narratives to understand their conceptions of space and place; many of which I did not anticipate. My following thesis is a full report of the results garnered with my study. Ultimately, this study shows that allowing, potentially, queer folx to identify their own conceptions of space and place shows richer conceptions of space and place than have been identified in previous literature. Space and place take on various connotations respective to the user, and rural users of these queer-intended LBSN apps discuss how Grindr and SCRUFF are spaces and places that serve different users and have contingency to physical geography.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

According to previous literature, I believe space and place are complicated concepts that are continually evolving for queer folx. Space and place can relate to physical geography, cyberspace (mainly referring to the internet), and spaces and places that are arguably hybrids of physical geography and cyberspace. When each of the spaces and places are experienced by queer folx, the literature suggests that they experience new relations and nuance, meaning that what is anticipated by most, may not be the experience of queer folx (Halberstam 2005). For Halberstam (2005), this is expected of queerness and one of the reasons why queerness has been so attractive, saying, it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space.” Other scholars have also identified the importance of the insights resulting from examining queer folx experiences with physical geography (Haddock 2016; Halberstam 2005; Herring 2007; Munoz 1998; Thompson 2010; Weston 1995). Cyberspace (Wakeford 2000), as well as how folx in different geographical locations experience cyberspace (Gray 2009), particularly through apps that use geolocativity, referencing one’s physical location as fundamental to how the cyberspace app functions (Aunspach 2015; Batiste 2013; Blackwell et al 2014; De la Cruz 2017; Hardy & Lindtner; Lampkin et al; Roth 2004; Whalen 2017; Willynick 2003). Halberstam’s statement appears to ring true throughout the literature, regarding all three aforementioned spaces and places. As I and other researchers continue to examine the complications of space and place for queer folx, I believe we, as always, need to center the populations who experience such spaces and places and maintain their narratives as the knowledge and phenomena itself. In this way, I assert that we can have a greater chance of understanding the “new life narratives and alternative relations,” that may otherwise be lost for

those of us without such understanding (Halberstam 2005). In order to do this, we must first discuss what previous literature has said about each of these respective spaces and places.

### **Queer Folx and Physical Geography**

Space and place in terms of physical geography have been formative for how queer populations have found community. “The Great Gay Migration” saw “an influx of tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men... [migrated] into major urban areas across the United States” looking for community (Weston 1995). A preference for urbanity, however, has not been a consensus among queer folx. Queer folx in rural areas constructed their own journals, centered around their rural queerness, that critiqued urbanity and the particular queerness that was privileged through metronormative space and places: spaces and places that privilege gay white cisgendered men living in the urban ghetto (Halberstam 2005; Herring 2007; Munoz 1998). They argued that this figure that emerged in metronormativity became an idealized figure who dominated the discourse of what it means to be queer (Munoz 1998) in ways that were too narrow and did not apply to the lived experiences of rural queer folkx (Halberstam 2005; Herring 2007). Halberstam (2005) refers to the privileging of this figure as “homonormativity,” and Herring (2007) refers to the movement of those who oppose urbanity and homonormativity as “queer anti-urbanism.”

Homonormativity has, therefore, not been a saving grace for all queer folx. According to Thompson (2010), “lesbians from across the country, seeking peace of the growing animosity toward queer sexuality, retreated into the Arkansas hills to construct communities on their own land and on their own terms” (p. 10). Some queer folx in the flint hills area of the US fear discrimination in rural communities, but this does not negate that rurality was an important

aspect of their queer identity or queer community (Haddock 2016). Though migration to urban areas has been important to many queer folx, it is not to all.

## **Cyberqueer**

Queerness has had an important enough relationship to technology, so much so, that it has warranted the term “Cyberqueer” (Wakeford 2000). The cyberqueer is an actor who exists in “[c]yberqueer spaces [which] are necessarily embedded within both institutional and cultural practices, and are a means by which the lesbian/gay/transgendered/queer self can be read into the politics of representation and activism confronting homophobia” (2000. p. 408). The cyberqueer exists in a variety of different formats in cyberspace and cyberspace has acted as a catalyst for queer folx to form communities.

Queerness as it relates to physical geography and cyberspace does not always maintain the distinctiveness of these two spaces. Rather, they can be conceptualized in a hybridized manner, meaning that aspects of physical geography and cyberspace have come together to create new spaces and places. Haraway (2000) imagines a “cyborg manifesto,”<sup>1</sup> “...an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism” (291). In this mythic manifesto, Haraway prophesied a liberatory society in which there is a blurring of boundaries and the construction of new hybrids. Ultimately, such blurring and hybridization have the potential to form new egalitarian ways of being. Wilson (2009) ethotically applies Haraway’s conception of hybridities to understandings of physical geography and cyberspace as space and place: “the larger purpose of this hybridization is to know differently our relationships with nature and technology-- a partial knowing that requires both ontological and epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> Weise (2018) critiques this work for erasing people with disabled bodies such as hers. Weise refers to herself as a true cyborg because of her use of a prosthetic leg.



hybridity” (115). I believe Wilson’s understanding to be imperative to understanding how concepts of cyberspace and physical geography meet in Location Based Social Networking (LBSN) apps.

