

**Straight Lines?**  
**Re-Reading the Discourse of Straight-Acting for**  
**Subversive Effect**

by

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## **Abstract**

Engaging with a rich history of gay masculinities, this research analyzes the contemporary discourse of straight-acting as a site of masculine identification for gay men within the context of queer liberalism. Mapping the discourse from a poststructuralist, queer perspective, straight-acting is on one hand theorized as a continuation of a discourse that promotes a valorization of normative configurations of masculinity, with an eye to its potential as a performative subversion of the 'naturalness' of heteromascularity. Through an autoethnographic analysis of the geosocial gay hook-up app Grindr, the research argues that the contemporary discourse of straight-acting is a reflection/function of particular neoliberal norms of self-discipline vis-à-vis the digital app space. Conversely, the potentials for straight-acting to problematize the coherence of a sexual binaristic logic points toward the destabilizing quality of straight-acting when speculated upon beyond queer liberalist functions, turning to face the possibility of resignification for subversive effect.

**Keywords:** Gay men; Straight-Acting; Masculinity; Queer; Discourse; Grindr

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction and Theoretical Directions

*This familiarity is not, then, 'in' the world as that which is already given. The familiar is an effect of inhabitation; we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 7).*

The preceding excerpt of Sara Ahmed's poetic prose engages with the fine-grained quality of the 'familiar', shedding light on the movement and aspiration toward familiarity within space and time. This passage inspires a thoughtful consideration of what it means to be 'familiar': How can we become 'familiarized' with our surroundings? What effect does this familiarization have on our bodies and the bodies of others? How can we cultivate familiarness in order to find our footing within a global context that feels more and more precarious with each passing day? I choose to begin this project with the evocation of place and familiarity in order to firmly situate myself within an active process of self-interrogation in light of familiar forms: whether these be life-paths, styles of becoming gendered, articulations of sexual desire, or attachments to futures that hold out promises of happy fulfillment and self-realization. I want to engage with how particular arrangements of living point us toward familiar paths by placing certain objects within view, while obscuring others. This is the flint that sparked my fascination with the normative arrangements that structure the boundaries of a 'good life', aiming to analyze these forms for their ability to reveal that which appears inevitable, decided, or ahistorical. In the exploration of this fascination, I have chosen to engage with the phenomenon of straight-acting as a specific discourse of normative heteromale identification among gay men, usually deployed on gay geosocial hook-up apps.

Identifying the core impetus driving this research, I am primarily concerned with assessing the discourse of straight-acting for its subversive potential, positioned here as a distinctly performative evocation of sedimented styles of 'authentic' masculine expression that appear to be territorialized under the sign of 'natural' heterosexuality. Following from the theoretical insights of Judith Butler (1990; 1993a), I consider straight-acting to demonstrate the performative quality of heteromale identity as it is taken up by queer subjects, insofar as the discourse illustrates the cultivated and repeated

accumulation of gendered behaviours that appear 'natural' when performed by straight bodies. This positioning of straight-acting runs contrary to the majority of academic and popular assessments of the phenomenon that understand the discourse within frames of masculinist domination and hegemonic masculinity, whereby straight-acting is positioned as a dangerous and toxic identification within gay culture. Although I do agree with these observations, my position is one that embraces the potential for straight-acting to function both as a form of patriarchal hegemony and as a possibility of productive subversion, in light of normative cultural logics that cement the ahistoricity of a binary and essential understanding of gender and sexual identity. By this I mean that my process of re-reading straight-acting understands this discourse as a process of queer normalization along heterosexual lines, while at the same time challenging the 'familiar' reading of this normalizing discourse as an inherently threatening phenomenon to the diversity and uniqueness of queer life.

These questions and queries undergird the specific analysis of the discourse of straight-acting presented in this research, assessed through a method of autoethnographic exploration that looks toward an interrogation of the 'normal'. This exploration takes place within the digital space facilitated by the hugely popular gay hook-up app, Grindr: a geosocial networking app that utilizes locative smartphone technology to connect gay, bi, curious, and queer men with one another, usually for the purposes of hooking-up. I chose Grindr as my specific site of inquiry because it was within this specific app where I first came across straight-acting as a term that highlighted the normative, conforming, and aspirational qualities of this specific digital space. With this in mind, I developed a method of exploration predicated upon my own 'walking' of Grindr as a queer man that does not identify with the discourse of straight-acting, engaging with my own subjectivity within this space of conformity along normatively masculine lines. This is why I have chosen to analyze Grindr as a specific case and not a more obvious site of straight-acting, such as *StraightActing.com*, due to the ability for Grindr's specific technology to forefront a culture of conformity and requisite self-work required within this context. To this point, this research understands Grindr, and other LGBTQ-targeted (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) geosocial dating/hook-up apps, to be a significant technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) within a contemporary context that is highly mediated through mobile and social media technologies. Furthermore, I position Grindr as a site of self-work under a purview of



biopower (Foucault, 1990), providing tools and signposts in the process by which gay men find their way within this particular historical moment. I argue that this historical moment is entangled with neoliberalist and homonormative (Duggan, 2003) pressures that congeal around an context of queer liberalism (Eng, 2010), which aims to flatten difference and straighten queer bodies into lines that promote domestic privacy, efficiency, and consumption. Queer liberalism is defined by Eng (2010) as “a contemporary confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (p. 3). By situating Grindr and straight-acting within a particular moment of queer liberalism, I will offer an thick articulation of the discourse as embedded in wider economic and political discourses that fashion and shape the contours of a ‘livable’ and ‘significant’ life.

As this may suggest, this research grapples with the complexity of a term that is highly controversial and enmeshed within a cultural context that disavows femininity and non-normative expressions of gender identity and sexual expression, while promoting life-paths of privilege. The goal of this project is to explore the messiness of this discourse, laying out the exclusive and harmful aspects of straight-acting from a feminist perspective, while offering a re-reading of the phenomenon that is in service of a theoretical position situated upon the rejection of prediscursive subject, turning toward the potential for the active negotiation of available discourses by subjects. This specific positioning of the discourse of straight-acting is informed by the work of Michel Foucault, who could be understood as the intellectual ‘daddy’ of this research. In particular, I draw upon his conceptualization of discourse as a series of systematic statements and material elaborations that form regimes of knowledge that appear self-evident at their moment of articulation, yet are open to active negotiation by subjects within the fabric of everyday life (Foucault, 1991; Hall, 2001). Similarly, I call upon the salient insights gleaned from the work of Butler (1990) on gender performativity, presented as a theoretical model that demonstrates the citational and historically-mediated quality of gender and sexual identities, denying an ‘inner reality’ that organizes our gendered postures. These theoretical pivot-points situate this exploration of straight-acting under the purview of poststructuralist thought, demonstrating a denial of a pre-discursive subject while turning toward alternative knowledges and conceptions of being in the world that complicate normative, taken-for-granted arrangements. The salient and vital

perspectives of Sara Ahmed (2006a; 2006b) function as a gloss to the insights provided by Foucault and Butler's theoretical frameworks, placing emphasis upon the phenomenological aspects of 'becoming oriented' and finding one's way within a world of pre-assumed heterosexuality. Weaving these threads together, I will explore the possibility for straight-acting to offer 'oblique routes' (Ahmed, 2006b) through its perhaps contradictory denial of inner gendered reality, keeping in mind that the discourse, in all of its exclusivity and privilege, may solely function as a aspiration toward heterosexualized futures.

Fully embracing this uncertainty, this project begins by a grounding of the discourse within a dense, theoretical network in order to situate straight-acting within a fine-grained theoretical context. Next, this discussion will flow forward into a considered contextualization of straight-acting by engaging with the term in both popular and academic literature, outlining a history of gay masculinities in order to situate straight-acting within an archive of gay masculine styles. This exploration will demonstrate the connection between a discourse like straight-acting and a lineage of sexual binarism, while placing emphasis upon the complexity of the relationship between the cultural position of gay men and masculinity. These explorations will inform my perspective on straight-acting, providing the groundwork for an autoethnographic analysis of Grindr as a specific site of self-work, engaging with the discourse straight-acting within the purview of queer liberalism. This will be achieved through a personal and textual analysis of Grindr, guided by the desire to locate examples of a straight-acting self-ethic that could point toward the subversive potential of the discourse. Branching out into both theoretically informed and speculative discussions, I will conclude with an in-depth analysis of my findings gleaned while in Grindr, bringing the discussion of straight-acting back to the demonstrated archive of gay masculinities and the theoretical positions that undergird this research. Although this procession may imply linearity, I hope to problematize this notion while working within a structure that provides a clear path through the messiness of the discourse, while remaining open to contradiction and complexity. In this way, the structure of this piece should not suggest that the conclusions reached are somehow authoritative and/or sealed-off from further investigation; rather, I want this process of analysis to be positioned toward the future by suggesting that this exploration does and will not end with the last page of this document.

## **1.1. Michel Foucault's Concepts of The Subject, Biopower, and Technologies of the Self**

I have implied in my introduction that Michel Foucault could be understood as the theoretical daddy of this project, primarily because his influence comprises the core philosophical positioning of power, discourse, and the subject utilized at every level of analysis and interpretation. In order to follow the intellectual trajectory put forward here, the reader must maintain a firm grasp on Foucault's interpretation of power and subjectivity (positioned within this framework to signify 'subjectivization', the means and process by which one becomes a subject), which will be elaborated and contextualized in the following section. I will begin with a discussion of Foucauldian power dynamics, which signal a shift away from structuralist interpretations of power that assume a sovereign or concentrated nexus of power in the hands of a few (termed by Foucault [1982] as 'juridico-discursive' understandings of power). Because a Foucauldian interpretation of power and resistance places centrality on discourse and the subject as an actor within certain limits (Foucault, 1987; Hall, 2001), it comes as no surprise that this framework of power dynamics would be central to an analysis that aims to complicate 'ruler/ruled', binaristic interpretations of straight-acting as solely a discourse of privileged masculinity. Foucault's model of power dynamics diverges from various (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008; Burke, 2016; Eguchi, 2009) examples of research on straight-acting that utilize a strict hegemonic model of power in the study of (hetero)masculinities, inspired by the influential work of Raewyn Connell (1995) and her theory of hegemonic masculinity. Conversely, a focus on discourse and discursive regimes offers researchers studying heteromascularity a framework from which to analyze and unpack the historical construction and deconstruction of a "masculine subject" (Whitehead, 2002, p. 110) within particular networks of power and resistance, which for Foucault (1990) are always simultaneously at work and not totally centralized in/with a specific group or location.

Perhaps the most impactful theoretical implication taken from Foucault's work for this analysis of straight-acting is a reevaluation of power as a productive, 'net-like', and micro-political force that is imbued in the social fabric of everyday interactions (Foucault, 1982; Hall, 2001). This reorientation of the dynamic quality of power relations "shifts our

attention away from the grand, overall strategies of power towards the many localized circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates – what Foucault calls the ‘meticulous rituals’ or the ‘micro-physics of power’” (Hall, 2001, p. 77). By situating a subject within these ‘meticulous rituals’ and articulating how power relations do not simply work in a ‘top-down’ model of subjugation, Foucault (1990) allows for a more dynamic, complex, and negotiated model of the subject, in contrast to interpretations of power where a social actor is assumed to function in a negative relation to a dominant, centralized power structure (Hall, 2001). Foucault’s (1987; 1990) positioning of the subject within relations of power implies a capacity for negotiation, whereby the subject is not external to the effects of power as imposed upon or implemented from a centralized source to which subjects have no significant access (Whitehead, 2002). This does not preclude the possibility of domination from centralized nexuses of power; rather, Foucault’s (1982) theories allow for a reordering of power beyond a model of domination/submission, while not excluding observable instances of centralized domination and subjugation.

Aligning with the suggestion that power is inherently productive, Foucault’s (1977; 1982; 1987) reformulation of power relations implies a resistive capacity through the ability of the subject to reflect upon and mediate certain discursive regimes of truth, forming oppositional strategies or counter-readings. This rendering of power relations describes the “ethical subject who can maintain some critical distance... by reflecting on its own relationship to... forms of power” (Miller, 2008, p. 265). The ethical subject surfaced in Foucault’s later writings (Foucault, 1987; Miller, 2008; Rabinow, 1984; Whitehead, 2002) and reflects a dynamic rendering of the subject in light of a system of power relations that is micro-political, spread-out, and productive. As Miller (2008) implies, the ethical subject brings in the question of freedom for the subject:

In terms of its relation to dominant discourses, the ethical subject has a certain freedom – a freedom within limits – to reflect on ways it is positioned by such discourses... and to consider other styles of self, together with the principles that inform them. (p. 265)

However, this freedom is always enacted from within the historical and discursive structures that form certain logics within a specific moment in time, signaling the subject toward the ‘liveness’ of discourse and power as dynamic, modulating phenomena. I have chosen to use the word ‘liveness’ in this context to highlight the active and shifting

quality of Foucault's notion of discourse, demonstrating that it both 'animated' and is 'animating'. For these reasons, I chose to utilize a Foucauldian model of power relations in the analysis of the discourse of straight-acting because it affords the possibility for a theoretical position that takes into account the multilayered and dynamic quality of the phenomenon, while situating the subject within a network of power relations that are not wholly determinative. In other words, the adoption of Foucauldian theoretical backbone places straight-acting in a position that highlights its seemingly damaging qualities, while opening up the potential for the discourse to offer subversive results, depending on how subjects negotiate the unique discourse.

Keeping these vital articulations in mind, Foucault (1990) presents a model of power dynamics that characterize our contemporary, Western context, referred to specifically as 'biopower' (Anderson, 2012; Foucault, 1990; Foucault, 2008). Biopower is an understanding of power relations that personifies the shift from the 'juridico-discursive' rule of a sovereign toward a functioning of power that enhances life and firmly places emphasis on the optimization of the self and body (Anderson, 2012; Foucault 1990; Foucault 2008; Rabinow, 1984). This marks a fundamental shift away from what Foucault (1990) theorizes as 'the rule of the sword', which characterized historical forms of domination where a sovereign ruler had the capacity to "*take* life or *let* live" (p. 136, emphasis original). Operating on two 'body' poles, biopower encompasses micro and macro flavours, described respectively as 'discipline' of the material body and 'biopolitics', or the management of large populations by the rule of the norm (Anderson, 2012; Foucault, 1990; Rabinow, 1984). Foucault (1990) describes discipline as

an *anatomo-politics of the human body*... centered on the body as machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls. (p. 193, emphasis original)

This is achieved through systems such as standardized education and the rise of capitalism, which implies a mechanical and instrumental ordering of the subject as a self-disciplining being. Going hand-in-hand with the biopolitics of the "species body," biopower sees the utilization of demography, population management, and knowledge of biological processes in the pursuit of optimizing and extending life, in order to diminish threats toward this extension (Foucault, 1990, p. 139).

Unsurprisingly these two poles work in tandem with one another, demonstrating the manifold ways in which the subject works toward the optimization of life in line with certain averages or state coherencies that legitimize a particular set of expectations or aspirations (Foucault, 1990). As Brodwin (2017) points out, biopolitics'

sole principle should... be the state's own preservation, strength and expansion... individuals would have significance only insofar as they weaken or strengthen the state. This political rationality became translated into technologies to govern people's concrete activities, notable the maintenance and restoration of their biological health. (p. 80)

Further, these factors "together aim for a homeostasis via the force of norms" (Anderson, 2011, p. 32), where security and any threat toward the bolstering of life is dismantled and diffused. In this way, biopower effectively says 'yes' to certain avenues of life optimization, because it assumes that this turning would ultimately benefit the subject (which is interpreted as a unit of a wider state optimization), implying an obvious alignment. Thus, biopower acts as a sort of benevolent force, seemingly impartial, yet predicated on the exclusion and extermination of ways of life, bodies, and subjectivities that do not align with sanctioned categories of measureable worth. Simply put, biopower "has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor... it effects distributions around the norm" (Foucault, 1990, p. 144). This observation appears evident when one analyzes the significance of both discipline and biopolitics, as these interconnected poles imply a subject that aligns itself with a permutation around a stable, measureable, and 'healthy' norm. For these reasons, the situation of biopower sits neatly with a current climate of late capitalist neoliberalism (Foucault, 1990), whereby individual subjects are implored by logics of self-management that parade under the assumption of a neutral subject, as similarly indicative of queer liberalism and homonormativity.

In the application of these theories to this particular analysis, the function of the norm is predicated on discourses that congeal around straight-acting, primarily through the logic of queer liberalism (Eng, 2010), which establishes understandings of subjectivity around the privatization of intimacy, (neo)liberal citizenship, and normative, 'straight' masculinity. Elaborating on these effects, Foucault (1990) suggests that the advent of discipline and biopolitics gave way to "*techniques* of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions... act[ing] as factors of segregation and social hierarchization... guaranteeing relations of domination and

effects of hegemony” (p. 141, emphasis original). This harkens back to the points outlined above, as biopower seems to suggest a bodily alignment that is at once desired and disciplining, implying a preexisting system of value and worth (Anderson, 2012; Foucault, 1990). Thus, biopower predicates its aims upon the notion of a ‘free’, rational liberal subject, who has a ‘right’ to life and liberty, measured against the norms and averages that make such an ideal livable, aligning with contemporary logics of neoliberalist subjectivity (Foucault, 1990). This alignment marks a divergence toward the dawn of the individual subject implicated by/through biopower and its optimization of life, who exercises its “‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations’” (Foucault, 1990, p. 145). Foucault (1990) astutely points out that this shift in Western power relations is significantly tied to the dawn of liberal citizenship and the rise of capitalism as dominant forms of cultural ideology in the West, not exterior to the observations made by Eng (2010) and Duggan (2003) regarding the advent of queer liberalism as a discursive phenomenon. Following the logic of Foucault’s (1990) argument, the shift into biopower as the dominant form of control and exercise of power in the West would imply a turning toward activities that seem to bolster life and liberty, which the subject is assumed to move toward willingly, as these established norms facilitate a life that is livable and thus aspirational.

It with these notions in mind that I position the discourse of straight-acting within the purview of biopower and queer liberalism, highlighting the particular emphasis placed upon the aspirational and normative quality of straight-acting. Biopower seems to get at the core of the discourse of straight-acting as a process of subjectivization that involves a particular amount of self-work along the axis of a measurable norm that appears at once ‘neutral’ and ‘beneficial’. The framework of biopower allows us the ability to analyze a phenomenon like straight-acting from a vantage point that sees how the discourse functions as a consolidation of certain privileges (passing, normative masculinity, desirability, state recognition, access to middle-class privileges, etc.) that have to be *worked on* or cultivated on/in the body. This also highlights the ways in which this mode of identification is highly racialized, gendered, classed, and ableist, functioning around a set of norms that are positioned as ‘valuable’ or ‘neutral’ within a particular historical moment of queer liberalism, yet parades as ahistorical ‘fact’. Stated clearly, the interplay between an ethical, ‘free’ subject and the consolidation of a specific set of

'healthy' norms under biopolitics undergirds the theoretical positioning of straight-acting in this project, suggesting that straight-acting is a function of privileged forms of masculinity and 'neutral' neoliberal subjectivity. However, this observation does not preclude a more dynamic analysis of straight-acting that accounts for possible disruptive or subversive effects of this discourse, which is characterized by the unique position undertaken in this particular project. Within a network of biopower, straight-acting does suggest an alignment with particular norms that are highly stratified and policed, whereby bodies are disciplined in a fashion that appears desirable or aspirational, displaying the interplay between biopolitics on a wider, 'norm-producing' scale and the function of discipline as a site of self-work. However, my goal with the subsequent analysis of straight-acting as produced by/through Grindr is in service of locating the possibilities for the discourse to function subversively against the assumption of heterosexuality as natural 'fact' and the inevitability of a heterosexual norm.

Expanding upon this discussion, I would suggest that because biopower assumes a dynamic quality of power and subjectivity, one could understand straight-acting as a complex and modulating phenomenon that simply does not reflect back *only* presentations of hegemonic masculine privilege (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008; Burke 2016; Eguchi, 2009). I propose that straight-acting also problematizes the assumed naturalization of heterosexuality and heteromascularity by demonstrating the performative and culturally-specific quality of these discourses, vis-à-vis the suggestion that the subject has the capacity to produce alternative, or disruptive readings of straight-acting while negotiating the discourse. Thus, straight-acting also functions in part as a conceptual framework that allows for one to see the limits of the norm produced within the logic of biopower, firmly situating the assumed 'natural' connotations of heterosexuality and heteromascularity within a non-totalizing and discursive realm of power relations. Foucault's (1990) astute observations on the nature of power and discourse are particularly salient here:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (p. 101)



Because straight-acting employs a particular set or constellation of observable styles, codes, and assumptions of value, it allows one to engage with the “practices of freedom” (Foucault, 1987, p. 114) that order this discourse, yielding results that appear to confirm the homeostasis around a norm of heteromascularity. However, following from Foucault’s (1990) position, this activity also demonstrates the capacity for straight-acting to dislodge or problematize this coherency, through its discernably performative flavour and active negotiation by subjects. Furthermore, the discourse of straight-acting deploys very real, dominating effects, but at the same time it allows one to analyze the manner in which a set of partial norms are consolidated, circulated, and accessed by subjects in a way that initially seems invisible. To state this in another way, Foucault’s philosophy of relations of power and the nonpartisan focus on the creation of the human subject within a specific historical moment allows one to analyze the discursive formation of straight-acting not simply as an example of domination and social privilege, but as an opportunity for a counter-reading of exactly *how* this discourse functions via the rule of the norm and what possibilities (if any) it allows for transgression, reformulation, misreading, and subversion.

Furthering these suggestions, Foucault’s (1988) concept of technologies of self provides the possibility for self-regulation and creativity that at once underscore the potential for disruption and alignment to/with normative methods of self work and the care of the self. Analyzing the notion of ‘taking care of oneself’ through examples culled from an investigation of classical Greco-Roman and Christian texts, Foucault (1987; 1988; 1990) proposes an ethic of self-actualization observable throughout history, focusing on how subjects self-regulate and work on themselves vis-à-vis specific knowledges and models of transcendence. These methods are, unsurprisingly, highly reflective of the dominant philosophical and ontological understandings that characterize the periods from which they emerge (Foucault, 1988). A focus on specific technologies of the self implies a subject that actively works upon itself

permit[ting] individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

This formulation of the subject through specific technologies of the self allows one to observe the manifold ways in which the subject engages in particular practices in order

to consolidate an aspirational subjectivity, whereby these technologies “simultaneously represent and enact much broader cultural commitments and notions of value” (Brodwin, 2017, p. 78). For contextualization within this particular project, this potential could be elaborated through the use of Grindr as a technology that facilitates this process of self-creation, in line with neoliberal cultural metrics of value, in which the digital space of Grindr produces the potential for self-work to align the subject with the discourses of queer liberalism and homonormativity. I am also intrigued by the particular manifestations of this self-work within Grindr, choosing to understand the methods of the cultivation of a straight-acting ethic as technologies that align one with certain postures that are presumed to cultivate happiness and fulfillment. As I stated in the introduction, I position Grindr within this project as a digital space of creative possibility, where users are engaged in a process of self-creation that is reflective of the specific discursive elements of the app, articulating an assuredly normative masculine presentation to other users. To this point, one of the primary goals of this research is to analyze the specific self-discipline deployed by users on Grindr, in the hopes of locating specific performance of straight-acting technologies that offer the potential for subversion.

Returning to the importance of biopower in this dynamic, this impetus of self-discipline ties the deployment of technologies of the self to the wider biopolitical cultural matrixes that undergird the self-disciplining subject enmeshed in power relations within a context of biopower, where the subject takes up a process of self-care that manages the individual as a micro-instrument of a wider governing order (Foucault, 1990; Mitcheson, 2012; Brodwin, 2017). The existence of the self-disciplining subject allows one to observe how norms are reproduced in/through the fabric of everyday life, while the creative potential implied by technologies of the self does not deny an active, dynamic subject who has the capacity to shape their subjectivity in a manner that allows for innovation. It must be noted that the “strategic uptake of technologies of the self is not a pure autonomous act... [but] occurs within, and in relation to, the network of power relations, which it simultaneously works to disrupt and reshape” (Mitcheson, 2012, p. 72), implying the dynamic quality of the subject enmeshed within networks of power relations, which was discussed earlier. The emphasis placed here on the dynamic quality of the process of subjectivization within relations of power refuses to foreclose the possibility of innovation or subversion of norms, placing emphasis on the ethical implications of Foucault’s philosophy of power, while contrasting the accusation of non-

agency sometimes lobbed in Foucault's direction (Foucault, 1987). Resistance is thus not placed in a binaristic relationship to the notion of power, but is implied in the messiness of straight-acting as both a tool and stumbling-block for normative understandings of heteromascularity, value, and worth, opening up sites of potential subversion and innovation (Foucault, 1990). Mitcheson (2012) provides a salient reflection on this matter, where this approach to power and resistance

works to challenge the idea that the subject as we know it is fixed, creating the space to employ technologies of the self towards the constitution of different subjectivities... this has the potential to disrupt the existing order of power relations... because the current power strategies of the state are so bound up with a particular notion of subjectivity, in which the subject's own sense of self depends on it being subjected to monitoring and examination. (p. 72)

Therefore, technologies of the self do not simply suggest the implications of discipline within the logic of biopower, but operate with the possibility for different subjectivities that may not conform to a set of state-sanctioned permutations around a measurable norm; this innovative capacity at once recirculates, or at least reengages with, the discourse in which it engages, but at the same time, allows for the possibility for different ways of thought or action that emanate from this discourse. For the purposes of this project, this potential is extended within the digital space facilitated by Grindr, which will be assessed for its ability to promote an ethic of (normative) self-work within a digital context that may or may not lead to potentially productive results.

To this point, Prodwin (2017) notes "[t]echnologies of the self reveal politics as inscribed in the texture of everyday life and outside solid institutional forms," (p. 78) but not beyond the strategic functioning of relations of power. It is important to highlight this possibility in light of a discourse of straight-acting that does not preclude political deployment or subversive parody, as these are possible observations within a dynamic field of power relations, specifically assessed here through Grindr's digital space within a context of queer liberalism. Foucault's positioning of discourse and power as dynamic, fluctuating, and complex is absolutely vital in the analysis of straight-acting, implying a utilization by subjects in a fashion that is not purely unilateral or always following a predictable course, pointing to the vitality of the concept of technologies of the self for this research. Reinforcing the points outlined earlier, by situating Grindr as a specific technology of the self that functions as part-and-parcel of the straight-acting discourse,

we can begin to unpack the process by which the subject may align with hegemonic or normative styles of heteromascularity, while allowing for a fine-grained analysis of how subjects become instruments of power, by both their own creativity and by the dominant categories of worth prevalent within a contemporary Western context. For this reason, I situate Grindr as a unique arena of self-discipline that enmeshes users within a field of nearby bodies with a distinctly conformist flavour, despite the possibility for this queer space to resignify certain practices of masculinity away from a heterosexual referent. Holding this disruptive close, I refuse to accept a reading of straight-acting that forecloses the function of this discourse as simply a fact of domination, instead considering how “self-formation [can be] a form of resistance... operat[ing] between control and creativity” (Mitcheson, 2012, p. 73). Suspect of claims pertaining to the false consciousness of straight-acting gay men within a context of hegemonic masculinity, this project will stay open to the possibility of innovation and disruption on both material (as in, what straight-acting bodies do and how this may not align with a particular set of norms) and intellectual registers (implying that the concept of straight-acting allows for a dislodging of naturalized understandings of heterosexuality and heteromascularity) through the analysis of the specific digital field facilitated by Grindr.

## **1.2. Judith Butler: Gender Performativity and the Subversion of Norms**

It seems crucial at this juncture to introduce the other main theorist who will be utilized in this project, namely Judith Butler (1990; 1993a) and her work on gender performativity. Butler’s concepts and philosophical positioning of gender are crucial for my particular analysis of straight-acting, as they elaborate a manner in which the phenomenon is a form of reiterative performance of masculinity, denying a pre-discursive or ‘in-born’ quality to the subject prior to culture. Through this framework, straight-acting functions as a consolidation of certain “styles of the flesh” (Butler, 1990, p. 190), which are reiteratively performed in such a manner as to project the illusion of a coherent or essential gendered self that exists within the subject, a reality that Butler denies. This position is a fundamental philosophical benchmark to the project, which argues that the subject is always created in and through cultural frameworks of intelligibility, refuting an in-born, deterministic nature (a ‘straight-acting’ nature or ‘natural’ heteromascularity) that somehow exists before/outside culture. Butler (1990; 1993a) and

Foucault (1982; 1990) propose that our logics of meaning are functions of language (to state the obvious), which make sense or appear already formed due the systematic quality of discourse and relations of power, a key theoretical position in this research. Further, Butler's (1990) notion of the heterosexual matrix puts forth a logical framework for which the coherence of sex-gender-desire assumes obvious or ready-made pathways for subjects to traverse, providing a psychoanalytical logic to heterosexual supremacy. Interestingly, straight-acting logically aligns two of these notions (sex-gender), while dislodging and/or misreading the third (desire), opening up potentials for disruption, which will be assessed in the analysis of Grindr as a facilitation of the straight-acting discourse. These observations will be extended and contextualized in the following discussion.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is a vital framework for interpreting how subjects become gendered and what sort of constraints and/or freedoms are enabled in this process. Gender performativity refers to the construction of a gender identity that is a citational "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191), whereby the subject is interpellated into a matrix of cultural intelligibility that exists prior to the subject; this process determines the life-world, expectations, norms, and so on that will largely characterize the subject's existence (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993a). Performativity outlines "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993a, p. 2), literally demonstrating the material elaboration of discourse as a function of power, which characterizes both Butler and Foucault's use of the term. It is vital to point out that the gendered subject is not a humanistic 'choosing' being who can put on a gender at will, but is constructed by and through the grids of cultural intelligibility that operate via the force of conventions, norms, and their accompanying police function(s), as related to normative categories of gender (Butler, 1993a). As Butler (1993b) states,

Gender is performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized *under constraint*. Social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of norms. (p. 21, emphasis original)

Thus, gender performativity places emphasis on the *process* by which subjects repeat a set of conventions/styles/codes that, through this repetition, produce the effect of a coherent or essential gendered self that implies an interior reality or truth (Butler, 1990). The force of discourse to at once 'act' via the articulation of gender norms and expectations seems to conceal its construction, implying a naturalness that exceeds or exists apart/before discourse, or at least as a 'fact' about oneself (Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1993b), performativity

is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged. (p. 22)

This implies that performativity highlights the realm of possibility related to gender as an act of both constraint and subversion, recalling Foucault's (1990) salient comments on the possibility for discourse to be both an instrument and obstacle to entrenched forms of domination. In turn, this notion does not denote pure subjugation in the face of capital-D Discourse as an all-encompassing force, but turns toward the possibility of discourse as both the means by which both compliance and resistance can be enabled, a position that is core to this analysis of straight-acting.

Furthermore, Butler (1990, 1993a) argues that an anatomical sex is always under the fiction of gender, implying that one cannot conceive of a prediscursive sex that somehow exists beyond the signifying practices of its particular moment of emergence. The argument that 'sex is always gender' is a controversial position as it appears to deny any sort of biological reality to the subject beyond the play of discourse (Butler, 1990). However, Butler (1993b) points out:

to claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. (p. 10)

Thus, when one 'speaks' sex as a natural fact one is engaging with the cultural reservoir or meanings, symbolic structures, and regimes of power that order our interpretative capacities, signaling that which typically thought to come under purview of 'gender' (Butler, 1990). In other words, the materiality of the sexed body is very much 'real', but this reality (if one wants to use such a term) is always constituted by the cultural

meanings, sanctions, taboos, assumptions, and so on that cohere around one's anatomy; sex does not exist in a teleological or transcendental relation to the meanings which orbit around it, but is *signified* and *made meaningful* by these systems of signification (Butler, 1993a). To state this claim through Butler's (1993a) own prose: "If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties, but rather, *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on" (p. 5, emphasis original).

