

(Grindr, 2022)

**The Grindr grid:**  
**Exploring how masculinities are visually and linguistically**  
**constructed on the World's largest gay social networking and dating**  
**app.**

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## Abstract

This study examined the world's largest gay social networking and dating app, Grindr (Grindr, 2022). This work highlights how visual mediums- profile pictures, and linguistic descriptions- biographical descriptions, are constructed showing a spectrum of masculinities. Using hegemonic masculinity as an ideological framework, emphasis was placed on how users of Grindr visually construct their profile pictures through masculinity markers and composition, in order to self-present.

Self-presentation in this study is linked to desire, communication and objectification as Grindr is situated in the digital paradigm of hook-up culture, which merges offline and online intimacies. Linguistic investigation was applied to understand how users communicate preferences, self-presentation, and desires.

By employing a content analysis to investigate the diversity of presentations and visually significant symbols, I analysed how the body is used in a process of sexualisation through the (in)visibility of intimacies, whilst body types, facial disclosure and activity in the profile picture gave rise to multiplicity in self-presentation styles. There was a dominance in the hypermasculine presentation, visually presented by topless, athletic bodies. Presentations were intensified by linguistic choices, whereby users sought to communicate their masculinity through gym references as well as the blatant use of the word masculine. Ties to heterosexuality were also observed, whereby homonormativity was used as a marker of acceptable masculinity performance, expressed through the body and linguistics.

This study finds that Grindr is a unique dating application that offers sexual fulfilment and connection through the layering of queer mobility in heteronormativity environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Grindr is “the world’s largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans and queer people” (Grindr, 2022). When a user opens the Grindr app, they are presented with an arrangement of profile pictures that display users’ first profile pictures structured by proximity- The Grindr grid. Grindr is a social networking site (SNS) that combines gay dating functionality with networking accessibilities that allow users to connect locally, nationally, and worldwide (Grindr, 2022). The app has been hailed as liberating the gay dating scene, whilst also criticised as fuelling the demise of homosexual spaces such as bars and clubs (Conner, 2019; Musto, 2016). The application allows for anyone who signs up to connect with other likeminded people, creating a profile and messaging others who identify as LGBTQ+.

Scholarly discourse that surrounds gay dating apps has demonstrated how mainstream hegemonic standards of masculinity, that are projected by the media and ingrained into body image, are reified on Grindr (Rodriguez et al, 2016; Conner, 2019). This has psychosocial implications that juxtapose Grindr as an important space that counters minority stresses experienced in heteronormative environments, therefore I wished to investigate *How masculinities are visually and linguistically constructed on Grindr*.

The application organises profiles in ascending order based on GPS coordinates and the geographical proximity to the user, which gives each user a unique experience (Abbott et al, 2015 & Anderson et al, 20). By looking at the collective visual data that is presented on the Grindr grid, I was able to see how collective queer identity informs micro-level choices in self-presentation. User experiences must be cogitated in order to understand Grindr presentations. Explorations of how users choose to construct their identity have led me to recognise that the

Grindr experience is intensely sexually motivated, with heteronormative masculine ideologies fuelling a culture of objectification, desire, and instant gratification.

By conducting a content analysis, I use profile pictures and biographical descriptions as texts to uncover how masculinities are presented through visual and linguistic choices. Furthermore, my content analysis enabled me to understand how gay males use their body and compositional form to construct symbols of power, desire, and intimacy. These symbols are articulated on a virtual space, leading to the eroticisation of images; Asking: *What features do people use to present masculinity in the photographic elements of their profile picture?* As well as *How do users present themselves in their profile picture through compositional photographic elements?*

Grindr's possibilities have not been fully recognised, writes Turkle (2011). By exploring identity choices and the flourishing culture on Grindr, I can contribute to the field of research that illuminates minority perspectives, generating greater understanding of the psychosocial effects of Grindr as well as how it could be utilised to address sexual awareness and minority anxieties. By directing my research towards visual and linguistic data, I recognise how users make linguistic claims to support the visual elements of their profile, something that intensifies the presentation of identity; Asking: *What language do people use to communicate their self-description and preferences in their profile?*

Grindr is a distinctive space which allows for the unequivocal expression of sexual activity, which has been labelled 'hook-up culture', in contrast to this, diverse utilisation of the app can be drawn out from the visual and linguistic texts (Rodriguez et al, 2016). I have asked: *How does the time of the day affect the way people use Grindr?* To illuminate whether presentations on the app are bound with time.

By investigating these questions, I understand how Grindr reconfigures everyday lives, with a focus on how people's bodies, spaces and technologies are comprised on the application (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Chen, 2015).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Masculinity theory and Grindr masculinities**

A prominent scholar in masculinity theory, Connell (1993), wrote about the construction of the masculine identity as being a reproduction of the gender order, with masculinity presented in early childhood by the family. Homosexuality is perceived as a negation of masculinity, finds Connell (1992), gay people are oppressed but not omitted from masculinity, where they face conflicts between their sexual object preferences and their relationships with straight men and women. Connell (1995, p.77) focuses on hegemonic masculinities, which “guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”. Pertinently, the subordination of homosexual men has been seen through political and cultural exclusion, violence, and discrimination (Connell, 1995). Rodriguez et al. (2016) see this process of hegemonic masculinity as effecting networked masculinities, which they define as a macro-level process, informing micro level inclusive masculinity. By focussing on hegemonic masculinity effects, Rodriguez et al. (2016) find that users reinforce their networked masculinity by seeking masculine partners, reinforcing a masculine elite on Grindr, which extends to the gay community.

Rodriguez et al. (2016) see men on gay dating apps as displaying themselves as an advertisement, whereby masculine indicators are used to reify the masculinity of the users and their desired partners (2016). Rodriguez et al.’s (2016, p.256) textual analysis study finds that the word ‘masculine’ is used to convey ideal gender presentation, both for users and their partners. By using the word masculine regularly, an ‘appropriate’ gender performance is communicated as an expectation for partners, highlighting that language ‘does’ gender (Jones, 2016).



Masculinity is seen as way in which “men position themselves through discursive practices”, not a type of person (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 p.841). This is important as it highlights the efforts in presenting as masculine. Researchers suggest that hegemonic norms are used strategically by men in specific circumstances, as well as having numerous configurations (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). This shows norms and expectations are constructed by users on Grindr, whereby masculinities are played out visually and linguistically in more rigid ways, as well as highlighting the favouring of hyper-masculinities and the stigmatisation of feminine masculinities (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017).

‘Masc4Masc’ is a particularly important phenomenon on gay dating apps that describes the dominant preference for masculine men by users who deem themselves masculine on gay SNS (social network sites). Research has found that ‘Masc4Masc’ culture is presented through profiles that emphasise their masculinity and physical fitness (Miller, 2015). This is seen as a projection whereby gay men reject the notions that they are ridiculed for, e.g., being feminine, and therefore try to “seek validation in a way that directly opposes stereotypes and ostracizations associated with male queerness” (Corrall, 2019, p.1).

Femmephobia has been researched in terms of partner selection, looking at anti-effeminate language on Grindr. Findings from an online experiment showed that users who had stronger anti-effeminate attitudes were more likely to find a femmephobic profile as sexually self-confident and rated the user as masculine (Miller & Morawitz, 2016). This shows how femmephobic language can affect sexual desire and masculinity perception, as well as highlighting how desires for offline interactions are informed by linguistic choices. However, research on Grindr profiles in Tel Aviv found that users oppose hegemonic masculinities through

visual presentations of a more feminine self, showing a variation of gender expression (Katz, 2020).

Reinforcing Miller's (2015) ideas, Rodriguez et al (2016) find an emphasis on the sexual and athletic functions of the body in Grindr profiles, whereby there is masculine hierarchical negotiation, with men placing emphasis on gym use and athletic ability. This links to Connell's idea that masculinity archetypes are positioned on a hierarchy, with sport helping establish and sustain a man's power within this masculine hierarchy (Connell, 2005; Rodriguez et al, 2016). Payne's (2007, p.526) research finds users use the term 'straight acting' which conveys performative actions linked with heterosexuality, seeing this as emphasising the "conventional aesthetics and bodily valorisation ... of hegemonic masculinity".

Using the online disinhibition framework, Miller (2015) shows how users frame their own masculinity, femininity, race, and body type/fitness level through visual and linguistical profile components. Through their content analysis, Miller (2015) found anti-effeminacy in profiles, with pro-masculine attitudes in profile language. Men who represented their body linguistically in their profile supported this self-presentation with "visual documents of fitness" (Miller, 2015, p.649). Many men referring to fitness levels and self-descriptions of their hypermasculine self-presentation can be seen on Grindr both linguistically and visually.

The above-cited research therefore shows that there is a complexity to the masculinity spectrum of identities on Grindr, which highlights an interrelation of homosexuality and heterosexuality in a digital space, whereby users prioritise white, masculine, straight acting partners, reinforcing the supremacy of the toned, muscular visual - the masculine elite (Rodriguez et al, 2016).

Previous research has indicated sexualised, racialised language attached to racial stigma on Grindr (Han, 2008 & Katz, 2020). Miller (2015) found that 3% of users communicated their racial preference, this was through positive discrimination, communicating preference of certain races. However, Miller (2015) marks this as still erasing other races from user preference, therefore racial stigma is still perpetuated, identifying the failings of the Grindr network. Miller (2015) finds that gay men have created a racial hierarchy which has positioned white men at the top and Asian men at the bottom. This is due to white men seeing Asian men as possessing feminine traits, therefore subverting masculine norms (Han et al, 2014). This reinforces that there are clear discourses of masculinity and femininity at play on men who have sex with men (MSM) networks that centre around discrimination and exclusion of bodies. Payne (2016, p.22) identifies this as “relations of power conducive to racial otherness”.

## 2.2. Features of Grindr.

Research on Grindr has illuminated many different facets of how the app is utilised by a range of people, although research is sporadic in academic literature, there is still thought-provoking investigations of the application. Bonner Thompson (2017) applies digital geography theory to Grindr, which focusses on how locative apps augment our behaviour through infrastructures that mandate our surroundings (University of Exeter, 2020). What Bonner-Thompson (2017) is writing about here is Grindr's relationship with locative functions and user manipulation in self-presentation. Research has mainly focussed on the convergence of homosexual digital spaces and heterosexual physical spaces, with location at the centre of this focus (Fisher, 2015).

Grindr provides a virtual setting that physically expands and shrinks with the concentration of users (Abbott et al., 2015). Abbott et al. (2015, p.1121) show that geography is “the primary determinant of visibility to others”, highlighting how geography informs the structure of the app, as well as how boundaries are difficult to discern on the app due to its ever-changing organisation. This means that strangers can meet without the concern of identifying places or contacts. Bumgarner (2013, no pagination) states that because of Grindr's locative aspect “users are situated in a geographically proximate way that transcends and conflates socially defined places and neighbourhoods” (cited in Abbott et al, 2015, p.1121). Highlighting how the Grindr grid creates a cyberspace that blurs the lines between online and offline.