LBSN apps are virtual apps that utilize cyberspace to aggregate users based on their physical location using geolocativity: the ability for one’s physical location to be identified through the use of one’s cellphone. The hybridization of physical and virtual space and place that is found in LBSN apps creates new opportunities for users to conceptualize space and place (Willynck 2003). This is due to peculiarities of queer LBSN apps. Grindr aggregates diverse sets of people through its locative functioning, “co-situating” them, meaning that Grindr is aggregating users based on their proximity to other users of the app instead of based on their immediate physical area (Blackwell et al 2014). Queer-intended LBSN apps have been attributed to movements of queer spaces from physical locations, such as gay bars, to such apps (Aunspach 2015). These apps have also helped users identify physical areas that have higher concentrations of queer folk, as determined by who is using the apps (Batiste 2013). Roth (2004) also discusses how such apps disembody users through its cyberspace, but then re-embody them through geolocativity, providing additional complexity to this population and how they exist in space and place. Tziallas (2015) asserts that users’ presentation of self (Goffman 1959) for users of queer-intended LBSN apps is one in which they engage in self-pornography as a way earn sexual rewards in what Tziallas (2015) calls, “[g]amified [e]roticism.”

Some studies have examined rural, queer cyberspace, and more particularly, rural use of queer-intended LBSN apps, focusing on the importance of media for how rural queer folk connect with each other and form their identities (Gray 2009). Additionally, there are discussions regarding the discretion of the users of queer intended LBSN apps (Whalen 2017; Lampkin et al

2016; De la Cruz 2017). The literature suggests that users who want anonymity on the app and in their physical geography (Whalen, 2017), are concerned with their sexual health; STI and HIV transmission (Lampkin et al, 2016). Finally, some users form their identities and connections while reifying masculinity, “risky encounters,” and “social (un)belonging” (De la Cruz, 2017). Hardy & Lindtner (2017), in a call for more research regarding rural usage of LBSN apps, examine the experiences of SCRUFF users through a concept they identify as the “desiring user,” in which SCRUFF privileges certain users through its interface and whom the interface caters towards, and rural users are ultimately failed by the privileging of the desiring user. Though there is a developing body of literature regarding rurality and queer-intended LBSN apps, my study fills a methodological hole by conducting a phenomenological study that explicitly asks general questions about users’ conceptions of space and place. This is necessary because users of Grindr and SCRUFF have not explicitly been asked these questions. In doing so, I aim to center the narratives of these rural users and give such users an opportunity to uncover “new life narratives and alternative relations,” to space and place (Halberstam 2005).

## Chapter 3 - Methods

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants over Grindr and SCRUFF's messaging functions. I do so in order to account for the possibility that Grindr and SCRUFF users likely have more complex understandings of space and place when asked in a space and place that has an aspect of cyberspace as well as physical geography. Also, I felt that this avenue was the most effective way to correspond with users, and most conducive for allowing them shared narratives of space and place that may reference their respective geography, cyberspace, and the apps themselves. The five questions that were determined before each interview were variations of the following:

- "What can you tell me about this space and place?"
- "How do you conceptualize space and place?"
- "How do Grindr/SCRUFF users in your space and place talk about such space and place?"
- "What themes, if any, are there regarding how Grindr/SCRUFF users in your space and place talk about such space and place?"
- "How has using Grindr/SCRUFF influenced how you experience your space and place?"
- "How has your space and place influenced how you use Grindr/SCRUFF?"

The five general questions I asked were used as points of entry to discussions of space and place. I then asked follow up questions based on the participants responses. I asked nine of the participants all five of the general questions. I was unable to ask two of the participants all five of the general questions due to the busyness of their schedules. I informed participants

through the informed consent form that they would be referred to as rural users of queer-intended LBSN apps and that questions would not be asked about their gender identity or sexuality. I employed cold-contacting and snowball sampling in order to access participants. Firstly, I utilized cold-contacting then I utilized snowball sampling through my own personal networks. I created a profile that explained that I was a researcher for Kansas State University and was talking to people about their conceptions of space and place. I waited for users to initiate conversations with me. I then asked if they would like to participate, and if they answered affirmatively or asked for more information, I provided them with a picture of the informed consent form and I encouraged them to ask me further questions if they had any. I used this method at five different research sites over the course of a month, in which one rural user became a participant. Due to the low response rate, I, in consultation with my thesis committee, determined that it would be best to use my personal networks to find rural users interested in participating in my study, and conduct my research in their respective site. Through my snowball method nine users agreed to participate and were contacted through a variety of different methods to gauge interest, and then I conducted interviews over Grindr and SCRUFF. Another user decided to participate through the referral of one of the participants from my personal network.

## Chapter 4 - Data & Measurement

My final sample size was 11 participants who lived in rural areas of a midwestern state. Rurality has arbitrary definitions: “[m]any people have definitions for the term rural, but seldom are these rural definitions in agreement. For some, rural is a subjective state of mind. For others, rural is an objective quantitative measure” (La Caille John & Reynnells). I gathered users from areas in which they could see users of other cities, towns, and geographical areas who showed up on their respective apps, but who were still considered close enough by the apps’ algorithm to show up in the participants respective grid of users.