Butler's argument against a prediscursive sex that somehow orders or determines the cultural elaboration of one's anatomical or physiological makeup lends force to a critique of the heterosexist bias that solidifies certain discursive practices under the sign of 'objective truth'. This rejection of a natural ordering or teleological understanding of the subject is crucial in this analysis of straight-acting and also in Butler and Foucault's work in general. A denial of a prediscursive sex underlines the distinctly unstable and culturally-mediated qualities of both gender and sexual identity, which are taken up in this project to signify the distinctly performative quality of straight-acting. My interpretation of the discourse of straight-acting arrives from a place informed by Butler's theories, whereby the articulation of a straight-acting performance is enmeshed within the cultural logics that inform 'normal' masculine styles, coded as 'heterosexual' in this particular moment. I have chosen to conceptualize straight-acting in a fashion that highlights its inherently performative flavour, in order to shed light on the potential for this performativity to dislodge the coherency of heterosexuality as natural fact, entangled in a fictive confluence of sex, gender, and desire.

Taking this discussion further, the heterosexual logic that undergirds discursive systems of gender, sex, and sexuality comes under rigorous scrutiny in Butler's texts, elaborated as 'the heterosexual matrix' and/or 'heterosexual hegemony' in both *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993a). The heterosexual matrix is largely conceived of as a psychoanalytic concept of identification, consolidating certain logical 'facts' about the coherency of sex, gender, and desire that routinely line-up within a system of heterosexual privilege and assume a totalizing primacy or uncontested origin to heterosexual desire (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) refers to the heterosexual matrix as a system that provides intelligibility to bodies and desires within the cultural logic of heterosexuality as natural fact, for it could be assumed that one who is born anatomically male is predicted to present oneself as a masculine man and desire his

anatomical and cultural opposite, one who is anatomically, genetically, and culturally female, which frames heterosexual desire as the 'natural' and 'original' desire. This appears as natural fact within a context of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1986), insofar as compulsory heterosexuality promotes a 'logical' life path that subjects will traverse unless something goes 'wrong'. Taken holistically, the heterosexual matrix

designate[s] that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized... [which] characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender... that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990, p. 208, note 6)

Thus, the heterosexual matrix functions as a cultural logic that activates particular forms of attraction, identification, idealization, and material elaboration, while excluding those that misalign with this matrix of naturalized biases (Butler, 1990). Implicated within this network of coherencies are obvious relations of power as bodies are subjected to cultural controls with specific political and legal privileges that reproduce and recirculate heterosexual hegemony, informing the impossibility of certain abject subjectivities to entitlement of a livable life (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993a). This is why I position the heterosexual matrix as an integral logical framework in the articulation of a straight-acting discourse, for it produces a stranglehold on the possibilities for identification that follow straight line as 'natural fact', while demonstrating how the discourse of straight-acting is entangled with assumptions of normative gender expression as connected to heterosexual desire. However, the emphasis upon the performativity of this identification as implied by the '-acting' portion of straight-acting allows us to consider the complexity of this discourse and possible avenues for subversion, despite its reference to 'authentic' masculinity as part-and-parcel of heterosexual 'primacy'.

To this point, Butler (1993a) does not suggest that the heterosexual matrix is a totalizing system of domination; rather, she proposes that subjects have a certain ability to dislodge or complicate this naturalized logic by demonstrating its fragility and openness to de-legitimization. Using the example of drag, and in particular through the presentation of drag balls in the 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, Butler (1993b) argues that, through the parody and mimicry of dominant norms, one can observe the



constructed and reiterative quality of 'naturalized' presentations of gender and sexuality that play out in everyday life. Illuminating these points further, Butler (1993a) suggests

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarisms... [implying] that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. (p. 125, emphasis original)

Drag allows one to observe the fragility of the heterosexual matrix, which is always a projection of an illusory ideal that one cannot fully embody, functioning in a manner that has to constantly restate its claims toward naturalness and ahistoricity (Butler, 1993a). The police function wielded by the formal institutional and informal social powers that reinforce the legitimacy of heterosexuality as natural fact is largely a process that seeks to push back against the spectre of abject sexuality that haunts the legitimacy of heterosexuality as a biological enterprise, demonstrating the brittle quality of the heterosexual matrix and its naturalizing effects.

Furthermore, because no subject is able to fully approximate the seemingly coherent norm that informs idealized expressions of masculinity and femininity, the performative qualities of both desire and gendered expression are inherently unstable and incomplete (ibid.). As Butler (1993a) states: "Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated" (p. 126). By this she implies the dynamic quality of discourse and subjectivization to never solely be determined beyond the capacity of subjects to negotiate these discursive regimes. Through reference to the notion of competitive 'realness' in *Paris is Burning* (where participants are judged on how closely they approximate a 'real' or 'natural' woman), Butler (1993a) argues that a display of this nature "attempt[s] to approximate realness, but it also exposes the norms that regulate realness as *themselves* phantasmatically instituted and sustained" (p. 130). We can see here how the revalorization of certain dominant and oppressive norms that parade as 'realness' function both in a manner that demonstrates their implied cultural value and worth, while also illustrating a denaturalizing potential, revealing the constituted quality of assumed 'natural' or 'real' categories of identification. This process of revealing the instability of 'real' categories of identification will be taken up in the exploration of straight-acting for its obvious, yet contradictory, reference to 'natural' heteromascularity,

in the possible service of subversion. I consider straight-acting to function in a similar manner as drag within Butler's framework, for the manner in which it demonstrates that heteromascularity is not the natural 'property' of straight subjects, through the active and/or passive articulation of straight masculinity through/on queer bodies.

To elaborate upon this suggestion further, Butler's (1993a) analysis of *Paris is Burning* is open to the possibility of a complex negotiation between dominant forms of social value and worth, similar to the process of analysis underway in this particular project. She notes, "[the film] calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms" (p. 125), articulating my own anxieties about the discourse of straight-acting as both a damaging and potentially subversive phenomenon. Placing this notion in relation to Butler's specific analysis, the displays of assumed 'realness' in the film exhibit the possibility of a revalorization of privileged positions related to race/whiteness, socio-economic wealth, traditional femininity, and so on (hooks, 1992), which does not foreclose the possibility of subversion, but produces a complex situation that at once seems to promote the value of certain privileged and exclusive norms *while also* producing a denaturalizing effect to these norms.

The complexity observed in *Paris is Burning* highlights a similar complexity that underpins the analysis of straight-acting, for many of the same reasons as pointed to above. I am curious as to whether or not the potential for straight-acting to be both a consolidation of particular dominant norms and exclusions and still produce a denaturalized reading of heteromascularity does in fact offer opportunities for subversion. Much like Butler's (1990, 1993a) observations of the subversive potential of drag as a signification of the performative quality of gender, I argue that straight-acting allows for the disruption of the coherence between sex-gender-desire as logical frameworks of heterosexual supremacy. This argument does not preclude the very exclusionary reality of straight-acting as a site of identification; rather, it points to the messiness of the process of subjectivization, whereby the subject's agency is "in part... implicated in the very relations of power that one seeks to oppose" (Butler, 1993a, p. 123). By the same token, it should be made clear that subjects are never fully determined by the aspirational norm, but the space created in the approximation of the norm allows for a resignification precisely because the norms that are part-and-parcel of

intelligible systems of worth are inherently illusive and not completely deterministic (Butler, 1993a). To use Butler's (1993a) own words, while replacing 'drag' with 'straight-acting', straight-acting could be "subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative strategy by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (p. 125). The extent to which this is achieved and/or measurable is not particularly evident at this point, but I do think it is vital to suggest the complex quality of straight-acting as a site of possible subversion *and* revalorization of dominant, privileged cultural logics of worth.

These considerations give way to a discussion Butler had with Liz Kotz for an issue of *Artforum* (1992), in which she reflects on the measurability of subversiveness that points to the complexity of the argument posed above. Butler (1992) ponders, "it seems to me that there is no easy way to know whether something is subversive. Subversiveness is not something that can be gauged or calculated. In fact, what I mean by subversion are those effects that are incalculable" (p. 84). This discussion is furthered in *Bodies That Matter*, relating to the possibility of drag balls in *Paris is Burning* to function as both re-idealizations of particular dominant norms of gender expression and as potential sites of subversion. In particular, the film's demonstration of alternate kinship relations (the 'house' structure) that overtly mimic traditional notions of 'family' turn toward the possibility of new, unrealized systems of kinship relations (Butler, 1992; Butler, 1993a). In an effort to consolidate this observation, I would contend that Butler's use of *Paris is Burning* as an example of the complexity of the subject and its negotiation within established networks of power does allow one to see the constructed and performative quality of normative gender as a function of the heterosexual matrix, while demonstrating the impossibility for one to totally approximate the ideal implied by its logic. This also provides the opportunity for different ways of being in the world that radically depart from traditional notions of kinship and bonding, a result of the active engagement with discourses at hand (one has to 'know' what a family is in order to reconceive traditionalist kinship relations, which will always reference established forms of belonging). This would be the 'calculation' of subversiveness that Butler alluded to, seemingly an impossibility because this potential has-yet-to-come and points toward the impossibility to transcend established discourses and norms. However, this does signal the potential for a reconfiguration and resistance toward the status quo, whereby the turning toward queer reimaginations of kinship bonds not only functions to delegitimize the

nuclear family structure, but provides considerable and radical possibilities for future relations not yet realized. I would agree with Butler (1992; 1993a) that a denaturalization of the norm is not enough to dislodge or disrupt the hegemonic function of said norm; rather, one must be able to locate the potential for new ways of life, thinking, and being in the world that directly emanate from this denaturalizing process. My particular project is intent on locating this potential in the discourse of straight-acting, which will inform the exploratory impetus of the forthcoming analysis.

Bringing this discussion back to Foucault, Butler's theory of performativity, as a site of potential subversion of norms, highlights the messiness of the process of subjectivization, demonstrating how the potential for resistance and subversion within a context of polyvalent power relations is not as clear-cut as with juridico-discursive interpretations of power. According to Butler (1993a):

The paradox of subjectivization... is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a *reiterative* or *rearticulatory* practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (p. 15, emphasis added)

An awareness of this paradox is absolutely vital to this project, for the discourse of straight-acting is not positioned in this analysis as in exterior relation to power (in other words, wholly transgressive of dominating and exclusive norms), but functions both as an instrument and as a potential obstacle to the naturalizing impetus implied by compulsory heterosexuality and logic of the heterosexual matrix. Butler's (1993a) significant observations on the complexity of subjectivization on one hand produces the inescapable bind that one finds oneself in, but *at the same time* opens up a space for productive subversion and the creation of different ways of being, thought, and action within the world, recalling the prior discussion on realness. In other words, the subversive potential of any articulation of gender is always measured and informed by the constraining, normative categories that inform the resistive act. This aligns with Foucault's (1990) theory of biopower, whereby subjects practice self-discipline in order to align with particular state coherencies and norms; however, this alignment does not deny the possibility of creativity and innovation, implied within Foucault's concept of technologies of the self. Taken together, it seems that one resists dominant, naturalized regimes of truth through both the disruption of the naturalized discourse itself and by

producing different ways of being in the world that offer possibilities for reconsidered subjectivity, turning toward the future in a way that is not immediately evident or calculable. This project will aim to locate the potential of this turning from within the controversial discourse of straight-acting, situated here to function in part as a problematization of the legitimacy of the heterosexual matrix. I hope to establish the unique self-ethic of straight-acting from within the specific digital space of Grindr as a process that could point toward different or reimagined possibilities of being in the world.

### **1.3. Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Embodied Awareness, and Stickiness**

The embodied and reiterative emphasis in Butler's work recalls the third theoretical pillar of this project, Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology. I interpret Ahmed's (2006b) theories as a vital intervention with/between Foucault and Butler, highlighting the nuanced ways in which subjects are oriented toward various avenues of identification, through Ahmed's queered reappraisal of phenomenology. For this particular project, the affective and phenomenological flavour of Ahmed's (2006b) work demonstrates an understanding of how straight-acting subjects are implored to turn toward identifications or pathways that imply some form of social gift, namely a gift that is consolidated by the percepts of queer liberalism. Ahmed's (2006b) emphasis on the notion of 'orientation' within the context of 'sexual orientation' gives way to a fruitful theoretical framework that places emphasis on how subjects and life-worlds are informed and constructed by object choice and the movement through social worlds (both familiar and unfamiliar), assessed in this project for the potentials of this reading of orientation to function within digital space. Ahmed's (2006b) work suggests that "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others... shap[ing] not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inheritance... [and] 'who or 'what' we direct out energy and attention toward" (p. 3). The acknowledgment here of a 'world of shared inheritance' implies the manner in which orientating oneself within the world involves an engagement with a preexisting social reality that is structured in such a manner that certain objects are more readily 'reachable' than others (Ahmed, 2006b). Without departing from the theoretical and philosophical concepts put forth by Foucault and Butler, Ahmed's (2006a; 2006b) theoretical insights provide a useful vantage point that enables an analytic emphasis

upon the manner in which embodied subjects move through space and time, in particular the digital space facilitated by Grindr, pulled toward or away from objects, beings, and pathways that point to a 'livable' or 'significant' life.

Ahmed's influential text *Queer Phenomenology* (2006b) engages with phenomenology in the context of queer theory and poststructuralist thought, conceptualizing its uses for queer theorization (Berggren, 2014; Goldberg, Ryan, & Sawchyn, 2009). Phenomenology is the philosophy of experience (referring to phenomena, perception), it places emphasis on the manner in which the individual interprets the outside world as perceptible reality, highlighting the importance of how the individual subject is pulled toward certain objects through physical, psychic, and sensual interpretive frames (Smith, 2016). Taken holistically, phenomenology "is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object" (Smith, 2016, para. 1). Early pioneering work by Edmund Husserl asserted that consciousness is directed toward an object ('intentionality') that 'stands out' against a background (the history or familiarity of an experience that permits the object of one's consciousness to 'make sense', allowing an interpretation vis-à-vis one's personal history) and is informed by the individual's life-world, which is personal and intersubjective (Ahmed, 2006b; Smith, 2016). Merleau-Ponty's groundbreaking *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) provided further dialogue and expansion on Husserl's pioneering work, whereby "Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the centrality of the lived body inhabiting its world, rather than being simply a disembodied mind or a mechanical physical entity" (Berggren, 2014, p. 239) focused on the importance of cementing experience and perception within the frame of the individual body and lived experience. Moving away from the mind-body dualism of Cartesian thought, Merleau-Ponty proposed that "consciousness is embodied (in the world), and equally the body is infused with consciousness (with cognition of the world)" (Smith, 2016, para. 52), placing firm emphasis on the embodied quality of experience and knowing. This also highlights the manner in which phenomenology assumes the individual body is a discrete and unique entity that evades general abstraction, able to perceive of and interpret reality in a manner that is individualized and informed by a unique history/familiarity (Berggren, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2009; Smith, 2016).

According to Ahmed (2006b), phenomenology is vital for queer analysis because “it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (p. 2). Queer phenomenology allows for a focus on the manner in which the lived experience of subjects is shaped by one’s materiality and life-world, while conceptualizing the importance of directionality and space in how we come to know and experience the world that we inhabit and, in turn, how we come to know ourselves as in the world. Ahmed (2006b) is interested in the concept of sexual orientation as a directional intention and mode of residence, as it implies both how the subject is situated in space (‘I turn to the left and am oriented to the North’) and whom it is oriented towards (‘I desire people of the same sex’). Her queer reading of phenomenology “offer[s] an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon” (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 2). Thus, sexual orientation is as much about object choice as it is about how and with whom we inhabit space, implying intentionality to the action of the subject with a particular life-world and background. Ahmed (2006b) contends that being “orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way. These are the objects we recognize, so that when we face them, we know which way we are facing” (p. 1). In this way, orientation also implies a notion of comfort, belonging, and home: when subjects are oriented, they ‘have their footing’, know which way they’re heading, and are lined up with particular available paths, turned toward certain objects that are within reach (Ahmed, 2006b). For Ahmed (2006b), the “question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’” (p. 7). This is an important notion as it implies that orientation involves not only the centering of one’s experience and direction of consciousness, but the manner in which the process of finding one’s way is an act of feeling comfortable within the world, structured by larger systems of value and social belonging.

In Ahmed’s (2006a; 2006b) queer phenomenological framework firm emphasis is placed on the intentionality of the subject, who both impresses and is impressed by the space in which it inhabits. Ahmed (2006b) proposes that “phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in folds of the body” (p. 9), implying that both the subject and the social take shape within a dynamic interactive relationship, where the subject’s embodied materiality

cannot be divorced from the history and location of its unfolding. Reminding one of the importance of space within the process of subjectivization, Ahmed (2006b) uses tenets of the phenomenological method to point out that how one is oriented puts certain objects within reach and, by the same token, excludes a number of possible objects and alternate pathways. In other words, the subject's bodily horizon forms a particular limit or "the 'line' that bodies can reach toward, what is reachable, by also marking what they cannot reach" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 552), suggesting the manifold ways that subjects are impressed by space and the history that informs one's orientation toward the future. It becomes apparent from Ahmed's (2006b) writings that the subject's orientation within space and time allows for a certain capacity to both impress upon and be impressed by "the social skin" (p. 9), where repetitive action can reproduce a background that informs object choice and the movement toward an idealized object of identification. This promotes the intentionality of consciousness toward objects that are in reach, forming a social promise for the individual subject that is oriented "by repeating some actions over others, as actions that have certain objects in view, whether they are the physical objects required to do the work... or the ideal objects that one identifies with" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 553). Therefore, Ahmed's (2006a) use of orientation as a way in which the subject is positioned in the present is also pointed toward the future, where the subject's direction can open toward the possibility of diverging from the available or 'well-trodden' path. This discussion takes on a particular theoretical usefulness when applied to sexual orientation and the manner in which bodies tend toward 'straight' or 'queer' lines of identification, which will be unpacked below.

Ahmed (2006a) affirms that one becomes straight by orienting oneself toward heterosexual objects, while turning away from objects that would lead one away from the 'straight-and-narrow'. This is elaborated through compelling descriptions of the family home, with its requisite dining room table, surrounding photos of happy families and couples, and promises of inheritance and belonging, in which Ahmed (2006a) demonstrates how space becomes heterosexualized through the manner that bodies are not simply oriented toward a heterosexual object choice, but that heterosexuality "is also something that we are oriented *around*, even if it disappears from view" (p. 560, emphasis original). We could say then that heterosexual trajectories follow familiar patterns: we know from a young age what social and cultural expectations and futures lie open to us, which are almost always informed by heterosexual patterns of kinship and



coupling, forming the 'background' to our experience. This also allows the subject to more easily 'find their way' because heterosexuality allows for a "familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 7), informing how one interprets or perceives the world and the expectations implied by normative social forms. If one is oriented in a 'straight' way, then one has placed oneself in such a manner that promotes a certain proximity to established lines of worth and social promise, consolidated by compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2006b). For the purposes of this analysis of straight-acting, I locate this social promise within the logics of a system of queer liberalism, proposing particular 'straight futures' that imply certain outcomes. We could also then extend this discussion of 'becoming straight' in consideration of how the straight-actor reaches toward straight objects, while tending toward non-heterosexual sexual object choices, adding complexity to the notion of sexual orientation. If we consider Grindr to be a particular space crucial to this orientation, we can explore how its design and cultural embeddedness places particular objects in nearer proximity to the subject, in such a fashion that appears to draw the subject into straighter paths toward straightened futures.

Ahmed discusses this proximity to straight futures in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), in which "Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose, or as what *drives the story* (p. 90, emphasis added). Furthermore, the familiarity of heterosexual relations is "not, then, 'in' the world as that which is already given... [but] is an effect of inhabitation, we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by *actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach*" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 7, emphasis added). Thus, the objects within reach of the subject are co-constructed with the intentionality of the subject as it moves toward these objects on the bodily horizon, craving the normative line more deeply in space. To this point Ahmed (2006a) suggests:

What is present to us in the present is not casual... certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our life courses follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or of being directed in a certain way. (p. 554)

This observation allows for the capacity to analyze how and why subjects are oriented toward established modes of (straight) orientation, which demonstrate the contingency of these movements to consolidate under an impression of "the magic of arrival" (Ahmed,

2006a, p. 555), seemingly without reference to the history that undergirds these established routes.

Unsurprisingly this emphasis aligns with Butler's theory of performativity, where Ahmed (2006a) proposes that the

lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are... performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes, and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. (p. 555)

With an obvious Butlerian flair, Ahmed (2006b) highlights the role of performative action in the process of subjectivization, teasing out the ways in which well-trodden paths place certain objects in nearer proximity to the subject. Furthermore, these objects appear more 'available' or conducive to a livable life, where the alignment with these identifications re/create normative paths through their very articulation. Using Ahmed's (2006b) words, "the normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, *which puts some objects and not others in reach*" (p. 66, emphasis added). Therefore, orientation relies on the continual 'walking of' or 'tending toward' a particular path that appears to be reached without any observable effort on the part of the subject, in which the subject becomes straight through its approximation and orientation toward straight objects (Ahmed, 2006a). It also demonstrates how bodies are steered toward 'straight lines' over queer ones, in which "the politics of the straight line helps us to rethink the relationship between inheritance... and reproduction" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 555), giving the subject its social sea-legs and allowing it to feel at home, while pointed logically toward a 'good' or 'livable' future. Ahmed (2006a) suggests that because the nearness and arrangement of certain straight objects is not casual, the heterosexual background forcefully promotes an active movement toward a heterosexual promise that is promoted by the implied continuation of the familial line, via inheritance and reproduction (and, interestingly, this movement reproduces the same line of inhabitation). Ahmed (2006b) poetically describes this continuation as a form of pressure: "There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes us along specific paths" (p. 90). This description lends weight to the performative quality of being oriented, where the effect of

'walking the line' conjures forth the path that is being walked, performatively erasing the history and work that goes into the process of being oriented.

To take this point further, the alignment with such a straight line is however "not disinterested: to follow a line takes time, energy, and resources... we follow lines, and in following them we become committed to 'what' they lead us to as well as 'where' they take us" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 17). In this sense, the subject who tends toward straight objects is invested in the continuation of that line, and in doing so, creates and carves that line deeper into the impressionable surface of the social skin (Ahmed, 2006a; 2006b). To this point Ahmed (2006b) proposes:

Following lines also involves forms of investment. Such investments 'promise' return (if we follow this line, then 'this' or 'that' will follow), which might sustain the very will to keep going. Through such investments in the promise of return, subjects *reproduce the lines that they follow*. (p. 17, emphasis original)

It is here where the question of return and intentionality is provided an answer: the straight line becomes a predictive path, one that also implies a certain return on investment (such as the promise of a livable or 'good life'), which is part-and-parcel of the cultural institutions that promote and consolidate compulsory heterosexuality within the family home, but also within the very fabric of social belonging (Ahmed, 2010). The straightened body is therefore 'in line' with other lines, creating the impression of seamless integration with social promise and 'logical' expectation, "whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 70). Similar to Butler's (1990; 1993a) insights regarding sex and gender, the subject does not have a 'natural' orientation; rather, cultural and social apparatuses of compulsory heterosexuality and, in the context of this analysis these apparatuses are informed by the specific logic of queer liberalism, place pressure upon bodies to 'fit' within established or straight lines, clearly demonstrating that a 'natural' orientation is as much of a fiction as an essential gender identity (Ahmed, 2006b).

Taking these observations as a point of departure, it almost goes without saying that the subject can deviate from the straight-and-narrow despite its predictive quality and requisite promise of a livable life. Ahmed (2006b) uses the poetic notion of 'desire lines' to personify this potential turning away from the normative. Desire lines "describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday coming and goings,

where people deviate from the paths that they are supposed to follow” (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 20). Because of the performative and (literal) ground-breaking quality of the subject’s orientation, desire lines demonstrate the potential for embodied subjects to traverse alternate paths that can produce effects unimaginable or unconsidered, which “affects other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one’s desires, means inhabiting different worlds” (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 68). Precisely due to the turning toward straight objects, one cuts oneself off from other possibilities of object choice and identification, but this potential also allows for disorienting effects, in which the subject can turn toward objects that deviate from the normative (Ahmed, 2006b). In this way, one becomes disoriented when one deviates from the straight path, but this deviation is productive and destabilizing, allowing for new lines to accumulate on the social surface (ibid.). This aligns with the productive quality of discourse within both Foucault and Butler’s respective frameworks, where the capacity for subjugation also forms the potential for subversion and innovation. It would appear that the very potential for the reproduction and valorization of the straight-line allows for the possibility for disorientation, and the construction of new ways of being in the world: when one walks the ‘queer line’ one is in fact ‘creating’ or etching a path into the surface of the social skin, promoting the possibility for others to follow such a line.

This intention brings us back to the question of straight-acting and how Ahmed’s salient theories provide an embodied vantage point from which to view the phenomenon. Because the straight-acting subject may culturally and politically be oriented toward straight objects (in the sense that the straight-acting subject walks toward the promise of a ‘normal’, straight future and all of its privileges, as implied by the logic of queer liberalism), we could hypothesize that this orientation is one that follows the logic outlined above, affording the subject with particular benefits as reflective of compulsory heterosexuality and queer liberalism. However, it bears mentioning that the straight-acting subject is *in fact not straight*, and tends toward same-sex sexual object choices. In this way, the path walked by the straight-acting subject is in part representative of the ‘straight-and-narrow’, yet deviates from this path by positioning itself as a queer path, albeit one that inspires to a ‘neutral’ or normative promises of economic and political privilege. This theoretical complexity echoes the positioning of straight-acting in this project as a phenomenon that refuses to sit comfortably between hetero- and

homosexuality, seemingly allowing for covert disturbance from within its own logic of primacy and originality.

Moving on to another salient theory, Ahmed (2006b) highlights the fruitful concept of stickiness, which is explained in detail in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014): “stickiness is an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs” (p. 90, emphasis original). This suggests that objects, bodies, and signs become sticky through contact with other sticky surfaces, but that this notion of stickiness implies a ‘being-stuck-together’, as well. Ahmed (2014) proposes that

Stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a ‘withness’, in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together. One can stick by a friend. One can get stuck in traffic. Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. (p. 91)

It is intriguing to take note of how Ahmed (2014) highlights the notion of ‘boundness’ along with ‘being stuck’, playing with the multiple meanings associated with the concept of stickiness, implying that “signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that ‘use’ becomes intrinsic; it becomes a form of signing” (p. 91). This provides a dialogue on how the “binding effect of the word is also a ‘blockage’: it stops the word moving or acquiring new value” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 92), through the suggestion that a sign can bind together multiple meanings (for example, the word ‘straight’ evokes certain other words, some of which were mentioned earlier, which ‘stick’ to the surface of the sign of straightness), while also pointing to the history of ‘stuck’ meanings that accumulate on the sign. Ahmed (2014) points out that signs, bodies, and objects become sticky through contact, which does not imply that some words or objects are intrinsically sticky, rather, stickiness is an effect in which the accumulated meanings attached to an object effects other objects, as in, stickiness is manifested in the act of touching or transfer: “to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky” (p. 91). ‘Sticky signs’ are then articulated as a ‘chain of effects’ of being ‘sticky’ and also of being ‘stuck-to/in’, where “the sign is a ‘sticky sign’ as an effect of a history of articulation, which allows the sign to accumulate value” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 92). In other words, when an object is sticky, it has a quality of the consolidated accumulation of a history of meanings, where this object by the same effect, binds together the bodies that come in contact with the object under its address, implying both the linguistic

sedimentation of signifiers, but also the necessity for the material articulation of signifiers through subjects (Ahmed, 2014).

If we were to think of the concept of straight-acting as a 'sticky sign' we could consider the ways that this sign accumulates value via a history of other words and meanings attached to the concept of 'straight', but that the addition of the notion of 'acting' problematizes the seamless transposition of 'straight' to a non-straight body. Thinking about the idea of stickiness in relation to Ahmed's (2006a; 2006b) notion of orientation, I would argue that straight-acting is sticky insofar as it refers to a heterosexual background, articulated in this project as indicative of a moment of queer liberalism, that informs a promise toward a 'livable life', while referencing observable norms of masculinity that come under the sign of 'straight'. Positioning straight-acting as a sticky sign also allows for an 'unblocking' of the sign of straightness, in the manner in which the appropriation of the sign of straightness under the evocation of 'acting' produces new meanings that stick to the surface of the sign of straightness. To state this in another fashion, the sticky quality of 'straight' touches the body that comes in contact with it, allowing for the accumulation of meanings that are not deterministic or fixed; the 'trace' of straightness on the queer body gathers meaning as the subject moves through time, allowing for the possibility of different meanings to enter under the sign of straight. This does not preclude the strengthening of the sign of straightness as a referent to that which is "decent, conventional, direct, and honest" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 70), but it does engage with the possibility of 'straight' to acquire new meaning when it comes into contact with queer subjects. Stated clearly, I am intrigued by the capacity allowed by the idea of straight-acting as a sticky signifier in its turn toward the accumulation of different meanings and uses beyond a typical deployment of implied heteromascularity.

Let me bring this discussion back around to *Queer Phenomenology* in which Ahmed (2006b) notes "that the object in sexual object choice is sticky: other things 'stick' when we orientate ourselves toward objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the family or social line" (p. 101). This also implies how 'being sticky' also refers to 'being-stuck-together': queer orientations bind things together, under the action of sexual object choice. Thus, sexual object choice also impacts other options and decisions that the subject can make and Ahmed's (2006b) notion of stickiness highlights the manner in which the subject becomes straight, queer, or otherwise through their active engagement with the world and the experience of turning toward and away from certain

object choices, in which these turnings 'bind' particular bodies together. When one deviates from a normative sexual object choice one's world is oriented in an oblique manner, forming pathways and connections that deeply involve how the subject relates to others and the social world at large (Ahmed, 2006b). If one thinks of 'straight-acting' as a sticky sign, it recalls a multitude of meanings that bubble up at its moment of articulation but are left unsaid, "the association between words that generate meaning is concealed: *it is this concealment of such associations that allows such signs to accumulate value*" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 92, emphasis original). When one becomes 'stuck' to the sign of straight-acting an impression is left and the implications of heteromascularity that are called forth but not named under the sign of straight-acting 'stick' to the surface of contact, recalling both the lived experience of bodies and the process of discursive subjectivization, informed by normative frames of heteromascularity in this analysis.

It is in this implication where the Foucauldian and Butlerian flavours of Ahmed's work shines forth: one is oriented as an individual body, however this body is always implicated under the social constraints and discursive regimes that orbit the subject within a given historical moment. For the purposes of this project, Foucault, Butler, and Ahmed contribute vital theoretical positions, but are connected together through shared emphasis upon the process of subjectivization, the instability of discourse, and the performative quality of gender expression and sexual subjectivity. Simply put, these theorists walk the poststructuralist line, drawing our attention to the processes by which the subject becomes subjectified, albeit through diverse modes of theorization and description. Because Ahmed's queer reading of phenomenology brings in a poststructuralist reorientation of the phenomenological method, we are able to evade the "false choice between discourse, norms, and power on the one hand, and bodies, emotions, and lived experience on the other" (Berggren, 2014, p. 245), a crucial position in this project. A queer reading of phenomenology allows one to emphasize the individual's experience as vital (but not as authentic or originatory) while refusing to avoid the formative and absolutely imperative role that discourse and power play in the process of subjectivization. Berggren (2014) proposes the concept of 'sticky masculinity' as an intervention between the false poles of poststructuralism and phenomenology, whereby "[b]odies culturally read as 'men' as oriented toward culturally established signs of 'masculinity', such as hardness as violence. The repeated sticking together of certain

bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity... [which] is always a contested, variable, and uncertain process" (p. 245). In such, this framework does not deny the intentionality of the individual subject, but also is not recourse to the phenomenological body whose consciousness implies some *a priori* authenticity. It instead allows for a fine-grained analysis of the manner in which bodies tend toward certain objects for specific reasons, which are largely informed by wider discursive regimes, where the performative quality of the subject veils the historicity of the moment of articulation.