Abbott et al.'s (2015) research focuses on how Grindr users experience varying proximity co-situation and how this effects the management of identity; they found that Grindr is seen as a virtual setting that functions differently due to context, with changing expectations of its users. Abbott et al. (2015) found that Grindr's locative properties meant users possessed the ability to

present to multiple audiences, through perceptibility to strangers with mutual interests within geographic boundaries, allowing for users to connect with each other in a virtual space whilst in a social physical context. This shows how social and physical contexts are altered by using the app and its locative function, Grindr becomes an added layer on top of physical spaces for the identifiability of users, which are often positioned in ‘straight’ environments (Abbott et al, 2015). Interestingly, scholars recognise how these blurred distinctions give rise to some users not wanting to be identified on Grindr, with these users in co-situation described as ‘peeking’ in (Abbott et al, 2015). McKenna and Bargh (1998) find that the anonymity of online communities can provide those with stigmatised identities the chance for identity de-marginalisation, with participation in these groups seen to lead to greater self-acceptance and increased revealing of a person’s sexuality.

Jaspal (2017) draws on Abbott et al.’s (2015) research and finds that the transcendence of physical space offers ways of constructing identity, as stigmatised preferences, e.g., sexual role, can be expressed more openly on Grindr, with users co-situated in a community of similarity and like-mindedness. Hautefeuille (2016, p.4) builds on this, identifying that gay cyberspace provides “a vital framework for understanding the production of sexual subjectivity and queer sociability”. Queer cyberspace offers the chance for gay men to seek support and information, generating socio-sexual landscapes for identity construction and negotiation (Race, 2010).

Research has found that gay men’s well-being can be negatively affected by homonegativity, therefore online platforms can provide an outlet for countering the minority stress of being gay, “providing a safer space than physical LGBT spaces do” (Zervoulis et al, 2020, p.90). This juxtaposition between heterosexual offline spaces and homosexual online space is a concept that is given much importance in Grindr usage research and is bound to

psychosocial effects (Miller, 2015). Jaspal discusses how Grindr users are exposed to “more gay affirmative imagery and language” (2017 p.5). The result of this is that self-esteem may ease the understanding of one’s gay sexuality (Abbott et al., 2014). Highlighting how imagery on Grindr can affect identity construction within social contexts. Showing the relevance of researching this topic through its implications for real life issues.

Zervoulis et al. (2020) find that although research addresses some of the issues that gay men face, it potentially presents some issues of its own. This is illuminated by research that has found contrasting findings that gay dating apps reify hegemonic standards of masculinity and intensify gay male aesthetic standards (Katz, 2020).

The most important research relevant to my investigation concern's identity construction through users’ choice of profile picture on their profile. As identified, research has focussed on the locative function and effects on Grindr, however more recently researchers have begun to look at the visual composition of Grindr and how sexuality, masculinity and objectification are bound up with constructing a profile.

Miller’s (2015) research on Grindr identifies that physical characteristics are incredibly important to gay men, finding aesthetic qualities are more important than internal characteristics, with emphasis attributed to the ‘sexy’ body (Sergio & Cody, 1986 cited in Miller, 2015). Gay men see body shape and size as being more of a concern than heterosexual men do, with risky eating behaviours attributed to the minority stresses of being gay (Miller, 2015).

The hypermasculine image of the gay body is highlighted by the mesomorphic ideal (a muscular yet lean build), being the goal for gay men (Anderson et al, 2018). The components of masculine physicality and traits are physical power, large physique and bodily elements

associated with a muscular fit- these things are “deemed highly important in the assessment of gay masculinity” finds Miller (2015, p.652).

Hautefeuille (2016) finds that the male body is portrayed in an objectifying manner in the media, with these images of the male body being unattainable. The gay community is directed towards these images of sexual objectification as the white straight male is the most dominant image of the man, with gay males becoming reliant on this image, heightened by the degree they are ‘othered’ as well as never being a real ‘man’ (Coles, 2007). The strive towards this image of sexual objectification is particularly intensified in the physical attractiveness appeal that same-sex male relationships possess, whereby “gay men yearn to attract other men who value the physical attractiveness of their partners” (Hautefeuille, 2016, p.8). This results in a feeling of concern about their physical appearance, which manifests in visual self-presentations. Beren et al (1996) found that gay men were considerably more dissatisfied with their bodies compared to heterosexual men, despite being no further away from their body ideal. They also found that gay men were more distressed in psychosocial areas of body dissatisfaction, highlighting the emotional and physical effects that some gay men deal with in terms of body standards through appearance (Beren et al, 1996).

Bonner-Thompson (2017) finds that there are two main masculinities on Grindr: hypersexualised masculinities; and lifestyle masculinities, defining hypersexualised masculinities as showing skin, with the body being the site of importance. By removing “other embodied dimensions of the self and focusing on other body parts, the construction of gender and sexuality is partial, giving rise to the hypersexualised idea of a profile image” (Bonner-Thompson, 2017, p.1617). Bonner-Thompson (2017) goes on to state that hypersexualised masculinity is used by men to market themselves as sexualised bodies, to increase the chances of touching. This is

supported by the app being synonymous with hook up culture, with other research also finding the majority of their sample used Grindr to find people to have sex with (Zervoulis et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2005).

In contrast, a lifestyle masculinity is presented as a digital body constructed as being entangled with every day and material geographies, showing photos of leisure, work, and objects (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). This research will be incorporated into the coding of my content analysis through coding categories that explore activities in profile images

Objectification theory has been used to illustrate behaviours on Grindr, Anderson et al. (2018) categorises objectifying profile pictures as those that are sexualised and body focussed, they found that those with a sexualised profile picture were reported to score higher in levels of self-objectification than those with a non-sexualised picture. This research is relevant as MSM (men who have sex with men) are more likely to be targeted for sexual objectification online, meaning significance and attention is given to sexualised bodies which can be seen in the users' choice of visual images. (Anderson et al , 2018 & Szymanski et al, 2019). This will be adapted into my research, through investigating whether time is an indicator to the presentations we see on Grindr.



### 2.3. Selfies, masculine intimacy, and online identity.

Gay men are acknowledged as initial adopters of the digital technology that the internet offered (Zervoulis et al, 2020). Homosexuality is seen as being interwoven with internet spaces due to “queerness historically occupying liminal physical space in society” (Miles, 2018, p.2).

At young age we become sexually socialised through what we learn, the cultural dimensions of sexual script theory theorise that individual perspective and structure is something that should be considered when discussing a sexual event (Daneback, 2006). This is related to Grindr as it shows that learnt cultural dimensions, something prevalent on Grindr aesthetically and performatively, effect the occurrence of a sexual engagement (Daneback, 2006). This perspective is important as it also considers how individual sexuality is often coupled with guilt and shame, but applying this theory to the internet highlights how the anonymity provided on digital technologies fosters sexuality communication online (Daneback, 2006).

With the internet offering a protective environment, queer people can represent themselves in ways that help them identify with other users (Goluboff, 2016). The limitation of the internet is that it is bound to being virtual, whereas with the advent of location technologies and mobile applications, a digital-physical hybridisation has been birthed that sees the connectivity between mobiles and online, with free movement allowing for an increase in proximate encounters (Miles, 2018).

Selfies are a ubiquitous form of self-presentation, which is said to contribute to reclaiming power over the embodied self (Tiidenberg, 2014). Building on Foucauldian beliefs, Tiidenberg (2014) highlights that the sexualisation of self-shooting contrasts to consumer culture which exhibits a regime of shame through restrictive aesthetics. This is noteworthy as the Foucauldian discourse focusses on how sexual narratives “underpin how societies establish the

truth of a subject” (Tiidenberg, 2014, p.3). Once again this highlights the interwovenness between society and sexual visual representation and postulates the liberating effects of self-shooting. Enguix and Gomez-Narvaez (2017, p114) see the digital visibility of our body produced by the selfie as offering symbolic dimensions, enacting “recognition, empowerment, power, stigma and control”.

Once again, norms and expectations on Grindr are important, research has found that participation on an app that shows selfies, as well as people’s reactions, are important determinants of what image will be posted (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017). The final aim is for users to produce a body image that people will gaze at and desire, which is often a masculine body. Social media platforms offer regulation through positive and negative comments of gender performance, other users have visible record of this regulation, building network expectations (Marquez & Williams, 2015).

The ‘spornosexual’ has been identified as an overrepresented body on Grindr, a stable signifier of masculinity from Ancient Greece, comprised of showing muscle, body hair and large body size; spornosexual masculinities tend to show more parts of their bodies compared to resistant bodies (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017). Intimacy is created by the user through visibility/invisibility of what they want to show in an image. The glorification of the hegemonic and masculine body is seen in selfies that show eroticized portions of the body in order to construct intimacy, such as genital bulges, whereas intimacy can also be conveyed through extreme close ups of the face, eyes, or hands (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017). This research highlights how the body is creative, and “redefines intimacies through agential decisions- on what to stress and make visible and what to hide” (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017, p.124).

In Siibak's (2010) content analysis on young men's profile images on SNS *Rate*, she chose to categorise the types of images in relation to masculinity representations. Siibak (2010) found that the effects of the advertisement industry could be seen, whereby young men tried to seduce other users by canting their head and focussing directly at the camera. Analysing selfies and profile images offers me the opportunity to understand whether users use the (in)visibilisation of their bodies to reconfigure intimacies .

#### 2.4. The case for Grindr

Studies have found that sexual encounters are the dominant use motivations of Grindr users (Licoppe et al, 2015). This can somewhat problematise Grindr, whereby issues with harm and privacy inundate the app. The app states that you must be a legal adult, with no use by underage persons (Grindr, 2020). However, it has been reported that underage users have been identified using the app, posing problems for exploitation and trafficking (McKim, 2021). The issue with this is that Grindr makes no effort to verify identities, stating:

*“Grindr does not conduct criminal or other background screenings of its users. Grindr does not verify the information provided by users with respect to users’ identity, health, physical condition, or otherwise”* (Grindr, 2020).

This highlights a concern of usage on Grindr, with sexual activity being a sensitive, personal topic, confidence should be placed in using the app and Grindr’s policies can sometimes conflict with this.

Data issues intensify the sensitivity of identifying information that users present on Grindr. Data breaches have occurred, whereby sensitive data including HIV status’, sexuality and explicit images have been exposed, threatening privacy for users (Whittacker, 2020).

On the other hand, Miles finds that MSM dating apps like Grindr allow for the “extension of social-sexual networks, facilitating meetings with like-minded men across a city” (2018, p.8).

The extension of social-sexual networks increases sociality, which improves mental well-being, identifying the constructive side to Grindr. Presentations are bound to psychological and social contexts, and the dichotomy between construction and constriction highlights that there is a case for Grindr to be studied. A better understanding of the self-presentations on the app and how it’s

used by a range of identities for different purposes, helps contribute to the discourse discussing the issues and potentials that Grindr offers.

### **3. Method**

This current study aimed to elucidate how masculinities were visually constructed through profile pictures, linguistic choices in bios and pre-set filtered profile information to support visual representations on Grindr. I chose to conduct a content analysis to explore how men use masculinity markers based on visual attributes, as well as photographic composition, as a tool of self-presentation.

Content analysis is defined by Berelson (1952) as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p.18). Manifest content is planned, and its functions are intended, therefore understanding what the manifest content looks like allows me to explore how this content creates meaning.

Content analysis is a quantitative technique that has been identified as useful when recording a large corpus of visual data (Kleinheksel et al, 2020). However, content analysis should not be overlooked as a strictly quantitative tool: it is effective in displaying the communication of content succinctly (Miller, 2015).