I triple-coded the data. The triple-coding was a method that I developed for the particular data that I had that satisfies Groenewald’s (2004), 5-step method for explicating data for phenomenological studies. Groenewald quotes Hycner (1999) who states “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants.” (p. 156). Additionally, this triple-coding Saldaña’s (2009) method of coding, collapsing codes into categories, and then recoding and recategorizing. First, I examined each interview and pulled out concepts and quotes I believed to be key from responses given by participants. Since I conducted the interviews over the apps’ respective messaging functions, there were additional textual communications regarding how to communicate over the apps, and then a subsequent question, response, question, response pattern. The focus of my first coding was on parsing out content in the form of quotations from the responses given from individual participants. Second, immediately after the first coding of an interview, I collapsed the key concepts and quotes from the interview into themes respective of each user. Third, the themes from the second coding, which still was respective to each user, I organized and collapsed the data to identify general themes across the sample as a whole, as well as idiographic phenomenological themes, which are

themes that are not general findings in the study, but still have empirical importance (Finlay 2012), in order to maintain the narratives of the participants (Jones 1995). To further maintain the narratives and their complexity, I then did a partial examination of the first coding to see if those key concepts and quotes fit multiple themes or were better suited under different themes. I constructed codebooks that maintained the first and second codes under the pseudonym of the respective user, by labeling the level of code and numbering each code. Finally, I made a spreadsheet for the third level of coding with the general themes and which of the first and second codes corresponded with which themes.

I attempted to act as an anthologizer with these methods of coding and reporting results. As an anthologizer, I attempt to maintain the narratives of participants within the contexts that they were used. Anthologizing, I believe, still contains bias. I believe this to be the case because I believe in my anthologizing I am selecting quotations from the entirety of the data. Though I do this attempting to mitigate bias, I think anthologizing as constructing a mosaic. I am still discerning which portions of the data are worthy of notability and where such portions fit in the construction of what I believe to be the narrative and mosaic of the data as a whole. Therefore, I assert there is bias in my coding and reporting, and ultimately in the entire discourse of this paper.

## Chapter 5 - Results

### Connotations of Space & Place

*“In architecture terms, it would be physical space or shelter that serves function for human being, I guess in this case it’s a space on the cloud that allows people to connect through a[n] interface.” -Jei*

Rural users of Grindr and SCRUFF, alike, shared experiencing a variety of connotations of space and place. Upon asking participants the first general question regarding space and place, almost half of the participants asked for clarification. In response, I encouraged these participants to interpret and answer the question in whichever way they saw fit. In this way, all 11 participants interpreted and answer the question in a way that falls into 4 categories: physical space and place; Grindr and SCRUFF as space and place; Grindr, SCRUFF, and the physical as space and place; and space and place as abstractions.

### *Physical Space & Place*

Some interpretations of space and place focused on physical geography. For the three with physical interpretations of space and place they related to characteristics that could be measured within the physical world. Such understanding connotes space place as a “physical spot,” as put by Bee, or “wherever our actual physical presence is at, I suppose,” according to Tee, and in architectural terms for Jei “it would be physical spaces or shelter that serves function for human beings.” For two, space and place have context that regard physical geography as well as relationships, or the lack thereof, to such physical geography. Dee explains that “Space is more of an abstract idea while place is something I have connection to.” Dee says “I can see space literally: as places I don’t visit, empty areas, etc.” Dee’s description is dichotomous; place

as connection, and space as vacancy. Eks has a contrary connotation to Dee's interpretation of place: "A place is a physical location that still has yet to be determined safe, unsafe, neutral."

This type of place can be identified in regard to its physical geography, but not its safety.

#### *Grindr & SCRUFF as Space and Place*

For one respondent, Si, space and place is related to Grindr in which Si says "this space and place... I'd say is overrated and people are under appreciated." Si, still, wanting to participate in the study, did not offer any additional understandings of space and place.

#### *Grindr, SCRUFF, & the Physical as Space and Place*

Five of these rural-users had consciously multiplicative conceptions of space, whereas they mentioned how Grindr and/SCRUFF interact with physical geography. Ef, En, and Aych discuss the difference between the space and place of Grindr and SCRUFF, but have some different connotations of each. Ef says "the men on Grindr rarely show their faces and usually want nsa [(no strings attached)] hookups. SCRUFF has many guys like that, but tends more towards men willing to show their faces and looking for more serious relationships." En's conception is similar to Ef's regarding looking for more serious relationships, but includes additional qualifiers. En says SCRUFF "seems to attract a certain type [and] those who like that type... Seems to not be as hook up as [Grindr]." "Rugged type... beard, hairy, outdoor, not effeminate." "Leather guys... like wearing leather, blue collar look, can be into kink." Aych uses SCRUFF to avoid the "hyper masculine" and other exclusionary characteristics which Aych identifies, saying "I don't want to be [a part] of that space." Aych states "I use SCRUFF because there are more users who are less jock and [twink] like Grindr where I have just had a terrible experience."



Jei's interpretation has a multiplicative understanding of Grindr and physical geography. Jei, having an architectural understanding of space and place, also says "I guess in this case it's a space on the cloud that allows people to connect through an interface." Kei, Dee, and En also make comparisons regarding Grindr and/or SCRUFF and physical space and place, but do not explicitly connote these queer-intended LBSN apps or the physical as space and place. For Kei, Grindr is an app to "get away" from Kei's physical space which is "sheltered and traditional." Dee sees the app as providing place for a lacking gay community respective to Dee's physical space and place: "I feel like there is no explicit gay community in [this state]. Grindr is the only place where I feel a sense of connection with other gays. If I didn't have Grindr then I'd feel very isolated." Aych, similarly, respective to Aych's physical space and place, uses SCRUFF as an "avenue:" "not really knowing how to find other people." En discusses how Grindr or SCRUFF will have more prominence depending on the city.