## Chapter 2.

### The Historical Contextualization of Straight-Acting

Moving out of the dense theoretical mapping that was previously underway, it feels necessary to return to a place of personal reflection by beginning this chapter with a discussion of my own experience of/with straight-acting, in order to situate this analysis within the context of my own subjectivity. I want to evoke these memories in order to highlight the specific inspiration behind my fascination with the concept as a site of possible agency and innovative subversion, as a gloss to the exploration of straight-acting within a history of gay masculinities, which follow this brief reflective discussion.

Before embarking on this specific research, I was originally planning on exploring a graduate thesis that would engage with the changes in masculine identification for younger gay men, particularly relating to the implications of mainstream gay visibility and marriage rights as indicative of a cultural sea change regarding normative standards of gender identity. I ran with this idea for as long as I could, but eventually realized that this focus was too broad and did not allow for the specific and deep probing that I was craving for my graduate research. One evening while meditating, I recalled my own brief experience with online dating in 2013 through the use of the popular gay hook-up app Grindr, an experience that confirmed my general leeriness about using geosocial dating apps in the pursuit of love. I discovered that what really struck me about that experience was how alien my presence on the app felt, triggering a memory of the vast amount of profiles that placed keen emphasis on one's masculinity, sometimes through the use of 'straight-acting' as a term of identification. This was really all I needed to spark a flurry of thought fragments that I inputted into my iPhone, allowing me to consider how the concept of straight-acting suggested the performative quality of straightness, while signaling the potential for subversion that was allowed by such a performance. I was also etymologically attracted to the phrase, particularly for its overt reference to performance ('-acting') within a heterosexist context that often presupposes primacy and ahistoricity. Returning to my desire to find a specific route into an analysis of gay masculinity within this particular historical moment, my fascination with the concept of straight-acting allowed for the intellectual depth that I was seeking and I began to

fashion this project as a process of exploring the contours of heteromascularity and the potential for straight-acting to be an agentic practice that at once promotes a privileged and often exclusionary set of identifications, while offering potentials for subversion and innovation.

The messiness and contestability of this discourse was, if I'm being honest, one of the more intriguing potentials of this project: I was seduced by the ability for my thinking and judgments about straight-acting and its subscribers to fluctuate, shift, and be challenged as I moved through the research process, promoting a feeling of uneasiness and inability to settle upon a definitive stance on the concept. This promise held fast through the entire research process, where at times I felt as if straight-acting was a toxic, heterosexist revalorization of heteromascularity and its implicit misogyny, racism, and homophobia, while at other moments I observed the potential for straight-acting to offer new dialogues on queer subjectivity at this particular moment in time, allowing for the contestation of heteromascularity (and homosexuality for that matter) as something that operates beyond its cultural mechanisms of deployment.

Keeping this tug-of-war in mind, the following chapter will explore the historical and discursive elaboration of straight-acting. This is not meant to be a definitive or totalizing document; rather, I hope that it offers the potential for dialogue beyond what academic literature has to say on the topic, calling forth the experience of readers from a vast range of subjectivities and cultural situations in consideration of the material. I will begin with an exploration of what straight-acting has come to signify through a discussion of academic research available on this topic, along with popular dialogue on straight-acting in recent gay media. Next, this discussion will dovetail into a presentation of an archive of masculine identifications within gay male culture, fleshing out a history of styles that, I argue, influence the contemporary discourse of straight-acting and leave their traces upon current performances. I will then segue into the cultural construction and policing of a heterosexual/homosexual binary, a discussion that is essential to this project, for a binaristic system of sexuality undergirds the logic of the discourse of straight-acting. Furthermore, this exploration will work alongside LGBTQ history, where liberationist tactics can sometimes revert back to discussion of essences and immutable destinies (Bernstein, 2002; Eisenbach, 2006; Levine, 1998). It is my goal to problematize this demarcation by offering the argument that straight-acting can problematize/complicate this division, in order to demonstrate the manner in which

radical queer essentialism still plays by the rules of heterosexist logic, deepening the division between hetero and homo subjectivities in a binary relation.

## **2.1. What Becomes a Straight-Acting Gay Man Most? Popular and Academic Perspectives on Straight-Acting**

While reference to the entry on straight-acting from the popular alternative internet dictionary *Urban Dictionary* seems like a flippant place to start in the discussion of straight-acting, it does allow for a fruitful glimpse into popular discourse surrounding the phrase. *Urban Dictionary* has three separate, user-generated definitions of straight-acting and the most popular reads:

1. Conventionally masculine. Describes a homosexual male whose behaviour resembles that of the traditional heterosexual or straight male stereotype. Often considered politically incorrect (or even homophobic) as a label, but can be used facetiously. May apply to gay males who exhibit conventional masculinity out of a genuine predisposition, as well as to those who affect it out of insecurity (sometimes to remain in the closet).
2. The gay male equivalent of the lipstick lesbian. As a social phenomenon, the 'straight acting' homosexual breaks from gay stereotypes in a way comparable to the metrosexual's defiance of straight stereotypes. (Both labels rely on stereotypes in order to be understandable, even as they describe non-stereotypical behaviour). ("straight-acting," 2004, para. 1-2)

The above definition is the most comprehensive and favored by the site's visitors, displaying a 'thumb's-up' rating of 246 versus 46 down-cast votes (as of March 15, 2017), solidifying its place as the most accurate definition of the phrase on the site. The definition also provides contextualized examples of straight-acting in order to elaborate on its use: "I've never considered myself downright flaming, but my straight acting boyfriend makes me look sooo [*sic*] faggy"; "He's so straight acting he passed by my gaydar undetected"; and "I hate the term 'straight acting.' I mean, who's to say that straight people aren't trying to act like US?" ("straight-acting," 2004, para. 3-5). As far as popular definitions are concerned, I would contend that the *Urban Dictionary* entry does a good job of introducing the term and its uses within gay culture, as both a label for a desirable partner and as a site of self-identification. The most interesting aspects of the entry lie in its emphasis upon a heterosexual/homosexual binary and its requisite 'inner reality', its acknowledgment of both straight and gay stereotypes, and the reference to

backlash against the term as a heterosexist and homophobic label. It appears that the logic of straight-acting is tied to the idea of a binary system of sexuality, and despite awareness of the failure of straight-acting to achieve some sort of an ideal (in a very Butlerian fashion), the *Urban Dictionary* entry does acknowledge the idea of straight-acting as a 'put-on' in service of a broader cultural system of worth.

Following similar logic, the *Wikipedia* entry on straight-acting describes the phrase as:

a term for a same gender-attracted person who does not exhibit the appearance or mannerisms of what is seen as typical for gay people. Although the label is used by and reserved almost exclusively for gay and bisexual men, it may also be used to describe a lesbian or bisexual woman exhibiting a feminine appearance and mannerisms. Because the term invokes negative stereotypes of gay people, its application is often controversial and may cause offense. ("Straight-acting," 2016, para. 1)

Deviating from the *Urban Dictionary* definition slightly, the *Wikipedia* article suggests that straight-acting is not gender-exclusive (unlike the lipstick lesbian mirroring in the *Urban Dictionary* definition), despite evidence that the term is usually used by gay men (see *StraightActing.com* for confirmation of such, especially regarding the notion of straight-acting as discursively contrasted to effeminacy, more discussion on this later). The definition does briefly allude to hetero/homo binarism (the entry is haunted by the spectre of binaristic thinking, especially when referring to the straight-acting gay man "who does not exhibit the appearance or mannerisms of what is seen as typical for gay people" ["Straight-acting," 2016, para. 1]), but does not overtly relate its claims back to heterosexual culture and the assumption that only straight men can be 'authentically' masculine. I find it compelling that the *Wikipedia* definition never mentions straightness, implying an ambiguity that straight-acting could mean multiple other things beyond 'looking and acting straight' (the definition begs the questions: What is 'typical behaviour' for gay people? Are all alleged 'atypical' gay behaviours examples of straight-acting?).

Despite my dissatisfaction with the *Wikipedia* entry and its ambiguity, the *Urban Dictionary* and *Wikipedia* definitions highlight the polarizing quality of the phrase, linking it to negative stereotypes and possible homophobic implications. However, the *Wikipedia* entry does not place emphasis on the performance of straight-acting, as evident in the *Urban Dictionary* definition ("...who's to say that straight people aren't trying to act like US?") and does not include any descriptive elaborations, perhaps

suggesting the more clinical/quasi-professional format of *Wikipedia*. With that being said, the *Wikipedia* page on straight-acting links to other articles on 'Acting white', 'Butch and Femme', 'Classical definition of effeminacy', 'Down-low', and 'Metrosexual', situating the density of the phrase within the context of these other articles, signaling the wider cultural implications of straight-acting. The suggestion here is that straight-acting is in dialogue with particular cultural categories of gender expression (Butch and Femme, effeminacy), divergence from a norm (Metrosexual, Acting white), and sexual deviation (Down-low), allowing for the reader to explore the concept of straight-acting within a constellation of various identifications and cultural significations.

Furthermore, the term 'straight-acting' also appears in *Harper Collins English Dictionary*, denoting the phrase as 'informal' and referring to "(of a gay person) having the mannerisms of a heterosexual person: used esp [sic] by gay people of other gay people" ("straight-acting," n.d., para. 1). Additionally, it provides an explanatory example using the language of a personal ad: "Smooth, slim, straight-acting 37-year-old seeks younger guy for relaxed, dependable friendship" (ibid.). Much like the other less 'official' definitions of the phrase outlined earlier, the *Collins* entry forefronts the logic of the term within the context of hetero/homo binarism, referring back to a stereotypical or idealized function of the blanket 'heterosexual person', which is also evident in the *Urban Dictionary* definition and implied in the *Wikipedia* entry. The *Collins* definition ties the phrase to use on dating apps and in personal ads, suggesting that the term is often deployed in a strategic fashion on these platforms, expressing some form of aspirational identification, which aligns with popular discourse on straight-acting in gay media (Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015; Hall, n.d.; Stalling, 4 January 2013). To this point, the majority of popular articles on straight-acting from gay media outlets criticize the phrase for its inherent homophobia and exclusionary impetus (Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015; Hall, n.d.; Michelson, 24 September 2015), most often referenced within the context of gay geosocial hook-up apps, where geolocative (GPS) technologies connect nearby users through the app's digital network for the purposes of hooking-up. Signaling the 'toxic' quality of straight-acting as a dangerous ideal within contemporary gay life, these articles echo the more dubious implications of the definitions outlined above, tying the discourse of straight-acting to homogenizing, exclusionary, and privileged activities within the gay dating world (Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015; Hall, n.d.; Michelson, 24 September 2015).

These observations can be augmented by the ‘similar searches’ displayed on Google, which appear after an original search for the term ‘straight-acting’ (see Figure 1). It appears that internet users who are drawn to the term are also interested in cultivating the implications that go along with straight-acting in themselves, while finding potential partners who exhibit normative displays of masculinity that match an ideal masculine figure, tied up with ideas around straightness. I actually find the searches related to straight acting to be quite indicative of the more telling implications of the term, as they illustrate the clear self-help/self-work ethic that is implied in many of the results (“How to be more straight acting,” “How to act more straight,” “How to act like a straight man,” “How to act masculine”). There is an obvious conflation here between ‘masculinity’ and ‘straightness’, which almost goes without saying; however, it is worth noting that these searches and definitions assume that ‘masculinity’ is the property of straight men and is something that gay men should aspire to in order to be desirable, or at least ‘normal’ within the context of heteronormativity (see Chauncey, 1990 for a fabulous historical discussion of the development of heterosexuality as a marker of authentic masculinity; see also the influential work of Connell [1995] regarding hegemonic masculinity in relation to heterosexuality).

### Searches related to straight acting

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <a href="#">how to be more straight acting</a>  | <a href="#">how to act more straight</a>       |
| <a href="#">straight acting quiz</a>            | <a href="#">straight acting brooklyn</a>       |
| <a href="#">straight acting book</a>            | <a href="#">how to act like a straight man</a> |
| <a href="#">how to meet straight acting men</a> | <a href="#">how to act masculine</a>           |



**Figure 1: Google searches related to straight-acting**

An interesting observation here is that gender expression and sexual orientation are conflated in the context of straight-acting, whereby the deployment of the term already predicates itself on the logic of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). I do not think that the recourse to ‘straightness’ as a stand-in for ‘masculine’ is an accident, but rather, it provides a clear indication of how idealized gender expression is tied up with sexuality and the cultural apparatuses around heteronormativity. Within the logic of the

heterosexual matrix, one understands masculinity via the context of heterosexual culture, assuming a primacy or at least as possessing authentic jurisdiction over normative masculinity, where straight men just 'are' masculine and gay men have to 'work' at being less effeminate (here again we can observe an adherence to inner realities/essential truths, an integral logic to the discourse of straight-acting). We could also interpret this notion of 'work' within the context of Sara Ahmed's (2006b) queer phenomenology, in the sense that heterosexual bodies articulate "the magic of arrival" (p. 555), negating any evidence of labour in the cultivation of their normative, 'proper' gender identity. This also presupposes the in-born quality of heterosexuality that is fundamental to the logic of the heterosexual matrix, where straight men are naturally masculine and gay men naturally *are not*, cementing any and all claims toward originality.

Definitions such as those listed above offer a cursory overview of the discourse of straight-acting within popular contexts; however, the notions presented by *Urban Dictionary*, *Wikipedia*, and the *Collins English Dictionary* can be augmented and deepened by academic research done on the phenomenon of straight-acting. Carpenter (2008) defines the term as:

A slang term typically used to describe homosexuals who do not fit the stereotype that homosexuals are gender nonconformists. It refers to appearance, dress, mannerisms, language, interests, and even entertainment choices... it is almost always used to describe gay men... [and] is most often used by gay men to describe themselves or to signal the kinds of qualities they seek in potential partners. It is often used in personal ads in gay newspapers and websites. (p. 804)

Clearly, this summary does not deviate far from the collective points put forth by the popular definitions that were described earlier, adding to the discussion by acknowledging that straight-acting is not just about how one looks and acts, but is also about one's taste. Furthermore, Carpenter (2008) notes that straight-acting is "a fairly widespread phenomenon in homosexuals' personals ads, in which a premium is placed on gender-conforming qualities" (p. 805). Although this use is implied by the example given in the *Collins* definition, it is not as explicitly outlined as it is in this description, which overtly contextualizes straight-acting within the framework of the personal ad/gay hook-up scene, connecting to much popular discussion on the term and its aspirational impetus.

In a similar vein, another academic definition of straight-acting suggests that the term “seems intended as short-hand for a variety of attributes stereotypically linked with heterosexual men, which might include the equally slippery ‘masculine’, perhaps ‘manly’ and ‘butch’, but also what these attributes are often taken to oppose, such as ‘feminine’, ‘queeny’, and ‘camp’” (Payne, 2007, p. 526), suggesting the overtly (hetero)masculinized quality of the phrase. We can infer from these insights that straight-acting is often placed above and in direct relation to the effeminate other, which is rejected and disavowed, in the service of a seemingly ‘authentic’ or ‘legitimate’ masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is a crucial observation that aligns with popular responses to the use of the term on geosocial hook-up apps like Grindr, where straight-acting is often used in conjunction with anti-effeminate and often racist language (Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015; Hall; n.d.; Michelson, 24 September 2015). Similar responses can be seen in the discourse of straight-acting gay men on the forum space of *StraightActing.com* (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008), which will be expounded further below.

Placing these definitions within a wider context of gay culture, the controversial use of straight-acting as a term of self-identification and as a description of an idealized romantic/sexual partner is understood by some critics as “both a betrayal of gay liberation and pride and a manifestation of something even more sinister” (Carpenter, 2008, p. 806). Dale Carpenter (2008) does a fairly exhaustive job of listing the popular critiques of straight-acting, seen by some as a tactic to make oneself appear more acceptable to heterosexual culture, which is argued to be indicative of a disavowal of gayness by championing the value of ‘being a normal guy’, characterizing an active denial of one’s community that indicates a general disapproval with being gay. Furthermore, critics claim that homophobia does not discriminate between gender conformists and gender nonconformists and that straight-acting is fundamentally a process of assimilation that insults the nonconforming and transgressive acts of historical LGBTQ ancestors who fought for equality during the era of gay liberation (Carpenter, 2008). Similar observations can be seen in popular opinion pieces on straight-acting, such as in articles from the *Huffington Post* (“If You Think ‘Straight-Acting is an Acceptable Term, You’re an A\*\*hole” [Michelson, 24 September 2015]) and *i-D* (“The Problem with Straight Acting Gay Men: Are Queer Spaces Moving Towards Homogeneity and Inward Prejudice?” [Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015]).



I would argue that, while these critiques may in fact be accurate in some cases, they partly inscribe an essentialized, transgressive quality to being queer that presupposes an identity prior to culture and essentializes the queer subject as the logical opposite to (hetero)normative, mainstream culture. Carpenter (2008) deploys a similar logic, suggesting that critiques of this quality “essentializes what it means to be gay: to be gay is to be a gender transgressor, to cross all boundaries of gender and other traditional patterns, well beyond sexual behavior” (p. 808). The aforementioned articles also imply that straight-acting involves a homogenizing process from within the purview of gay subjectivity, which is carried out in order to disavow and mediate anxieties around being gay (Al-Kadhi, 28 September 2015). We then can understand that this logic inscribes straight-acting as a fundamentally *inauthentic* activity, and at the same time, suggests that people should ‘be who they are’, implying at once the denial of a ‘true self’ (wherein many straight-acting gay men see themselves as ‘authentically’ this or that) and a fundamental false consciousness to the identification with straight-acting. Such a reading also denies the potential for the ‘inauthenticity’ of straight-acting to challenge preconceived notions regarding the fixity of sexual attraction as an internal reality, within the logic of the heterosexual matrix.

While expressions of gender nonconformity and the subversion of cultural norms are absolutely essential actions (and characterize the foundational theoretical impetus of this project), such activity does not mutually entail an in-born or implied transgressive character to the queer subject. We cannot lose sight of the damage of reversion to essential, immutable realities and ‘facts’ about ourselves in the pursuit of challenging the norm and its requisite police function. Rather, rigid categories of binary gender and sexuality fail because they do not encapsulate the nuances of subjectivity and agency expressed in our everyday interactions and negotiation of available discourses. This goes for the suggestion of a compulsory radical queerness as well, which functions within the logic of a hetero/homo binary, asserting the essential differences between these sexual types, which reinscribe their legitimacy. While the often exclusive and regressive qualities of the discourse of straight-acting can promote the adherence to an established order of privileged masculinity that demands assessment and careful exploration (and in turn implies that that men are ‘naturally’ masculine in specific, historically recent ways), to suggest that these gay men are in fact betraying their true identity through their identification with heteromascularity does not effectively engage

with a thoughtful critique of the limitation of a binaristic logic to sexual expression. Such a denial also forgoes any acknowledgement of straight-acting to provide possibilities of transgression and the subversion of the established logics of heteronormative culture, which could be due to the messiness of the term to be at once a valorization of heteromascularity and an identification that demonstrates the cracks in the assumed inimitability of heterosexuality and its 'logical' coherence.

Despite the cultural presence of the term as an inflammatory and controversial phenomenon, there exist few studies that explicitly delve into the cultural and social implications of straight-acting as a site of identification among gay men. The earliest examples of academic work done explicitly on straight-acting were put forth by Jay Clarkson (2005; 2006; 2008), who analyzed the discourse of straight-acting as elaborated on the website *StraightActing.com*, a space devoted to this particular phenomenon. Although earlier studies noted the use of term in gay personals ads, these studies do not explicitly analyze straight-acting as a specific discursive phenomenon (Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997; Phua & Kaufman, 2003). Clarkson's (2005) first article on straight-acting discusses the rhetoric between the users on *StraightActing.com* regarding the then-recent television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007). These straight-acting users positioned the program within the context of a wider process of the effeminization of gay identity and the encroachment of capitalist and consumerist ideals into gay male culture. Clarkson (2005) suggests that

*StraightActing.com* represents a site of ideological contestation where its members challenge the notion that gay men similarly respond to gay representations from a monolithic gay subject position... seen [as] defending traditional masculinity by reinscribing its antifeminine and homophobic characteristics. (p. 236)

All of Clarkson's (2005; 2006; 2008) studies conceptualize *StraightActing.com* as a space where gay men struggle over the 'authentic' or 'proper' representation of gay subjectivity, arguing that the men on the site are committed to upholding ideals of traditionalist/working-class masculinity in the face of stereotypical or effeminate representations of gayness that are often assumed to represent all gay men within the heterosexual imagination. Drawing from the influential work of Raewyn Connell (1995) on hegemonic masculinity, Clarkson (2005) proposes that the men who interact with one another in the forum portion of the site ('Butch Boards') struggle over the privileges afforded by hegemonic masculinity, where a revalorization and re-entrenchment of the

existing gender order can be observed, often with violent, exclusionary language lobbed at any gay men who do not conform to the rigid norms of traditional masculinity championed by the site. To this point, Clarkson (2008) argues

attempts to reincorporate hegemonic masculinity, homophobia, and misogyny into these resistive identities reveal how dominant these concepts are in the public imaginary and suggest that even resistive subjectivities can be seduced by the lure of a higher position in the hierarchy of power. (p. 194)

This clearly aligns with Connell's (1995) theoretical model of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities, suggesting an ideological strategy deployed by straight-acting gay men in the desire for power and privilege. Clarkson (2006) proposes that the discourse of straight-acting is indicative of normative masculinity that rests upon the condemnation and ridicule of women and effeminate gay men, reflective of wider cultural examples of toxic, violent masculinity, arguing that the users of *StraightActing.com* lack sufficient awareness of feminism and the damaging implications of privileged masculinity.

Clarkson's (2005; 2006; 2008) studies are instructive and useful in a discussion of straight-acting because they explicitly engage with the inflammatory and anti-effeminate thrust of the discourse, pointing to the controversy of the term as a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, classed, and highly privileged site of identification. However, from the perspective of the users on *StraightActing.com*, their site offers a space where like-minded, masculine-identified gay men can represent themselves within a culture that allegedly denies representations of gayness beyond a 'sissy' or 'flamer' stereotype (Clarkson, 2005). The discussion of straight-acting then becomes more complex with this in mind, especially at the time of writing nearly a decade ago, where the users of the site bemoan the lack of representation of gay men who are simply 'normal guys' with typical working-class values, styles, and interests (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008).

Complementary to this observation, Clarkson's (2008) most recent article on the phenomenon analyzes the notion of gay visibility in the context of straight-acting, where self-identified straight-acting men criticize the attempts by more flamboyant men to 'stand out' in mainstream culture, either intentionally or unintentionally, seen as a negative or contemptible activity. Clarkson's analysis of the discourse of users of on

*StraightActing.com* suggests that there is a battle waged over ‘true’ gay visibility, where only one ‘authentic’ gay identity should be represented in the mainstream (from the perspective of the gay men on *StraightActing.com*: one that looks no different than existing images of heteromascularity, which then implies that the ‘natural’ way to be a man is to be a ‘straight’ man, even if one desires a partner of the same sex). In this way, the users on *StraightActing.com* wish to blend in with mainstream, heteronormative culture, which is positioned in a positive manner in contrast to ‘flamers’ or ‘queens’ who are seen as monopolizing the popular consciousness around what it means to be a gay man in contemporary Western societies (Clarkson, 2006; 2008). The emphasis upon ‘normalcy’ and unmarked gayness expressed by users on *StraightActing.com* is a crucial point to take from Clarkson’s work on straight-acting, as his analyses of the site provide a look at how straight-acting gay men represent themselves as normal and typical (no different than your ‘average Joe’), yet marginalized from mainstream gay representation because they do not fit into the out-and-proud flamer stereotype that is argued to personify gayness within popular consciousness.

Much like the popular definitions outlined earlier, Clarkson’s (2005; 2006; 2008) research on straight-acting discusses the concept within the context of stereotypical representations of gay men as effeminate, where the discourse of straight-acting is considered to be a remedy or cultural opposite to ‘sissy’ men by the individuals who subscribe to it. Other researchers (Eguchi, 2009; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016) picked up on this connection, analyzing the manner in which *StraightActing.com* promotes a ‘sissyphobic’ rhetoric, where “the traditional power structure of hegemonic gender may be co-constructed and co-shaped by the rhetorical strategy of straight-acting among some gay men” (Eguchi, 2009, p. 194). More recent research (Burke, 2016) on straight-acting has focused on the influence of stereotypes in pornography on straight-acting, where ‘Str8ness’ becomes an object of fetishization and desirability within gay pornography. Nathaniel B. Burke’s (2016) research revealed that ‘Str8 dudes’ are positioned as the physical and emotional opposites to their ‘twinky’, submissive sexual partners, reinscribing the cultural assumption that gay men are diminutive, sexually submissive, and effeminate. Yet it should be noted that this overt emphasis on the performativity of these identifications within gay pornography points toward the culturally inscribed quality of these gendered, porn performances, in part refuting their authenticity. Burke (2016) proposes that these performances are indicative of hierarchies of

masculinity with obvious implied power differences, which suggest that these categories effect the ways in which sexual attractiveness and desirability are implicated in cultural dynamics of power and privilege.

Furthermore, psychological research done on straight-acting and masculine ideals (Sanchez, Vilain, Westefeld, & Liu, 2010; Sanchez & Vilain, 2012) proposes that gay men generally prefer masculine partners, and those who are concerned with violating traditional codes of 'appropriate' masculine behaviour are more likely to feel negatively about being gay, backing up the claims from popular sources that see straight-acting as an example of internalized homophobia (Al-Kadhi, 2015 September 28; Mitcheson, 2015 September 24). These studies also suggest that gay men long to be perceived as more masculine and see masculinity as important both in themselves and in their partner, demonstrating an active aspiration to an ideal of traditional masculinity (Sanchez, et al., 2010; Sanchez & Vilain, 2012). Sanchez and Vilain's (2012) research presents the finding that anti-effeminate behaviour exhibited by gay men is linked to negative feelings about being gay, where these impressions are mediated through the identification with traditional masculinity as a valuable and important characteristic in oneself and in potential partners.

Taken together, these researchers (Burke, 2016; Clarkson, 2005, 2006, 2008; Eguchi, 2009; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016) consider straight-acting to be a mediation on the part of gay men to reassert their fallen masculinity in the face of a culture that devalues femininity and male effeminacy, vis-à-vis formal and informal cultural activities of shaming, exclusion, and humiliation, which they then draw upon in their disavowal of effeminacy in themselves and in others. Informed by a hegemonic, structural interpretation of power, straight-acting within this context incites the adherence to a hierarchy of cultural privilege that is attractive for gay men who have presumptuously experienced condemnation for their transgression of normative heterosexual expectations by engaging in sexual and romantic relations with individuals of the same-sex. Psychological interpretations follow a similar logic, where straight-acting gay men adhere to certain codes of masculinity and disavow femininity in order to mediate feelings of alienation due to disapproval with their own sexuality (Sanchez, et al. 2010; Sanchez & Vilain, 2012).

Furthermore, this body of research finds that straight-acting gay men push back against what they perceive as limiting and insulting stereotypes, which they assume to take prevalence over what it means to be 'authentically gay' within contemporary, Western cultures. To elaborate this point further, Clarkson (2006) notes:

The plea for tolerance of their straight-acting preference thinly veils a discourse that is highly homophobic and glorifies normative standards of masculinity. It is a reminder that the struggle to define gay identity often pits those who should be allies against each other in a struggle for gendered privilege. (p. 192)

Despite the evidence that straight-acting gay men are simply striving to be 'accepted' as something other than a stereotype, this body of research implies that straight-acting gay men's language and attitudes toward effeminacy promote toxic and homophobic responses to behaviours that do not align with normative expectations of masculine gender expression.

While there is much value and truth to these assessments, I do not think that this particular perspective describes the totality of the potential for straight-acting to function as something that is not simply in service of a privileged ideal. We have to ask whether or not the identification with normative masculinity *always and forever* entails a homophobic and misogynistic rhetoric, as some researchers (Ward, 2008) have astutely implied. Although I do think that the theoretical insights provided by the academic work on straight-acting offers vital and essential dialogues on the ideological motivations that may underpin aspects of the discourse, I would argue that it is perhaps too simplistic to claim that straight-acting is only a phenomenon that signals the hunger for power or self-hate/internalized homophobia, despite evidence that this may be the case in some instances. I would argue that this assumption sells the concept short, ignoring the possibility for straight-acting to parody or delegitimize heteronormativity and the potential for the discourse to function in a subversive manner. It also overlooks the fact that power is tactical and does not always function within a structural logic of a hierarchy, recalling the theoretical insights provided by Foucault. Although instances of self-hatred and anti-effeminacy can be observed in the elaboration of the discourse of straight-acting, I would find it difficult for researchers to suggest that *all* straight-acting gay men are motivated by the rewards of privileged masculinity and/or exhibit feelings of internalized homophobia.

My point here is that, if we assume that straight-acting is always and forever a damaging enterprise, we lose the nuance that straight-acting acquires when it is taken up by subjects within the fabric of everyday life, misrecognizing the ability for straight-acting to queer normative notions of sexual behaviour and subjectivity. The potential for straight-acting to parody or delegitimize straightness as an in-born, unchanging quality of heterosexual subjects is one such possibility; however, I am also intrigued by the potential for straight-acting to trouble the clear boundary between heterosexual and homosexuality as essential cultural categories. Furthermore, if we refuse to engage with straight-acting beyond an interpretation that favours hegemonic structures of power, we lose the ability to see how straight-acting could undermine the logic of sexual binarism, characterized by the logocentric quality of heterosexuality. This interpretation aligns with Foucault's (1990) discussion of discourse as both the 'stumbling-block' and instrument of power, where the discourse of straight-acting allows for a deconstructive moment *from within* the complexity of its elaboration.