I examined the influence of ideologies, importantly hegemonic masculinity in relation to Grindr presentation. Krippendorff (1989) discusses that content analysis is used to analyse data “within a specific context in view of the meanings someone, a group or a culture attributes to them” (p.1). The context of my study is situated in gay culture and the aesthetic pressures that are bound to constructed masculinities and bodily appearance, which are performed in everyday environments. As Parry (2018) discusses, focussing on how these realities are constructed and communicated being affected by context, production, and consumption, illuminates the unique perspective of gay men in urban spaces

I studied how the group of Grindr users digitally mediate the pressures and standards of the medium affecting their self-presentation on the mobile app. By conducting a content analysis, it allowed me to see how presentations of masculinity vary in frequency, identifying popular and less common features of masculinity through counting the frequencies of each code within each category (Ahuvia, 2001).

### 3.1. Sampling

My unit of analysis, Grindr profile pictures, is described as a “mass media item for homosexual and bisexual men” (Yab LTD, 2021). As found in previous literature, the dynamic nature of homosexual spaces gives rise to a variety of opportunities for self-representation, essentially diverse messages of the self. Grindr mediates these messages in some way. Neuendorf (2018) sees the summarising nature of content analysis as a pertinent characteristic, it allows for characteristics of visual messages, drawn from a large corpus of data, to be concluded and generalised.

My sampling method was a convenience, random sample as Grindr uses locative services and places those around you in a grid ordered by physical proximity, therefore I analysed users via radius, this meant I could keep the location the same every time, ensuring greater validity to the findings through replicability. My sample initially included 432 participants first profile pictures and descriptions from Grindr. Previous research informed my sample size. Miller (2015) found that 300 participants ensured a variety of profiles, as I eliminated profiles without profile images and images that did not show a person as well as duplicate accounts, I ended up with a sample size of 340 users. The faceless profiles were coded in my facial disclosure category as

these have a relevance to gay sexuality through anonymity, linked to greater disinhibition (Suler, 2004; Abbott et al, 2014).

To ensure a representative sample and obtain an accurate visual recording of Grindr's users, I used Miller's (2015) temporal structure of coding, coding in 4-hour intervals, over 24 hours, starting at 00:00am on Friday and ending at 0:00am on Saturday. I selected the first 72 profile pictures that showed on the grid as texts, this is a feature of the free version (See Appendix 2).

Importantly, Grindr is for gay, bi, trans and queer people, with a lack of apps including transgender identities, I felt it necessary to include this group of people in my data. The centrality of the body in experiences for trans people "shape and redefine masculinities in ways that illuminate the nexus between bodies, embodiments and discursive enactments of masculinity" (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2021, p.1). Showing how imperative it is not to exclude these people as they offer a unique self-presentation perspective.

### 3.2. Coding and research questions

I had one demographic variable, age of the Grindr user, which increased in years of 10 from age 21. I used nominal measurements, whereby my categories are distinct from each other, my coding scheme has been made so that there is only one appropriate code for each case coded (See Appendix 8.3). I included a 'not-applicable' (N/A) code in each coding category as this is an important catchall, allowing for each profile to be coded (Neuendorf, 2017).

The first question I asked examines the primary visual actor within each profile picture, this served to highlight idealised masculinities amongst users and what this look like visually, concerning how they wish to be perceived by other users in the context of masculinity and desirability to a fellow MSM (men sex with men) user. I have asked:



*RQ.1- What features do people use to present masculinity in the photographic elements of their profile picture?*

I selected coding manual categories that were informed by empirical work and theory as outlined in my literature review (See Appendix 8.3). This is centred around the body, activity, sexualisation and features that a user chooses to highlight. Taken from Burke's (2016) analytical dimensions, I have chosen to include an activity orientation coding category, this includes images of playing sport/exercise, partying and travelling.

Sexualisation coding was adapted from Anderson et al (2018), I classified more in-depth codes with importance stressed on what was being emphasised in the picture (See Appendix 8.4.4). Making it specific increases the accuracy of replicability and decreases the chances of overlap. Research finds that the visual is paramount in forming relations, therefore visual construction on Grindr can have impacts on behaviour and human activity (Katz, 2020).

As identified, research into Grindr's profile images have found that sexualisation and objectification is translated into how users present themselves visually on the app. However, it is imperative to understand in what way selfies and profile pictures present the masculine body, as well as how they construct levels of intimacy, therefore I asked:

*R.Q.2 - How do users present themselves in their profile picture through compositional photographic elements?*

Here I will be focussing on photograph style and shot distance (See Appendix 8.4.7 & 8.4.8). Intimacies are said to be defined by the distance a user creates within an image, therefore this question will allow me to explore how self-presentation is affected by composition (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017).

Previous research found that Grindr users use language to construct masculinities, therefore I felt it necessary to consider what users said in their profiles to construct their profile (Hautefeuille, 2016; Miller, 2015). Linguistic choices have been identified on Grindr as a way of advertising the self, whilst phenomenon's such as the 'masc4masc' culture have given rise to a gay lexicon centred around sexual activity (Abbott et al, 2014; Wu & Ward, 2017). Therefore, I asked:

*R.Q.3. What language do people use to communicate their self-description and preferences in their profile?*

I will analyse this through content analysis coding. Preferences on Grindr are often stigmatised, by understanding how Grindr users communicate their preferences, it may illustrate how users use language to represent themselves on the hierarchy of masculinity (Jaspal, 2017).

My final question is:

*R.Q.4- How does the time of the day affect the way people use Grindr?*

This unit of analysis will show me how the time of the day affects the self-presentation styles. Adapted from Anderson et al (2018), I will use the pre-set 'looking for' categories that Grindr allows users to select to distinguish themselves by what they are using the app for (See Appendix 8.4.9). By comparing the data from each coding session over one day it will allow me to see if there are any popular self-presentation techniques or preferences shared by users at certain times.

### 3.3. Ethics

An advantage of using both quantitative and qualitative analysis is that it is unobtrusive, I did not have to obtain user consent as I have edited the profile photos and they are unidentifiable. As Abbott et al. (2015) identify, the population of study is potentially vulnerable,

however a strength of choosing Grindr is that I have insider knowledge and experience using the app, this positionality makes me sensitive to the content as well as being empathetic to the data. I am also the only researcher that coded, possessing consciousness about my coding categories. Being the single coder in the study I ensured I had intra-coder reliability by conducting a pilot study, ensuring that my coding categories were well defined, increasing the consistency of the experiment if someone was to replicate the study.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographic

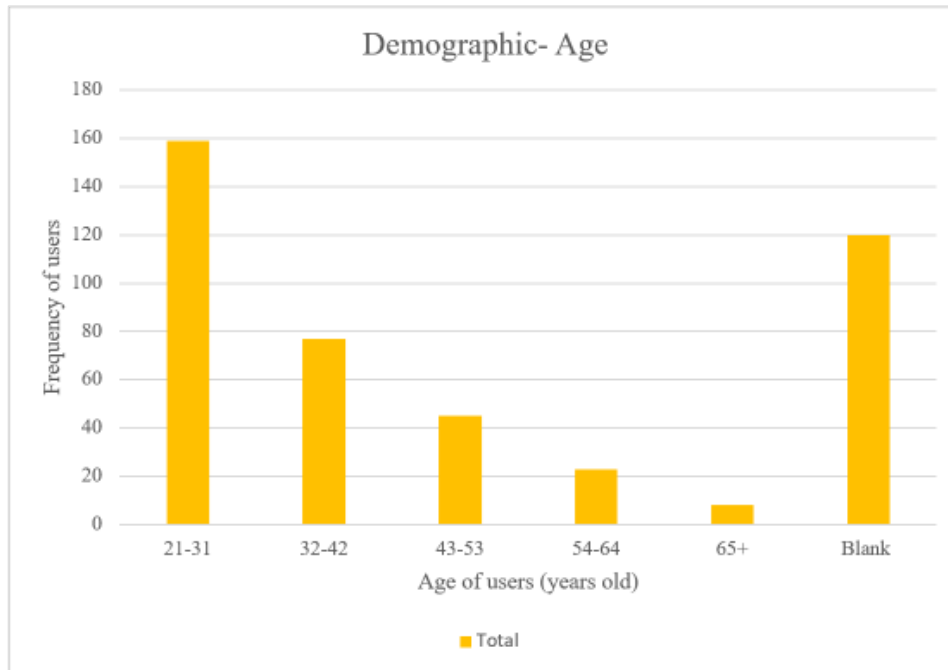


Table 4.0.1- Demographic of users

The variation of ages was between 21 and 70 years old, the estimate of the mean age was 33 years old. 37% ( $n=159$ ) of users were between 21-32; 18% ( $n=77$ ) of users were between 32-42; 10% ( $n=45$ ) of users were between 43-53; 5% ( $n=23$ ) of users were between 54-64 and 2% ( $n=7$ ) of users were over 65. 28% ( $n=120$ ) of users did not provide their age on their profile, indicating that these percentages should not be taken as fixed. The blank profiles indicate that age is proscribed to pejorative connotations. This is congruent with the ageism that exists in the gay community, whereby older age is stigmatised, with age becoming an element of self-presentation that is used to support under 30s in the presentation of a young, athletic, healthy person (Abbott et al, 2015).

Mobile literacy could also be identified as playing a part in the decline of users as age increases, giving rise to a digital divide whereby technical issues, physical restrictions and lack

of knowledge create a gap between young people engrossed in the experience of the app and older people who are less invested (Marciano & Nimrod, 2021). This could be linked to hook-up culture, which has emerged because of the immediacy and instant gratification of sexual activity that Grindr affords. Hook-up culture could be looked down on by older people, whereby sexual politics and sexual fluidity are more significant in the lives of young people today due to sociocultural changes in the acceptance of sexuality (Albury et al, 2017). Grindr can be seen as dominated by a youth community, whilst aging bodies are seen as flawed (Marciano & Nimrod, 2021).

#### 4.2. RQ.1- What features do people use to present masculinity in the photographic elements of their profile picture?

In terms of the variables of interest, I have chosen to include data from my data gathering techniques to elucidate RQ1, I will identify the key findings and themes in this section which are further explored in the discussion.