#### *Space and Place as Personal Boundaries and Safe Space*

For two users, space has a particular connotation of safety and boundaries. Bee, in addition to believing place to be physical, believes "[s]pace can be more abstract. As in 'don't invade my space'. That [could] still be a physical space surrounding a person, or it could be don't get in my business. Don't speak for me when I'm capable of it myself. At work, do your job, stay away from mine." Bee, regarding queer-intended LBSN apps, emphasizes that "sex is secondary to an emotional and mental connection. When someone pushes that envelope, i.e. sending nude photos before even saying hi, my space had been invaded or violated." Eks, in a similar vein to the importance of Bee's boundaries, discusses space as safe space: "Grindr should be considered a safe place," but the safety of Grindr "is depend[e]nt on who you attempt to interact with."

Space and place for 3 of these users were contingent on the networks constructed through connections of themselves to others. Ef describes this by saying “I would conceptualize space and place as primarily the people you interact with on a regular basis in a given area, including their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes.” Tee says of space and place, “the medium or way I’m holding the conversation with someone as the actual place, as opposed to me being in my house or office, and whomever I’m communicating with being wherever they are physically located. Almost as if holding a conversation online puts us in the same space, so to speak.” For Ef and Tee, connection to others and the experiences and ideas they respectively hold is what constructs space and place. Dee, discusses space contrarily, but with ethotic similarity, to this idea of connections, and views space as the vacancy, “separation between myself and other people or places.”

Idiographically, Kyoo also had a multifaceted understanding of space and place, saying, “I’d say any environment could be conceptualized as space and place. It doesn’t have to be a room with four walls and a ceiling. Grindr is a space and place just as [this town] is a space and place. Even my inner consciousness is a space and place...Anywhere you can focus your consciousness.”

### **The Intentions vs. the Actuality of Grindr and SCRUFF**

*“[Grindr] is a hookup site. Anything else one may acquire from Grindr is a happy accident” - Eks*

In the discussions of space and place by these rural users, distinctions were made by the users indicating what these apps were intended to be, according to their respective creators, and what the apps actually are used for. For these users, sex was a major use of these apps, and these apps were coined as places and spaces that were used for finding “hookups.” Though users

attribute hookup culture to be a primary discourse of these apps, some also found that these apps could be used for finding community.

### *Actually About Sex*

Conceptualization of space and place does not sufficiently the ways in which users of these spaces and places actually utilized and interacted on such spaces. The most explicit iteration of the intentions versus actualization of space and place is expressed by Eks regarding Grindr: “Grindr is an app intended for connecting gay and queer identifying people. It has the ability to connect a diverse population in many different dialogues but is primarily a dating/hookup site.” and confirmation of its primary use as the actualization, “Grindr is a hookup site.” “Anything else one may acquire from Grindr is a happy accident.” Many of the rural-users mention the component of hook ups or sexual relations, some to different degrees. Jei moralizes the sexualization of Grindr by saying “Grindr is definitely somewhere that consist[s] of [the] dark side of humanity. It’s beyond a dating app.” “[O]ften we can see that photos and description are used very intentionally to fulfill sexual desire.” Additionally, Jei believes that the structure of Grindr facilitates this fulfillment asking users to show “the info of [sexual] position preference[s].” Furthermore, the actualization is sex without rules. Jei says Grindr is “almost like a space with no limitation and rules. People do whatever they like... They might think greeting with a nude is a good idea. Or they might be not so respectful but go straight to ask[ing] for [a] sexual request.” It will “exaggerate people’s desire and allows people to speak the darkest idea or thoughts. But it’s norm if it happens inside of the app or space.” Jei attributes this norm to the potential anonymity of users of Grindr, saying “[i]t almost allows people to go straight to ‘business’ and get what they want instantly.”

Eks realized that “[it] forces you to not take anyone seriously. I’ve had a handful of very positive encounters, but they are not the norm. Nothing has resulted in friendships or romantic relationships.” Ultimately, Eks concludes that “I don’t think [G]rindr brings people together the way it could[,]” despite “an effort in [Grindr’s] social media to sort of combat that.”

### *Actually, Not All About Sex*

The point is made by users that not everything on these apps is related to sex. Eks has conversed with other users, Jei “by meeting and talking to people... [realized] there is so many ways to live ur life and so many decision[s] for you to make.” For some, the actualization of these apps is in its ability to connect to other queer folx. It acts as a way to meet queer folx for Dee, Aych, and Ef, and space and place for Tee to just meet people: “keeping me occupied with conversations that I normally would not be having. It helps fill that social void in my life.” “I don’t think I would use [Grindr] at all if I had the face to face connections and friendships.” Uniquely to Bee, SCRUFF has been “a way to educate [other users] about living with HIV.”

HIV education for Bee looks like educating “guys who just want to know what it’s like,” if Bee is “desirable” due to Bee’s status, “behavior, both past and future,” and education on “PEP (post exposure prophylactic)” and “TAP (treatment as prevention).”