Despite the observation that the majority of academic material focuses on a hegemonic interpretation of straight-acting, the work of Robert Payne (2007) on the phenomenon best aligns with my poststructuralist stance. Payne (2007) theorizes that straight-acting implies an active subject who is in a process of becoming, contrasted with the term 'masculine', which implies a settled-upon 'fact' about oneself. Already indicating a more dynamic deployment of the term, Payne's (2007) emphasis on the use of straight-acting as a concept that highlights an active 'doing' over a passive 'is-ness' considers a poststructuralist interpretation of the label as a performative practice. He elaborates that "labeling oneself straight-acting is performatively inscriptive despite entering heteronormative discourse by attempting to pass itself as *less* than, *uninscribed* by stereotypical gayness, and relatively silent amidst noisy gay discourse" (Payne, 2007, p. 534, emphasis original). In other words, straight-acting may attempt to present itself as a silent and neutral identification, but this unmarked quality is in actuality a performative practice, not one that signifies an essential 'fact' about oneself, which is implied by the '-acting' portion of the phrase (Payne, 2007). The argument that Payne proposes is linked to this observation, presenting a hypothesis that straight-acting is not simply 'passing', but is an identification that flags gayness through its elaboration within queer space, *despite* its reference to invisibility. To state this differently, the talk and activity of straight-acting gay men attempts to push back against the spectre of the

flamer in order to dissolve any connection with the 'negative' image of the effeminate gay man, but in doing so, it still reverts back to queerness as it is a queer identification. He also points out that the use of straight-acting within queer space is not in service of actually 'passing' as straight, which would imply the "misrecognition of straight-acting as gay fetish, resonating as it partly does around the risk of misrecognition and the erotics of danger and unknowing" (Payne, 2007, p. 533), as the men who deploy straight-acting as a identification are presumably gay, unlike 'down-low' men-who-have-sex-with-men who claim that they *are* straight (Reynolds, 2015; Ward, 2008). By the same token, the straight-acting gay man in an assumed heterosexual space would not only 'pass' as straight, but also uses the performance of straightness to mediate association with gay effeminacy (Payne, 2007). Therefore, straight-acting does not function simply as 'passing'; rather,

Passing as straight-acting is not passing as straight, which is about blending into a presumed neutral space, appearing unmarked by what may be read as legible difference from heterosexual neutral... [straight-acting] is a rhetorical invocation of wanting *to be able* to pass as straight but precisely so as *not* to pass. (Payne, 2007, p. 533, emphasis original)

The insights provided by Payne offer an intellectual depth to the discussion of straight-acting as something that functions in variable ways depending on the context of its elaboration and how the concept is (mis)recognized by a potential viewer and/or partner. Despite the strange situation of straight-acting within heterosexual space, I am most interested in the deployment of the discourse within queer spaces, specifically in the liminal environment of the geosocial hook-up app. Stated clearly, an analysis of straight-acting within a queer context allows one to consider how the term functions as a consolidation of heteromasculine styles as not to explicitly pass as straight (as this would block the culmination of a romantic meeting, and to a lesser extent, sexual encounter by foreclosing the notion that these men self-identify as gay, bi, queer, or fluid/curious), but to incite a particular performance of queerness that situates itself against the image of the flamer. This is why straight-acting and passing do not seamlessly align, despite the reality that straight-acting gay men may in fact pass as straight within predominantly heterosexual contexts. To this point, I agree with Payne's suggestion that "labelling oneself straight-acting in queer space is a panicked *denaturalisation* – it reveals its tracks, not covers them" (Payne, 2007, p. 535, emphasis original). This aligns with Butler's (1990) insights regarding the parodic potential of an enterprise like drag to signal



a denaturalization of the heterosexual matrix, albeit within a different context. This is a main theoretical pivot-point of this project, for I am arguing that straight-acting does function in part to denaturalize heteromascularity as an essential and ahistorical fact about straight men, while at the same time, engaging with how the discourse champions the value of heteromascularity as an aspirational and valued identification in the face of disavowed femininity.

The salient points brought forth by discussions of the privileged and exclusive aspects of the discourse of straight-acting allow for a considerable contemplation when discussing the denaturalizing potential of the discourse. To this point, Payne (2007) asks

what if the artifice to which attention is drawn does not attempt to parody but to *recuperate a necessary status*; not to queer but to straighten, even as this straightening is performed under the explicit auspices of being gay? (Payne, 2007, p. 535, emphasis added)

Following from this query, I wonder if the potential for straight-acting to function as an aspiration toward a damaging and illusive norm of idealized masculinity negates the potential for the concept to function at once to revalorize and undermine the presumed naturalism of heterosexuality. My position is that these notions can (and will) exist simultaneously, where aspects of the discourse may in fact suggest the 'inimitability' of straightness within the logic of the heterosexual matrix, while not foreclosing the possibility for straight-acting to also subvert and offer productive possibilities for a non-essential reading of sexual attraction. The tug-of-war that characterizes the subversive and re-territorializing flavour of straight-acting is described by Payne (2007) as a "balancing act," where "the continuity of the 'ing' in straight-acting may be a register of the anxiety of this balancing act: continuous because never able to stand still on the highwire of recognition, and never able to get to the mythic stable ground of authentic masculinity" (p. 535). This notion of a balancing act is a useful metaphor in the exploration of the discourse of straight-acting, situated in a quasi-paradoxical fashion in this project.

Furthermore, it feels crucial to highlight here how straight-acting gay men's rejection of the stereotypical image of the effeminate flamer is always haunted by the fear of being seen as 'other', which aligns with the percepts of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as its logical opposite, each relying on the other for its meaning. Straight-acting also suggests that heteromascularity is not an authentic fact

(despite being claimed to be 'authentic'), as the notion of 'acting' forefronts the agentic and performative practice of straight-acting to cultivate 'straightness' as impressions on queer skin. In this way, heteromascularity may function to be read as primary or inimitable (under the jurisdiction of the heterosexual matrix), but the performance of straight-acting *denies this primacy through the performative evocation of heteromascularity* from within the context of queer subjectivity. As Payne points out, the "use of the term works hard to fix itself as a label but can never entirely crystallise meaning or identity... straight-acting fits at best uneasily within the self-structuring coherence of the heteronormative label menu (male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/gay)" (p. 525). Straight-acting then appears to be inherently unstable, recalling multiple meanings and seemingly contradictory potentials, deconstructing its own claims toward authenticity at the very moment of its evocation.

## **2.2. Queer, Macho, and Straight-Acting: An Archive of Gay Masculine Styles**

In order to historicize and contextualize the performance of straight-acting within gay male culture, it is essential that I introduce historical examples of gay masculinity as ancestors in a line of masculine-identified gay men. I intend for this section to augment the discussion outlined earlier, regarding the unstable and fluctuating quality of discourse and the fragility of heterosexuality as an inimitable fact. This section will draw from significant historical and ethnographic texts that discuss particular constructions of gay masculinity, in particular George Chauncey's historical analysis of early 20<sup>th</sup> century queerness, *Gay New York* (1990) and Martin Levine's similarly groundbreaking piece, *Gay Macho* (1998). These studies were chosen for their explicit rigor regarding historical/cultural constructions of gay masculinity in dialogue with the rise of heterosexuality as a cultural project, while pointing to the fluctuation in the performatives of gay masculinity throughout time. Achieving a striking clarity regarding the cultural shifts that contribute to the consolidation of a generally accepted sexual binarism, the work of both Chauncey and Levine offers examples of gay masculine performances that I argue have left their trace on the contemporary performance of straight-acting. A discussion of Chauncey and Levine's work will segue into an analysis of straight-acting that locates the practice within the mechanics of a culture that has solidified the categories of straight/gay as internal realities. It could be argued that the presence of the

term 'straight-acting' in place of say, masculine or macho, articulates something crucial about the historical-discursive moment of its expression, referring explicitly to a post-gay liberation, post-AIDS epidemic, and pro-gay rights context within contemporary Western cultures, articulated as a moment of queer liberalism in this project (Eng, 2010). This refers to the potential for gay men to actively identify with straight futures and life-courses due to the affordance of certain civil rights and a generally more accepting/less pathologized response to gayness. Unsurprisingly, Ahmed's (2006b) insights regarding orientations toward a 'straight path' shed light on this observation, suggesting that these wider cultural shifts could make straight lines more livable, accessible, and also more open to re-routings through the activity of queer subjects.

Before beginning an exploration of gay masculinities, it feels important to note that a more adept historian could locate a dense network of straight-acting performances within the fabric of Canadian culture, tying the contemporary discourse of straight-acting to a progression of styles that reverberate forward to the present moment. An excavation of this nature would be absolutely fascinating and provide a thick, rich understanding of the particular contours of gay masculinity within a Canadian context; however, this project does not seek to achieve this result. Rather, I would contend that while the following discussion engages with American studies that analyze the complex history of gay masculinity within particular metropolitan centres, these analyses contribute to a genealogy of straight-acting as a discursive phenomenon, in which specific codes and practices articulated in these projects have left their traces upon the contemporary discourse of straight-acting. These studies are not accessed in order to promote a linear, progressive interpretation of history upon the discourse under analysis, but they do offer illumination on the manner in which understandings of gender and sexuality are cultural enterprises that fluctuate through time, alongside LGBTQ political and social history. My main point here being that, although straight-acting may seem like a new phenomenon in some ways, there exists a complex history of gay masculine styles that recall the deep entanglements of the discourse within specific cultural and historical networks of understanding. The work of both Chauncey and Levine offers a vantage point from which to begin to track these performances and interpret how the workings of the discourse of straight-acting is highly reflective of its historical moment of articulation, yet does not exist in some sort of cultural vacuum, divorced from past styles and cultural milieus.

### **2.3. Fairies, Trades, Wolves, and Punks: Routes Toward the Middle-Class Queer and the Internalization of Sexuality**

George Chauncey's (1990) illuminating study of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gay world in New York provides vital insights on the flavour of gay subjectivity prior to the homophile movement of the 1940s and the advent of gay liberation in the late 1960s. His work suggests that working-class and middle-class men engaged in various activities that would be categorized as 'homosexual' in our current cultural context, putting forth numerous 'gay' subject positions (fairy, trade, wolf, punk, and queer) that point to the complexity of gender expression and sexual behaviour prior to a monolithic 'gay' signifier that understands gayness under the logic of out-ness and the closet. Chauncey's project unveils a dense, complex network of interactions organized around lines of class that did not work along contemporary logics of immutable hetero and homo subjectivities, providing opportunities to understand the movement toward the consolidation of this logic within the contemporary moment. Furthermore, Chauncey argues that medical discourses did not create the homosexual *overtly* but rather named, defined, and medicalized behaviour that was already underway and present within early 20<sup>th</sup> century society. He argues that this was due to multiple factors during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that called for a clear line be drawn between heterosexuality and its deviant other, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Chauncey's historical excavation proposes that the logic of gender inversion characterized the understandings of same-sex behaviour in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wherein the figure of the fairy played a central role in the gay subcultures under analysis. The fairy came to personify an anatomical male who was an 'inner' female, categorized not as a 'homosexual' but as an 'invert', mainly because the desire for men/masculinity was understood as a 'female lust' during the period of question. Thus, the fairy's homosexual behaviour was a characteristic of gender inversion and not one's 'sexuality', suggesting the significance of gendered cultural milieus that men navigated during this time period (Chauncey, 1990). Fairies were characterized as "adopting feminine camp names, using feminine pronouns, and burlesquing gender conventions with a sharp and often sardonic camp wit" (Chauncey, 1990, p. 105), seen to be expressions of their 'interior' womanliness, which was also part-and-parcel of their submissive or 'womanly' role during sexual interactions. By the same token, the logic of the fairy personifies a container for gender transgression (and in the context of inversion,

of gender confirmation) and same-sex sexual behaviour, whereby 'normal' men could safely locate gender transgression within the figure of the fairy. According to Chauncey (1990), "[the fairy] was so obviously a 'third sexer', a different species of human being, that his very effeminacy served to confirm rather than threaten the masculinity of other men, particularly since it often exaggerated the conventions of deference and difference between men and women" (p. 57). Expanding this notion from another angle, the presence of 'trade' or 'rough trade' (working-class men of the emerging bachelor culture who were seen as masculine through-and-through) demonstrated more fluid understandings of same-sex sexual interaction, where a man who was trade could engage with a fairy in a sexual manner but this interaction did not threaten his interior masculinity if he demonstrated a dominant, 'masculine' sexual position (Chauncey, 1990). Therefore, the rules that structured the sexual activities between trade and fairies reinscribed the established gendered conventions precisely because the interior masculinity of the trade was not threatened by the interior feminine character of the fairy. Similar behaviour today would signal a closeted/repressed homosexuality within these masculine men; however, the idea that same-sex sexual activity did not signal a *homosexual identity* is a key take-away from Chauncey's work.

Understanding the dynamics of the fairy and trade offers up potentials for a historical reading of sexual subjectivity that is not overtly tied to a heterosexual or homosexual identity, despite the interiorized gendered implications of the framework, which still worked within a binary system of opposites. Chauncey's (1990) analysis of the interactions between fairies and trade reveals a distinctly class-influenced conceptualization of sexual subjectivity, where working-class men were more apt to engage in same-sex sexual behaviours than middle-class men, precisely because the restraints of middle-class culture forbid such activity. Further, the figure of the 'wolf' was another classification of working-class male sexuality that transgressed procreative sexual activity. Unlike trade, the wolf was a man who "abided by the conventions of masculinity and yet exhibited a decided preference for male sexual partners" (Chauncey, 1990, p. 87), and thus was not considered queer within the logic of gender inversion that was characteristic of the time period. Wolves are intriguing for the fact that they expressed a distinctly homosexual interest (to refer forward to our contemporary understandings of sexual identity), yet were not assumed to be queer because their activities were still in line with the then-current conventions of gender expression

(Chauncey, 1990). Wolves were generally interested in fairies or punks (young, working-class men who had an ambiguous sexual signification within pre-World War II New York, but were seen as generally submissive, and thus, a suitable consort for the wolf), figures that did not compromise the wolf's masculinity, which was valued and coveted (Chauncey, 1990).

I would argue that while these figures still reverberate through contemporary understandings of sexual identity and behaviour, the main take away from this brief discussion of fairies, trade, wolves, and punks lies in the evidence it provides toward an understanding of sexual behaviour that does not subscribe to the logic of a hetero/homo binary. Rather, it illustrates how turn of the century knowledge of sexual behaviour was seen as secondary to the gender expression of the participants, where criteria relating to passivity/effeminacy and activity/masculinity became markers of one's gender identity; this functions contrary to contemporary understandings of sexual identity, while still operating within an understanding of opposites and essential truths. It is key to note here that this contrast does not signal a seamless, linear transition from one discursive regime to the next, but rather, the implications of conforming/nonconforming gendered behaviour still indicate an implied heterosexuality or homosexuality, as seen in the contemporary anxieties around gay effeminacy and a valorization of 'straight' masculinity by straight-acting gay men (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008). It is important to note the ontological differences in the frameworks of gender inversion and sexual identity, which Chauncey's (1990) work clearly demonstrates, making the point that the behaviour and dynamics of fairies, trade, wolves, and punks worked in the service of demonstrating the *differences* between these characterizations, in contrast to a hetero/homo logic that would attempt to consolidate these differences under the monolithic banner of shared homosexuality. The point here being that the maintenance of one's masculinity did not have to include a disavowal of same-sex sexual behaviour, but rather, that this maintenance sometimes *included* same-sex sexual behaviours, suggesting that for working-class men, heterosexuality was not a precursor of normative masculinity within this particular historical moment (Chauncey, 1990).

While the social-sexual dynamics of working-class men at the turn of the century allowed for an illuminating glimpse into an understanding of sexuality that is not organized by a binary hetero/homo logic, the identification of middle-class queers seems to more neatly align with the contemporary discourse of straight-acting. Chauncey

(1990) notes that because of the “highly visible style” (p. 99) of fairies, the figure of the effeminate fairy came to personify the popular image of homosexuals, suggesting a movement toward the ‘natural’ alignment of effeminacy with homosexuality. While the fairy worked as a primary source of identification for queer men at the time, not all men characterized themselves as gender nonconformists, as implied earlier, despite their same-sex attraction. These men “struggled to forge an alternative identity and cultural stance, one that would distinguish them from fairies and ‘normal’ men alike” (Chauncey, 1990, p. 100), despite pervasive cultural attitudes that assumed that their same-sex interest signaled an interior femininity. These men are identified as middle-class ‘queers’, invested in the conventions of middle-class culture with significantly more at ‘stake’ than their working-class contemporaries, understanding themselves as possessing a sexuality that existed separately from their gender identity (Chauncey, 1990). Chauncey (1990) argues that the presence of middle-class queers signaled the rise of a heterosexual/homosexual binary in the middle-class, where subjects began to think of themselves as possessing a sexual identity that was not simply a symptom of an interior feminine character, but was a fact about who they were. Unlike fairies, queers were “unwilling to become virtual women, they sought to remain men who nonetheless loved other men” (Chauncey, 1990. p. 100), overtly positioning themselves in contrast to working-class fairies who were thought of as ‘flaunting’ their femininity. Using similar discursive logic as contemporary straight-acting gay men, queers at this time “believed it was the flagrant behavior of the fairies on the streets that had given the public its negative impression of all homosexuals” (Chauncey, 1990, p. 103). Interestingly, the in-your-face effeminacy of fairies worked as a possible smokescreen to the reality of queers who blended in with middle-class America, appearing as ‘normal’ in contrast to the fairy, who functioned as an identifiable gender nonconformist and container for male homosexuality (Chauncey, 1990). In this way, the fairy was the *de facto* image of the male homosexual, one that consolidated the general idea of what a homosexual was in the popular mind, while solidifying the effeminate behaviour of the fairy as a *widespread fact* about homosexuals, which echoes the anxieties displayed on *StraightActing.com* (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008). While these mainstream assumptions did allow for middle-class queers to move through the straight world largely undetected (Eisenbach, 2006), it also demonstrated the alignment of effeminacy with homosexual behaviour, which in turn caused anxiety on the part of queers for their closeness/similarity to the seemingly ‘unappealing’ image of the fairy (Chauncey, 1990).

It comes as no surprise then that I would argue that the turn of the 20th century queer has a lot in common with the contemporary straight-acting gay man, precisely because both discursive locations call for a normative (by the cultural standards of the time) masculinity intended to blend in with mainstream culture. This includes an active disavowal of overtly effeminate characteristics, often to the point of vitriol. To this point, the anxieties of both the queer and straight-acting gay men lie in their fragile position of affinity to the flamer and fairy typologies, by the simple reality of their sexual desires; as Chauncey (1990) notes, “While most [queer] men could elaborate the ways in which they were *different* from the fairies, they needed to do so only because their similarities seemed so frighteningly apparent” (p. 104, emphasis original). Such an observation recalls the contemporary struggle over representation as described by Clarkson’s (2005) analysis of *StraightActing.com*, where an emphasis on difference appears to signal a scrambling effort to mediate the similarities between flamers and straight-acting gay men due to heterosexual logics that assume all gay men are effeminate/gender nonconformists. While the particular style of middle-class queers as refined, dandy-like men (Chauncey, 1990) contrasts contemporary standards of masculine behaviour, the attitudes and discursive framework deployed by middle-class queers does share much with the discourse of straight-acting, understood as a push back against the conflation of male homosexuality with effeminacy. In particular, “middle class queers blamed anti-gay hostility on the failure of fairies to abide by straight, middle-class conventions of decorum in their dress and style” (Chauncey, 1990, p. 105), a claim that could be ripped from posts on the Butch Boards of *StraightActing.com*, albeit with tweaked linguistic details.

It is interesting to note how queers, within a burgeoning context of immutable sexual identity, were possessive of their middle-class, male privilege, concerned with how the image of the fairy contributed to homophobic attitudes from a lofty position of middle-class affluence. We can infer from this position that much of the friction between queers and fairies was characterized by a class-based antagonism, in which queers advocated for a homogenization of homosexuality from within the context of mainstream, middle-class standards of behaviour, where “middle-class gay men’s distaste for the fairy’s style of self-presentation was that its very brashness marked it in their minds as lower class – and its display automatically preempted social advancement” (Chauncey, 1990, p. 106). In other words, middle-class queers were concerned with preserving their privilege, while at the same time, were aware of a cultural terrain of upward mobility,



where acceptable, 'mannered' effeminate behaviour was a sign of refinement and sophistication, functioning as an aspirational ideal (Chauncey, 1990). Because "the cultural stance of the queer embodied the general middle-class preference for privacy, self-restraint, and lack of self-disclosure, and for many men this constituted part of its appeal" (Chauncey, 1990, p. 106) their motivations were similar to that of straight-acting gay men who valorize the conventions of heterosexual culture within a context of queer liberalism, positioned as aspirational and indicative of an ideal subject position. While the middle-class rejection of the fairy differs from the discourse of straight-acting due to its specific historical character, it does indicate how the proliferation of the logic of heterosexuality and homosexuality as interior 'facts' shifted the clearly class-driven responses of queers into a more general realm of sexual subjectivity that touched nearly every aspect of contemporary culture.

The presence of the queer signaled a shift in middle-class consciousness regarding the nature of sexual desire, which began to detach from conceptions related to invertedness, moving toward contemporary notions of hetero- and homosexuality. As Chauncey (1990) notes, late nineteenth century middle-class America saw a particular 'crisis of masculinity', where anxieties arose around the 'feminization' of society and an overcivilization of boys, leading to a fundamental 'crisis of masculinity' that called for a widespread, remedying response (for more on this see Chauncey, 1990, pp. 111- 125). Particular activities and cultural discourses were deployed in service of this 'remasculinization', in which heterosexuality (and the domination of women by men) became a significant factor in the establishment of an 'authentic' masculinity during this period of time (Chauncey, 1990). The main takeaway from this discussion lies in the conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality, where the positioning of a deviant other (the homosexual fairy) allowed for a containment and easily identifiable source of effeminacy from which heterosexual men could safely measure their masculinity (Chauncey, 1990). In this context, all same-sex affective, romantic and sexual behaviours came to signify a *homosexual* identity, which in turn signaled the consolidation of heterosexuality as a logical, normative fact about middle-class men:

Middle-class men increasingly conceived of their sexuality – their heterosexuality, or exclusive desire for women – as one of the hallmarks of a real man... they had decided that no matter how much their gender comportment might be challenged as unmanly, they were normal men because they were heterosexual. (Chauncey, 1990, p. 117)

This attitude was buttressed by emerging medical discourses that cataloged and defined the homosexual (and in turn, the normal standards of heterosexuality), who stood out from the gender invertedness of the fairy by its same-sex desire (Bernstein, 2002; Chauncey, 1990; Eisenbach, 2006; Katz, 1995).

Therefore, this logic solidified the notion that any affective and sexual relations between men signaled a homosexual disposition, which had to be rejected and disavowed in service of the legitimacy of the heterosexual project. Chauncey's (1990) concluding arguments propose that the division between working-class and middle-class ideas around masculinity and romantic/sexual activity are indicative of heterosexuality as a bourgeois instrument of selfhood, following from the insights provided by Foucault (1990) and echoing the salient points put forth by Duggan (2003) and Eng (2010). In other words, the "grouping of fairies and trade together in the single category of the homosexual was predicated on the emerging notion that male normality depended not on a man's masculine comportment but on his exclusive heterosexuality" (Chauncey, 1990, p. 124). For the purposes of the discussion of straight-acting, this consolidation illustrates the manner in which heterosexuality developed as a complex phenomenon that conflated normal, acceptable masculine subjectivity around a heterosexual, interior reality, which would not be achievable by men who desired other men. Through this logic, we can begin to observe the manner in which the solidification of the heterosexual matrix provided certain criteria on how to be masculine, which was intimately tied to one's heterosexuality even more so than one's outward masculine appearance.

## **2.4. The Gay Clone: Post-Gay Liberation Masculinity**

The presence of the middle-class queer within the cultural landscape of the early/mid 20<sup>th</sup> century is tied to the burgeoning homophile movement of 1940s, which aimed to secure legal and civil rights for homosexuals (the word choice here is intentional) as an identifiable minority (Eisenbach, 2006). Without going into a vast amount of detail, the early homophile movement sought to demonstrate the similarities between homosexuals and the heterosexual mainstream, contrasting prevalent images of 'sickness', 'deviance', and 'perversion' and understandings that circulated around popular assumptions about the constitution of 'the homosexual' (Bernstein, 2002; Eisenbach, 2006). Organizations such as the Mattachine Society worked within the discursive and legal frameworks of the time period, appealing to certain psychiatric and

medical experts to legitimize homosexuality in order “to prove that they were in fact, no different from the majority in any socially important respect” (Bernstein, 2002, p. 541). Arguing from a space that relied on ideologies of sameness, the homophile movement did not aim to revolutionize and deconstruct homosexuality, but instead hoped to grant significant civil recognition for homosexuals through available legal and political channels (Bernstein, 2002; Eisenbach, 2006). However, splinters within the movement resulted in more radical, less accommodationist tactics, where public protests and consciousness-raising activities contributed to a significant change in the image of the homosexual within the popular heteromind (Eisenbach, 2006). The movement toward gay liberation through more overt, less accommodationist processes altered the place of gay men in civil society, where media coverage and popular depictions of queer individuals implied a more militaristic character and the introduction of a burgeoning and distinct gay social and political world (Eisenbach, 2006).

Although much could be said about the shift toward gay liberation within the context of the New Left, for the purposes of the current analysis, this period is crucial in the contextualization of a new gay subjectivity that was underway, a subject position that was “contrary to all psychoanalytic predictions, [where] gay men were as much ‘real men’ – and saw themselves as such – as were heterosexual men” (Levine, 1998, p. 4). The importance of cultivating a masculine subjectivity in a post-gay liberation context provides a roadmap toward the contemporary discourse of straight-acting vis-à-vis the disavowal of effeminacy, which is expertly discussed by Martin Levine’s groundbreaking work *Gay Macho* (1998). Levine (1998) proposes that from the period following gay liberation toward the onset of the AIDS crisis, gay men within this social and cultural context “confronted, challenged and transformed existing stereotypes about male homosexuality, and the ways in which gender – masculinity – became one of the chief currencies of that transformation” (p. 4-5). The hypermasculine styles taken up by many gay men were indicative of the standards of the period and rallied against popular notions of gay men as effeminate gender nonconformists, forming a sexual/social subculture that produced institutions and social codes that were predicated on a visible masculine character (Levine, 1998). This was executed within burgeoning categories of sexual difference along a binary axis, where ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ signified the internal character of the oriented subject in the context of gay liberation and beyond.

These masculine-identified individuals, termed 'the gay clone' by Levine, were highly visible gay men in the urban enclaves of America that "modeled themselves upon traditional masculinity and the self-fulfillment ethic... Aping blue collar workers, [clones] butched it up and acted like macho men" (Levine, 1998, p. 7). Committed to gay liberationist goals and ideologies, the gay clone's performance of masculinity did subvert and parody the masculine norm, playfully illuminating the reality that gay men could be 'manly' too, while taking this manliness to levels of excess and subversion. According to Levine (1998),

the clone was, in many ways the manliest of men. He had a gym-defined body... looking more like competitive body builders than hairdressers or florists. He wore blue-collar garb... kept his hair short and has a thick mustache or closely cropped beard. (p. 7)

This image transgressed both the 'relaxed' or 'aloof' image of straight masculinity and the assumed effeminate character of gay men that were characteristic of the post-World War II period, while embracing a hedonistic lifestyle that was afforded to gay men in a post-liberation context: "[the clone] 'partied hard', taking recreational drugs, dancing in discos till dawn, having hot sex with strangers" (Levine, 1998, p. 8).

Furthermore, because the gay clone was shaped by the overt discrimination and stigma attached to same-sex desire within a post-World War II middle-class context, the cultural and social implications of the clone discourse were tied to established codes of masculine behaviour and the rejection of effeminacy, which these men mediated through their performance of masculinity as a historically-specific queer subjectivity (Levine, 1998). Similar to the discourse of the turn of the century middle-class queer and the contemporary straight-acting gay man, the gay clone was set in relation to the rejection of gay effeminacy and the championing of an 'alternative' style that in part valorized middle-class understandings of appropriate and acceptable manly behaviour, while also deconstructing traditional notions of masculinity as a heterosexual disposition. The general impression that gay men were 'failed men' "who deviated from masculine norms because they were either mentally or morally disordered" (Levine, 1998, p. 20) contributed to the push back by clones against the effeminization of gay subjectivity within perceived 'limiting' feminine stereotypes, indicative of the discourse of gay masculinity as in response to the spectre of the flamer/fairy. In this way, the gay clone was a meeting point between a cultural context of "masculine socialization and the

stigmatization of homosexuality” (Levine, 1998, p. 11), negotiating his subjectivity along cultural codes and mores that generally forbade same-sex activities beyond acceptable homosocial bonding practices. Within the context of post-World War II, middle-class socialization, boys were expected to aspire toward masculine postures, fitting into the appropriate cultural metrics in place that circulated the acceptable postures and styles afforded to men as masculine subjects (Chauncey, 1990; Levine, 1998). This process of socialization promoted certain (hetero)sexual codes and gendered behaviours, which were indicative of a valued masculine identity, characterizing what it meant to be ‘sufficiently masculine’ within the post-war sociohistorical moment.

This traditionalist set of identifications gained traction with the advent of gay liberation, which sought to destigmatize gay love and detach the idea of gender nonconformity from homosexuality (Bernstein, 2002; Eisenbach, 2006; Levine, 1998). The gay clone arose as a post-closet subjectivity that aligned with the logics of liberationists who promoted the notion that gay men did not have to identify with camp or femininity, but could be ‘authentically’ masculine in their expression of interest in men as sexual and romantic partners (Levine, 1998). The libertarian flare of the movement aligned with political and ethical goals that championed the legitimacy of homosexuality as “a natural, healthy, and worthwhile form of self-expression” (Levine, 1998, p. 27), promoting the positivity of gay life and the importance of coming out of the closet and living as an out gay individual. Gay liberationists did not seek to appeal to straight society, unlike accommodationist attempts by the homophile movement, but shifted the place of the homosexual within civil society while critiquing and dismantling the sexual piety of middle-class culture (Eisenbach, 2006). The gay clone took up these percepts, twisting the idea of what ‘the homosexual’ was supposed to look and act like with a hypermasculine outness that defied the closetedness of prior eras (it’s important to note here that the assumption that, prior to gay liberation, all gay individuals were forced to live a life of secrecy is only partly true and not a widespread reality. We can recall the insights provided by Chauncey [1990] for confirmation of such). As Levine (1998) summarizes:

Gay men now regarded themselves as masculine. They adopted attire and demeanor as a means of expressing their new sense of self. They also adopted this look to enhance their physical attractiveness and express improved self-esteem. Since American culture devalued male

effeminacy, they adopted manly demeanor and attire as a means of expressing a more valued identity. (p. 28)

The importance of the above quotation lies in its recognition of the clone's identification with a masculine style that was *valued* as an identity, within the context of masculine socialization and a stigmatized/violent response to homosexuality and effeminacy, echoing the implications of a society that devalues femininity and champions a very narrow and limited conception of masculinity.

Expanding on these notions further within the context of gay liberation, the gay clone was a personification of the maxim that

Gay men were simply men who loved men. They were not deviant, were not failed men. They were real men – and in their presentational styles they set about demonstrating their newfound and hard-fought conformity to traditional norms of masculinity. (Levine, 1998, p. 57)

This positioning of gay subjectivity was in stark contrast to the image of the feminized homosexual, but at the same time it championed the percepts of normative masculinity as valuable and aspirational. I find the curious contraction between the non-accommodationist thrust of gay liberation and the reentrenchment of (hetero)normative standards of masculinity to be compelling especially in regards to the messiness of straight-acting within the contemporary moment. In a sense, the gay clone attempted to push back against straight culture's idea that homosexuality equated to gender nonconformity through the various styles of rugged, working-class masculinity, which deployed the signs of traditional masculinity for political effect, despite a recourse to an ideal that was in part indicative of heterosexual standards of gendered behaviour and (hetero)sexual desire. Much like the contemporary discourse of straight-acting, the positioning of masculinity under the purview of heterosexual culture refers back to the utter pervasiveness of heteronormativity as a site of identification and future possibility. However, this does not deny the possibility of subversion when these styles are taken up within a queer context, as Levine (1998) points out:

What mattered was the doubleness of the clone style – its self-conscious, almost parodying references to stereotypically traditional masculinity, and its self-conscious embracing of that very stereotype at the same time. Clone style was both a *parody and emulation*.” (p. 59, emphasis added)

The embrace of traditional masculinity along with working-class codes by the gay clone altered the recognition of the style as purely heterosexual, and thus, opened up the

potentials for subversion and political deployment. In this way, the similarities and differences between the gay clone and the contemporary straight-acting gay man are evident, as both identifications could potentially promote a queering effect on assumed 'typical' heterosexual styles and postures. However, the discursive frameworks that characterize the materialization of both the straight-acting gay man and the gay clone indicate a similar thrust of heterosexual socialization and the disavowal of effeminacy as homosexual prophecy.