##### 4.2.1. Facial focus on profile pictures

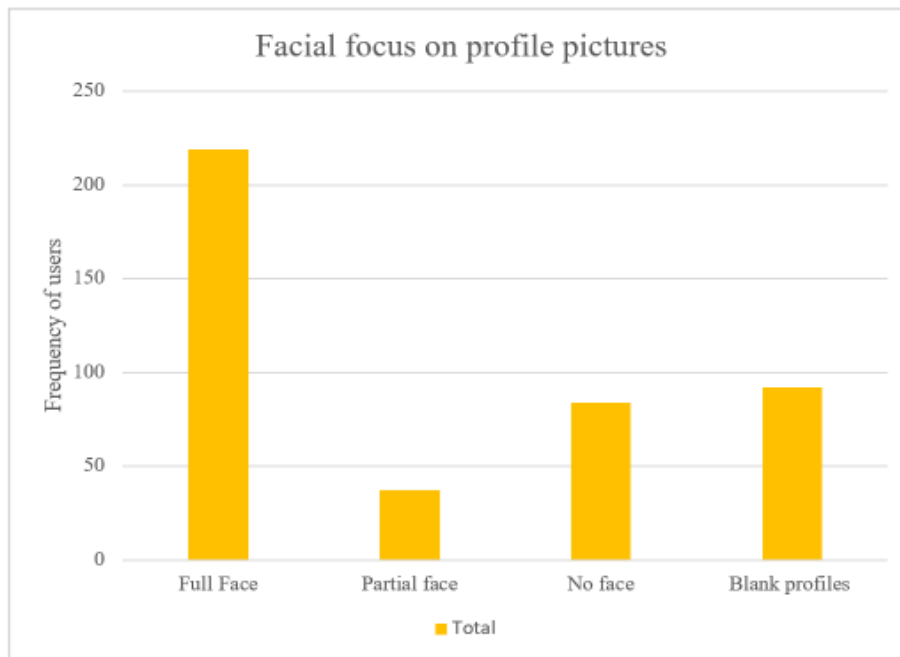


Table 4.1.1.- Facial disclosure on profile pictures

Facial disclosure saw most users (50%,  $n = 219$ ) show their full face, with 9% ( $n = 37$ ) showing partial face and 20% ( $n = 84$ ) showing no face. Blank profiles and no face were distinct categories from each other as a blank profile showed Grindr's pre-set ID icon, whereas 'no face' was comprised of images where you couldn't see any parts of the face. The high frequency of no face profiles and blank profiles has been attributed to the sexual nature of Grindr, which could

pose risks for identifiable photographs (Miller, 2015). The dominance of full-face pictures shows that Grindr is facially orientated, no photos featured users with facial disfigurements, highlighting that the images of mainstream beauty standards infiltrate digital images on Grindr.

Full face photographs contribute to the online culture of fast attraction on dating apps, by presenting what you look like, it allows for other users to make their mind up on whether they are sexually attracted (Finkel, 2012). The immediate yes-no functionality of Grindr is representative of human attraction, but more so the culture that internet dating has intensified by the lack of repercussions and online distance between the user and the person behind the image (David & Cambre, 2016) .

#### 4.2.2. Amount of skin showing

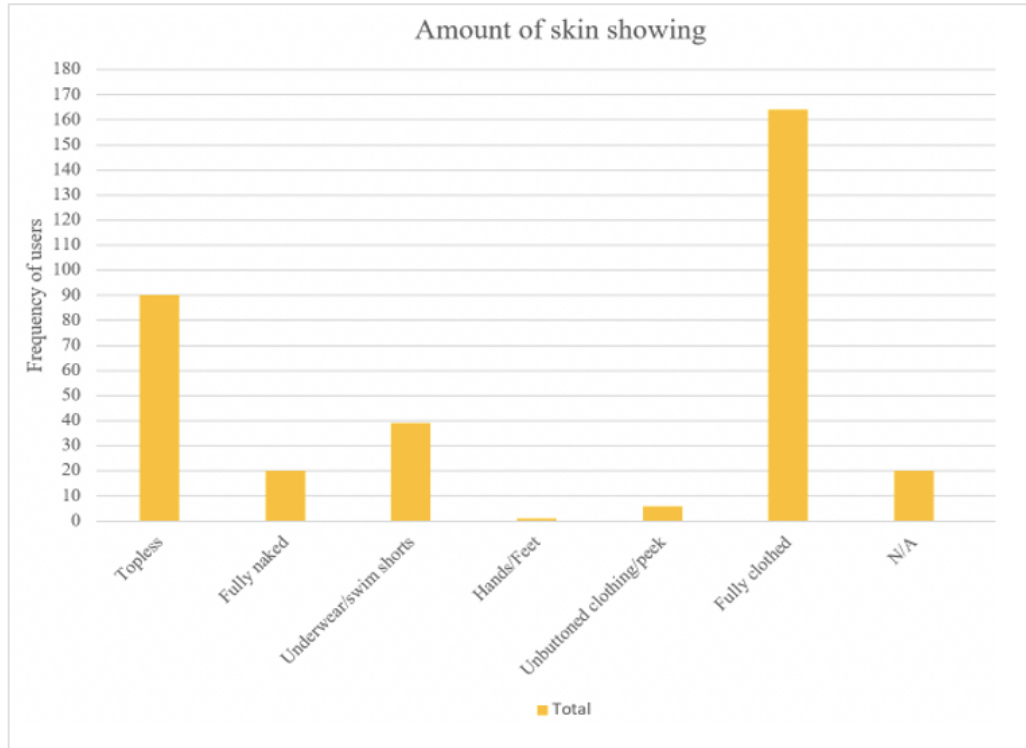


Table 4.1.2- Amount of skin showing in profile picture

By considering the amount of skin shown in the profile it allowed me to see how skin is used as a symbol of intimacy. Most users being fully clothed reflects that clothing is used as a form of identity construction, as well as fitting profile picture codes and conventions (Palmgren, 2010). With 25% ( $n = 90$ ) of users being topless in their profile picture, it reinforces the ‘naked torsos of Grindr’ which have come to be a type in self-expression on the app (Hautefeuille, 2016). Furthermore, 6% ( $n = 20$ ) users were fully naked and 11% ( $n = 39$ ) in underwear/ swim shorts, these images were often hypersexualised, focussed on a penis bulge, or wearing jockstraps or lingerie.



48% ( $n= 164$ ) of profiles were fully clothed and 45% ( $n= 156$ ) of users showed some form of skin apart from their face. This highlights that the skin is a relevant visual tool in constructing attractiveness and identity, as much as clothes.

#### 4.2.3. Sexualisation of profile picture

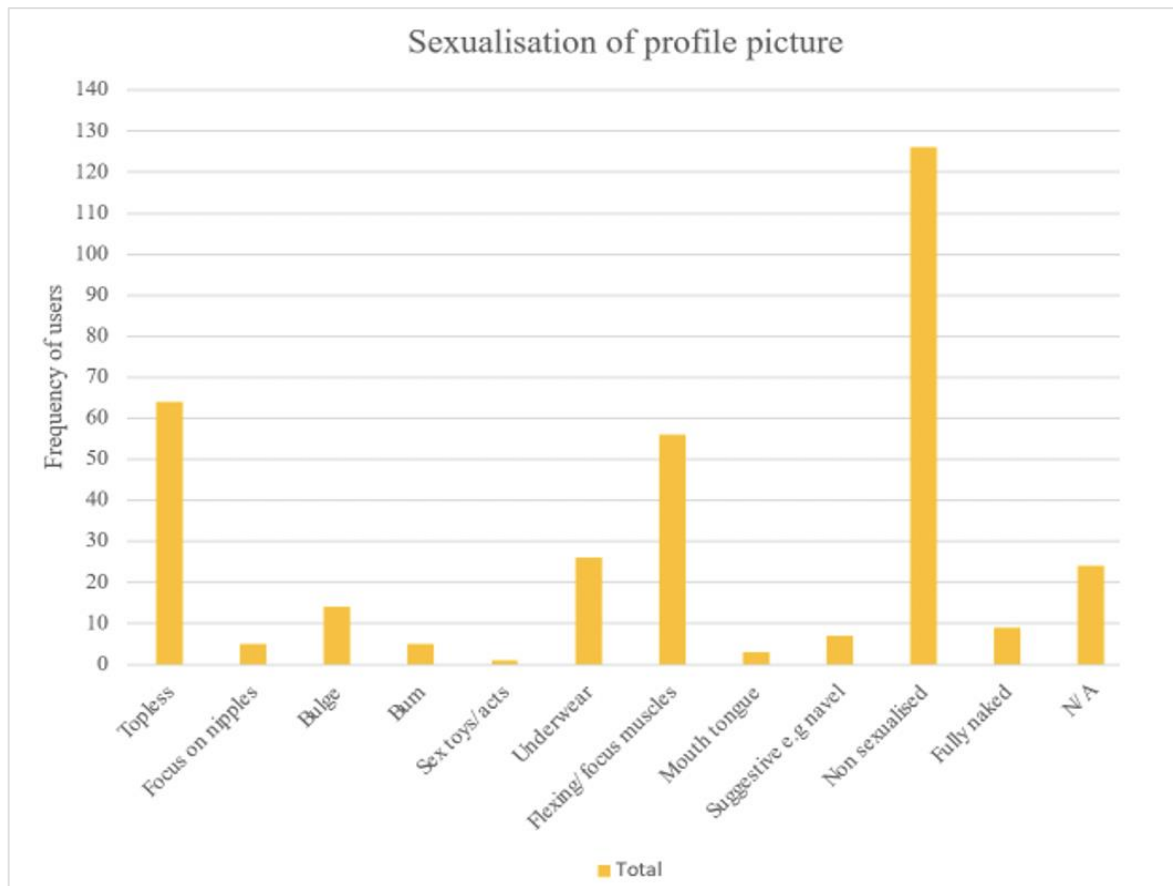


Table 4.1.3- Sexualisation of profile pictures

The variation in the sexualisation of profile images highlights how users choose to make visible different parts of their body in their self-presentation. 37% ( $n= 126$ ) of user's profile images were non-sexualised, with 56% ( $n= 190$ ) of profile images sexualised in some way. 16% ( $n= 56$ ) of users flexed/focussed on their muscles, this was seen through pectorals, biceps, and torsos. Users in my study have emphasised these areas to position themselves at the top of the

masculinity hierarchy. Furthermore, the penis is accentuated in bulge and underwear pictures, occupying 12% ( $n=40$ ) of the Grindr grid. The penis is used as a discursive symbol of masculine power, referencing manhood and power in a primal sense (Lever et al, 2006). Highlighting user choices in presenting themselves through heteronormative markers of masculinity that exist as powerful symbols that connote a person's social standing.

#### 4.2.4. Activity in profile picture

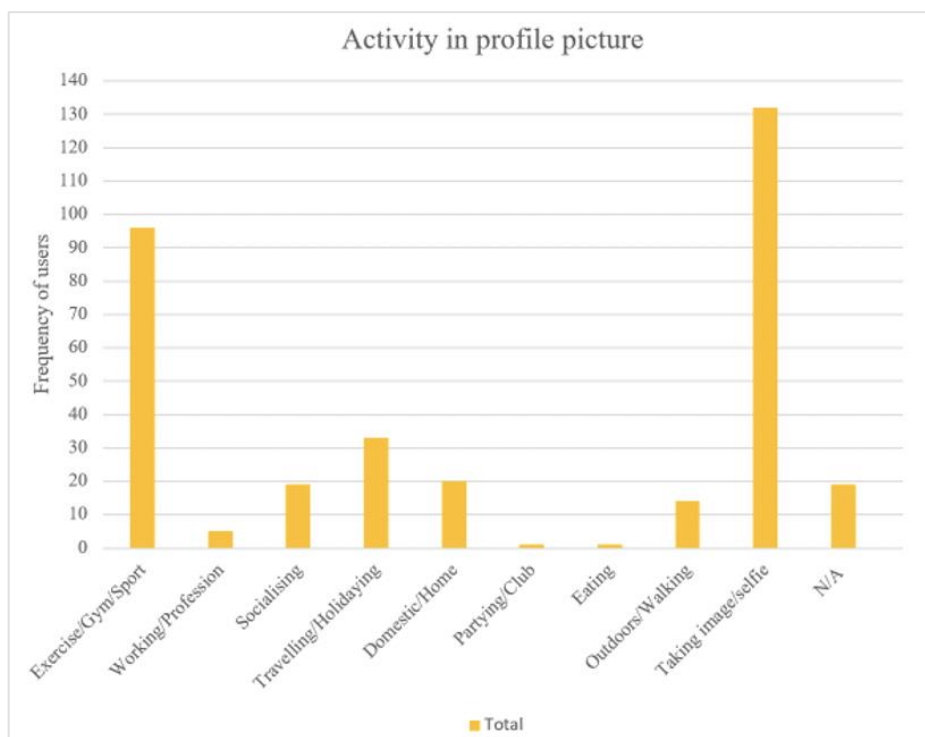


Table 4.1.4- Activity in profile picture

Grindr is congruous with online photographic trends, whereby users dominated the 'selfie/taking photo' activity presentation as the main activity in their profile picture (39% of users,  $n= 132$ ). Exercise/Gym/Sporting activities were also seen in 28% ( $n= 96$ ) of user's profile pictures. This reinforces the athletic, muscular picture of a lot of the users in my sample. The significance of gym activities in profile pictures anchors Connell's (2005) claim that sports

determine a man's right to rule, placing him at the top of the masculine hierarchy (Rodriguez et al, 2016).