Tee and Ef are able to find nuance in their declared spaces and places of connection. Tee still finds connections outside of “sexual invitation, and exchanging pictures... there are the small handful that agree with me that you can make real friends and have deep connections that are not always sexual.” Ef says “[it] has made me more aware of both the number of gay/bisexual men near me as well as their diversity. Not so much racial/ethnic diversity as diversity in how... queer men present themselves.” People that have interacted with Eks “face to face” will ignore Eks on Grindr.

## **The Presentation of Self on Grindr and SCRUFF**

*“I would conceptualize space and place as primarily the people you interact with on a regular basis in a given area, including their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes.” -Ef*

How users of Grindr and SCRUFF present themselves on these apps is a prominent theme for 8 of the 11 rural users. If space and place are defined by some users as the networks and connections of people, it makes sense why presentation of self is salient to users (Goffman 1956) of Grindr (and Scruff?). Such discussions of presentation are discussed by users in how they regard themselves, and how they regard the rural-users they have potential to connect with on Grindr and/or SCRUFF. These discussion regard duplicity, anonymity, and authenticity.

Duplicity of presentation of self has to do with interactions that the rural-users have with the same people in both these apps and in physical space and place. Kei says “[it’s] honestly a bizarre dynamic people you have met in person at a college party or something will pop up on Grindr but they won’t be themselves till on Grindr and they most of the time won’t meet u because they think they will be outted since u have already met them. People are so different on here they are more aggressive and sexual here but in person often qui[et] and shy.”

For Bee, the duplicitousness centers around sex and lack of boundaries. Bee, discusses sexualization in physical interactions as it differs to receiving unsolicited nude pictures from other users: “[i]f you’re chatting up a guy at a bar, he’s not likely to take his clothes off mid conversation. Of course, he might get physically affectionate without being invited, which can’t happen [online]. Either way, if I’m not interested, I say so. If they don’t act appropriately, the conversation ends.” Jei and Kyoo attribute experiences akin to Bee’s to be due to anonymity. Jei says “People can hide their identity... By using fake pic[tures] or profile[s] without face [pictures.] Even like my torso profile [picture]... So they won’t be responsible for what they say.”

“In daily conversations, expressing sexual desire as conversation [openers] is not common. But it is in Grindr.” “[A] face to face conversation would expose ur identity and make it harder to say [somethings] compare[d] to hid[ing] behind [a] screen and send[ing] some messages or requests.” Kyoo says, “[i]t’s easy to do those things when you aren’t face to face with someone.” “He might think twice about [insulting me] in person because I could always lash out and punch him in the face. You can’t punch through an iPhone.” Kyoo thinks that “[t]here are no major immediate negative consequences when chatting via Grindr,” Kyoo still says, “[a]t least ostensibly there are no consequences,” in which Kyoo worries about the health consequences of those who are insulted for their weight.

Anonymity was mentioned by Kei and Eks, both indicating that anonymity is a commodity on Grindr. Kei suggests that “[t]aking your face out of the pic” “[m]akes yourself seem more discreet in my community gets you more convos and sexual [encounters].” Kei believes this is so because “they don’t seem out,” meaning that they are not publicly open about using Grindr. Eks personal experience says “I almost get more attention on [G]rindr when I don’t have a profile picture up.” Kyoo, also explains how anonymity could be personally meaningful to users: “it’s easier to explore parts of your sexuality that may be deemed taboo by society when you’re able to do so anonymously.”

Anonymity only has importance for some. Others believe that authenticity is essential for engaging in space and place. For Bee and Aych being authentic on these apps as well as in physical space and place is essential. Bee describes Bee as “pretty plain spoken. I make my position clear and go from there.” And also says “I react to people pretty much the same [online] as in person.” Aych says “I live my life’s space and place the same as on S[CRUFF]. Real about who I am and my intentions. As well as respecting differences of ppl.” Aych uses SCRUFF

specifically because “there is a more genuine connection with folks who are less mainstream,” and this comes from personal values that place emphasis on honesty and reciprocity: “I would want someone to be honest with me so I present myself this way.” Authenticity strikes such importance for Aych because “[t]o be my authentic self is important for me because it took me [awhile] to get here and I like it. It also allows me to support others in finding their authentic selves.” While authenticity has internal rewards for those who find it imperative, Eks wonders if there is an external reward for those aspiring to authenticity: “how level of a playing field- how safe of a space it is to really meet another person who is also trying to be authentic.” Eks question rings true to Kei who, regardless of desired presentation of self, feels objectified: “[j]ust the constant view of being seen as an object sometimes wears me down.” Eks attributes this to users not being authentic and replies to such users saying “that’s just what to expect from men who aren’t comfortable with themselves yet.”

### **The Script of Space & Place**

*“Grindr[r]... easy hook up.” “S[CRUFF]...depends.” “Different cities favor one [or] the other.” “Perhaps [due to] the culture of the gay community... Culture... The values norms and accepted and rejected behavior of each gay community.” -En*

Some rural users within my sample discuss the unique presentations of self for users of Grindr and SCRUFF, so it is unsurprising that they also identify unique scripts for existing and interacting other users on Grindr and SCRUFF. These scripts regard conversations and presentations that use these apps to seek out sexual encounters, scripts regarding deprecation of rural users who decline sexual invitations, scripts of how “blocking” is used on these apps, and how Grindr and SCRUFF have scripts that differ from one another.