The fruits of Levine's sociological work on the subcultural scene of the gay clone allows one a particular glimpse into the metrics of a new subjectivity that was informed by the political and social gains of gay liberation. It is impossible to divorce the gay clone, and his valorization of traditional masculinity, from the context of gay liberation and post-World War II consciousness, as much as Chauncey's (1990) analysis of the middle-class queer is tied to particular cultural shifts and prevailing discourses that informed the possibilities afforded to men who engaged in same-sex sexual activities during the specific time period under analysis. In a similar vein, one cannot remove the straight-acting gay from a post-AIDS epidemic, pro-gay rights context, where anxieties around the spectre of the fairy still haunt the 'legitimacy' for gay men to be 'authentically' masculine. Such a contextualization will be executed in the analysis of the discourse of straight-acting through the geosocial dating app, Grindr. My goal with this analysis is to extend upon the discussion above, locating the discourse of straight-acting within the discursive frameworks that characterize the contemporary moment, informed by the instructive and rich work on queer liberalism and homonormativity in the context of neoliberalism, as put forth by David Eng (2010) and Lisa Duggan (2003). This will illuminate the ways in which the discourse of straight-acting is highly reflective of current neoliberal and biopolitical discourses of selfhood, informed by a cultural system of privileged, white heteromascularity that is in-part co-constructed by and through the popular geosocial hook-up application.

## Chapter 3.

### Case and Methodology

#### 3.1. Progressive Locations: The Situation of Grindr Within the Context of Queer Liberalism

The preceding chapter analyzed a trajectory of gay masculinity vis-à-vis two pivotal studies that described the particular, historical methods gay men deployed in the cultivation of an 'authentic' masculinity. These analyses allow for a crucial and significant vantage point from which to observe gay masculine permutations along the dominant discursive structures of their times, with an emphasis upon the classed, gendered, and racialized dynamics that underpin how gay men can effectively appear masculine within a specific historical moment. Both Levine (1998) and Chauncey (1990), along with the body of academic work on straight-acting, situate gay masculinity as an unsettled and modulating concept, oftentimes set firmly in contrast to the pervasive image of the effeminate fairy/flamer, but also as something that can offer a queering effect on mainstream, heteronormative performances of 'interiorized' masculinity.

The following analysis will attempt to continue the exploratory genealogy sketched above by situating the discourse of straight-acting within a post-gay liberation, post-AIDS epidemic, pro-gay rights historical moment of queer liberalism, a pivotal concept gleaned from the work of David L. Eng (2010). Along with the work of Lisa Duggan (2003) on the 'new homonormativity', this analysis will place straight-acting within a context that understands gayness under the frames of global neoliberalist 'progress', tying the discourse to particular socio-economic arrangements. Although I am arguing that straight-acting can allow for the possibility of productive subversion, it is crucial that the discourse be elaborated and analyzed from within its cultural mechanics of deployment, primarily that of the geosocial hook-up app as embedded within the neoliberal logics of late capitalism. Ignorance of the crucial fact that straight-acting is a phenomenon that is informed and innovated through the dominant cultural and economic structures of the contemporary moment would undermine a rigorous analysis of the potentials for straight-acting to function beyond the "recuperat[ion] [of] a necessary status" (Payne, 2007, p. 535). In sum, this research will fill the gap left by previous



studies on straight-acting that do not explicitly situate the discourse within the frames of late capitalism, while hypothesizing on the necessary significance of the geosocial hook-up app as a key creative space of self-discipline in the cultivation of a straight-acting subjectivity.

Arriving concurrently with the presence of the Religious Right and the subsequent AIDS epidemic, the rise of Western gay rights activism shifted its focus away from the revolutionary thrust of the gay liberation movement toward the broadening of legal and civil rights extended toward gays and lesbians, “abandon[ing]... radical cultural goals [of gay liberation] in favor of fitting into the system” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 554). This cultural and political context, along with the increasing influence of the neoliberal agenda on a global scale, paved the way for what David L. Eng (2010) terms ‘queer liberalism’, a significant concept in the elaboration of the discourse of straight-acting within this specific historical moment. Succinctly put, queer liberalism is “a particular confluence of political and economic conditions that form the basis of liberal inclusion, rights, and recognitions for particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects willing and able to comply with its normative mandates” (Eng, 2010, p. 24). Moving away from deconstructionist or radical critiques of normative gender roles, sexual practices/desires, and kinship arrangements, which characterize much queer activism, queer liberalism aligns with the tenets of neoliberal subjectivity, placing emphasis on the cultivation of a self-ethic predicated upon the value of “individualism, personal merit, responsibility, and choice” (Eng, 2010, p. 5). Developing from philosophical origins in classical Liberalism, distinctions such as the division between public and private spheres and the significant concepts of “the *state*, the *economy*, *civil society*, and the *family*” (Duggan, 2003, p. 4, emphasis original) are maintained within the logic of neoliberalism. As Duggan (2003) argues, these concepts congeal to conceal the crucial ways that these terms are refracted through categories of race, gender, and sexuality (for further information and context on the influences of classical Liberalism here, see Duggan, 2003, pp. 4-9), promoting an illusion of colourblindness (Eng, 2010) and gender equality. Within the logic neoliberalism, the sham of inclusive multiculturalism parades as economic freedom of choice, where the terms of Liberalism:

On the one hand, obscure and mystify many aspects of life under capitalism – hiding stark inequalities of wealth and power and of class, race, gender, and sexuality across nation states as well as within them. Inequalities are routinely assigned to ‘private’ life, understood as ‘natural’,

and bracketed away from consideration in the 'public' life of the state. On the other hand, as the ideas of Liberalism become common sense, they also work to *create* or *remake* institutions and practices according to their percepts. (Duggan, 2003, p. 5, emphasis original)

In tandem with Duggan's insights, Eng (2010) argues that the suggestion that the fight for gay rights characterizes the 'new' civil rights movement/final frontier of identity politics denies the intersectional and very real reality of racialized inequality that persists in the current moment, while ignoring how race, class, gender, and sexuality interact in complex ways. This suggestion situates racial inequality within the past, seen as 'over' and 'settled upon' at the very moment of invocation, denying an intersectional politics of the present (Eng, 2010). I bring these points forward to highlight the violent blind spots within the logics of queer liberalism to forefront a notion of progress that foregoes a critical examination of how the discursive framing of gay rights as superseding the civil rights movement and women's liberation movement implies a model of progress that produces an illusion of triumph and a model of denial, while bracketing the realities of gender, race, and sexuality away from the realm of 'public' economic and political discourse (Duggan, 2003).

Furthermore, the core percepts of Liberalism (and later of neoliberalism), characterize the historical advent of queer liberalism, whereby gay rights activism can be located within "the private sphere of intimacy, family, and bourgeoisie respectability" (Eng, 2010, p. 43). As Eng (2010) astutely suggests, "[our] putatively colorblind age is replete with assumptions that freedom is made universal through liberal political enfranchisement and the rights of citizenship, and through the globalization of capitalism and the proliferation of 'free' markets" (p. 23). Such an emphasis is characterized by the rallying cries around paramount gay rights projects in the last few decades, primarily regarding efforts to allow gays and lesbians to serve in the military and the affordance of marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples, often seen as the most 'vital' (or at least the most highly publicized) LGBTQ activist moments in recent history. Duggan (2003) and Eng (2010) both contend that these institutions are indicative of particular normative arrangements of sexuality and kinship, informed by typical liberal distinctions between domestic privacy and civil public life, all the while promoting a privatized, consumerist ethic of the self. Access to these institutions, while important, implies that queer liberalism is heavily contingent upon "a politics of good citizenship, the conjugal martial couple, and the heteronormative family" (Eng, 2010, p. 25), projects that align with

common sense implications regarding 'proper' citizenship under the doctrines of neoliberalism.

At this juncture it feels crucial to return to a point made earlier on, where I pondered the significance of the term 'straight-acting' as opposed to 'masculine', 'macho', or 'manly' as characteristic of a particular gay masculinity at this moment in time. I find that queer liberalism and the situation of straight-acting within a context that moves particular forms of queerness (and the limits/affordances of access to particular institutions for particular queer individuals that are implied by this logic) nearer to a mainstream palatability answers this query. As many of the opponents to the discourse of straight-acting would imply (Carpenter, 2008), queer liberalism does afford rights and freedoms to particular manifestations of kinship and intimacy that, as Duggan (2003) and Eng (2010) point out, follow lines of normative citizenship that increasingly appear more invisible and inevitable under a global system of neoliberal expansion. Furthermore, Eng (2010) places these methods of 'good citizenship' within an ethic of consumption, noting that

queer liberalism functions as a supplement to capital, but in a desexualized, repackaged, and contained form... we might say that neoliberalism enunciates (homo)sexual difference in the register of culture – a culture that is freely exchanged (purchased) and celebrated (consumed). (p. 30)

Interestingly, these anxieties do evoke similarities to the fears of cooption under a gay consumerist ethic communicated by the users of *StraightActing.com* in their assessment of the harmful effects of programs like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Clarkson, 2005), albeit from differing vantage points. Within a context of global neoliberalism, it appears that 'good citizenship' means 'good consumption', whereby freedom is framed as a choice one makes in an illusory field 'free' from structural inequality and disadvantage. Such a desexualization of queerness presents a subjectivity and life-path that is informed and oriented toward tasteful domesticity and the privatization of intimacy, recalling the insights of both Duggan (2003) and Eng (2010). Thus, the normative masculinity that is assumed to come under the sign of heterosexuality within the discourse of straight-acting aligns with particular *economic* and *social* arrangements and privileges extended towards queers who champion the value of normative masculinity, not dissimilar to the observations made by both Chauncey (1990) and Levine's (1998) respective analyses.

In an effort to deepen these linkages, the conflation of queer citizenship with ‘good’ consumption practices and privatized domestic intimacy calls forth Duggan’s (2003) concept of homonormativity, theorized as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 50). Unsurprisingly, the precepts of homonormativity conjure the ghost of Chauncey’s (1990) middle-class queer while pointing a finger toward the contemporary straight-acting gay man, understood as discursive performances that appear to capitulate to normative categories of citizenship and domestic privacy, reaching out to the promise of happy and safe upward mobility. This is partly why the label ‘straight-acting’ functions so well under the framework of queer liberalism: the forms of normative citizenship that characterize both homonormativity and queer liberalism indicate the aspirational impetus behind the use of straight-acting over masculine as a descriptor, particularly in the ways in which queer citizenship appears indistinguishable from normative arrangements within this context. Literally speaking, when the limits of possibility surrounding citizenship increasingly follow a neoliberal political and economic agenda, straight-acting gay men actually *do* act more straight, in the sense that ‘straightness’ and ‘gayness’ do not seem all that different within this discursive logic.

By placing straight-acting within a context of queer liberalism I hope to avoid muddying the points outlined earlier regarding the assumption of an inherent queer radicalism and the threat straight-acting poses to the persistence of a queer politics of reimagining and resistance. By demonstrating that straight-acting is a function and distillation of a contemporary moment of queer liberalism, I hope to produce a thick reading of the discourse beyond a hegemonic masculine interpretation. Furthermore, an acknowledgment of queer liberalism situates straight-acting within a global context that sees ‘livable’ subjectivities as highly entrenched within capitalist logics of worth, giving way to the erasure of difference and an illusory assumption of equality maintained by such logic. In this sense, we could understand straight-acting as a particular illusion of triumph that denies the very real, material factors that weigh upon individuals as structural oppressions under a context of neoliberalism. Such a reading also demonstrates the crucial situation of class, gender, race, and sexuality within the assumptions of queer liberalism, denying the false division between ‘private’ and ‘public’

spheres maintained by neoliberal logic. In this way, the situation of straight-acting under the purview of queer liberalism recalls the arguments made earlier regarding straight-acting as a function of biopower (Foucault, 1990). In particular, how can straight-acting gay men turn toward avenues of self-care that promote an aspirational ethic along normative lines and, perhaps more importantly, why do they do this at this particular moment in time? The Ahmedian (2006b) flavour of this sentiment adds particular weight to a discussion of straight-acting that focuses its gaze upon the integral influence of queer liberalism and the ways in which gay men can orient themselves in a world that is increasingly reflective of neoliberalist doctrines of progress, 'freedom', and privatization. Queries presented earlier in this research speculated on the particular appeal that straight-acting offers gay men, and while this pull is a complex, modulating movement, I would argue that the advent of queer liberalism plays a large part in this phenomenon and its apparent attractiveness as a queer identification. In other words, we are not simply speaking about 'masculine' gay men, but gay men who are *heteromascu*line and *straight-acting*, implying deeper significance beyond simply appearing 'authentically manly' within this particular moment.

### **3.2. How Grindr Grinds: Grindr as Case Study**

Keeping these crucial points in mind, I will move forward with a discussion of the particular field of study analyzed in this project: Grindr, a hugely popular gay geosocial hook-up app. This analysis is predicated on the hypothesis that straight-acting, within a context of queer liberalism, takes shape and is innovated/extended through the digital app space, providing keen and vital insights on the particular situation of straight-acting at this contemporary moment. Because much gay media (Helligar, 2017 Feb 21; Get Real Cambridge, 2015 March 21) and my own personal observations (discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter) situate the discourse of straight-acting within the digital app space, it seemed logical to explore the contours of the app and the ways in which the design, interface, and promotional materials that constellate within Grindr point toward/inform an ethic of self-discipline along normatively masculine lines. I also find that the particular space created by Grindr demonstrates the possibilities for digital locations to provide opportunities for self-work that can follow normative lines, but situate this potential as open to reconfiguration and possible subversion. Furthermore, Grindr is articulated here with the insights from Sara Ahmed (2006b) in mind, whereby I engage

with Grindr as a particular “homing device” (p. 9) within contemporary gay male culture, demonstrating a distinct node of finding one’s way within a contemporary context that is largely mediated through virtual screens.

Before diving into a discussion of Grindr and the academic research conducted around the app, I feel it is necessary to make clear to the reader why I chose Grindr and how I approach research through this particular app. Plainly speaking, I chose Grindr as a site of analysis due to its ubiquitous nature as the premier gay geosocial hook-up app, which is demonstrated through the vast amount of popular media coverage pertaining to the app and its high number of monthly users. Upon its release in 2009, Grindr was one of first apps of its kind to use locative GPS technology for romantic purposes (Beymer, Rossi, & Shu, 2016; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014). This altered the tides of online partner selection in mobile dating, ushering in an era of quick, on-the-go romantic and sexual encounters, while establishing a format that has seen great success more recently with heterosexual-marketed apps such as Tinder and OKCupid. Following from this fact, I assumed that the popularity of Grindr and its situation as the original and most popular geosocial hook-up app for gay men would allow for a dense and heavily populated field in which to explore, providing rich, complex insights on the phenomenon of straight-acting.

Introduced in March of 2009 (Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014), Grindr was a pioneering app in the now commonplace world of mobile geosocial networking technology that “utilizes the smartphone’s internal global positioning system to map the user’s location in relation to other users” (Beymer, Rossi, & Shu, 2016, p. 698). Moving away from online dating formats of the past (Beymer et al., 2016; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014), particular technological advancements and the relative ubiquity of smartphone use provided the economic and social setting that granted the potential for GPS technologies to revolutionize dating practices (Goedel & Duncan, 2015). These innovations fit snugly in line with

a world of radical individualism, multiple identities and dynamic relationships, unfettered markets and consumer capitalism, [where] mobile dating is perfectly suited to a mobile society where relationship tourism has become a way of life for millions of people. (Quiroz, 2013, p. 184)

According to Grindr's website, the app is "the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, curious and queer men. With millions of daily users spanning almost every country in every corner of the planet" ("grindr.com/about," accessed 26 April 2017); it is worth noting here that the label 'queer' was added into this tagline sometime between 2016 and 2017, as the slogan appears differently in Stempfhuber & Liegl's (2016) study. Such lofty statements are borne of humble beginnings: in 2009, Grindr was developed by 32 year-old Joel Simkhai for just \$5000 (Gudelunas, 2012), and in 2014, the application saw 5 million global users active per month with 10 million unique downloads of the app on to smartphones worldwide ("Fortune," 12 August 2014).

These observations demonstrate how Grindr has completely revolutionized the manner in which gay men can find love, sex, and friendship (along with all that falls in between these categories), ushering in a new era of on-the-go dating options for both queer (Adam4Adam, Scruff, GROWLr, Jack'd, etc.) and non-queer individuals (Tinder, OKCupid, etc.). This sea change opened up the potentials for the commodification of dating and hook-up practices, whereby the commercialized digital app space demonstrated that great profits were to be had from expediting the hook-up experience as a specific opportunity for economic gain (Licoppe, Rivere, & Morel, 2016; Quiroz, 2013). Similar intentions are mirrored in the actual activities and expectations of some users, in which the process of hooking-up on Grindr is "often described as a consumption process, targeting others framed as objectified commodities (often referred to as 'meat' or 'fresh meat')" (Licoppe et al., 2016, p. 2541). Recalling Levine's (1998) observations of a dynamic of consumption within cruising practices, the mobile hook-up experience has been theorized by some academics as an extension of the 'flagging' or 'cuing' of other gay men within public space for cruising purposes (Ahlm, 2017; Corriero & Tom Tong, 2016; Tziallas, 2015). Innovating this practice, Grindr takes the public out of the private interaction (Ahlm, 2017; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016), allowing the potential for the virtual 'gaybourhood' to also move into the private space of the home (Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014; Licoppe et al., 2016; Roth, 2016).

As stated earlier, these observations are not dissimilar to the particular practices that the gay clone deployed in public spaces outlined by Levine (1998); however, the introduction of geolocative technologies into a constellation of cruising practices and codes furthers the development of alternate modes of self-presentation, often in less-covert, less-coded manifestations (in some ways and not others, this will be expanded in

the following chapter). In this manner, Grindr becomes an experimental space where gay men can practice self-discipline in order to achieve certain outcomes (Jaspal, 2016; Licoppe et al., 2016), whereby the technological and spatial affordances allowed by Grindr's interface reconfigure the necessities surrounding visibility and covert recognition within predominantly heterosexualized space. For example, the unique practices involved in cruising during different eras that allowed interested parties to connect within heterosexualized space (Chauncey, 1990; Levine, 1998) are no longer necessary in a context where the hook-up meeting can occur within the relatively private corners of Grindr's interface. In other words, users do not need travel to specific parts of town or be hip to certain postures and cues in order to communicate their desires to other men. Returning to my earlier point, these less-covert performances are also highly contingent upon the logics of worth and value within a particular historical moment, a continuation of the thrust of both Chauncey (1990) and Levine's (1998) pivotal works. Taking these observations together, the pressure to both demonstrate one's intentions within public space and to slip by the heterosexual gaze undetected shift and become less crucial when the process of cruising moved into a digitized space, promoting the development of different strategies of self-creation within Grindr's digital space (Ahlm, 2017; Tziallas, 2015).

Furthermore, recent academic research on Grindr provides this analysis with fruitful vantage points from which to approach the app, informing the subsequent analysis and interpretation of data. Perhaps the most significant dialogue arises from Jody Ahlm's (2017) recent study of the app, in which the researcher locates Grindr within the purview of queer liberalism, similar to my own perspective on Grindr as a reflection/result of this particular cultural moment. Moving forward with Eng's (2010) insights, Ahlm suggests "[the] logics of queer liberalism structure both users' rational choices about how to use the app as well as their perceptions about what the app is for" (p. 377), insights that I take to be central to this research regarding the articulation of straight-acting from within Grindr's digital space. Further, Ahlm (2017) notes that "[the] ambiguous distinction between private and public space, and sexual and non-sexual space on Grindr produces a multiplicity, and often ambivalence, of user intentions" (p. 371), implying the complex and often modulating quality of Grindr as quasi-public-private space. In a similar fashion, Roth (2016) situates Grindr within a cartographic, spatial perspective, discovering that



[the] geography charted out by Grindr is a kind of floating locality: a map whose borders and content are constantly in flux and a community whose participants enter, interact, and exit at will. The cartography of Grindr is virtual, nebulous, and in a perpetual state of reconfiguration, but it is anything but disembodied. Real bodies, interacting both in physical and virtual space, are the core of the experience of geosocial networking. (p. 442)

Insights such as these lend themselves to an analysis of Grindr from the perspective of the user as embodied within the complex, shifting landscape afforded by the app. If we think of Grindr in terms of a 'map' oriented toward a certain goal or achievement, we can then begin to consider the ways in which Grindr has been both structurally and conceptually configured to 'lead' us somewhere, which is typically toward other bodies in the hopes of hooking-up. I argue that this process of being lead toward a particular outcome by the app promotes a process of self-discipline in conjunction with physical movement through time and space, not dissimilar to the studies discussed above. This is a main reason why I chose to situate myself as a primary source of data in the analysis of Grindr, as I aim to produce a snapshot of Grindr from the perspective of a non-participating, lurking user that moves through the app's digital space.

Furthermore, Stempfhuber and Liegl's (2016) analysis of how geosocial dating apps shift understandings of spatial awareness and intimacy provides a phenomenological take on Grindr, where

Orientation can be accomplished by figuring out where one is and where one might want to go... users can create their own landscape, potential routes, and imaginary journeys which take their own position as a point of reference and relate it to self-selected points of interest. (p. 65)

I bring this notion forward, along with Ahlm and Roth's significant insights, in the hopes of counterbalancing the encoded and implied use of Grindr as a means-to-an-end, which is the often seen purpose of the app from both a strategic and logical perspective (Licoppe et al., 2016). The studies described here provide us with a vision of Grindr that sees potential for use beyond current trends of access that see users simply scrolling through Grindr's cascade in search of a new hook-up or intimate partner. This informed how I approached the app as a researcher, curious to discover the potentials for use beyond the encoded purpose(s) projected by the functional and discursive structures that orbit around the app. It bears mentioning that this intention brings forth the particular insights gleaned from Ahmed's (2006b) phenomenological approach to sexuality, in which I articulate Grindr as a particular path that one is able to walk in the process of

(re)orientation within this particular historical moment of queer liberalism. Because Grindr brings the user in proximity to bodies both virtually and physically, it provides one with a map to nearby men who are interested in similar activities, placing certain objects within reach of the subject. Taking this further, we can think of Grindr as a process for which one finds their way within a context of queer liberalism, with its overt emphasis on choice and consumption as benevolent activities, reflecting back these values and recirculating their significance. A phenomenological interpretation of Grindr plays a dual role in this analysis, as I use the notion of orientation to demonstrate how Grindr co-constructively establishes and turns the user in a particular direction (toward a self-ethic of consumption and normativity), while deploying Ahmed's (2006b) theories in a methodological fashion, articulating how *I, as researcher* am oriented within the app through its design and culture of conformist masculinity.

These observations on the 'normative' orientation implied by the app appear to converge when one considers two contrasting mission statements released and revised by Grindr within the last year. Positioned as a convenient and immediate answer to 'modern' dating expectations, Stempfhuber & Liegl (2016) display a now-removed explanatory statement from Grindr's website (removed sometime between 2016 and the time of writing):

Grindr's different because it's uncomplicated and meant to help you meet guys while you're on the go. It's not your average dating site – you know, the ones that make you sit in front of a faraway computer filling out complex, detailed profiles and answering invasive psychological questions. We'd rather you were zero feet away. (p. 55)

This material seems to function as a quasi-mission statement regarding Grindr's intervention into outdated, tired logics of mobile and online dating that obscure face-to-face interaction, denying the physical and/or affective contact that is assumed to be desired by both parties. A situation of this kind presents Grindr as an innovative technology within the world of mobile hook-up practices, suggesting that the ultimate use of the app culminates in users becoming 'zero feet away' from one another. This echoes the literature on Grindr that suggests that its use is centred around bodies meeting 'IRL' ('in real life') for the purposes of hooking-up (Abbott, Blackwell, & Birnholtz, 2015; Chan, 2017; Gudelunas, 2012).

Furthermore, it is worth noting the benevolent ‘We’ that is articulated in Grindr’s mission statement implies that closeness within Grindr is not simply about being close to other bodies, but about being close to Grindr as an app enmeshed in logics of profit and consumption. This confluence connects back to the situation of straight-acting as discourse within a context of queer liberalism that is in part predicated on the ‘freedom to consume’, elaborated here within the context of Grindr as a space that provides opportunities for the ‘free’ consumption of available bodies, but also of the app itself as a corporatized, commercial entity. Thinking about straight-acting as informed by a context of queer liberalism, we can interpret Grindr’s mission statement of being ‘zero feet away’ as an identification that is fully enmeshed within logics of consumption, in which the nearness to Grindr is conflated with the user’s proximity to other bodies, establishing from the user, a commitment *to the app itself*.

In contrast to the archived statement listed above, the ‘About Grindr’ section of [grindr.com](http://grindr.com) reads differently today:

Grindr brings you zero feet away from connecting to a community that grows stronger every day. Now more than just a means to chat and meet, Grindr is providing a welcoming window into a passionate and progressive lifestyle. Our rapidly expanding content and collaborations in photography, fashion, social issues and more mark a bold and exciting chapter in our evolution. **Can you keep up?** (“[grindr.com/about](http://grindr.com/about),” accessed 26 April 2017, emphasis original)

The shift demonstrated away from Grindr as corporate entity reformulates the situation of being ‘zero feet away’ as a positive and progressive location, losing the seemingly consumerist signification of the prior statement. It goes almost without saying that this revised mission statement firmly locates Grindr within the logics of queer liberalism, putting forth a discursive framing of the app from a rights-based discourse of progression and evolution, in which ‘zero feet away’ is actually positioned as a process of quasi-activism and community-building, a sham that masks the typical deployment of the app as a tool for hooking-up. The contrast between these two statements, which I stumbled upon by accident when I read Stempfhuber & Liegl’s (2016) article and discovered the discrepancy, suggests that the current version of the app (one that includes a digest of app-generated content on the aforementioned categories of photography, fashion, and social issues) looks to move beyond being simply seen as a hook-up app, although such is never stated clearly in any of Grindr’s promotional and descriptive materials, as far as

I can tell ('Now more than just a mean to chat and meet...' and do what exactly?). The decision to move away from a tagline of 'zero feet away' as an indication of a consumerist ethic (despite its presence in the new statement) toward 'Can you keep up?' frames the app as focused on the user within a context of self-discipline, inviting particular responses on the part of the individual who accesses the app. This process of self-discipline resignifies (albeit, a resignification that fails, in my opinion) the app not as a 'way to meet guys in order to hook-up' (which is veiled by the above mission statement), but as a tool in service of connecting to a wider community of (similarly) progressive gay, bi, curious, and queer men.

To this point, I find it curious that the notion of 'community' is suggested within a commercial context, implied to characterize the 'millions of gay, bi, curious, and queer guys' who use the app for individual motivations. By the same token, the use of progressive language could simply be a smart PR move from within a contemporary moment that understands LGBTQ subjectivity as progressive; however, it runs contrary to how the majority of users traverse the app, where "[the] dominant use of Grindr involves an orientation towards the production of encounters as soon as possible, leading to fast sexual gratification and without any relational follow-up" (Licoppe et al., 2016, p. 2548). Such an observation appears to deny the functional deployment of Grindr in a fashion that actually furthers this promise of connecting a progressive community committed to passion and activism, a hypothesis that will be tested in the following analysis. Rather, it appears that, for Grindr, things are business as usual (and business is booming), despite its activist language and claims to progression.

However, I would like to suggest that the repositioning of Grindr as 'community' and the introduction of app-generated content with a social activist bent signals the potential for Grindr to function as a space that is not only operative within the goals of cruising or hooking-up. As Levine (1998) points out, the culture of cruising has extended and revolutionized certain patterns of kinship and connection. Furthermore, the emergence of the gay clone as a subversive performance of masculinity took cues from a rich culture of cruising, producing a style and political commitment that shook-up normative understandings of masculinity and effeminacy (Levine, 1998). I do not see why such a potential cannot be opened up by the digital app space that Grindr provides, despite the typical use of the app as a space to facilitate face-to-face, romantic and sexual interactions. This has been observed by academics as well: Brubaker, Ananny,

and Crawford (2014) provide insights on the varied use of Grindr as a ‘time-killer’ and to stave off boredom, understood less as a means to meet other men, but for a method to cope with social isolation. Furthermore, the chat function of Grindr allows for the possibility of protracted communication; however, as Tziallas (2015) notes, the majority of profiles bemoan the suggestion of ‘endless chat’ and ‘pic swapping’. With that being said, I would suggest that the opening up of Grindr beyond a profile-chat-meet up format could turn the user toward possibilities of use that are not already coded into the procedures of the application as digital cruising. In other words, the situation of Grindr as a site of creative production already innovates particular forms of masculine expression both within and beyond the virtual space afforded by Grindr, recalling the fundamental argument underpinning the placement of straight-acting within a archive of gay masculinities.

### **3.3. Writing a ‘Moderate’ Autoethnography: Method and Procedures in Mapping Straight-Acting on Grindr**

#### ***Preamble: Positions and Perspectives***

As alluded to earlier, this research proceeds as an autoethnographic exploration of Grindr from the perspective of an informed ‘insider-outsider’, yet as my distinctly poststructuralist and feminist research position would imply, I am not comfortable with the binaristic implication of this term. Stated clearly, I am committed to the deconstruction of a “male-biased positivism in the social sciences... [following] Critiques from women of color, Aboriginal, and lesbian feminists [who] challenged the white biases and colonial assumptions embedded in this [positivism]” (Pollack & Eldridge, 2016, p. 132). I want to highlight here the importance of feminist and anti-race scholarship and activism as a significant challenge to the phallogocentric quality of positivist research, working alongside the deconstructionist project implied by poststructuralism. As Pollack & Eldridge (2013) imply, the significant processes of critique and reimagining on the part of feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous, and queer academics and activists opened up the process of conducting research into alternate methods that take into account the situated and intersectional experiences of researchers and the subjects in which they engage.

Returning to distinction between insider and outsider knowledge(s) in this particular research, my situation as a gay man implies an insider knowledge and experience of the subjectivity under analysis; however, my non-straight-acting subjectivity displaces my body outside of the discourse of straight-acting. In this sense, I am both 'there' and 'not-there': my lack of identification with straight-acting produces an exteriority to the discourse, yet my identification with 'that which straight-acting is not' guarantees my closeness to the discourse at hand (also, my gayness implies that I have an personal knowledge/insight to straight-acting because it is a queer identification, which almost goes without saying). To this point, I would propose that my situation as the implied audience for an app like Grindr does not suggest an 'authentic' voice, but rather one that is enmeshed with the cultural dynamics that orbit Grindr as a popular app among gay men at this particular moment. I do however think that my voice is unique and worth considered exploration, while contending that I do not have to project an image of authority/authenticity in order to situate my position as layered and complex in this research. Keeping this in mind, I would subscribe to the argument that the distinction between an 'insider' or 'native informant' and the 'outside researcher/ethnographer' is an unnecessarily deterministic division that denies the complexity of the self within a complex cultural context (Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Reed-Danahey, 1997). As Deborah E. Reed-Danahey (1997) points out, researchers are interested and invested in their unique topics of inquiry and in the social context in which they are analyzing, suggesting that the notion of 'objective' research is a fictive proposition from the outset (Letherby, 2007).

The complicated and messy position implied by this discussion has turned out to be quite intriguing from an analytical point of view and I pledged to keep this complex perspective in mind as I made my way through Grindr's digital space, always aware of my curious situation as someone both invested in the cultural context being explored and as implicated in/excluded from the discourse under analysis. Because part of my fascination with straight-acting comes from an attempt to unpack and understand my ostracization from/with the discourse, I approached the app space from the intention of simply wanting to know more about its possibilities for self-creation and the logics of the deployment of straight-acting, unsure of whether or not gay men on Grindr even call themselves straight-acting at this moment in time. My exclusion from the discourse of straight-acting did not inform a research ethic of anger or resentment, which one can probably assume from my intellectual position on the discourse; rather, I attempted to

enter into the app space with the same curiosity that informed my initial interest in this discourse, albeit from a particular culturally embedded position that understands straight-acting and queer subjectivities in a fashion that is informed by my own personal experiences and engagement with academic literature. By the same token, this exclusion does not imply a coherent exteriority; rather, my own queerness is implicated within the discourse as rejected or as a mirror/confirmation of the discourse's normative masculine percepts (to a degree: this of course obscures the fact that we are complex individuals who do not seamlessly align with dominant cultural logics of masculinity and femininity). This implication/rejection provided a fascinating space from which to explore the app, which informed the interpretation of data and the conclusions presented.