To elucidate the styles of masculinity performed through activities, I draw from Bonner-Thompsons (2017) study, which found there are two types of masculinities on Grindr- hypersexualised and lifestyle masculinities. My data shows that 28% ( $n= 96$ ) of the activities would match a hypersexualised masculinity, with 26% ( $n= 93$ ) showing the features of a lifestyle masculinity. Hypersexualised masculinities in my study are centred around the gym as an activity, showing bodies focussed on the torso. In contrast, the lifestyle masculinities in my studies show socialising, travelling, and holidaying. These activities are markers of broader practices that are more focussed on the diversity of gender performance, centred around how “the digital body is entangled with material geographies” (Bonner-Thompson, 2016, p.1619).

#### 4.2.5. Body types

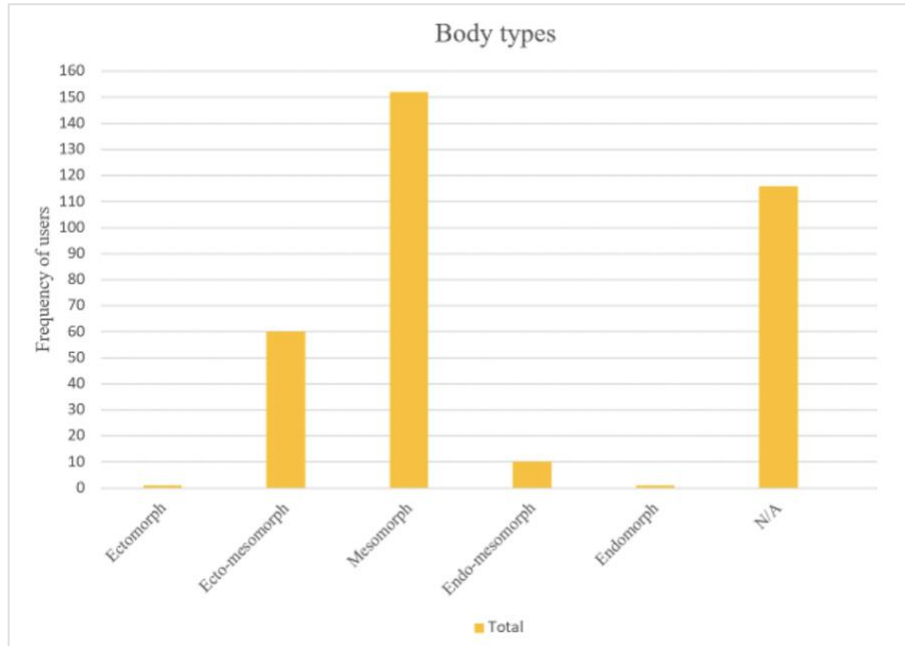


Table 4.1.5- Body types in profile pictures

The dominant body type on Grindr was the mesomorphic body, of which are “muscular/athletic appearing” (White et al, 1999, p.388). The 45% ( $n= 152$ ) of users displaying their mesomorphic body had big muscles and toned bodies. Of the users who were engaging in exercise activities in their profile picture, 80% ( $n= 72$ ) of them had a mesomorphic body, highlighting the correspondence between engaging in hypermasculine activities and visually presenting stereotypically masculine through their hypermasculine physique. Muscular bodies act as proof of the position of power in the community, bound to masculinity. (Siibak, 2010).

The ecto-mesomorph body type is “thin but shapely” (White et al, 1999, p.388), this was the second most frequent body type on Grindr, which 50% ( $n= 60$ ) of these users fell in the 21-31 years old category. This represents the ‘twink’, a hypersexualised tribe of young gay people that are “thin, smaller-built, and pretty smooth with little or no body hair” (Polaris, 2018). The ‘twink’ represents a stereotype of effeminate, young gay men that are sexually inexperienced,

this is disparate to hegemonic masculinity whereby the subordination of women like behaviour is a key component (Levy, 2005). 34% ( $n= 116$ ) of users fell into the N/A category due to a representative photo of their body type being unavailable, this could be because their body would be ridiculed or discriminated against due to the masculine elite on Grindr as they present themselves in a way that conceals their body.

### 4.3. RQ.2- How do users present themselves in their profile picture through compositional photographic elements?

Drawing on the main findings from RQ.1, I have found that shot distance and photograph style impact the visual presentation of the user and their digital identity.

#### 4.3.1. Shot distance in profile picture

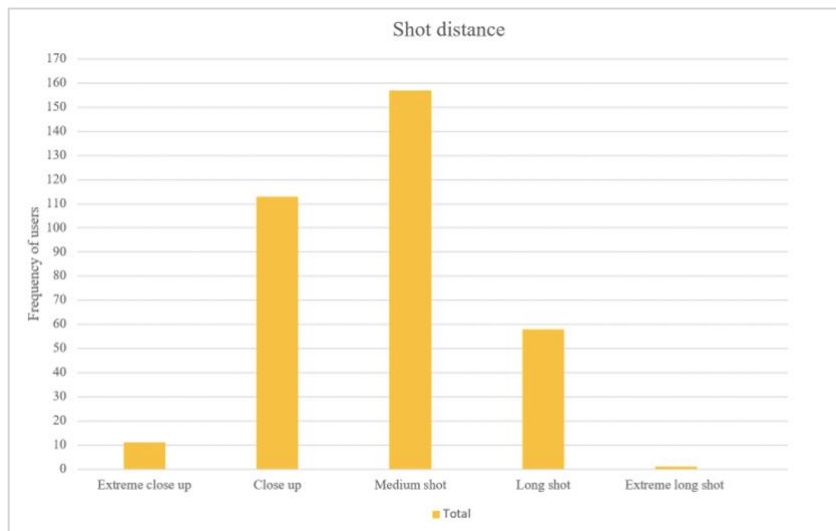


Table 4.2.1- Shot distance in the profile picture

I found that 46% ( $n= 157$ ) of users chose a medium shot photo for their profile picture, whilst 33% ( $n= 113$ ) used a close up. This highlights the intimacies selected, where the use of a close up makes visible the users face, bulge, underwear, torso and muscles, these articles are given attention. The dominance of the medium shot is unsurprising as it is a traditional shot for profile images, the medium shot allows for the body type to be understood, whilst contextual clues, such as activity and landscape, contribute to the performance a person has wish to communicate (Abbott et al, 2015).

My sample used shot distance to communicate intimacies, this was often done through sexualised images that were intensified by the shot distance, a bulge photo loses its impact if it is

surrounded by other things grabbing your attention, therefore users use composition to intensify the sexualisation of their images.

#### 4.3.2. Photograph style

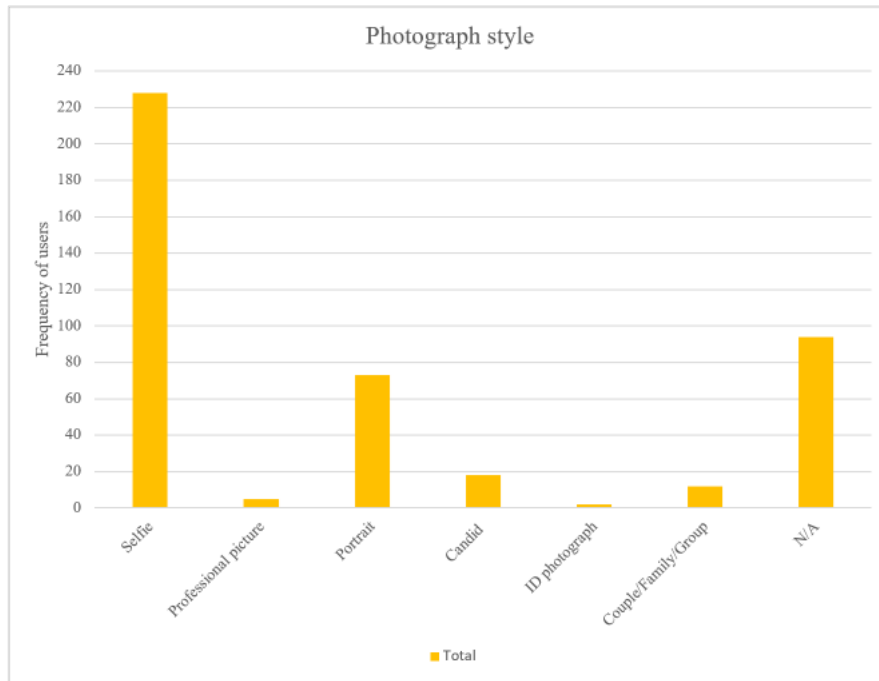


Table 4.2.2- Photograph style of the profile pictures

Again, the photograph style was informed by digital profile image practices, the selfie was the dominant photograph style of choice, where 67% ( $n= 228$ ) of images in my sample were a selfie. It is unsurprising that the selfie is dominant as with 56% ( $n= 190$ ) of images being sexualised, self-shooting is attributed to these types of images, as well as being “ubiquitous in our digitally saturated environment” (Tiddenberg, 2014, p.2). The selfies in my sample are discursive as they merge what is visually presented with discursive politics about hegemonic masculinity. The social importance of the selfie is key, whereby in my study the selfie makes visible the aesthetic choices, such as a pink tight jockstrap, constructed within relations of power, which creates the visible and visual self. 41% ( $n= 94$ ) of selfie takers were in the youngest

category of ages. Traditional portraits were used by 21% ( $n= 71$ ) of users. The average mean age of portrait users fell into the 43-53 years old category for traditional portraits. The differences in the use of portrait and selfies between age groups bespeaks of “adolescents engaging in more selfie-related behaviours than adults” (Nesi et al, 2021, p.3). This is to do with the advent of social media, the uptake of the selfie can be attributed in my results due to the high frequency of young people in my sample (Yashcheshen, 2013).



4.4. RQ3.- What language do people use to communicate their self-description and preferences in their profile? How does this affect their self-presentation?