“[P]laying field” is one of the conceptions mentioned by Eks about how Grindr functions like game play. With rural-users suggest that there is a script to how to navigate these spaces and places. This script, however, is more so defined by what is actually occurring in interactions, opposed to what should be occurring. For En, Jei, Tee, and Eks, there is a particular “script,” according to Eks, that is associated with being “fast tracked to a sexual encounter” via Grindr and SCRUFF. Jei says “For gay guys[, it] seems like getting into personal information for the first few chats or meetup is not so offensive and weird.” Tee discusses the term “looking?” as a cultural term related to this script: “[y]ou will get a message that contains that one word: ‘looking?’, meaning are you looking for sex, because they are.” En describes the script and criteria used to determine if En will have sexual relations with someone: “[d]epends on who hits me up, my mood, his look and how he want[s] to have sex[:] [a]ggressive or intimate...Depends on my mood and desire.” En’s criteria is focused on disposition, but also the revelation of the other users physical presentation as well as the menu of sexual preferences to be considered. Tee states the script within the syntactic context of space and place by saying Grindr is a “place for sexual invitation, and exchanging pictures.”

The script for when Tee declines a sexual invitation is met with insults: “[t]he reason I think they insult me is because after I tell them No, thank you. I’m not looking, they then usually make a comment putting down my physical appearance as if they were showing me some form of pity or mercy in asking me to hook up.” This insulting script has consequences for Tee, “It reminds me why I keep to myself and don’t actually meet anyone, haha (laughing and crying face emoji).” Similarly, Kyoo outlines the insults regarding body weight: “[h]e told me I was overweight (obviously I’m aware of this lol) and called me ‘fatty patty.’” Kyoo figures this as an “obvious move,” and attributes it to “[f]ragile masculinity” saying, “[h]e felt entitled.” “He



didn't get what he wanted-- his dick sucked." Similar to Tee's analysis Kyoo also mentions "[h]e said he was going to do me a favor by letting me blow him. This was after he got upset." Eks also recounts, "I can be blocked outright. I can be ignored. I can get small talk that doesn't advance any type of relationship. I can get interest in meeting for sex."

Blocking is a theme that arose from the counts of Bee, Tee, and Eks and is used to remove a user from being able to see your profile and contacting you through Grindr. Bee utilizes blocking for persistent violators of space and place, such as sending nude photos. Tee and Kyoo will block the users who insult their physical appearance for declining sexual invitations. Both of which are means to cease the harassment that these users face. In addition to blocking to cease harassment, Eks will block users based on the information listed in a user's profile, "If someone says they are only interested in talking to guys of a certain age, if they are only interested in white guys. If they don't want anyone effeminate. Some peop[l]e will block someone for not having a profile picture. I'm not there yet."

The script is also contingent on space and place, and Aych, Ef, and En think that Grindr and SCRUFF are notably different from one another. For En, one of the notable differences between Grindr and SCRUFF can be identified through the script of how SCRUFF users fill in their bios: "[w]hen you look at how [SCRUFF] guys look [and] describe themselves it's different than [G]rind[r] guys:" "Outdoor," "Scruff/beard," "Hairy," "Muscle," "Masculine." These descriptors outlined by En are also referential of identities held by these users.

In addition to the use of blocking, Kyoo mitigates negative aspects of the space and place of Grindr by trying to think about insults related to physical appearance as a "lack of intellect," and an "obvious move," saying, "I would be more insulted if my character was being attacked."

## **Identities, Hegemony, & Solidarity on Grindr & SCRUFF**

*“[W]e are almost like ultra marginalized by general heteronormative society, and by [our] own ‘community so it’s like a sub-community feel. It is more genuine in context... In the conversations they are more deep asking about work, school, checking in, more than ‘nice shoes, want to fuck’ type thing.” -Aych*

In addition to Grindr and SCRUFF’s marketing as apps that intend to serve queer folk (Grindr; SCRUFF), these rural users have nuanced understandings of identities and demographics, both as part of queer culture and subculture, as well as within general discussions of hegemony. Having understood the intricacies of the space and place of rural-users, it is imperative to discuss how such spaces and places relate to our identities in society and the queer-community and how Grindr and SCRUFF build solidarity, but also how they reflect ubiquitous hegemony within its own microcosm. In contrast to earlier themes that discuss anonymity and the erasure of identity, rural users within my sample discuss identities such as age, race, and weight which are part of the general discourse of demographics in the US, while also discussing identities that regard queer subcultures. Two users even argue that Grindr and SCRUFF serve different types of identities within queer subculture. Ultimately, these users discuss

The rural users within my study identify with a variety of different identities, “old,” “overweight,” “effeminate,” “black,” among other identities. Within the narratives of these users, identity is discussed in different ideations: personally claiming identity, indicating how they perceive others view their identities, identities they associate with, and identifying against identities (i.e., pointing out identities that they do not identify with), and subsequently discussing their experience as the outgroup to the identities they do not identify with. Eks and Bee identify

with particular identities. Eks identifies as a “black effeminate [m]an,” “overweight,” a “drag personality,” and “older.” Bee also identifies as an “older gay man,” and discusses Bee’s age throughout Bee’s interview.