To this point, I feel it is crucial that I outline my previous use of Grindr in order to allow the reader a clearer picture of my relatively limited use of the app before engaging in this research. Back in 2013 I used Grindr for all of one week, chatting with one person before deleting the app from my phone completely. I stopped using the app because I soon realized that my intentions to find a long-term partner did not match the expectations coded into the app (this was confirmed by the delivery of an unsolicited dick pic from a user I had never communicated with). Needless to say, my experience on the app was one that left me feeling violated, perturbed, and dissatisfied. I share these experiences here with the intent to inspire autoethnographic honesty and transparency, but also to demonstrate that I *do not* use Grindr in my daily life and have not used the app to meet anyone 'IRL'. I say this to answer multiple individuals that have assumed this research entails a covert motive for casual sex (an accusation that has been lobbed in my direction on more than one occasion), which is one-hundred percent not the implied or intended purpose of my exploration of Grindr as a site for academic research. However, these reflections go a long way in demonstrating that Grindr is generally perceived as an app designed for hooking-up and not a method to 'connect to a wider community', contrary to what Grindr's mission statement implies. The delivery of a dick pic and the general assumption that I would be using the app to concurrently hook-up while conducting academic research reveals the popular situation of Grindr as a space that is primarily assumed to involve sex between (relative) strangers, adding a gloss to the discussion above.

To be completely honest, I did have difficulty locating a methodology that fit the overall goals and the intended flavour of my desired project. I often find it irritating to

have to fit my research goals and intentions into predetermined procedures, even though I acknowledge the importance of this process and its necessity in conducting significant social research. As I floated between various methodological possibilities, I eventually realized that I was primarily interested in exploring the app in light of my own experiences and impressions, clearly articulating my situation within the culture under analysis. In other words, I wanted to deploy a method that placed a strong focus on my own embeddedness within the phenomenon of straight-acting, yet I knew I needed to conduct a rigorous analysis of Grindr alongside this intention that was informed by the theoretical tenets undergirding this project.

This led me toward the consideration that I was conducting what Sarah Stahlke Wall (2016) would describe as a ‘moderate autoethnography’, a style of autoethnographic research that modulates between analytic and evocative permutations of the genre. While I find this blend of styles to be the best fit for this particular project, I want to again deny the binaristic impetus of choosing either an ‘analytic’ or ‘evocative’ process of examination. What I mean here is that I intend to hold on to the analytic tradition of autoethnography by “developing [a] theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena, grounded in self-experience... framed by empirical data [aiming] to generalize [the] insights to a wider field of social relations” (Marecal, 2015, p. 2), while accentuating the uniqueness of personal experience and subjectivity within the analysis, as implied by evocative styles of autoethnography. However, I do depart from the orthodoxy of analytical autoethnographic methods, which are characterized by “a researcher... personally engaged in a social group, setting, or culture as a full member and active participant” (ibid.), as I was not a ‘full member’ or ‘active participant’ on Grindr in a strict sense, despite my ‘insider’ position as a gay man. This curious contradiction will be expanded upon later in this chapter.

Furthermore, the presence of postmodern, evocative strains of autoethnography does help to balance the more empirical tradition of analytic autoethnography by highlighting the fragmented quality of identity while “connect[ing] local action to larger social and even global contexts, spaces, and locations.” (Marecal, 2015, p. 3). The distinctly poststructuralist flavour of evocative autoethnography was a good fit for this project, which aims to explore the discourse of straight-acting in all of its messiness, positioned here as in a process of ‘unfinished becoming’. Evocative/postmodern autoethnography also proves to be a valuable approach to this topic as it allows for the



use of cultural artifacts “as forms of autoethnography as they provide a form a self-reference for the members of a particular region or community” (ibid.), which is clearly demonstrated by my use of Grindr as a unique discursive node within a wider context of queer masculinity. In a sense I will be performing a sort balancing act between these two schools of inquiry, developing an analysis that will interpret the collected data in an empirical fashion through a methodological position that demonstrates my situation as a unique subject implicated in the discourse of straight-acting.

For these reasons, an autoethnography that situates the personal reflections and insights of an informed researcher within a rigorous academic purview revealed itself to be the most effective method for maintaining a suspicious stance toward outright positivism and the avoidance of the sometimes navel-gazey potential that comes with self-writing (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Holt, 2003; Marcecal, 2015). My strong and unwavering commitment to centering myself as an implicated subject within the social-cultural field under analysis informed the ultimate realization that an analytical- evocative, moderate autoethnography would be the most suitable methodology from which to approach my core research queries. However, this arrival did not totally dispel all of my methodological anxieties, as I was (and still am) unclear as to how much personal reflection entails a distinctly autoethnographic method, begging the question, when does pronounced reflexivity and personal reflection reach the point of autoethnography? I would answer this query by suggesting that my overt use of ethnographic methods, which will be described in more detail below, aligns my particular research process with autoethnographic procedure. Despite this alignment, I have a certain amount of trepidation with using the term ‘autoethnography’ to describe my research because I am not an anthropologist, yet am reminded that the discipline does not ‘own’ this method of inquiry. It could be argued that this research characterizes digital ethnography as well, aligning with other researchers (Ahlm, 2017; Ward, 2008) who have conducted similar studies; however, I chose autoethnography here for its overt commitment to situating the researcher within the process of study, a goal that was paramount to this entire project.

This eventual methodological choice and deliberate set of intentions informed the research questions that guided my subsequent analysis, which are as follows:

RQ1: What are the norms of Grindr?

RQ2: How do the design, interface, and assumptions of the app contour one's experience of using Grindr?

RQ3: How is an ethic and/or impression of masculinity discursively communicated from within the digital app space?

RQ4: In what ways do the norms and interface of the app congeal around a masculine performance informed by a context of queer liberalism?

These four questions allowed for a multivalent approach to the analysis of the situation of straight-acting within a contemporary moment of queer liberalism, while pointing toward an analysis that explores the ways in which straight-acting could be seen as a possible subversive performance. I chose to utilize an autoethnographic method for various reasons, as discussed above, but primarily because I initially approached this discourse from a place of personal exploration, while attempting to provide meditations on the app from the point of view of a user (albeit one that does not use the app for its intended purposes). It seemed rather absurd to divorce this reality from the research process, and in actuality, I think the project is stronger with the deliberate focus maintained upon the personal and situated use of Grindr as an 'insider-outsider'. The balance between documenting my use of Grindr as a non-straight-acting white, middle-class gay man and providing a theoretically informed analysis of the discourse of straight-acting, provided the tug-of-war structure to the subsequent analysis of data, modulating between personal reflections and textual analysis.

Expanding upon the methodological discussions underway earlier, I chose autoethnographic methods for their deliberate deconstructive flavour, situated as "an avant-garde method of qualitative inquiry... Grounded in postmodern philosophy that makes room for nontraditional ways of knowing" (Stahlke Wall, 2016, p. 1). Following this impetus, I became committed to the deployment of a method that problematizes the coherency of 'objective' positivist research (Adams, Holman, & Ellis, 2015; Duncan, 2004; Stahlke Wall, 2016), which often attempts to remove the researcher from the research process, projecting in its place a phantasmagoric hologram of rational detachedness that I find uninspiring and unfaithful to the intensely situated quality of academic research. Such a commitment also deconstructs the often neat division between 'true', 'objective' research and personal writing (Duncan, 2004; Hertz, 1996; Stahlke Wall, 2016), foreclosing the potential for any valuable insights and observations to be obtained from research that takes into account transient impressions, affective

relations, and personal reflections. From the outset, this project was conceptualized to theoretically and methodologically trouble binaristic thinking and objective truth claims, which has been consciously incorporated into the research design. I hope as well to bring a rigor to autoethnographic research that puts forth observations from an informed historical-discursive location, setting out upon a moderate, analytical-evocative framework (Stahlke Wall, 2016) in service of discovering applicable insights on the discourse of straight-acting as gleaned from within the four-corners of Grindr's digital space.

In order to provide more detail on my specific research design, I will follow Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis (2015) who suggest that autoethnographic research is predicated upon specific ethical and procedural commitments, although a particular orthodoxy is not implied. These are described as 'guiding ideals', wherein the autoethnographer attempts to produce research that acknowledges the "limits of scientific knowledge... particularly regarding identities, lives, and relationships, and creating nuanced, complex and specific accounts of personal/cultural experience" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 25). The autoethnographer is also committed to bridging the gap between particular, personal experiences of phenomena to wider cultural, political, and economic systems of power (often calling into question false divisions between the personal and the political, revealing the distinctly feminist aspects of this methodology), while developing an attunement to ethical considerations and the very necessary cultivation of reflexivity and self-reflection (Adams et al., 2015; Duncan, 2004; Stahlke Wall, 2016). With these considerations in mind, Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) propose a general list of common commitments and concerns in the undertaking of autoethnographic research:

- (1) Foreground personal experience in research and writing
- (2) Illustrate sense-making processes
- (3) Use and show reflexivity
- (4) Illustrate insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon/experience
- (5) Describe and critique cultural norms, experiences, and practices
- (6) Seek responses from audiences (p. 26)

Although beneficial (and speaking to my love for lists and clear, concise procedures), I take the provided protocol as not an exhaustive map for conducting autoethnographic research (which the authors do not imply), but instead see it as a guiding commitment to certain methodological and ethical choices. My particular research will aim to invigorate

academic work on straight-acting through personal reflection and exploration, always with the goal of situating this discussion within wider networks of power (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Reed-Danahay, 1997), in order to offer salient interventions into theoretical and material debates around the phenomenon of straight-acting. As stated earlier, this is achieved through an analytical discussion that produces a document of my own use of Grindr in significant relation to a rigorous analysis of the discourse of straight-acting from an informed theoretical point of view.

I deployed various methods of autoethnographic observation in the process of exploration, primarily through personal journaling/recording of field notes, covert participant observation (I refrain from using orthodox 'participant observation' here as I made a conscious choice to not participate with other users directly or in the field of study; however I did make my way through the digital space as a 'non-participating user' or 'lurker'), and textual analysis. All of these methods were executed in a reflexive manner and the data was similarly collected in an intuitive fashion, guided by the research questions outlined above and personal impressions as I moved through the research process. The data was collected through handwritten, personal field notes (which could be described as a practice of reflexive and exploratory thought-capturing, combined with preliminary observations regarding the key research questions), screenshots of profiles and design aspects, and commercial and promotional materials from the app and Grindr's website (collected for recall and posterity purposes; these images were saved initially on to my iPhone, uploaded on to a secured, personal computer protected by a password, and then deleted from my phone). Similar to the autoethnographic research conducted by Margot Duncan (2004), the choice to include screenshots, PR materials, and so on was done in order to expand and deepen the research process beyond the recounting of personal reflections and experiences, which only characterizes the analysis in part. Such a commitment recalls Stahlke Wall's (2016) moderate autoethnography, whereby a certain academic rigor and theoretical sophistication is used in analytical tandem with personal, evocative insights, for the purposes of producing a work that is both situated within one's personal experience, while bringing a strong theoretical compass to the field of inquiry.

Because Grindr profiles are primarily made up of images with little descriptive information, I analyzed visual and textual materials together, choosing not to divorce visual data from written content. This was a methodological choice, as I wanted to

preserve the impression consolidated by the profile format as distinctly as possible for the simple fact that the profile format is the driving discursive space contained within the wider context of Grindr (the private chat space notwithstanding, which for ethical purposes was not accessed or used in this research). Further, the images of bodies and faces on the app function as a prime space of discursive communication, containing a rich complexity of data, that plays a significant functional role within the digital space. The gathered materials were then analyzed with an eye to the emergence of notable patterns and significant phrases/images that were linked to the guiding research questions.

Following from basic coding practices, the analysis of data was based on a four tier model that included the sorting out of “relevant texts” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 37) that related to my core research questions, where extraneous or seemingly irrelevant information was removed from the pool of available data (this was done whilst I was in the app and afterwards, and thus, the filtering process was nonlinear). This led to the uncovering of “repeating ideas” (ibid.) within these relevant texts, connecting discursive moments to the emergence of significant words like ‘masc’, ‘no drama’, ‘be normal’, and so on deployed across multiple profiles. These phrases were then slotted within broader organizing themes understood as “an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 38). Finally, these themes were organized according to larger “theoretical constructs” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 39) where I began to connect the themes within the profile data and my personal field notes to the theoretical viewpoints that informed the research (for example, how a stressing of oneself and one’s romantic partners as masculine, chill, and normal, both textually and visually, implies insights regarding biopower, performativity, and one’s orientation within a particular socio-historical moment).

This analytical framework was incorporated into a reflexive autoethnographic approach that integrated my own experience on the app with more typical modes of textual analysis. Often in intriguing and unexpected ways, the situation of my (digital) body within the research foregrounded particular categories and insights that were not originally part of the intended analysis (such as the phenomenological experience of using Grindr as a lurker), and in turn, implies that these two processes of analysis and reflection often occurred simultaneously, unable to be neatly divided. Temporally speaking, the analysis of data was not bracketed off to a space ‘after’ the fieldwork was

completed (although this did happen as well), but developed with and through my own movement through the app as the fieldwork progressed. From a meta-perspective, this observation implies a critique of linear time as an organizing procedural model that assumes the movement toward an ultimate goal or realization, working in tandem with the theoretical insights provided by Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) concept of 'chromonormativity', under the purview of biopolitical processes that orient bodies within frames of progression and synchronization (Foucault, 1990). Linear time is also troubled in this research by in the fact that my memories of using Grindr in 2013 and my initial thoughts on the topic at the beginning of the research process factor into the analysis, colouring the assumptions I made while traversing Grindr's digital field and the subsequent conclusions.

As implied above, I chose to situate myself in the app as a lurker, similar to prior studies on men-who-have-sex-with-men and personal dating practices (Reynolds, 2015; Ward, 2008). Being a lurker on Grindr involves producing a profile that is devoid of identifying information, which was achieved by the end of the research process; however, during the first week of exploration, my age (26) and 'distance away' (in meters) were displayed on my profile before I became conscious of the options for anonymization enabled by the app. From the outset of the formal research process, I did not include an image or state my intentions for study on my public profile. This was done for particular reasons, chiefly because Grindr allows users to block profiles that are uninteresting/undesired and I feared that my overt situation on the app as a researcher would limit the pool of available data. I also considered that the obvious positioning of myself as a researcher within the field would contradict my desire to be digital wallpaper within the modulating virtual space facilitated by the app: I was simply there to observe and make my way through the app without interaction with other users. I did not interact directly with any users on the app during my time in the field and I feared that displaying more personal/professional information on my profile might invite comment and discussion with other users, tempting me to use data/impressions that were supplied without institutional approval. I wanted to avoid this in order to maintain a level of distance from influence on the part of other users, aiming to observe, consider, and synthesize the available data as a non-participating, lurking user. Such as position fits the goals of this research, which does not attempt to make claims on what gay men think about straight-acting, but to observe the contours of the app space as a facilitating

membrane that produces/blocks/obscures a straight-acting ethic. In other words, I wanted to see what I was able to infer from the field without the asking of any specific question to a user or developer, but from my own exploration of Grindr and the profile content available to the public facilitated by the app.

My time in the field lasted approximately three and a half weeks, with data culled from four different geographic locations across two countries: Calgary, Alberta, Burnaby, British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, and Seattle, Washington. Access to Grindr in these various locations was serendipitously aligned with previously scheduled travel plans outside of Metro Vancouver, extending the pool of available data which to analyze. I accessed the app anywhere from once per day and up to three-plus times per day. The specific times in which I accessed the app were not fit into a rigid schedule; rather, I chose to explore the app at any time and any day of the week in order to capture a wider sample of profiles from which to glean data. Whilst in the app, I travelled through the cascade of nearby men, taking screenshots of profiles and materials that were relevant to the guiding research questions. This process evolved as I went through the app, where new postures, 'tribes', and lingo flagged me to permutations of a masculine ethic that were not initially apparent to the non-participating user. I then recorded any thoughts about the time spent in the app into a journal; this occurred immediately following or less than 12 hours after my time in the field (this was simply because I made a point of accessing the app before I went to bed and was not going to get up out of bed to write in my journal).

For the purposes of ethical anonymity, any data presented in the following analysis has been stripped of identifying factors (location, user name, age), unless said information could not easily lead a reader to the identity of the user in question. Functionally speaking, Grindr and its users do a good job of this already, as the majority of profiles deploy aliases, do not provide 'face pics', and put forth profiles with sketchily filled out informational data. It is also important to note that the profile information presented could be from any of the four geographical locations that factor into this research. Despite these cautions, I acknowledge the assumption of privacy on the part of users regarding the use of Grindr, where many users (especially those that come under an ethic of implied masculinity) wish to obscure their identities for various reasons. I respect this assumption and commit myself to furthering this obscurity in the analysis presented. It is also pertinent to note that this research attempts to map the facilitation of

an ethic of normative masculinity vis-à-vis the discourse of straight-acting through Grindr's digital app space; this goal does not expressly require the divulgence of identifying information, but rather attempts to paint a broad portrait of how the discourse is under way within this particular virtual field, through the tools of personal reflection and textual analysis.

Before launching into the analysis of Grindr, I want to bring the reader back to Sara Ahmed's insights and highlight the manner in which they factor into my particular autoethnographic method. Because I situate Grindr as a "homing device" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 9) within a moment of queer liberalism, I see it as a particular opportunity to explore the active working-out of gay male subjectivity in a unique discursive space that can be analyzed through my own movement through the app. What I mean here is that I approached Grindr as a process in which by which one finds their way within this particular historical moment, providing access to a particular reality of gay male subjectivity in a post-smartphone, pro-gay rights context. Although I do not recourse to my position as 'authentic' (aligning with Foucault's [1984] critique of phenomenology), I do find that a phenomenological approach to researching Grindr allows for a fine-grained analysis that takes into account the particular pressures and affective experiences that one undergoes while in the app. I agree with Berggren's (2014) approach in striking a balance between Foucault, Butler, and Ahmed, in which the research keeps in mind the interactions between discourse, embodiment, and experience, choosing to understand these factors as entangled rather than disparate, which is carried through the analysis of data. These vital theoretical points of view will colour the following analysis, brought together in the subsequent discussion of findings.



## Chapter 4.

### Analysis

#### 4.1. Being Straightforward: Analyzing Grindr

Following the protocol outlined in the previous chapter, I will analyze Grindr using a multi-method moderate autoethnography (Stahlke Wall, 2016), modulating between personal reflections and textual analysis. The analysis will be broken down into three interconnected sections, dedicated to the main research queries underpinning this research. Beginning with a description of Grindr from the non-participating, lurking user's perspective, this discussion will lead the reader into the digital life-world facilitated by Grindr, establishing the norms, uses, and culture facilitated by the app. Next, I will move forward into an analysis of the creation of a particular masculine ethic from within the app space, relying on personal reflections in conjunction with textual analysis of various users' profile data and app-generated content. This dialogue will segue into an analysis of the app and its masculine self-ethic as reflective of the contemporary moment of queer liberalism, following similar analytic and methodological procedures as outlined earlier. Although these sections are presented as discrete moments, I will remind the reader that this is for organizational and clarity purposes: these sections are interconnected and function under a unifying logic, demonstrated by the elaboration of Grindr as digital space. I would thus invite the reader to explore these sections as interrelated and in dialogue with one another, as such awareness holds on to the philosophical, analytical, and methodological commitments of this project.

##### ***Preamble: Primary Anxieties***

My initial (re)entry into Grindr occurred on April 13, 2017, inspiring a strange amount of anxiety regarding what I would find on the app, which signaled an emotional response that didn't completely take me by surprise. I actually avoided entering Grindr days after I had downloaded the app to my smartphone, making excuses up in avoidance of reentering the app's virtual world. I chalk this fear up to residual impressions regarding how I left Grindr feeling frustrated and violated four years prior and was thus unsure about how my presence on the app as a lurker/non-participating

user would be addressed by other users. There was a palpable level of discomfort involved with reentering a space that felt alienating and exclusive, which I had expected from the outset of choosing Grindr as my site of fieldwork. I was also worried about the possibility that I would not be able to find any straight-acting gay men on the app, which I had assumed would totally derail my research and force me back to the drawing board. As the reader will discover later, this was actually a significant choice, as had I decided to preemptively explore the app prior to conducting my research I may not have completed this project at all. It also almost goes without saying that by choosing to use the app for research purposes I was already establishing a feeling of anxiety, as my use and presence in the app was incongruent with the normative use of Grindr as a way to meet nearby guys.

To these points, I discovered that my movement through the cascade of faces, shirtless torsos, and random non-identifying images within Grindr felt strangely visceral, as touchscreen technology actually allowed me to ‘touch’ other users in the accessing of their profile, opening up discrete nodes of potential contact. I had not thought of Grindr’s reliance upon touchscreen technology in this way before, wherein my materiality was extended into the app space by physically impressing the screen as I moved through and navigated the app. This added a visceral relation with other users that was unexpected (perhaps inspired by my covert observation within Grindr) and resulted in the first few explorations into the field leaving me feeling strange and uncomfortable. This strangeness recalled the memories of alienation and exclusion that came flooding back as I walked through a digital space that placed high currency on physical fitness, masculinity, and sexual inhibition. I felt, and still do, feel like a stranger in this particular world. As I slowly made my way into the virtual world made possible by the app, this feeling of discomfort began to shift and I slid more into the role of researcher/observer rather than as a user. I soon realized that my situation within the app was different than it was years prior and I could explore the space with a certain level of detached fascination, as I was not directly using Grindr for personal fulfillment.

## **4.2. Using Grindr: Establishing Sea Legs and Walking the App**

Upon opening Grindr for the first time I noticed that the cascading wall of photos of nearby men was retained from my previous use of the app (see Figure 2). The

general design of Grindr presents the user with an auto-updating wall of photos to select from (100 for free users and up to 600 for premium Grindr XTRA subscribers) that shift and refresh as one moves through physical space. Men in closest proximity to the user appear first in the grid, digitizing physical space in real time through geolocate mobile technology. Almost immediately following my initial exploration of the app, I began to uncover new additions to the design of Grindr; the first of which was a newly-added 'Fresh Faces' bar appearing at the top of the screen, apparently flagging users to new enterers into the app who may be seen as 'fresh meat' by more established travelers. Because Grindr's interface is relatively simple, I did not expect the overall design and format to change drastically (and it didn't); however, there were various modifications made to the profile format and available categories that users could display on their profiles (Figures 3, 4). Therefore, the profile space became the area that was the most altered since I had used the app four years prior, with new categories such as 'My Tribes' and 'Position' available for user modification, along with an entire section on sexual health. According to Tziallas (2015), the addition of Grindr Tribes came bundled with the 2013 redesign of the app, yet I do not have any recollection of such when I used the app in that same year, and I would assume that my experience of the app was prior to the upgrade that added 'My Tribes' to the profile format (there is the possibility that I just totally forgot about this function, as well).

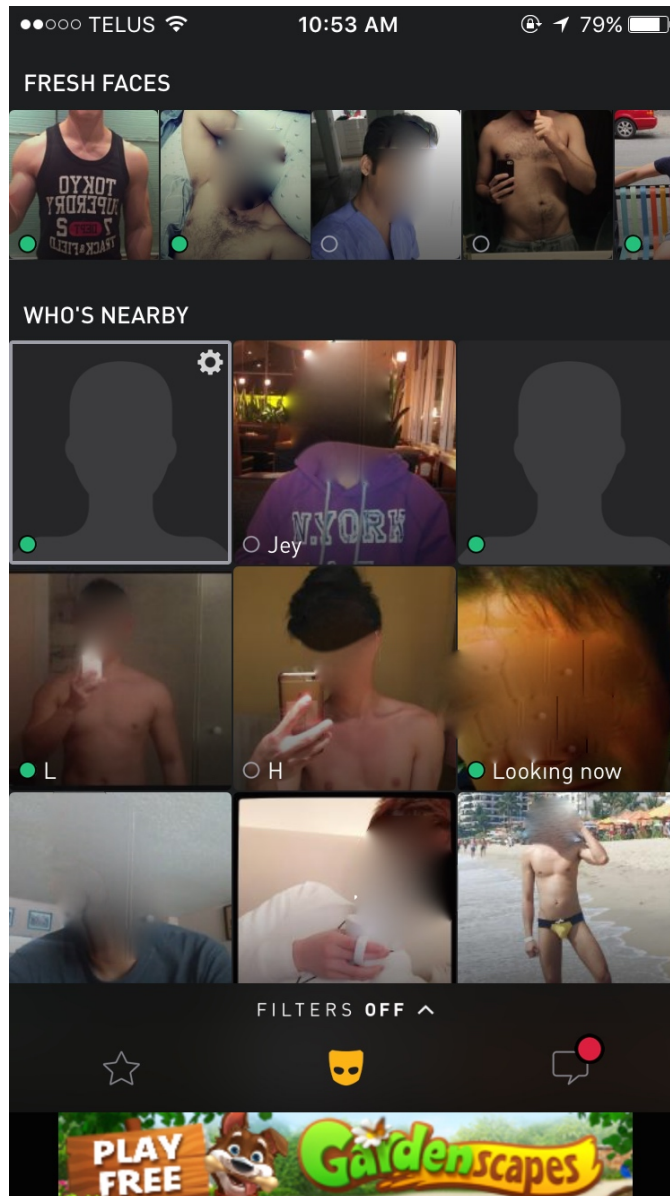
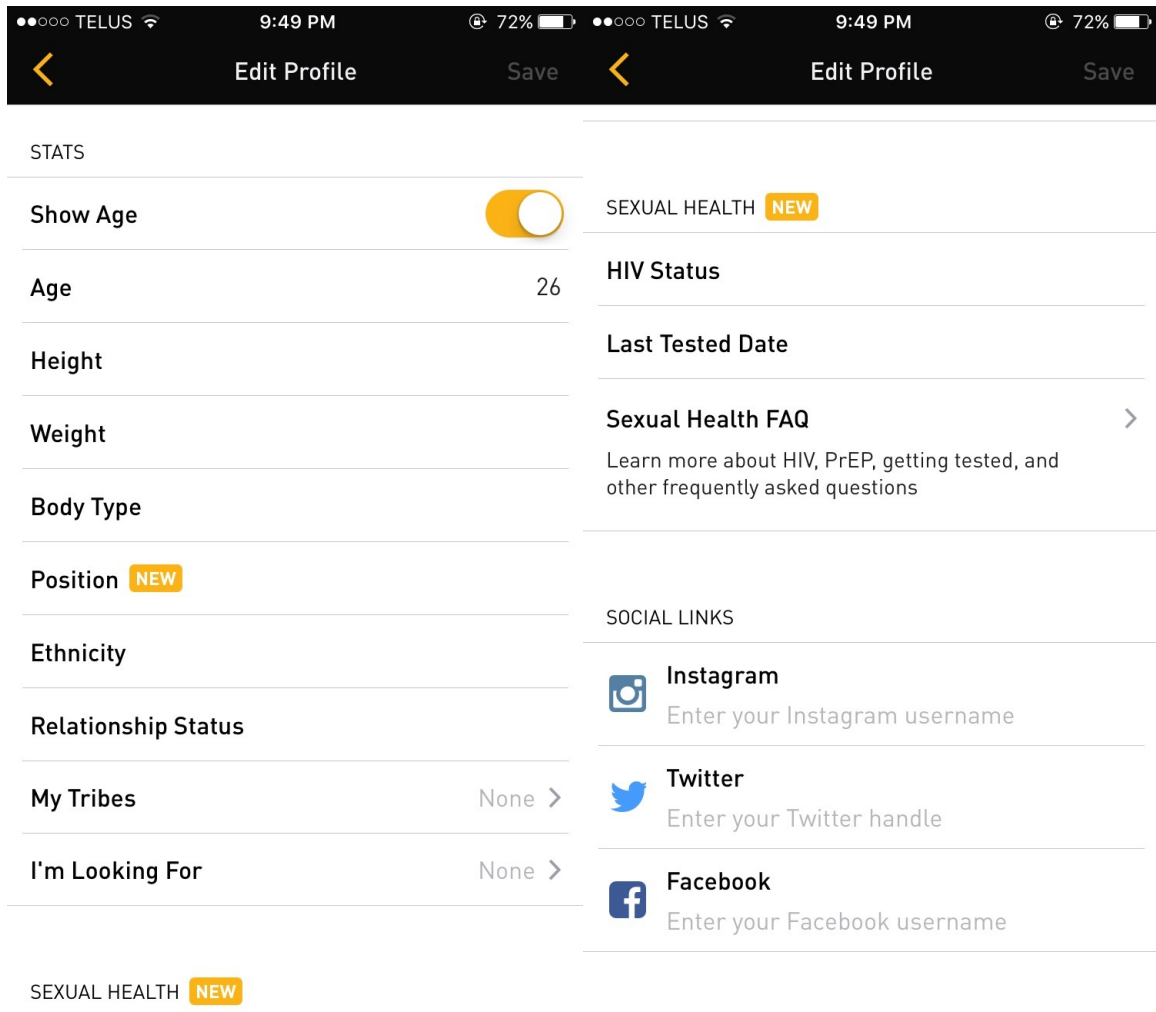


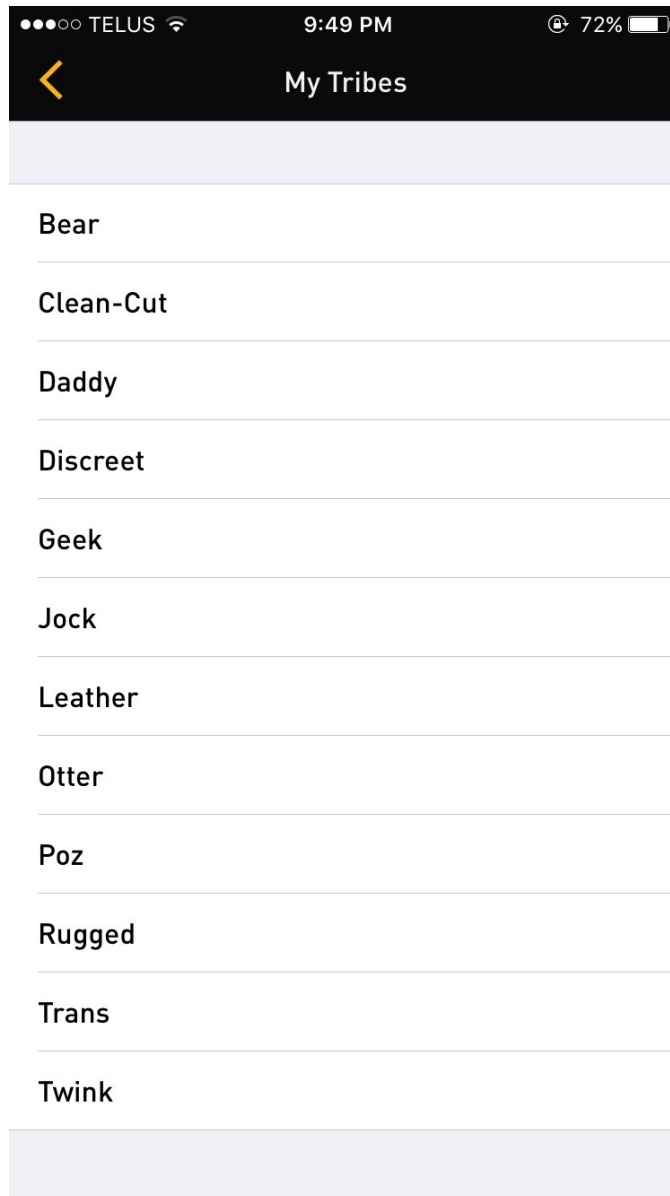
Figure 2: Grindr's cascade of nearby profiles



**Figure 3: Grindr’s profile options**

I found the presence of My Tribes to be the most intriguing of the new profile categories, as it appears to address the almost militant pressure to conform to rigid categories of intelligibility rampant within gay culture (see Burke, 2016 for a fascinating discussion on the influence of porn types on gay male subjectivity). The available categories include: Bear, Clean-Cut, Daddy, Discreet, Geek, Jock, Leather, Otter, Poz, Rugged, Trans, and Twink (see Figure 5), signifying particular locatable sites of identification that are common terminology among Western gay men. It almost goes without saying that the vast majority of these types are focused around an implied masculinity (whether that be through physical features [Bear, Otter, Jock, Rugged] or sexual practices [Leather, Discreet]), while demonstrating a lack of feminine identification for users who feel that categories like ‘Femme’, ‘Androgynous’, or ‘Queer’ would fit their gender expression more accurately (it’s worth noting that the Twink is

usually seen as more feminine in gay pornography and cultural discourse; however, the Twink is an identification that implies a particular body type and demeanor characteristic of younger gay men, fetishizing particular 'feminine' characteristics while still remaining within a purview of boyishness). These categories once again left me feeling strange, as I did not find that any of the available tribes fit my own subjectivity or even a potential image that I would want to communicate within the app. Furthermore, I was particularly discouraged to find that femininity within the app seems to be only overtly present with the Trans tribe (and of course, this was not an exclusive or exhaustive interpretation of the tribe), whereby the expression of femininity aligns with particular cultural logics that assume that 'men are manly' even when they transgress heteronormative sexual practices, which was in line with my previous feelings of exclusion from an app that places a high currency on normative logics of masculinity. Taken together, it appeared to the lurking user that these tribes congeal to inform the implied exhaustive categories of identification that are available to users from the app itself, despite the relative 'choice' provided by the various tribes with which to identify.