In my study 15% ( $n=48$ ) of users referred to a form of masculinity in their profile through self-descriptions or preference expression, this was through language such as “Masculine for masculine”, “masc”, “Masc4Masc” (See Appendix 8.3.1). A small number of users ( $n=5$ ) mentioned feminine preferences, “Femboys and cd pref”, “FEMALE LOOKING ONLY” and “fems to the front” (See Appendix 8.3.2). This contrasts to previous research which has found an absence of feminine preference, however language such as “NOTin2 fem actin guys” as seen in Appendix 8.3.3, that discriminated against femininity, reinforces the anti-effeminate language use on MSM sites through the policing of masculinity. Preferences of transgender users were communicated by 10% ( $n=32$ ) of users, for example: “Looking for TS women, but lover of feminine energy in all its forms”; “Lookin for cd/trans”; “interested in trans girls only” (See Appendix 8.3.4).

Interestingly, 9% ( $n=29$ ) users mentioned that they were vaccinated, with users going into detail about which vaccine they had received (See Appendix 8.3.7). Gym language dominated many bios, which were used to support the visual documentation of their athletic ability. Phrases such as “Athletic straight acting guy looking for the same” and “gym buds welcome” were used (See Appendix 8.3.5). Again, the mentions of gym activity were related to partner preferences, whereby muscular, hypermasculine men often sought similar men.

Justification of self-preferences was observed, for example “Just a preference” was used in bios to rationalise positive discrimination preferences; For example, terms such as: “black/mixed guys welcome” and “Asian/twinks to the front!” (See Appendix 8.3.6) were used that encouraged specific demographics to contact the user.

#### 4.5. RQ.4- How does the time of the day affect the way people use Grindr?

To answer this question, I recorded what each user had selected in the pre-set ‘Looking for’ category. It is not compulsory to select this, with 27% ( $n= 116$ ) of the sample not indicating their preference.

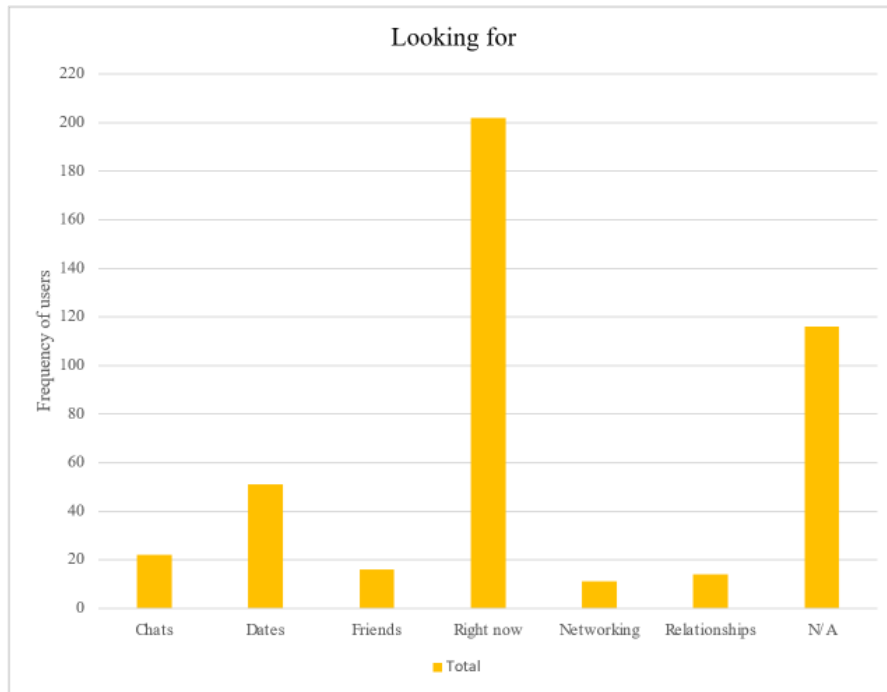


Table 4.4.1- ‘Looking for’ in Grindr bio

The hook-up culture characteristics were evident in my sample, whereby 47% ( $n= 202$ ) of users were looking for ‘Right now’, the use of this function is to indicate that the user wants sexual encounter as soon as. The ‘dates’ option was the second popular activity users were looking for (12%,  $n= 41$ ). My research corroborates overall literature that emphasises the sexual networks and gratification which users seek, as well as an active characteristic to the presentations in my sample. To understand the ‘Right now’ function I looked at how this fluctuated over the course of my sampling:

#### 4.5.1. Percentage of users looking for ‘right now’

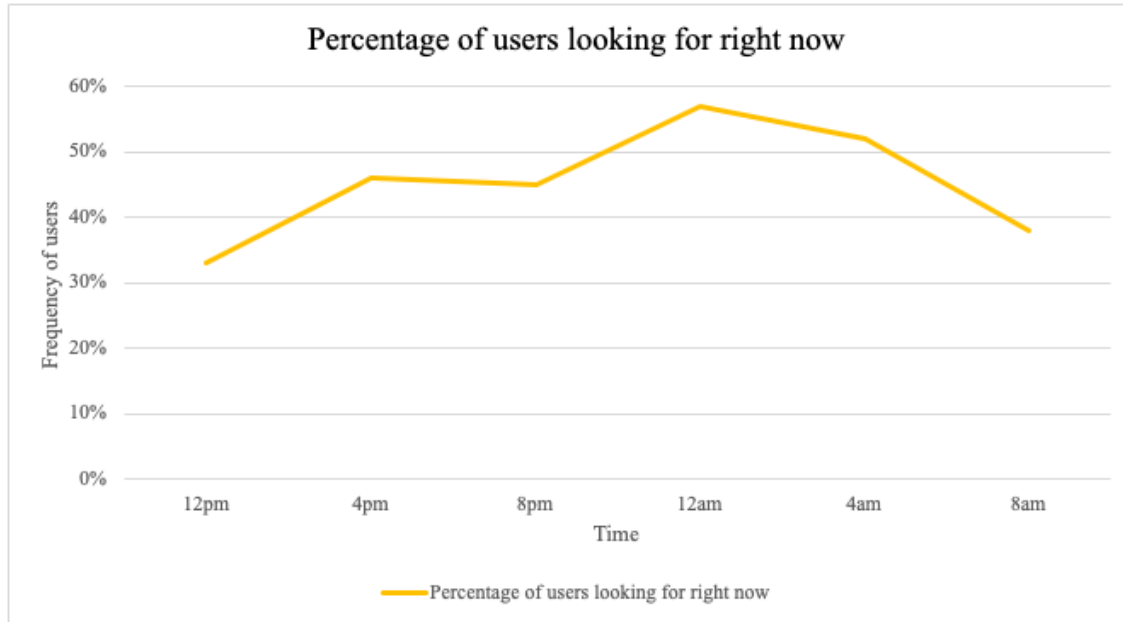


Table 4.4.2- Percentage of users looking for ‘right now’ over 24 hours.

Users looking for right now peaked at 12am, whereby 57% ( $n= 194$ ) of users online were seeking sexual encounters. The sharp incline from 8pm till midnight indicates that more users were seeking encounters as it got later, with users finishing work and enjoying leisure time. There was a small decrease to 52% ( $n= 176$ ) at 4am highlighting how the ‘right now’ function is most popular in these hours. Users can filter others by what they are looking for at a specific time, therefore this function proves useful as a compatibility element of the activity a user may wish to engage in through Grindr.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Grindr's masculine elite- the gays and their gaze.

By taking a nomothetic approach through the summarising nature of data collection which my content analysis allows for, I was able to make generalisable conclusions “from an aggregate of cases” about the self-presentations evident on Grindr (Neuendorf, 2017, p.23).

Although research has found that queer cyberspace is useful for identity construction and negotiation through the production of digital socio-sexual landscape; I found that Grindr was centred around perpetuating stereotypes and idealising masculinity (Race, 2010).

Framing my findings in the wider context of hegemonic masculinity, I have found that my sample disseminates the stereotypes associated with this ideology through the visual presentation of the body.

Grindr upholds the spornosexual physique as the dominant manifestation of masculinity, this is promoted through the mesomorphic body as the dominant standard by which Grindr's users succeed or fail to meet, corroborating findings that “MSM place more importance on physical attractiveness” (Anderson et al, 2015, p.605). Signifiers of masculinity in my study were mostly bodily features: flexed, large muscles- visually this commanded attention.

Imperative to the negotiations of masculinity are the sexual and athletic functions of the body, which perform gender (Connell, 1995 ; Rodriguez et al, 2016). Gender regimes are negotiated through highlighting one's muscular body on Grindr, placing a user at the top of the masculinity hierarchy if they conform to stereotypical masculinity markers. In contrast, if a user subverts these they are seen as effeminate, highlighting how gender is bound to self-presentation and the binaries that see the stigmatisation or commendation of a user's body (Connell, 2005).

Dyer (1992) finds that the naturalness of muscles bespeaks of achievement, this is a visual symbol used on Grindr that expresses the power and domination of man, anchoring the muscular body as a stable signifier of masculinity that was visually articulated in my study.

My linguistic investigation showed the bodies that diverge from this become ‘othered’ and less desired, which highlighted how the use of discrimination was justified through ‘preferences’, for example “Not into hairy”, “Notin2 Fem acting guys or guys in the scene” (See Appendix 8.3.6 & 8.3.3). The pejoration ascribed to ‘guys in the scene’ juxtaposes the use of Grindr, highlighting how the AIDS crisis has generated a sense of danger in sexual encounters, by which users use promiscuity to justify their discriminatory preferences (Conner, 2021). This discrimination emphasises the culture of ‘the metropolitan gay’, which comprises of the urban, city dwelling, white, middle class gay male, who ignores the exclusionary nature of white spaces (Hautefeuille, 2016). I find that in my sample, this exclusion is extended onto MSM networks. Furthermore, age is a discriminatory factor on Grindr, finding that emphasis placed on the preferences for smooth bodied, youthful ‘twinks’ contributes to the exclusion of certain bodies outside of Grindr’s idealistic masculinities. This exclusion can be interpreted using Conner’s (2019) work which suggests users screen out others that do not fit their idea of beauty, whereby categories of beauty become “reified, essentialised and used as status markers within the community” (p.400). This is essentially the core of Grindr, whereby markers of status are used in visual and linguistic presentations to justify preferences and discrimination whilst upholding the idealised ‘sexy’ identity. This speaks to a larger issue within the gay community, whereby people make pre-emptive strikes because of characteristics that are seen as deviating from heteronormative ideals (Helligar, 2017).

Grindr's filter technologies allow for users to categorise themselves into a 'tribe', this categorisation is "affiliated with body type" (Conner, 2019, p.403; Hunte, 2020). This exaggerated performance of self through the body bolsters stereotypes usually found within gay media, as well as offline interactions (Conner, 2019). By selecting a category that you belong to, it creates a homogenisation of identity by which behaviour and visual cues are obeyed, leading to the preference or rejection of specific identities (Dunbar, 2019). This preference or rejection binary is constructed by the masculinity hierarchy by which identities are stigmatised and discriminated against (Gudelunas, 2012). Highlighting how Grindr functions are complicit in reifying stereotypes.

Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez (2017) discuss that homosexual orientation is linked to the subversion of heteronormativity and gender, producing a link between gay men and heterosexual women through gender crossing, which is stereotypically bodily emphasised through actions. Therefore, gay men embody masculinities in attempt to contest these discourses that stigmatise homosexuality through appearing hypermasculine. Masculinity is also negotiated through the sexualisation of profile pictures, giving rise to a hypersexual masculinity presented on Grindr. Bonner-Thompson (2017) writes that profile pictures that focus on bodies and exposed skin give rise to hypersexualised masculinities. I found that hypersexualised images dominated Grindr, with 56% ( $n=190$ ) of profiles including images focussing on eroticised parts of the body through self-shooting. My results show a diverse range of how users choose to present themselves, making visible different areas of the body.

Presentations of masculinity in my sample were mostly projected through selfies. Drawing from Tiidenberg's (2014) findings, I find that selfies are a powerful medium by which masculinity is negotiated, as well as offering therapeutic sexual liberation through the act of

taking and posting a selfie. Selfies are identified as being “personal, bodily centred and highly visible” (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017, p.112). The selfie is seen as situating the body between the public and the private (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017, p.112). I observed that this is articulated through a complex mix of factors. I find that the private paradigm is concerned with intimacies through the accentuation or disguising of certain features, which concerns the domain of aesthetics (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017). This interacts with the social properties of a selfie, which project internalised masculinities publicly through symbols of masculinity, this concerns politics and relations of power (Brighenti, 2010). This is constructed by choices in production that are driven by motivations to show the best self (Hillis, 2001). This process highlights the complexities by which the ubiquitous selfie is constructed (Tiidenberg, 2014). I find that selfies are significant to Grindr as it highlights their place in a process that contributes to the practice of community construction through the self.

The selfie becomes the site by which masculinity is presented in variations and is “incorporated into a logic of instantaneity, sharing and communication” (Pastor, 2017, p.5). This has been identified as the process by which the body becomes a commodified work of art, I extend this to my sample whereby users profiles provided and acknowledged an eroticised conflation of the self through topless images, a form of telepresence on Grindr (Hillis, 2001).

Sexualisation happens on Grindr as offline contexts are invisible, therefore “bodies and skin become sites of eroticism and sexuality” (Bonner-Thompson, 2017, p.1617). Through positioning the skin as dismantled and a site of importance, intensified through the use of compositional choices, the image becomes eroticised, and the digital body is constructed as sexualised (Bonner-Thompson, 2017, p.1617). In contrast to this I found that underwear was used as a site of eroticism, featuring lingerie, jockstraps, and latex, this is blatant sexualisation

that displays the body as a digitally erotic body. Furthermore, full nudity was seen on Grindr despite policies prohibiting full-frontal nudity and pornographic, overtly sexual photos on user profiles (Reddish, 2021). I support the claim Bonner-Thompson (2017) makes stating that Grindr users use sexualised images that focus upon skin with the motivation being to increase desire to increase the likelihood of touching. I postulate that sexualised images on Grindr are used with the end goal of a sexual encounter, which is intensified by self-selected filters and biographical information.

Intriguingly, I found that a faceless, body focussed profile picture can be used to subvert sexualisation. I found that most users disclosed full or partial faces on their profile picture, however 25% ( $n=85$ ) showed no face at all. As identified, Grindr's anonymity allows for less risk of being outed, allowing for the safe pursuing of partners (Zervoulis et al, 2020). By not disclosing a face picture and using a sexualised photograph, the invisibility of the face creates an intimacy in the hidden identity. Hautefeuille (2016) finds that the body is used as a face, whereby the body is positioned as the first point of attention. I find in my sample the body communicates more about lifestyles; this is particularly prevalent when the body is used as a symbol of athletic hypermasculinity through gym photographs. This presents a level of control in which Grindr users have over their intimacies. Furthermore, it highlights how users are able to explore their sexual identities through the production of visual photography, a valuable potential for minorities whose sexual preferences are often stigmatised (Gudelunas, 2012).

As discussed, selfies are used as a dominant medium by which the body is made (in)visible in profile pictures, this links to visual framing theory, which Goffman (1974) proposes that the organisation of a message can impact the reading of an experience. Elinzamo (2018) discusses the activeness of visual communication in selfies, drawing on Hertog and



McLeod (2018, p.45) who found that frames carry power between users, whereby “they activate some related ideas or thoughts”. I should acknowledge that in dating profiles we see an exaggerated, idealised performance of a person, however it is this performativity that reifies high standards of body image and ways to behave as a gay person, although they may be disingenuous, there is perpetuation of stereotyped performances (Toma & Hancock, 2010)

My research shows that activities concentrated around the gym, exercise and sports are one of the most dominant ways a man presents their masculinity on Grindr. By situating oneself in the gym in an image, the user indicates their athletic prowess (Rodriguez et al, 2017). The gym has been identified as a sign of masculine success, with fitness being visually coded through aesthetics, with the image of the hypermasculine male identified as being objectified on Grindr (Hautefeuille, 2016).

The objectification of the male body is bound to desire, the intimacies in which Grindr profile pictures are constructed around are linked to a personal process in which the user desires to be desired (Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2017). This is a form of self-objectification. Self-objectification on Grindr speaks to the hierarchies of beauty in which Campbell (2004, p.156) finds are “imposed on gay men in their understandings of their own bodies and the bodies they should desire”. Miller (2015, p.653) writes that this myth encourages the visual deception by which the hypermasculine, he defines this as the “hypermuscular male body”, is projected as the idealised way to present oneself. Grindr encourages what Signorile (1997) identifies as ‘body fascism’ whereby a rigid set of standards are affirmed, this pressures Grindr’s users into conforming to them and ultimately giving rise to “a culture disposed to body oppression” (Miller, 2015, p.653). However, we cannot ignore Grindr’s practicality in exposing “gay affirmative imagery and language” to its users (Jaspal, 2017, p.5). There is diversity in the

presentations on Grindr, although visual presentations that are constructed using masculinity markers dominate, there are presentations that subvert the hegemonic ideology by which heterosexual standards are implicated. For example, images of users wearing makeup, wearing lingerie, photos of gay couples (See Appendix 8.2.4). This offers users the opportunity for internalisation of their sexuality through affirmatory imagery that acknowledges the fluidity of gender presentation. Showing Grindr as offering a space by which stigmatised mainstream preferences can be de-marginalised, affirming previous research that participating in MSM networks can lead to greater self-acceptance (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Jaspal, 2017).

## 5.2. Language as discrimination- Mask4Mask

In the present study, language was analysed concerning preferences and self-presentation. I found that language was used to support the visual presentation in profile pictures, mostly through expressing masculinity as something users possess as well as communicating what they were seeking on the app.

I unanticipated the use of vaccination references to COVID-19 in my study. Dating apps are encouraging users to become vaccinated through offering interactional iconography such as interactive stickers as well as premium features for those who revealed they are vaccinated (Makooi, 2022; Javed, 2022). Through encouraging users to list their vaccination status there is a culture of communication that promotes good public health. This is something Grindr is firmly cognizant with, with sexual health awareness directed through advertising HIV check-ups and both knowing and sharing your status to reduce stigma (Ubrihien et al, 2020). Backing government campaigns highlights the infiltration of political and social ideologies into SNS through language. This highlights how cultural climates have affected self-presentation through self-awareness, and fosters optimistic and progressive views regarding disease, which may contribute to the reduction of stigma and promotion of wider sexual health understanding, identifying a potential for public health relations (Ubrihien et al, 2020).

The blatant use of the word ‘masculine’ in my study corroborates findings that see the use of the word as a “discursive symbol of gender identity” (Rodriguez et al, 2014, p254). Linguistic masculinity markers were used in the bios of users in my study. Rodriguez et al (2014) sees these as following a process of ‘mascing’, whereby gay males reinforce their masculinity through expressing their masculinity and masculine partner preference (See Appendix 8.3.1 & 8.3.3).

Research has found that anti-effeminate language is used on Grindr (Miller, 2015; Conner, 2019). Contrastingly, I found that feminine qualities were seen as positive through preferential language (See Appendix 8.3.2). This highlights that some users are subverting the policing of masculinity and homophobic culture (Miller, 2015). Contributing to the lessening of gender confines within the LGBTQ community.

Linguistic choices posed as supportive to the visual presentation of the hypermasculine user whereby gym references were used to articulate athletic ability and lifestyle choices (See Appendix 8.3.5). This creates the idea that some Grindr users construct their profile like an advertisement, whereby the producer attempts, through language, to appeal to the desires of another user (Miller 2015). This has historical significance as older forms of MSM networking were through personal advertisements online, which did not use visual documentation to support their claims (Bakar, 2015). Research into this area also highlights that the documentation of masculinities was evident, highlighting how communication patterns and dominant visual forms of presentation on Grindr have infiltrated gay online spaces historically (Miller, 2015; Payne, 2007; Baker, 2003).

‘Str8acting’ was observed in the bios of users, this is acknowledgement that homosexual people are seen stereotypically as gender non-conformist and is used to signal a user’s distance from pejorative stereotypes, as well as partner qualities that they prefer (Carpenter, 2008). This creates a digital discourse through which language is used to subvert gay stereotypes, yet still perpetuates the masculine hierarchical order and reifies stereotypes to a degree. Partner preferences like this have been coined as part of the Masc4Masc culture, which speaks to the issues by which elitism and discrimination on Grindr are evident through partner preferences that are constructed around hierarchies related to the body and gender performance (Boyd & Ellison,

2008). This is an example of ‘in-group discrimination’, occurring within marginalised groups (Bostwick et al, 2015). I draw from this and find that discrimination is exercised through 3 main types:

1. Positive preference discrimination- this includes preferences of race, gender (tied to trans bodies) and age.
2. Unconcealed discrimination - exclusion of feminine characteristics, bodily features, and sexual roles.
3. Masculinity hierarchical discrimination- where the spornosexual body is the standard and bodies that do not match this are othered.

There is a distinction between positive discrimination and unconcealed discrimination as positive discrimination sees the spotlighting of a characteristic or demographic of someone as a preference, which is communicated encouragingly, for example “Asian/fems to the front” (see Appendix 8.3.6), this is often bound to ethnicity or age. Whereas unconcealed discrimination excludes specific characteristics that a person possesses. I find that these are equally as damaging as they contribute to the erasure and exclusion of bodies based on prejudicial toxic ideas.

Something that is particularly problematic is that effeminacy is linked to transgender bodies explicitly through language (See Appendix 8.3.4), whereby transgender users are often placed in conjunction with language that expresses a feminine preference. As effeminacy is seen as subverting hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculine presentations, the tying of effeminacy, which has pejorative connotations on MSM networks, to trans bodies, affirms that these users are viewed as incompatible with heteronormative standards (Buggs, 2021). The unconcealed objectification of trans users is expressed through language which exoticizes trans people, this is concerning as it reinforces the ‘othering’ of trans people who are therefore seen as

hypersexualised objects through sexual curiosity and gender fetishization (Haimson et al, 2021). The anonymity that Grindr allows for is a cause for concern as profiles who expressed trans preferences were often blank with little information, as the disinhibition effect occurs, users may choose to disclose information that liberates them but there is also the chance toxic disinhibition is exerted through discriminatory language, as there are little consequences (Miller, 2015; Suller, 2004). After years of criticism Grindr removed ethnicity filters, I find that if Grindr were to remove all filters and focussed instead on inclusive spaces whereby users could seek other users with shared interests or what they desired, the un-filtering of bodies may foster a healthier Grindr culture (Hunte, 2020). This could potentially reduce the fetishization of certain bodies and genders linked to sexual curiosity. This would be impactful as online beauty standards inform offline standards (Jaspal, 2017).