Aych’s experience with Grindr and SCRUFF are influenced by discourses of identities. Aych’s aversion to Grindr is because of Grindr’s proclivity “to be a more hyper masculine space. And profiles saying, ‘no fats or fems’ ‘no (list specific race),’ and masc for masc.” Aych does not “want to be [a part] of that space.” Kyoo discusses the exclusion of identities, partially attributable to “[f]ragile masculinity.” Kyoo focuses on fears of “fat shaming.” Having been insulted about Kyoo’s weight, Kyoo says “I’m not even that fat and I encounter situations one might refer to as ‘fat shaming’... I worry more for people who are bigger than I am. It can’t be healthy to be constantly berated and shit on for being [o]verweight.” Though not explicitly identifying masculinity as an issue, Si says “I just think most people on here are here for the most superficial form of men you can try to get. And the guys that aren’t ripped or have a little fat on them are glanced over.” Superficial being “guys with 6-8 pack abs, no fat at all on their body, 10 inch dicks. The ‘whole package.’” Ef identifies against these identities, but in a different manner than Aych, particular realizing that there were other identities that did fall under “stereotypes:” “[w]hen I was in the closet I would sometimes wonder if I would ever be able to fit in with other gay men. But seeing that queer people have just as diverse of interests as straight people was a relief.” Kyoo, however, believes that Grindr and “[a]pps like these are stigmatized” and using Grindr “perpetuates the stereotypes against gay men but it [is] also good” but mitigates the embarrassment felt from using the apps by “mostly jok[ing] about it...Or downplay[ing] it.”

Structurally, Ef mentions that “[s]ocial views” determine “social atmosphere,” in Ef’s discussing of conservatism in Ef’s respective physical space and place, as well as well as more

diverse views. Kei and Eks discuss how physical geography determines interactions on Grindr. Eks says “geographic location and demographics always play a huge factor in lgbt culture... liv[ing] in the midwest. This is a predominantly white, predominantly rural community.” Aych and Eks explicitly mention how systemic marginalization of identities plays into the use of Grindr explicitly. Eks describes how “[y]oung (18-25 [y/o]), white, still questioning and experimenting, into athletic or slender body types, [are] able to blend into society and not be marginalized on site.” Aych explains marginalization and being marginalized by others within Aych’s community: “we are almost like ultra marginalized by general heteronormative society, and by ou[r] own ‘community’ so it’s like a sub-community feel.” Aych is referring to a “sub-community” of “bears, trans, gender non-conforming, and other people who don’t fit the standard [type of] ‘jock,’ ‘twink,’ and ‘young.’”

Though there is an obvious discussion of structural hegemony and its microcosmic presence in Grindr and SCRUFF, Aych and Ef believe there is solidarity to be found. Aych says regarding the authenticity of SCRUFF, “S[CRUFF] seems to cater a bit more to the less mainstream. With woofing being a bit of play on the pup community I think.” Ef says “it is still not hard to find people of many different backgrounds in terms of race, religion, political belief, and especially nationality. I personally enjoy the diversity because I feel that it makes it easier for anyone to find a place where they are welcome.”

## Chapter 6 - Discussion

Within this one phenomenological study, these users have identified many themes from previous research, as well as new conceptions of space and place. First, Within Kyoo, Aych, Si, and Eks' narratives there are discussions that align with Halberstam's "homonormativity" concept, that is, the ideal type of gay men perpetuated in queer culture (Halberstam 2005; Munoz 1998; Herring 2007) and the "desiring user" (Hardy & Lindtner 2017). Homonormativity discusses the gay white men who migrate from rural areas to urban areas and are seen as the dominant representation of gay men within the discourse of what queerness is supposed to look like. Desiring user applies a similar concept of homonormativity to SCRUFF and suggests that these apps function best for people who fit homonormative standards and/or desiring users and particularly discusses how this fails rural users of SCRUFF who do not fit these images themselves and/or do not wish to meet others to fit or enact these images.

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life as a seminal understanding of how sociology is imagined in our everyday interactions was central to many users' explanations about their experiences on Grindr and SCRUFF- both in how they present themselves and their reactions to how others on the apps present themselves (Goffman 1959). Jei and Eks are the only users who explicitly mention how they have presented themselves differently on Grindr than in their everyday lives. Specifically, Jei's discussion of their torso picture as a profile picture, and the discussion about how Eks receives more responses when Eks does not have a profile picture displayed. Jei mentioning torso pics and other methods of akin presentation has potential to align with the concept of self-pornification of users as outlined by Tziallas (2015). The rest of the discussion of presentation of self is participants describing how other people utilize presentation

of self to achieve certain ends. Particularly for Kei, Aych, Dee, user's space and place are often constructed through relations to people and their respective ideologies.

The third theme in my study that aligns with prior work is how queer-intended LBSN apps can serve as sites of queer community. Aunspach (2015) discusses how queer communities have shifted from physical spaces and places, such as gay bars, to queer-intended LBSN apps. In my study, Dee, Eks, and Aych discuss these apps as such communal spaces, and describe them as such due to the lack of queer spaces and places within their respective physical spaces and places and assert that using Grindr and SCRUFF are one of the only ways to connect with queer folk.