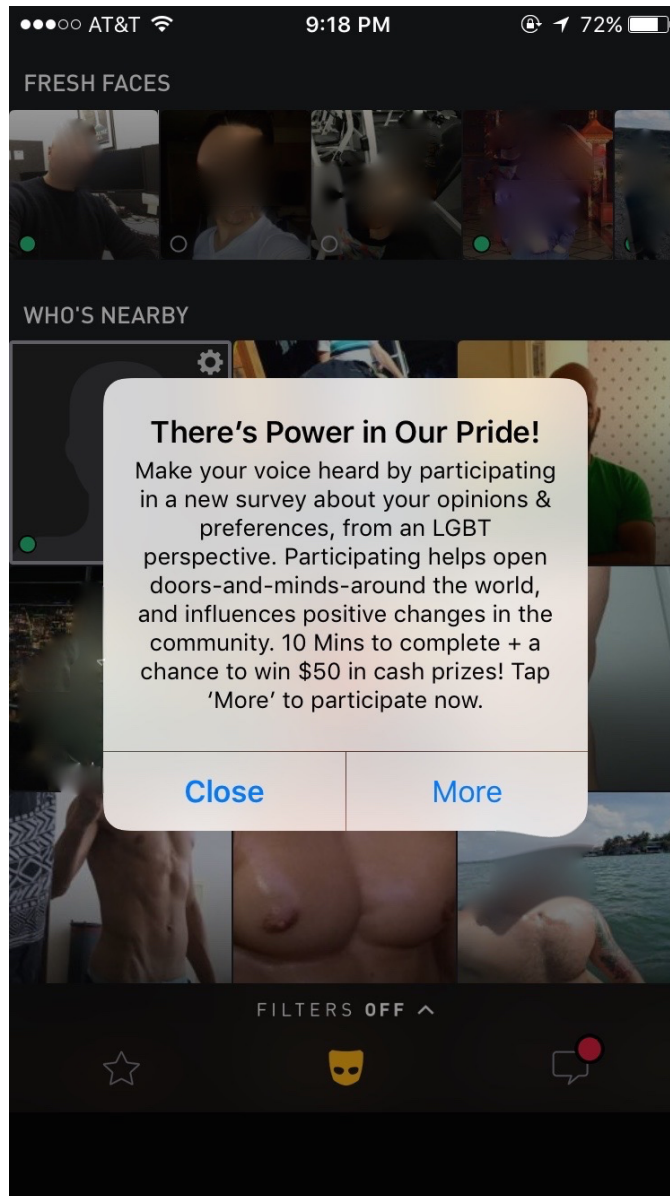


**Figure 4: Grindr Tribes**

The addition of the My Tribes classification system suggested to me that the app developers recognized a need for the presence of categories of identification for users to select from within the profile space, which was/is an informal practice undertaken by users in the 'About Me' section of their profiles. Although the majority of users still 'clarify' themselves and their tribal affiliations (I cannot ignore the outright anthropological flavour of the use of the word 'tribes' from within the app where I was conducting digital fieldwork, so please bear with any corny wordplay), the addition of these various tribes streamlines users' activities in the app and the potential for creativity, generating formal categories that limit how gay men can identify themselves

within the four corners of the auto-updating cascade of nearby guys. This could be a move on Grindr's part to capitalize on a shifting geosocial app market, where newer apps that are directed toward particular preferences cater to gay men who identify with some of the tribes outlined by Grindr (for example, GROWL'R and Scruff imply a community of Bears, Otters, and Rugged types, along with their admirers). This shift has diversified the gay app market, with other app options appearing more appealing to users who would prefer to use platforms that cut the available pool of men down to categories of their interest, providing the necessity for Grindr to adapt to this changing environment. However, I do have a hypothesis that the backlash against the rampant misogyny, racism, and body-shaming present in the app (some recent examples include: Jones, 2016 November 24, "No Asians, no black people. Why do gay people tolerate blatant racism?"; Krishnan, 2016 January 21, "So many gay dudes openly racist on dating apps") may have informed the 2013 redesign, in which developers attempted to move users away from the deployment of controversial categories like straight-acting, along with a de-emphasis on the 'no fems, no fats, no asians' rhetoric (Tziallas, 2015) that plagues/d Grindr's popular presence in gay media. To this point, the addition of app-generated content on social issues such as citizenship (I received a story about an LGBTQ refugee in the chat space from Grindr HQ), LGBTQ rights and activism (see Figure 6 for a pop-up I received and various messages from Grindr HQ on this topic), and the reorientation of Grindr as a 'progressive' tool within a 'progressive community' through its public-relations materials, appear to suggest that the app has attempted to mediate its bad reputation. Whether or not this was the intent behind the addition of My Tribes is not known conclusively; however, the presence of pre-determined categories of identification definitely contour and shift the way in which users can present themselves within Grindr, altering the culture and boundaries of expression facilitated by the app.





**Figure 5: Power in Our Pride**

In addition to the My Tribes section, one can choose to display multiple factors on one's profile, including a 15 character Display Name, a 250 character About Me section, Body Type (Toned, Average, Large, Muscular, Slim, Stocky: why is Toned presented first when the other options are in alphabetical order?), Ethnicity (Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, South Asian, Other: why are South Asian and Other out of order, I wonder?), I'm Looking For (Chat, Dates, Friends, Networking, Relationship, Right Now), and Relationship Status (Committed, Dating, Engaged, Exclusive, Married, Open Relationship, Partnered, Single). As discussed in the previous chapter, these categories point toward the use of the app as a

facilitation for face-to-face, romantic and/or sexual contact, allowing the user to display their physical attributes, desires, and limits of contact easily and quickly to interested users. The relative lack of material one can post in one's About Me section implies this as well, wherein users are forced to avoid lengthy descriptions of themselves within the profile space, opting instead to move discussions into the private chat screen. From these observations, I would assume that the profile is considered to be more of a membrane by which to facilitate initial contact, where interested parties can retreat into the private chat space in order to learn more about one another and plan a possible meet-up (or not, many users claim to want to simply chat with other guys). The implied 'ease' and 'efficiency' of these profile factors harkens back to the situation of Grindr as an intervention into modern dating practices as a quick and easy way to meet other guys who are similarly on-the-go. This establishes an observable ethos of efficiency facilitated by the app, which I would assume demonstrates much of its appeal to potential users.

After exploring the app's features and walking through the space for a few days, I began to notice certain trends and norms were not dissimilar from when I used Grindr in 2013. It is fairly evident from the material previously under discussion that Grindr is primarily centered on creating an experience of efficiency, with the goal of expediting quick connections that culminate in fun chats, friendly dates, or erotic encounters (or any combination of such, along with all that falls outside of this normative set-up). This is not to suggest that there is a typical path that all users walk while using Grindr; however, the design and profile features are contoured in such a way as to maximize potential crossings in a multitude of forms. Because I was situated in the app as a lurker, I was excluded from this process due to my intentional violation of the compulsion to present personal information to the public created by the app. However, this did not preclude the delivery of messages from other users inquiring why I was on the app, implying that anybody that enters into the app space is coded as accepting the premise(s) of the app and its general use, which is to connect with nearby guys (this may seem like stating the obvious; however it departs from other social networking apps where users can lurk with general anonymity and rarely be solicited by other members, such as with Instagram, Twitter, etc.). My presence on the app as lurker highlighted the relative ubiquity of profiles that demanded 'face pics' or 'pics' along with any contact from other users, an observation that was similarly noted in Tziallas' (2015) research. It appeared evident as I moved through the app that the majority of users demanded exposure before contact,

which again implies that Grindr is primarily a space that facilitates contact between recognizable users, suggesting a confluence between the 'real life' body behind the profile photo or headless torso.

The pressures around intelligibility within the app were not particularly surprising, especially if we keep in mind the overall goals and functions of the space that establish protocols for users, where those who transgress the normative functions of the app are often subject to 'calling out' by other travelers (many profiles displayed dismay at the amount of 'photo-less', 'fake', and blank profiles, demanding that one sends a photo before interaction). These standards of use did place me in a mildly uncomfortable position as it became obvious that I was transgressing the desired presence within the app space by choosing to lurk incognito. I assumed that my lack of identifying information would open me up to being blocked by nearby guys who saw my profile as clogging up space within the cascade of available profiles, which I assume did actually happen without my explicit knowledge of such. With that being said, I eventually discovered that my original anxieties about reentering Grindr as a lurker were largely unfounded, as the majority of users had no desire to contact a faceless, empty profile, which allowed for a relative freedom to explore the app. This suggested to me that successful use of Grindr requires members to present themselves within the app space with at least some clues as to their intentions and goals for using the app, following the normative logics of Grindr as a space that functions to connect nearby guys. Furthermore, I discovered through this requirement that the majority of users wanted nothing to do with faceless profiles, reinscribing the 'meat market' mentality of Grindr as a process of sizing up possible encounters for private contact (Licoppe, et al., 2016). The range of material that users present on their profiles suggests the relative creativity allowed within this ethic of selective disclosure, whereby content ranged from profiles with detailed profile information (filling out the majority of available categories), lengthy About Me sections, and obvious face pics, to profiles that were nearly blank, including instructions regarding their goals within the app ('NSA Fun', 'Right Now', etc.).

As mentioned earlier, a vast range of permutations were present between these poles; however, many users capitalized on a particular body ethic rampant in the app, displaying their shirtless, headless torso as a draw for browsing users. The 'headless, naked torso' is almost a cliché within (Kapp, 2011 May; Tracer, 2014 July 15) Grindr's four corners, seemingly consolidating an ethic of self-presentation within the app that

was almost laughably cliché. These photos appeared to function in order to entice to other users, wherein displaying one's toned or fit body seemed increase one's chance of success in the app. The relatively anonymous quality of the torso pic also contributed to the feeling of Grindr as a 'meat market', wherein faceless torsos take the place of profile photos that offer coherent recognition (Licoppe et al., 2016). The ubiquity of torso photos suggested to me that Grindr is a heavily eroticized space, where men feel not only comfortable, but also compelled to display themselves in a way that would usually transgress norms of respectability 'in real life', overtly communicating their desire for sexual contact. Furthermore, the disclosure of particular sexual kinks, fetishes (such as BDSM and other specific fetishes), and partner preferences breaks down typical barriers between interested parties, facilitating contact with consenting and informed individuals who are looking for similar experiences. Not to out myself as a total square, but the blatantly sexual nature of Grindr felt in some ways slightly uncomfortable, especially since my former use of the app was predicated on less sexually motivated goals and my leaving of Grindr was triggered by unwanted sexual attention, failing to align with the implied logics of the app. Needless to say, there were many profiles that bemoaned the pressures to hook-up or present themselves in an overtly sexual manner, demonstrating that Grindr is a space that includes multiple, variant motivations and intentions and cannot be simply distilled down into a singular experience.

As this quasi-consumerist body ethic might imply, I did find Grindr to be coded as an overtly commercialized space with various pop-up and banner ads accompanying my exploration of the app. Initially this did not shock me as I am used to advertisements bundled into freely downloaded content; however, I noticed the presence of a new add-on called 'Grindr Deals' that provided more salient observations regarding the commercial aspects of the app. Grindr Deals is an auto-generated weekly digest that sends the user offers on promoted content straight to one's chat inbox (see Figure 7). Although I am not particularly shocked or outraged that Grindr wants to sell me sexy underwear, an LGBTQ back account (whatever this means, I still don't know), a new mattress, or 'rosé for foreplay' (these ads are so obvious and in line with the erotic logics of the app that they take on a quasi-campy quality), this does create a space that is not simply about men meeting other men, but about men consuming products while they meet other men. The meta-observation that an app that encourages the consumption of available bodies through hooking up would also attempt to sell you products is not lost

on this lurking researcher, and Grindr Deals does seem like a logical development for an app with such a large usership and optional premium features. We cannot ignore how the overly commercialized space facilitated by Grindr informs the particular logics and assumptions of its design and use. This perhaps most obviously illustrated by the fact that Grindr is an app that generates large amounts of money while connecting guys in an efficient manner (recently a 60% share in the app was sold to a Chinese-based tech firm, Beijing Kunlun Tech Company, valuing the app at \$155 million USD according to Horwitz, 2016 January 12). This overtly commercial emphasis became evident from the first moment of reentering the app, partly demonstrated by a premium service called 'Grindr XTRA' that offers paying users certain perks. A run-down of the added features is as follows:

- 6x the amount of guys available
- Ability to see users who are online at the same time as you
- Option to view only profiles with images
- Unlimited favorites (to keep track of guys that may move out of proximity)
- Unlimited blocks
- Ability to save frequently used phrases to streamline the chat process
- Ability to send multiple photos at once
- Access to all premium filters (unsure of what these are)
- Removal of banner ads from the app

A premium membership costs anywhere from \$7.08 to \$15.99 per month, monetizing the app for interested users who wish to explore the app with particular filters and an expanded pool of nearby guys, adding a further mercenary layer to an already commercialized space.

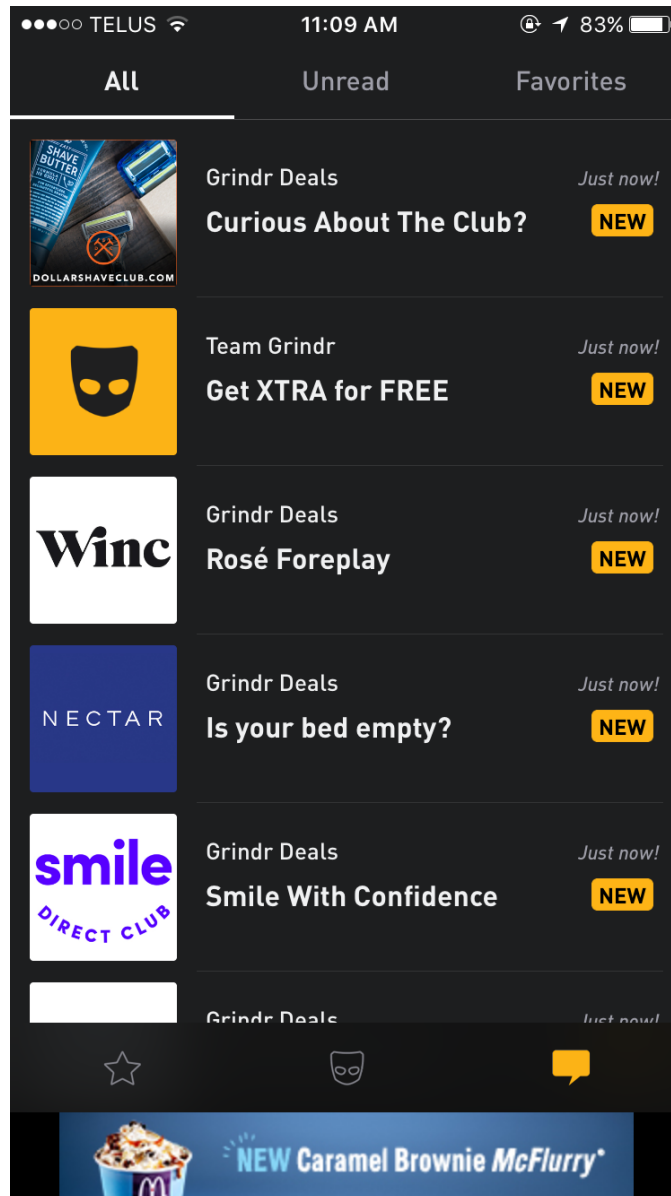


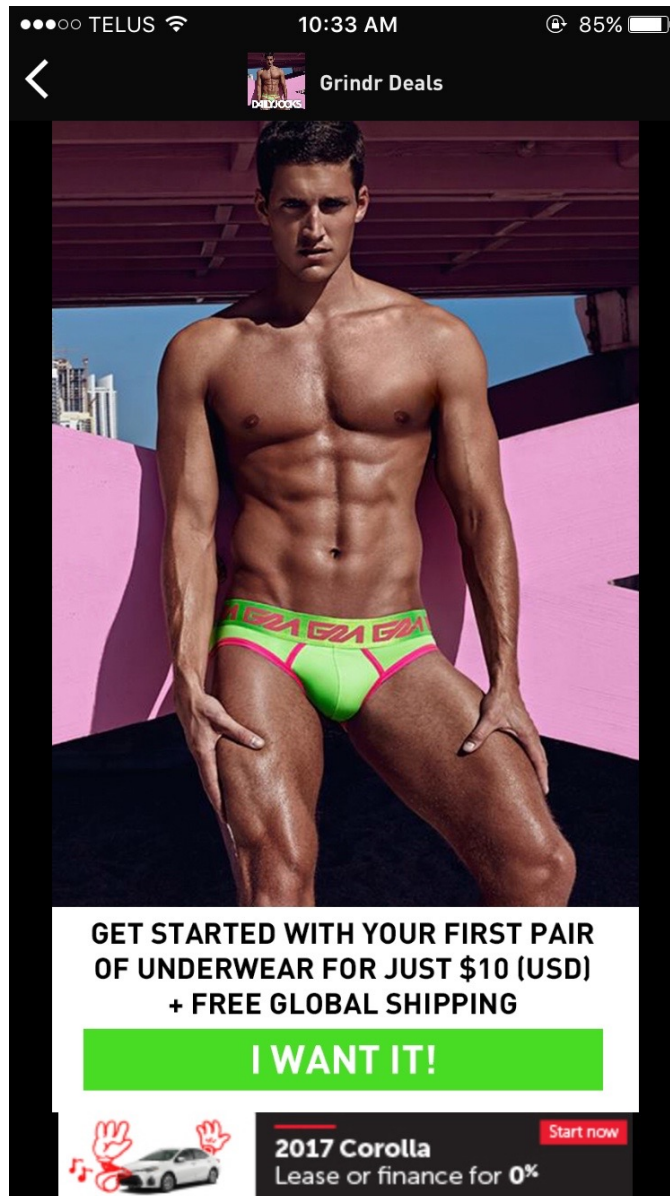
Figure 6: Grindr Deals

### 4.3. Masc and U B 2: The Establishment of a Masculine Ethic on Grindr

*Preamble: Reading Masculinity*

Expanding upon these observations that explore Grindr as a commercialized digital space, it should be noted that user profiles and the particular options included within were interpreted as masculine through Western cultural logics of gendered behaviour that inform intelligible masculine performances, which is evident in my

situation as a cultural subject and researcher embedded within the phenomenon under analysis. The manner in which these categories were used, in combination with overt masculine language on particular profiles, informed my interpretation of profile and app content as congealing around a particular masculine ethic that is partly informed by a reading of Grindr as 'masculinized space'. To take this further, the relative lack of profile options that imply an androgynous and/or feminine subjectivity/style already suggest an *a priori* masculinity that is coded into Grindr's user interface. As such, the positioning of Grindr as an app exclusively for 'gay, bi, curious, and queer guys' suggests that Grindr functions along an explicit masculine logic, despite the ability for users to fall within that purview in a multitude of ways. Promotional materials around Grindr XTRA demonstrate such as well, displaying shirtless, muscular masculine men using the app and meeting similar looking guys, while Grindr's weekly digest of advertisements usually promotes a parallel masculine appearance (see Figure 8). The expectations and systems of value that orbit these materials already impress themselves upon the lurking user, setting particular expectations of return and recognition along an observable masculine line.



**Figure 7: Grindr Deals advertisement**

I'm careful here to sidestep a chicken and egg argument, yet I wonder if the app itself has foregrounded the observable masculine ethic that is demonstrated through the app's design and user-generated content, or if user-generated content created a space that feels conformist and implies that the most successful and/or desirable profiles have to demonstrate some level of masculinity, which appears to align with larger cultural logics of male attractiveness and normativity. It is perhaps true that both are underway, as an analysis of the embeddedness of Grindr within a specific historical moment of queer liberalism would imply. These thoughts took me back to my brief dip into Grindr in 2013, as I chose to present myself on the app in such a way as to accentuate masculine



characteristics, albeit in a subtle fashion. I did this because I felt that doing so would make me appear more desirable within the app, and thus achieving success based on my specific goals for using Grindr within its wider culture of masculinity. The failure of this posturing and the feelings of falsity and deception that they inspired resulted in a process of working through my own complex subjectivity along lines of cultural worth and personal acceptance, a process that has continued through and beyond this research.

While the preceding section outlined my exploration of Grindr and the assumptions that inform the design of the app, this next discussion will engage with the particular articulation of an ethic and style of masculinity from within the app's digital space. The search for this observable style was the flint that sparked the fascination that coloured my entire time within Grindr, exploring the impressions of this ethic witnessed in my original use of the app. I had initially assumed that this process would involve the analysis of profiles with an overtly positioned straight-acting ethic in an attempt to establish a typology of a particular normative masculine style that is characteristic of the contemporary moment. However, I soon discovered that straight-acting is a dead signifier on Grindr in 2017: I came across only two profiles that deployed the term during my entire time in the field (with About Me sections that state: "Straight acting geek. Total top only interested in bottoms. More fem the better" and "Straight acting bottom. Bi guys to the front... I only play safe, ddf ['Drug and Disease Free'], you should be too"). Needless to say, this discovery threw me for a loop and I could not believe that a term with such ubiquity only a few years prior would suddenly vanish from the app almost entirely. This led me to consider why straight-acting had lost its effectiveness and desirability as a discrete term within Grindr, yet at the same time, it appeared that its primary logics and postures still remained intact within the app space. Through careful observation I realized that although the term straight-acting was no longer hot currency on the app, the style and flavour of straight-acting was very much alive and well, albeit coded and deployed in a more fragmented fashion. This allowed me to position the research in a manner that took into account *why* straight-acting no longer *overtly* exists within Grindr, speculating on the process by which it was written out of the app that seemed to be so integral to its genesis. These new directions allowed for exciting hypotheses on the reimagining of straight-acting in different contexts, a speculative practice that will be taken up in the following chapter.

Despite straight-acting's apparent vanishing act, it came as no surprise that users still accentuated their masculinity on their Grindr profiles, seemingly as a method to entice attention from other users within the digital app space. This palpable display of masculine signifiers did not shift significantly from when I had used the app in 2013, appearing in some ways to be consistent over time despite the loss of straight-acting as a consolidation of some of these identifications. I catalogued numerous examples of profiles that deployed signifiers such as 'masculine/masc' (by far the most popular), 'manly', 'a man', etc., while displaying various profile categories in the attempt to deepen this self-disclosure (by affiliating oneself with particular tribes, body types, sexual positions, and so on that read in a masculine manner). A few examples culled from the pool of collected About Me sections demonstrate this tendency:

User 1: "Masc [*sic*] and looking for the same"

User 2: "clean cut masculine"

User 3: "Honestly attractive, masculine and fit"

Various Users: "Be masculine"

Masculine-positioned users also took relative freedom in their About Me sections, demonstrating their manly tendencies often through various hobbies (fishing, camping, hiking, dirt biking, working on houses, etc.) and likes (beer, sports, video games):

User 4: "chill masc [*sic*] easy going guy. I like getting out in the mountains to board, hike and camp. I enjoy playing sports, drinkin [*sic*] beer, friends and good laughs"

User 5: "I'd consider myself to be a masculine guy. Love the outdoors, sports, and crossfit"

User 6: "down to earth... hiking, camping, traveling, mtn [*sic*] biking, Kayaking, remodeling homes, working on cars"

User 7: "masc [*sic*], easy going, chill, jeans n [*sic*] steel toe kinda [*sic*] guy"

User 8: "I'm a guy, I like guy stuff, not into gay scene, bars etc. I love the outdoors, camping, target shooting, hunting, working out, hiking, and good local beer"

These masculine-positioned tastes, although not uniquely indicative of straight-acting, do imply a normative masculinity that aligns with general assumptions about what (straight) guys like to do, positioned by some users as antithetical to 'gayer' interests,

even when not explicitly mentioned. I am reminded here of the spectre of the fairy, which seems to haunt gay masculinity and the positioning of oneself as masculine within larger cultural logics that understand homosexuality as effeminacy, whereby these ‘manly’ interests always have to be read against a logic that positions gayness in line with stereotypically ‘feminine’ activities. To this point, I found it particularly significant that these hobbies and tastes were emphasized strongly within the relatively limited profile format, implying a measure of value and worth to these activities and identifications. Furthermore, users augmented these moments of disclosure with a profile photo that depicted an image that was in line with the percepts of their masculine-positioned profile; some users displayed their shirtless, headless torsos in order to communicate their toned/muscular bodies to other travelers, while some simply displayed a photo of themselves that appeared to buttress their claims to masculinity (as in, they actually did appear masculine, confirming their closeness to typical ideals of masculinity).

Considering these multivalent methods of presentation, we can infer that the relatively limited scope of creativity allowed by Grindr does actually result in a diverse combination of factors that are deployed in the consolidation of an observable masculinity, which appears to be a vital and valuable identification within the app space. For example, masculine-identified users can present their masculinity simply by stating that they are in fact masculine, or conversely, they can choose to use their profile attributes and About Me section to project a coherent impression of masculinity (one could state that one is ‘masc’ and use masculine encoded profile attributes like ‘Muscular’, ‘Top’, and ‘Jock’ to consolidate a coherent impression). Such an activity seems obvious; however, I was mostly interested in contemplating the compulsion for users to present this information in such an obvious manner when the possibilities for self-disclosure on the app could take multiple forms that do not necessarily have to congeal around a masculine ethic. This echoes prior anxieties I experienced when I accessed Grindr as a user, recognizing the palpable masculine ethic that is cultivated from within Grindr’s digital space, which I felt excluded from yet pressured into subscribing because of its pervasiveness within the app.

As this subscription would imply, not only do users demonstrate their own masculinity through the available profile options, but such is achieved through a discursive positioning within frames of value and aspiration, choosing to highlight their implied masculinity as an ‘important’ identification (myself as not excluded here, which

points to the messiness of self-creation within a pre-coded digital space). Various profiles achieved this expression through overtly communicating their masculinity with a request that their potential connections on the app be masculine as well, implying that not only are 'men masculine' but that manly men are only looking to fuck other manly men; as three profiles demonstrate:

User 9: "men not boys"

User 10: "I'm a Man Not a pretty face/boy.No room for drama"

User 11: "I consider us men, not boys"

While these may be generalized statements and they do not conform to the breadth and depth of profiles and users on Grindr, the observable masculine ethic implied by many profiles is representative of a sizable portion of the app's usership, facilitating a distinctly masculinized digital context. Alternatively, it could be inferred from this data that the potential that digital technologies allow one to contour one's appearance in order to project a desired image, could in part characterize the proliferation of 'masculinly' coded profiles (Goffman, 1959).

As a few of the quotes presented above imply, masculinity communicated within Grindr is not solely connected to one's overt positioning of oneself as 'masc' through their About Me section, but such can also be achieved through one's apparent laid-backness, chillness, and drama-free sensibility. The utter proliferation of profiles with an observable reference to being 'chill' or 'laid-back' echoed similar to observations I made back in 2013, implying a particular type of detached masculinity that is allegedly 'comfortable' and thus assumed to be 'genuine' due to its laid-back expression. Users demonstrated this quality by often combining an overtly masculine sensibility with chilled-out language:

User 12: "Chill dude, athletic, masc [sic], top"

User 13: "Easy-going muscle guy, open mind, no attitude"

User 14: "easy-going guy looking for the same. no time wasters, no drama-queens and no flakes, please!"

User 15: "Into Masculine: Just looking for friends and fun. No drama!"

User 16: "Fun easy going no drama here and if we get there I'm a Top"

I found it particularly telling that chillness could be situated in conjunction with a negative comment regarding 'drama', which demonstrates that this orientation is often set in contrast to a feminized impression of a 'drama queen', implying particular disavowed, undesirable qualities. Whether or not such is implicit through the contrasting of drama and chillness is partly beside the point, as the use of chillness as a buttress to a user's 'authentic' masculinity demonstrates a crucial observation on the style and particular performance of masculinity that rejects certain identifications that would contradict an 'authentic' impression of masculinity. With that being said, users did deploy the signifier of chillness without overt reference to masculinity in their profiles, which seems to suggest that the environment of hooking-up also requires a certain carefree, 'NSA' ('no-strings-attached') disposition. Such an attitude aligns with the expectations that inform the popular use of the app as a easy way to hook-up with nearby guys (Jaspal, 2016; Licoppe, Rivere, & Morel, 2016), yet the use of 'chillness' in conjunction with masculine signifiers codes the expression of masculinity in a manner that implies a laid-back authenticity in a binaristic relationship to 'drama'.

Returning to a point mentioned earlier, many of the profile excerpts above demonstrate the positioning of one's masculinity in conjunction with one's physical body, associated tribe, and sexual position, sometimes with an overt reference to chillness. This combination of factors reveals that users have a relative smorgasbord of options from which to communicate their masculinity to other users, in which exclusive 'tops', who are 'muscular', 'chill', and 'discreet' perform their masculinity in a multifaceted manner, with each successive layer confirming the others, usually through 'dudely language'. For example: "Chill dude, athletic, masc, [sic] top." Because I had to use my own understanding of normative, aspirational masculinity as the standard by which these profiles were judged, it was evident that certain profile options were seen as more conducive with an implied masculinity, despite whether or not these options were selected for this function or were simply demonstrative of the individual user's physical profile or sexual preferences. It also bears mentioning that users often contradicted the assumptions of congruency that I brought to Grindr's digital space, scrambling these factors in ways that do not seamlessly align with my assumptions:

User 17: "Bi, masculine, mature, professional... Not muscular... Not a bottom"

User 18: "I'm musc [sic] and masc [sic] but I like to bottom"

User 19: “Masc. [*sic*] Muscled bottom jock”

User 18 and 19’s profile content aligns with previous research (Sanchez & Vilian, 2012), implying that a submissive position during insertive anal penetration could be seen as an activity that transcends normative logics of ‘feminine’ submissiveness within gay male sexual interaction. Therefore, the signification of being a ‘Total Top’ could demonstrate that one is in fact quite masculine, yet users could present themselves as a ‘Bottom’ and still maintain their implied masculinity, recalling the sexual practices and limits of masculinity as presented in Chauncey’s (1990) work.