### 5.3. Touching through the mobility of Grindr.

Conner (2019) identifies that Grindr does not have a comprehensive data set, which makes it difficult to understand the sociodemographic configuration of users. I chose to look at individual level data, what users were ‘looking for’ at certain times. As identified, ‘right now’ refers to the immediacy of sexual encounters on Grindr, by which users select as an indication to shared sexual desires (Oakes et al, 2020). I find that the dominance of the visual and linguistic sexualised presentation and the objectification of the body in my study highlights how Grindr is used pervasively as a hook-up application. Goluboff (2015, p.117) finds that the smart phone is integral to the hook up scene, its communicative capacity “lends itself easily to the process of negotiating sexual desire among potential partners”. The bridging between offline and online is clear, the digital-physical hybridisation can be seen in the production and reproduction of the selfie, showing the significance of the mobile in managing the presentation of the self on Grindr.

Grindr’s locative-related information can be seen as allowing for the interaction between on screen and off screen (Farman, 2012; Dunbar, 2019). Whereby Grindr becomes part of a ‘hybrid ecology’, and physical-digital environments emerge through interactional competences, in the form of taps and messages, that allow for the “initiation of social encounters” (Licoppe et al, 2017, p2; Crabtree & Rodden, 2008; Licoppe & Inada, 2010). This highlights how Grindr allows for queer male intimacies to become increasingly mediated by digital mobile technologies (Miles, 2015). Reinforcing findings that highlight that the accumulation of sexual networks is a primary gratification and use motivation for Grindr (Gudelunas, 2012). However, it is naïve to say that Grindr is only used for sexual encounters.

As illustrated by my findings, Grindr allows for a range of interactions and these speak to the diversity of identities on the app, Miles (2018) finds that the queer identity flourishes on

cyberspace due to use being unbound to geographical strictures. I would extend this to Grindr, even though the app is intensely geographically bound with locative technologies, I find that Grindr allows for an indiscernible layer of queer spaces to be performed in heteronormative environments, allowing for the queer identity to flourish where it may not have been able to; conflating societal boundaries (Abbott et al, 2015; Miles, 2018).



## **6. Conclusion**

Studying dating apps is a multifaceted undertaking, often overlooked due to the diffusion of apps into our personal lives, intensified by fast gratification and the immediacy of sexual pleasures (Hautefeuille, 2016). Our convoluted dating life becomes projected onto a tiny square on a mobile that is subsequently blocked, tapped, hearted, superliked and made part of someone else's screen, all within 5 minutes of logging on. Studying Grindr has illuminated how users navigate their identity online, constructing an idealised profile in the hopes of gaining the attention of another user.

I find that Grindr crystalises a form of discrimination through the othering of bodies against the idealised form of masculinity- hypermasculinity; this is embodied and is projected through users' choice in constructing masculinities through sexualised images that objectify and focus on the achievement of men through the power by which muscular, athletic bodies symbolise. Intimacies on Grindr allow for body valorisation that generate new anxieties in discourse surrounding presentations that are "distributed unevenly across the disparate online cultures" (Møller, 2022, p.48), these identities are what make up gay culture, highlighting how online intimacies still have as much relevance for gay communities as they did in the past.

The relevance of this study is important to acknowledge as there are potentially harmful consequences on Grindr. LGBTQ people are persecuted due to their deviation from heteronormative ideals and although this discourse permeates on Grindr in complicated ways through hypermasculine body standards, any research that explores the stigmatisation of LGBTQ persons is valuable as it contributes to the discourse of minority perspective (Meyer, 2015).

There are certainly two sides to Grindr, often hailed as empowering, with the ease of fulfilling an individual's sexual needs giving users "a feeling of control over their romantic and

sexual encounters” (Hobbs et al, 2017, p.276). Whilst using Grindr in anti-gay cities can have alarming effects, whereby the app has been used to discover user’s locations. This has led to the identification of the specific locations of users, used in Iran, Uganda, and Russia (Grindrmap, 2014). Exposing a users’ location data endangers users, whereby users have been attacked, imprisoned, and killed for using the app (Hoang et al, 2017). The threat of violence is a constriction on the lives of homosexual people. Highlighting how this investigation is valuable in that it contributes towards illustrating the experience of using Grindr, whereby the discourse globally highlights culturally concerning issues.

Feelings of discontent surround users regarding male queerness in society, whereby homophobia in physical spaces can be frequent, I find that stigma against sexualities and the marginalisation of users is also existent on Grindr through the regulation of bodies (Enguix & Gomez-Narváz, 2017). However, I find that Grindr allows for users to explore their identity through visual, locative, linguistic and communicational development.

Grindr use is motivated in part through wanting to be part of a community, Dunbar (2019, p.75) finds that this changes over time whereby Grindr poses as “an introduction to queer communities and identities... making the affordances for the sense of community an important and salient point of use”. The learning of identities and self-regulation is an important part of any person’s lives, especially as part of a marginalised community (Denbar, 2019). As gay culture increases in pertinence in the mainstream media it is important to recognise that perspective needs to be acknowledged over the lives of gay people, especially when corporations promote consumerism through seemingly ‘woke’ strategies, giving rise to a culture war (Jones, 2019).

Turkle (2011) writes that Grindr’s possibilities have not been fully recognised. After a detailed investigation of Grindr, I found that there is a hypermasculine elite that is visually

presented through: whiteness, youthfulness, and an athletic and muscular physique. This was exaggerated using sexualised images that were produced using digitally dominant shot distances and styles. This gave my sample a sexually affirmative association that is representative of Grindr's proximate sexual fulfilment culture. In comparison to Turkle (2011) I find that Grindr's possibilities are rich, greater inclusion could be promoted through app intervention strategies that focus' on functional and inclusive spaces on the app. My study shows how spaces are needed for people to engage in sexual activities whilst offering chances for minorities to connect.

#### 6.1. Limitations & Directions for future study.

Grindr offers a unique look at how apps reshape urban contexts through user engagement motivated to initiate connections determined by proximity awareness (Licoppe, 2017). Upon reflection I find that my sample can be generalised but only to a certain degree. I conducted my research in London, which despite a 21% increase in homophobically motivated hate crimes, there is a large LGBTQ community and a booming gay culture (ITV News, 2022; Avery, 2016). As identified my sample was very representative of 'the metropolitan gay' ideology; by which urban residing young men are central to (Sinfield, 1998). The metropolitan gay has been identified as a dominant form of post-gay representation; therefore, I find that a greater investigation into other urban areas as well as rural areas would allow for a more representative picture of Grindr presentation choices, reinforcing that a greater scope of users and locations would need to be conducted before claiming generalisability (Ghaziani, 2011).

The proliferation of Grindr has also been discussed as contributing to the closure of a lot of gay venues (Avery, 2016). For future studies it would be valuable to conduct qualitative interviews, which would allow for greater nuances to be drawn from the Grindr experience. This

would also help uncover Grindr's place in contributing to the cessation of gay venues with demographic range offering unique perceptions. This would illuminate the lived effects of dating apps infiltrating LGBTQ+ culture. Ultimately the effects of studying LGBTQ culture highlights rich perspectives that are pertinent in democracy, as well as continuing to illuminate the inner workings of gender and sexuality in our society.

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### 8.3. Appendix 3- Biographical descriptions

#### 8.3.1. Masculine marker bios

Masculine for masculine  
No into smokers.

bi masc top guy looking for fun

masc4masc only.

#### 8.3.2. Feminine preference bios

FEMALE LOOKING ONLY PLEASE!! Top male looking for genuine fem's. Not into fxxk n go! Something more relaxed! Ideally, more than just a one off.

Friendly bi top 🐣🐣 4 fun! Not into hairy! Asian/ twinks/ fems to the front! Love tgirls (not available ones) 🥰

I don't send face pics so please don't ask. Can't accom . I like almost anyone but femboys and cd pref. Also anyone looking to be owned?

#### 8.3.3. Anti-feminine bio

it 🧼 hygiene is a must ✅ 420 ✅ NOT in 2 fem actin guys (unless ts) or guys in the scene 🚫 No blank

#### 8.3.4. Transgender preferences

Lookin for cd/trans

Interested in trans girls only

Looking to meet Ts/TV or Fem/Twink guys for fun and dates

Mostly...Straight guy mainly looking for TS women, but lover of feminine energy in all it's forms. Always up for fun

#### 8.3.5. Gym/ athletic bios

all here for different reasons so live and let live. gym buds welcome. Taps are awesome, tap away.

athletic straight acting guy looking for same..  
I enjoy long romantic walks to the liquor store.



#### 8.3.6. Race preferences


black/mixed guys welcome.

No Escorts.

No bottoms only.

Friendly bi top 🏳️ 4 fun! Not into hairy! Asian/  
twinks/ fems to the front! Love tgirls (not available  
ones ) 🙄

#### 8.3.7. Vaccination reference

Vaccinated 

Vax x 3

Suck fun

#### 8.4. Appendix 4- Coding manual

##### 8.4.1. Demographic coding

Age	Corresponding number
21-31	1
32-42	2
43-53	3
54-64	4
65+	5
N/A	6

##### 8.4.2. Facial disclosure

Showing face	Corresponding number
Full face	1
Partial face	2
No face	3

##### 8.4.3. Skin on show coding

Amount of skin on show	Corresponding number
Topless	1
Fully naked	2
Semi naked/ in underwear	3
Hands/feet	4
Unbuttoned clothing/ peek	5
Fully clothed	6
N/A	7

#### 8.4.4. Sexualisation of profile picture

<b>Sexualised</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Topless	1
Nipples	2
Bulge	3
Bum	4
Sex toys/sex acts	5
Underwear	6
Flexing muscles	7
Mouth/tongue	8
Suggestive (e.g., navel)	9
Non sexualised	10
Fully naked	11
N/A	12

#### 8.4.5. Activity in profile picture

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Exercise/Gym/Sport	1
Working/ professional	2
Socialising in bar/pub	3
Travelling/Holiday	4
Domestic/ Lounging	5
Partying	6
Eating	7
Outdoors/ walking	8
Selfie	9
N/A	10

#### 8.4.6. Body types

<b>Body types</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Ectomorph	1
Ecto-mesomorph	2
Mesomorph	3
Endo-mesomorph	4
Endomorph	5
N/A	6

#### 8.4.7. Shot distance in profile picture

<b>Shot distance</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Extreme close up	1
Close up	2
Medium shot	3
Long shot	4
Extreme long shot	5
N/A	6

#### 8.4.8. Photograph style

<b>Photograph style</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Selfie	1
Professional picture	2
Traditional portrait	3
ID photograph	4
Candid	5
Couple/family/group	6
N/A	7

#### 8.4.9. Looking for

<b>Looking for</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Chats	1
Dates	2
Friends	3
Right now	4
Networking	5
Relationships	6
N/A	7

#### 8.4.10. Language coding

<b>Language used</b>	<b>Corresponding number</b>
Masculine/Masc	1
Straight/Str8	2
Feminine preference	3
Anti-feminine	4
Gym/ Exercise	5
Transgender preferences	6
N/A	7