Finally, prior research discusses the relationship between sexual health and queer-intended LBSN apps. HIV, though idiosyncratic mentioned within the study, is part of the discourse for at least one participant. For Bee, HIV is a notable subject for conversation and is used in a relational and humanizing way. Bee is an educator of sorts regarding sexual practices that mitigate the spread of STI's and has honest conversation about Bee's status and the subsequent desirability.

While there is confirmation of previous scholarship, my study also indicates that rural users of LGBTQ-intended apps have other interests/concerns than raised by prior work. First, contrary to Roth's argument that SCRUFF disembodies users through the cyberspace of the app, but then again embodying them through the geolocativity of the LBSN app, my users did not mention experiencing the apps in these ways (Roth 2014). Though this is a compelling argument by Roth, I maintain the narratives of the participants in asserting that such discussion of embodiment were not explicitly mentioned by users in my sample.

Additionally, unlike studies such as the ones conducted by Hardy & Lindtner (2017), Batiste (2013), and Aunspach (2015), which form theoretical frameworks through content analyses which are not deeply explicated within their studies regarding how they carried out their content analyses. Subsequently, these content analyses are used to frame the interview portions of their studies (Batiste 2013; Hardy & Lindtner 2017), this study works in an opposite manner. Picking a population and a general research question and lets participants tell me, the researcher, what matters to them. This method yields narratives that are less strictly affirming or demeaning of queer populations, but rather discuss the ambivalence of these users' experiences on the apps of Grindr and SCRUFF.

What is not expressed in the review of previous literature is a phenomenological approach to conceptions of space and place for rural users of Grindr and SCRUFF. What is yielded from such phenomenology is an unanticipated understanding of the relational structures formed on and through Grindr and SCRUFF as space and place, and how they interact with physical space and place, and through these narratives we learn that Grindr and SCRUFF are distinct spaces and places that serve different functions and different users, according to these rural users. I identified themes by organizing the rural users' narratives of space and place as they inductively arose from the semi-structured interviews and as they were analyzed, coded, and organized by the interpretations of a queer researcher: myself.

In my phenomenological study I find there to several instances that could be limitations to my research. Most of the users who participated in this research were gathered from my personal network. I reached out to these acquaintances because cold contacting people on these apps was largely unsuccessful in a variety of different rural areas. Ultimately, cold contacting only yielded one participant. Respondents were not asked demographic information such as

gender, race, ethnicity age, sexuality, or socioeconomic class. I made this decision based on the secrecy that some people have regarding their gender and sexual identities, and/or nonheteronormative behaviors and wanting to respect such secrecy. I then applied the omission of all demographic questions and feel ambivalent about opting for such omission. Identity was a salient theme within my research and those who expressed disenfranchisement attributed it to their identities that are oppressed by the general US society. Asking demographic questions could have been useful for comparative purposes, but ultimately would not have addressed the emerging themes of identities related to age, HIV status, body type, and queer subcultural identities. I conducted interviews over messaging functions of the apps. I strongly believe in the importance of conducting this research over the apps messaging functions to arguably situate myself as the researcher, and the users in the spaces and places of Grindr and SCRUFF. My decision to interview in this way allowed for time-lapses in responses, misspelling, and additional messaging exchanges to clarify the meaning of written responses made by myself and the users. Making my profile information state that I am queer and interviewing users of a queer-intended LBSN app, resulted in me taking knowledge and language specific to queer subculture for granted. In this way, I often did not ask these users to define queer subcultural terms.

There are, however, promises of the phenomena that I present in my research. Promises of a conceptually valid phenomenon through phenomenological methods, many conceptual formations that were unexpected and surprising to me, and a rigorous attempt to maintain the narratives and responses of participants, including concepts that were not anticipated by me, and including them as relevant to the research on space and place for rural users of queer-intended LBSN apps. In this way, the findings suggest that researchers should really take to heart



Halberstam's prophecy that queerness' attractiveness is partially due to its new relations to time and place. Let us go forth and not assume the phenomena that queerness intentionally subverts.

The phenomenon discovered is not in affective consensus, and more of an ambivalence. Kyoo describes the experience of Grindr as a theme that is summative of this study, "you've kinda gotta take the good with the bad," and for Kyoo, "I do feel like the good outweighs the bad."

## Chapter 7 - Conclusion

There is a variety of connotations of space and place, and this is reflected in the narratives of rural users of queer-intended LBSN apps. Regardless whether this is conceptualized as physical, virtual, both, or otherwise, the conceptions of space and place by these rural-users center around the networks of such users to others. In the context of Grindr and SCRUFF, these apps' interfaces act as the catalyst for networks of rural-users to other users. The networks are contingent on the identity of users and the presentation of self and are not always actualized in ways the users believe the apps were intended to be. Ultimately, the networks of Grindr and Scruff have different social constructions regarding who utilizes them, how they are connoted, what the script of the respective apps are, and how these factors either build solidarity or reinforce hegemony. The payoff for me centering the narratives of, potentially, queer folx is rich. In doing so, I was able to design a study in light of previous scholarship of previous and contribute to this emerging body of literature in a new, phenomenological way. I believe we should expect populations, who may identify as queer, to continue to change what we understand about the empirical world through nuance and subversion, particularly as they relate to time and space and place. Even for me, a queer researcher, they challenged my understandings and conceptions of space and place.

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