#### **4.4. Straight-Acting and Discreetness: Discursive Confluence?**

As the previous sections suggest, the deployment of an ethic of masculinity on Grindr is not a straightforward process, taking on multiple forms despite the presence of observable themes and consistencies across profiles. This complexity is confirmed by the evidence of straight-acting’s apparent vanishing act and I would argue that the ‘Discreet’ tribe signifies comparable discursive logics to straight-acting, functioning similarly within Grindr’s digital space. Discreetness suggests an observable masculinity along with other, more numerous significations such as undetectability, covertness, being on the DL (‘down-low’), and sexual fluidity, implying a structure of meaning that diverges from the majority of the other tribes available to users. Much like straight-acting, the Discreet tribe is a multivalent term and is the only option available to users that references a particular activity over the suggestion of a coherent identity, recalling the insights provided by Payne (2007) on the phenomenon of straight-acting as a ‘doing’ rather than an ‘is-ness’. In other words, the bulk of the available tribes imply a quality that the user ‘is’ something, rather than describing an activity that the user ‘does’ (the ‘Leather’ tribe is ambiguous because it too can be used to reference to a particular activity/culture). I found this deviation from the other available tribes to be compelling, especially in light of the particular emphasis on performance implied by straight-acting, which is partly retained under the sign of discreetness. However, I want to make clear that I do not see discreetness as analogous to straight-acting; the point of this discussion is to highlight the similarities and differences between these identifications and not to suggest that discreetness is a total recuperation of the discourse of straight-acting. I want to hold on to the discursive uniqueness of straight-acting as a distinct phenomenon

in light of my main argument, while demonstrating the similarities with discreetness in order to comment on the pervasiveness of normative masculinity within Grindr.

Similar to straight-acting, because the word 'discreet' means that one is largely 'undetectable', the identification carries with it a certain invisibility that appears to function in the assumed heterosexual world 'outside' of the app's digital space. Many of the users who subscribed to the Discreet tribe appeared to understand discreetness as a contract between users that veiled their activities under a certain assumption of privacy, meaning that their app interactions (that did or did not culminate in a physical meeting) should be largely secretive. Like straight-acting, the term could be deployed in a manner that strategically obscures the homosexual act/desire by coding itself as undetectable in heterosexual space, despite the observation that the user is 'outing' themselves on the app simply through the communication of same-sex desire. However, the alignment with discreetness is not exclusive to invisibility of this fashion, as it could also be deployed by gay men who use the app for hooking-up outside of the boundaries of monogamy from within same-sex relationships. Therefore, discreetness carries with it a secrecy or covertness that is applicable within different contexts, while appealing to a wide range of users who use the app in order to hook-up.

Expanding upon the implications of the term, discreetness combines the some of aspects of straight-acting with a presentation that could align with closeted men (and yes, users did deploy this specific term, I'm not projecting a logic of outness on these profiles) or guys on the 'down-low', which was demonstrated by multiple users who utilized a Discreet affiliation hoping to avoid compromising their marital fidelity and/or day-to-day straightness as communicated through their About Me profile content. Discreetness also could apply to situations where gay men who want to use the app in order to hook-up discreetly while in a committed relationships, as evidenced above. Taking this into account, discreetness does not always imply that the discreet subject is non-heterosexual, unlike straight-acting, since the tribe does not explicitly position one in-and-outside of the discursive frames of straightness. Because the tribe signals activities that are undetectable and unlikely to compromise one's everyday life, it has an application beyond a strictly 'straight' or 'gay' interpretation. Such a distinction suggests a fundamental failure for discreetness to function in a subversive manner, dissimilar to my argument regarding straight-acting, which implies a performative subjectivity and a disruptive potential to the coherency of heterosexuality as primary fact. Although

discreetness may not overtly challenge heterosexual hegemony, it can however throw normative logics of a coherent and interiorized binary sexuality into question, which is not as clearly demonstrated through the discourse of straight-acting.

Furthermore, users who described themselves as discreet did at times use the phrase in conjunction with a normative masculinity, similar to the discourse of straight-acting:

User 20: “Verse top here... Discreet bi, masculine”

User 21: “Discreet.Masculine”

User 22: “Two masculine buds, discreet, one Top... other Vers”

Multiple users who deployed overt masculine positioning in their profiles affiliated themselves with the Discreet tribe, deepening this connection further by suggesting that there existed gendered aspects of discreetness beyond its covert signification:

User 23: “Very discrete [*sic*]”

User 24: “Discreet only”

User 25: “looking for a strong tall top MUST be clean/discreet/hiv neg and ddf!”

This alignment implies that users understood the Discreet tribe as a confirmation of their gender-conforming tendencies, but could sometimes be associated with a disclosure of their sexual orientation (as straight, bi, poly, etc.) and/or their relationship status (more than one user confessed to being married to a woman, while others foregrounded their bisexuality: “Bi with GF [‘girlfriend’]. Yes she knows”). Unlike straight-acting, these examples demonstrate that discreetness takes on a wider range of significations, and thus, appears more functional within the app, possibly mediating the negative connotations associated with straight-acting, while still demonstrating many of the hallmarks of the discourse. In this way, many of the profiles listed above that positioned themselves as masculine and chill were also positioned within the Discreet tribe or made reference to discreetness in their profiles (you’re going to have to take my word for it, as I am not going to display screenshots of actual users’ profiles here for ethical reasons). Unlike other tribes that imply a more observable (Clean-Cut, Jock, Rugged) and/or queered masculinity (Bear, Leather, Otter, Twink), the Discreet tribe implies a normative/undetected masculinity that blends into straight culture, much like straight-



acting, which is confirmed by the deployment of the term by discreet users for its gender-conforming assumptions. Therefore, I would argue that the Discreet tribe functions in a similar fashion as straight-acting, albeit signaling identifications like 'down-low', non-monogamy, bisexuality, sexual fluidity, and closetedness, which is a direct result of design choices and app updates that shift and alter the available avenues for representation within Grindr's digital app space.

To this point, it seems evident from the contrast between the use of discreetness versus straight-acting in 2017 is indicative of specific design choices and how these changes function to directly alter and contour the discursive space established by the app. If anything, this observation implies that the introduction of Grindr Tribes to the available profile options altered the culture of the app and its requisite lingo, perhaps replacing the problematic straight-acting discourse with a less controversial term that could be taken to signify multiple practices within the app. This shift was evident in juxtaposition of my impressions of Grindr in 2013 versus the present day, wherein the erosion of an overt straight-acting ethic was readily filled by the discourse of discreetness, yet such a succession does not appear to be seamless and did not completely consume straight-acting as a discursive phenomenon. Reaching this conclusion is also subject to my own (limited) capabilities for recollection, as the discourse of discreetness may have been functioning alongside straight-acting prior to Grindr's redesign (I would assume that this a likely assumption, as its implications regarding users on the 'DL' is not a new phenomenon, see Reynolds, 2015 and Ward, 2008 for confirmation of such), and it should be noted that these points are not introduced here to suggest a coherent linearity, but rather to project a snapshot of the instability of gay (hetero)masculinity within a discrete node of gay male culture.

#### **4.5. Cleanliness is Next to Manliness: Pressures for Normalcy**

The final theme I would like to present from my time in Grindr appeared rather late in the process of exploration, becoming evident only after sifting through hundreds of profiles over the course of a few weeks. It became quite clear that in addition to an observable masculine ethic, users also placed emphasis on their own normalcy and cleanliness, which at times aligned with the logics of masculinity, chillness, and

discreetness that pervaded the digital app space. Users positioned normalcy on the app in various ways, referring to themselves as:

User 26: “Normal twenty something dude”

User 27: “Just a normal dude. Regular working dude, no agenda”

User 28: “I could say I try to be as normal as possible, but I don’t even know what that means”

While at times signaling the desirability of this trait in other users:

User 29: “happy healthy... easy going. Like regular normal everyday kinda [*sic*] guys”

User 30: “Safe fun with nice normal guys”

User 31: “clean & normal would play safe only”

This emphasis on normalcy also extended to profiles that explicitly demonstrated a preference for users to be clean while situating themselves as healthy:

User 32: “Fit, active, healthy, hygiene – things I value”

User 33: “I only top and I only fuck safe, DDF and and [*sic*] expect the same & want to stay that way”

User 34: “clean safe guy”

User 35: “I’m clean, non-smoker, no drama and DDF. Discreet and patient”

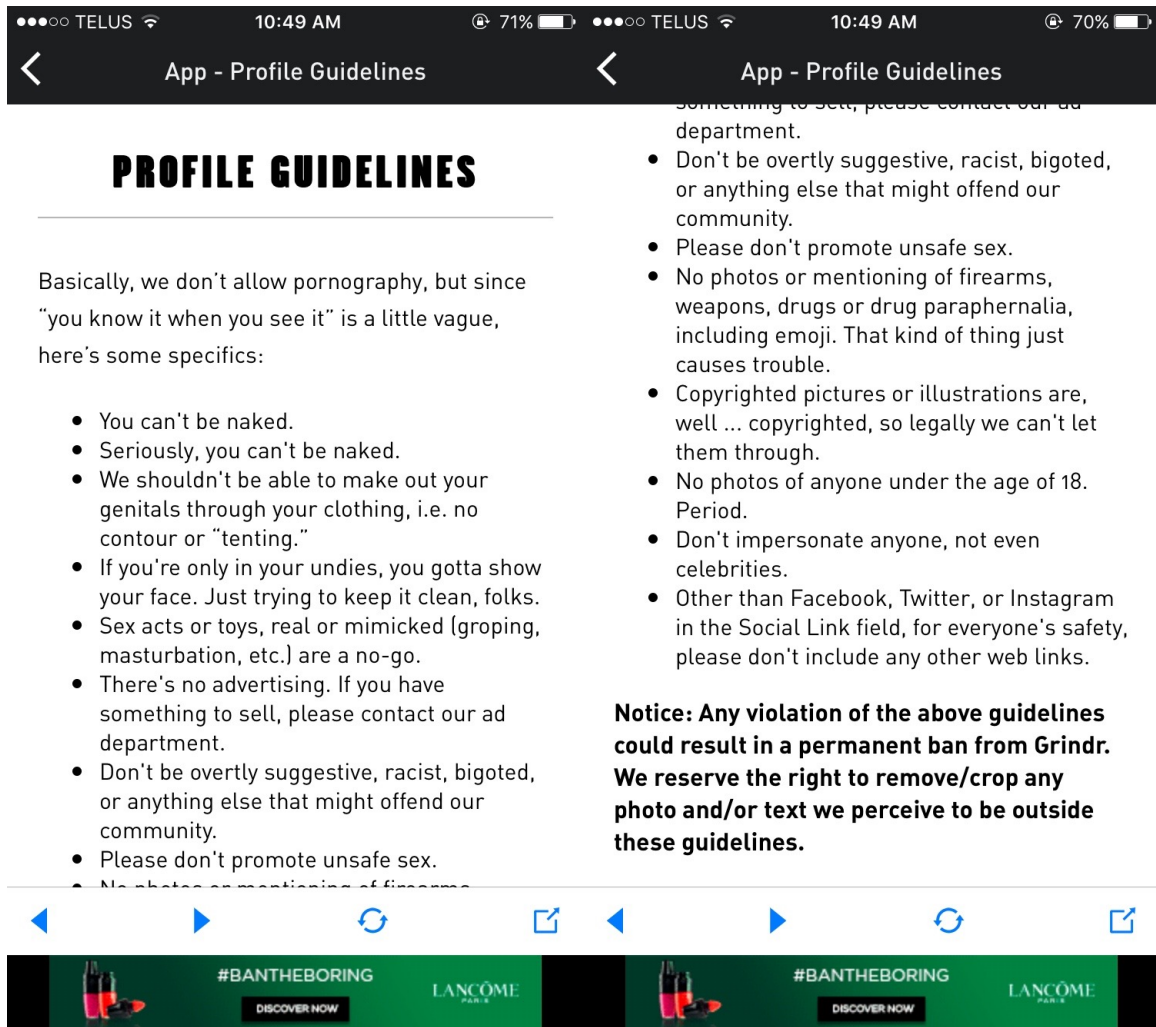
User 36: “good vibes only, Safe and clean guys only”

User 37: “clean, DD free. Only real and DD free please”

Although the use of signifiers like ‘normal’, ‘clean’, and ‘DDF’ were not as numerous as the presence of masculine identifiers, they did produce a distinct impression of sterility that signaled implicit assumptions based on class-biases that augmented my experience within Grindr.

At first the appearance of these themes did come as a surprise as I had not thought that such an emphasis upon normalcy and cleanliness would be observable or taken up by profiles. Yet as I thought about it more, it seemed more likely especially in light of the discourse of straight-acting, which places emphasis on one’s purported normative masculinity. This positioning began to make even more sense when I

considered Grindr as implicated by/within the discourse of queer liberalism, in a similar fashion to how the discourse of straight-acting functions as a leveling/normalization process, which is situated as an aspirational practice in this research. I recalled Ahlm's (2017) insights that position Grindr as an example of the privatization of a subculture of public sex and indicative of a process of managing respectability within a culture that places high value on a neoliberal subjectivity and sexual restraint. Thus, it made sense that users would choose to communicate to others that they were 'safe', 'normal', 'clean', and 'DDF' from within a context that aims to reduce possible obstacles in the way of a quick, NSA hook-up. Such an emphasis also has a logical function within the app, dispelling anxieties about the highly publicized dangers of unsafe sex outside of monogamy and the fears of sexually transmitted infections that have plagued gay male subjectivity since the AIDS epidemic (Katz, 1995). Without making judgments here, the palpable cultural discourses around sexual puritanism cannot be ignored within a space that implies hooking-up without ever making this explicitly part of their public platform (see Tziallas, 2015 for a discussion of constraints on Grindr by Apple to these ends). Additionally the requisite Profile Guidelines set out by Grindr demonstrate a similarly 'keep it clean, while you're on the hunt' sensibility (see Figures 9, 10). It appears that Grindr's developers are more comfortable with facilitating the opportunity for NSA fun outside of the app, rather than promoting a sexualized, pornified space from within its four corners, aligning with Ahlm's (2017) salient insights. And while the explicit emphasis on safe sex by some users was actually quite a reassuring discovery, I did wonder how such language carries with a classed bias against 'abject' or 'undesirable' interactions that transgress normative boundaries of respectable subjectivity, in line with the particular neoliberalist assumptions that congeal around the app. It seemed to me that these moments of reference to normalcy and cleanliness were positioned against possible undesirable attention from users who were not 'clean', 'normal', and 'DDF', implying particular and pointed logics of worth and value coded within Grindr's digital space.



**Figure 8: Grindr's profile guidelines**

Exploring these connections with the explicit concept of queer liberalism in mind provided further insights, and as many researchers have pointed out (Ahlm, 2017; Corriero & Tom Tong, 2016; Tziallas, 2015), Grindr signifies a unique intervention into a history of cruising practices that largely functioned within physical public spaces under the noses of heterosexual culture. With the advent of geosocial locative technologies moving this phenomenon (largely) into the privacy of the home, the practice of cruising was literally privatized and at the time partly dislodged the cartological and discursive uniqueness that came with metropolitan gay cruising areas (Ahlm, 2017; Tziallas, 2015). Although this interpretation of Grindr is not directly predicated in this analysis of the app's production of an ethic of masculinity, it does act as a gloss to a dialogue on Grindr as a function of queer liberalism, which positions the normalization of queer life and politics under a sign of privatized, monogamous neoliberalist politics of respectability

(Ahlm, 2017). This suggests that the emphasis that users place on masculinity, chillness, discreetness, and normalcy function together with a discursive logic that is indicative of a contemporary moment of queer liberalism, whereby Grindr is seen as a space that promotes certain styles of presentation that place emphasis on personal choice, privatization, commercial interests, and a normative subjectivity that congeal around an ethic of self-care that is immediately palpable as one moves through the app. Although some users did transgress this framework by situating themselves outside of this normative ethic, there is something to be said for the design of the app and its discursive hallmarks that cement a particular style of masculinity that is normative and conducive to a neoliberalist context. This does suggest to me the relative successfulness of the discourse of straight-acting on an app like Grindr, as it creates a space that is reflective of current logics of queer liberalism, while also offering possibilities for creativity and productive disruption (whether or not such is undertaken is another question). This analysis in turn provides clarity to previous assumptions regarding the closeness of straight-acting and normative masculinity as expressed through/within Grindr to a larger discourse of queer liberalism. With that being said, I do not think that Grindr is a zero-sum-game where users are brainwashed into presenting themselves along an observable masculine ethic of the self, but I do speak from experience when I say that the pressures to align with this logic are real and do impress their influence on the user. Such an observation does allow the potential for users to act creatively within the app to disrupt or challenge the normative logics that are coded into Grindr as functional cues and orienting tools, despite Grindr's embeddedness with neoliberal ethos of self-creation. An exploratory discussion such as this will be expanded and deepened in the following chapter, wherein I will reengage with the discourse of straight-acting in light of this research, contemplating the possibilities for the discourse to be taken up for subversive ends.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **5.1. Normative Frames: Unpacking Grindr Within the Context of Queer Liberalism**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, my situated use of Grindr produced both predictable and unconsidered results, pushing this project in new, uncharted directions. From the outset of the research process, I had assumed that this project would tackle an exploration of straight-acting as a particular performance of masculinity that is representative of our contemporary moment, with an emphasis upon the discourse's arguably subversive potentials to the logic of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). While this intention held fast throughout my entire time in the field, the actual mechanics of deployment shifted, in which I discovered I was in part elaborating upon a discourse of (hetero)masculinity that had shed its skin of overt straightness while still retaining its normative postures within Grindr. It appeared that a more fragmented, less coherent masculinity was deployed through various signifiers of normalcy, discreetness, and cultural logics of 'authentic' masculinity that were part-and-parcel of the straight-acting discourse, yet appear to have been dislodged from the coherent discourse of straight-acting on Grindr in 2017. While this does imply that straight-acting has left its trace upon the use and logic of Grindr as a normative, masculinized space, I would argue that such a disappearance opens up the possibility for the signifier to take on new forms that perhaps highlight its more disruptive qualities. Keeping this mind, this concluding chapter will aim to not only synthesize the threads of inquiry that have been woven through this entire project, but will present an exploratory framework that asks the reader to consider the possibility for straight-acting to function beyond its typical deployment within Grindr, argued here as a space that places emphasis on establishing a masculine ethic of self, predicated upon queer liberalist values of efficiency, consumerism, and normativity.

Branching out from the discussion previously underway, my exploration of Grindr was grounded in the assumption that this particular digital space plays a significant role in the elaboration of a distinctly normative masculine ethic, and I would still hold that

assumption as valid given the observations made whilst in the field. Much like other social media applications that demand a statistical or 'intelligible' rendering of the self (such as Facebook, Instagram, etc., apps that ask us to present ourselves in digestible chunks), Grindr deploys a profile format that consolidates and streamlines subjectivities insofar as they are conducive to a general assumption of quick digestion, immediately communicating oneself to interested users. Within this context of efficient legibility, we are flagged to easily readable and understandable codes that are used to measure the desirability of the user to other players within the digital app space, elaborated here within the frames of masculinity, discreetness, chillness, and normalcy. Researchers Licoppe, Riviere, and Morel (2016) make parallel observations, describing Grindr "as a resource to produce a distinctive type of social encounter, quick sexual encounters between strangers (which need to be had within the half hour) based on location awareness" (p. 2555), establishing the typical use of Grindr that was outlined earlier. Tziallas (2015) takes a similar stance, proposing that the 'gamification' of Grindr positions the app within a discourse of gaming and reward by highlighting the strategic navigation of the app on the part of some users who contour their representation on the app in order to achieve a desired outcome. Such a navigation establishes "sets of requirements one must meet in order to play—white only, single only, be masc(uline), be ddf (drug and disease free), be discreet, be over 30 under 50, be under 25, NSA only (no strings attached)" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 768). These 'desired' qualifications are set within a wider culture of commercialization and efficiency facilitated by the app, suggesting that these normative identifications are enmeshed in logics of profit and gain, reflective of queer liberalism.

As my time in Grindr demonstrated, I would argue in tandem with these findings, suggesting that users call upon certain performances and discursive tools in order to achieve the assumed results of a face-to-face encounter. These appear to function based on both the immediate conformist culture of the app and wider cultural assumptions regarding male attractiveness as 'masculine', which congeal around the codes of the 'ideal user' within the app space. This observation demonstrates the discursive space facilitated by Grindr as fully entangled in the specific cultural systems of gendered and sexual behaviour that organize 'normal behaviours' as desirable both in oneself and other in the object of one's attention. A discussion of this nature recalls the influential theories of Erving Goffman (1959) that place emphasis on the careful

performance of self within social interaction, relating to the 'authentic' quality of users' presentation(s) on the app. Goffman's theories are relevant here as they point toward the manner in which users choose to present/contour their presence on the app in order to elicit responses from other users, based on cues and assumptions regarding 'desirable' bodies. Because so many men on the app chose to highlight their masculine character (in all of its complexity) despite a relatively limited profile format, it could be argued that users are engaged in a process of impression management, putting forth masculine signifiers that are shown to perform well within the given situation. Speaking from my own limited experience in the app as a user, I can attest to the pressures to perform 'masculinely' within the space facilitated by Grindr's design and culture, producing a palpable sense of conformity in line with established values of worth implied by the app and wider matrices of 'acceptable' masculine behaviour. My previous personal experience can be augmented by the time spent in the field, in which the observation of this particular mode of self-presentation is prevalent and tangible even to the lurking, non-participating user. For these reasons, I would locate Grindr as specific technology of the self at this particular moment in time, allowing for the active self-creation of the subject within a climate of queer liberalism.

While I do think that consideration of the presentation of self is important and vital to take into account, I am less apt to make general assumptions about *why* users choose to access Grindr, but am instead interested in how the app facilitates a space that places an emphasis upon the cultivation of a normative masculinity that aligns with a context of queer liberalism. My argument here coincides with Brandon Andrew Robinson's (2016) work that stresses the importance of how the profile format and general layout of Grindr enmeshes gay bodies within a 'quantifiable-body discourse' that is reflective of biopower and the normalization of bodies along lines of biopolitical self-discipline. It can be observed through Grindr's design and orbiting discursive elements that the app is highly reflective of a process of biopower working through/upon bodies in a digital context, where the impetus to place bodies within a quantifiable and measurable system of appraisal is articulated (ibid.). Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) concept of chromonormativity lends a particular gloss to this argument, as this theoretical perspective highlights the manner in which a narrative of progressive time "organize[s] individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (p. 3). Freeman's (2010) connectivity between space and time as principles that consolidate certain temporal and



spatial biases as 'natural' under a purview of productivity is not dissimilar to the percepts that undergird Grindr as 'time-saving' and 'efficient', positioned toward the (consumerist) event of hooking-up. Linking this discussion to the contemporary context of queer liberalism allows an emphasis upon certain forms of life that are in fact more 'livable' and conducive to an arrangement of power relations that 'makes life and lets live', ordering existence and allowing for the growth and expansion of certain normative arrangements of subjectivization that appear beneficial, not in contrast to the observations I made whilst walking through Grindr. These arrangements, as explored earlier, suggest a life-path that is predicated upon normative assumptions around sexuality, intimacy, and kinship arrangements (Duggan, 2003; Eng, 2010), in which the struggle for equal representation under the law still plays by the rules of normative selfhood that structure this very system, namely in the manner in which they are productively pointed toward an eventual culmination. In this way, Grindr becomes a digital space that orients one within the boundaries of normative subjectivity from a queered perspective, in which the logics of queer liberalism are deployed through discourses of normalcy, masculinity, and chillness, albeit in a less transparent fashion than observed in the discourse of straight-acting.

This situation allows us to consider how the movement toward a form of queer subjectivity that is in many ways identical to 'normal', straight subjectivity is cultivated in a multivalent fashion from within Grindr, partly through its positional proximity to a discourse of 'progression' and for its particular mechanics that congeal around a neoliberalist ethic of the self. Because users on Grindr place emphasis on normative styles of the self (which take on appearances that do not solely refer to one's gender identity), it could be argued that much of the body logic that informs the behaviours and postures observable on the app integrate the assumption that a 'normal' gender identity (or, to state this differently, one that aligns nearest to cultural assumptions of authentic masculinity) is 'good' and something that should be rewarded or at least recognized as desirable. As other researchers have pointed out, the app promotes the privatization of intimacy (Ahlm, 2017) along with an overtly consumerist ethic, which work in tandem with the app's culture of normative conformity. I would argue that these factors are partly indicative of the prior success of a phrase like straight-acting to achieve traction on an app like Grindr, as it sits comfortably within the normative process of self-work that is underway within the app. However, as the research of both Clarkson (2005; 2006; 2008)

and Eguchi (2009) implies, straight-acting is not a term that is solely deployed within a geosocial networking spaces, but the movement and integration of this phrase within these contexts suggests its comfortable situation within frames of logics of attractiveness and self-creation, along a queer liberalist axis.

Returning to the argument that Grindr typifies a particular technology of the self within a digitally-mediated culture, if we take the various profile markers of masculinity, discreetness, chillness, and normalcy together, we can discern that Grindr facilitates a certain performance of masculinity that holds fast to 'typical' tropes of straight male behaviour as a process of self-discipline in which the profile format and requisite categories of identification provided by Grindr push the user toward the cultivation of a 'normal' and 'healthy' presentation of the self on the app. This process is reflective of larger cultural metrics of queer liberalism, which organize this logic as aspirational. This observation can be supplemented by the 'similar searches' related to straight-acting on Google (refer to Figure 1) that imply straight-acting is not simply a 'fact' about oneself, but is entangled within a process of self-work and self-creation in the service of aligning oneself with normative logics of masculinity as future promise. It is worth noting that this interpretation of Grindr is not exhaustive or conclusive, but aims to demonstrate the process of normalization that is in underway in the app, even when this normalization works alongside the presence of other queer masculinities (such as with the presence of Grindr Tribes like Bear, Otter, Twink, etc.). Rather, this discussion accesses significant strains of typical use and relevant patterns observed within Grindr from the lurking user's perspective, in order to demonstrate the congruency between an ethic of normalcy and an app like Grindr.

Working in tandem with these observations, the obvious commercialized nature of Grindr enmeshes users with a consumerist environment that places emphasis on the consumption of both products and of available nearby bodies (Licoppe et al., 2016). Grindr presents us with these options for consumption with a knowing benevolent wink: we are supposed to want to buy a new mattress, contour our beards, and fix our broken smiles because doing so would allow us to be wanted within an culture of hooking-up that places value on one's immediate desirability. This firmly positions Grindr as a space that engages in an entrepreneurial interpretation of sexual object choice, whereby those who 'adapt' to the mandates of the commercialized space have the greatest chance of surviving in this digital field. I am reminded here of Anderson's (2012) intriguing

meditations on the relationship between affect and biopower and I wonder how it would feel to be recognized as 'normal' or successful within the app space through the alignment with a particular performance of masculinity that projects a perfectly normal and healthy impression to other users. This is why I find Foucault's (1990) theory of biopower so vital in this discussion, as it presents a model of power dynamics that push subjects toward certain life-paths that appear *a priori* 'beneficial' and free from coercion, wherein an alignment with normative lines of being presents itself as a 'good' thing, demonstrating the neat fit between neoliberalist logics and a system of biopower working through populations and individual bodies.

At this point it bears mentioning that this discussion is also predicated upon the situation of behaviours within an affective environment of hooking-up because, after all, we are talking about emotion, connection, and intimacy whenever we talk about dating apps (whether they be for hooking-up or not) and not the rigid execution of mechanical activities devoid of personal investment (even if this personal investment simply implies that one is getting one's rocks off). A situation of this nature was a contributing reason as to why I chose to analyze Grindr from the perspective of personal exploration, as a methodology that holds this intention at its centre can tease out the very real effects of this ethic of self-discipline on users in the field, calling upon the salient and integral work of Sara Ahmed (2006a; 2006b). Through my time in the field and subsequent contemplation, I discovered that Grindr seems to tell users that they are not good enough and thus need to perform a measured amount of self-discipline to appear masculine, normal, and desirable in order to achieve success in and outside of the app (which, unsurprisingly, sounds a lot like capitalism). This is demonstrated not solely through the app's overt emphasis upon transcendence through consumption (of products, bodies, and the app itself), but also through its presentation of perfected masculine bodies in its promotional materials, which further demonstrate the emphasis placed on the cultivation of a particular type of body and disposition for success on the app.

As we orbit this discussion of normalcy and self-work on Grindr, I am reminded that we cannot ignore the fact that much of the logics of this particular form of self-discipline are reflective of heteronormative values of selfhood as implied by queer liberalism, which maintain and undergird a heterosexual logic of worth that includes largely white, middle/upper class, and healthy bodies as aspirational and/or desirable.

For these reasons, I position Grindr under the purview of biopower as a specific tool that could be utilized in the cultivation of a particular subjectivity that follows normative assumptions regarding what entails a 'good' and 'livable' life, as understood by the percepts of queer liberalism. Referring to the prior discussion regarding the logic of heterosexuality as an organizing principle regarding sexual subjectivity in our contemporary moment, the specificity of normalcy within a 'queer space' seems to be indebted to the logics of 'a normal life' that structure our entire (heteronormative) culture, reflecting back life-paths that follow heterosexual lines. The pull toward normative life-paths and the orientation of oneself within queer liberalist frames demonstrates the strength of biopolitical processes on the horizons of intelligibility when it comes to one's access to what is deemed 'livable' life within this particular historical moment, chiefly along patterns of straightness and middle-class respectability.

Returning to the specific case of Grindr, I would argue that the deployment of a discourse of normalcy as unfolding on/through the app implies that the process of normalization already asks its users to align themselves with certain logical (straight) presentations of the self, with seemingly benevolent and beneficial results. Whether or not this compulsion is pushed forward by Grindr itself or is a combination of the context of queer citizenship in this particular moment and the process of self-presentation in the app is not known, but I would argue that both factors function within a feedback loop, reaffirming and strengthening one-another through a pervasive discourse of queer liberalist subjectivity. It also is worth noting that the actual mechanics of Grindr do allow for a certain amount of options for users to deploy (for example, one need not present a 'healthy' body type in their profile); however, the overwhelming strength of cultural discourses of desirability to restructure the value of these identifications within the space facilitated by Grindr, pointing toward bodies and subjectivities that are normatively desirable. My point here is that I am not arguing that Grindr is always and forever a space that demonstrates a normative/dominant ethic of the self, but that such a disciplining process is highly indicative of the general design and discursive field that is established when users interact with Grindr's unique technology, precisely because this app is enmeshed within a particular moment of queer liberalism and neoliberal ethics of the self.

## 5.2. Where Have All the Straight-Acting Boys Gone? Meditations on the Disappearance of Straight-Acting

Because I had hoped that I would be able to demonstrate that this logic of normalcy was in line with 'straight futures' through the discourse of straight-acting, I did not initially think that I would need to map out the ways in which Grindr's facilitates a normative ethic *without* overt reference to heterosexuality. As the discussion underway suggests, Grindr does create a culture that implies particular normative postures as desirable amongst other less standardized understandings of desirability; however, with the loss of the coherent reference of straight-acting we lose sight of the ways in which this process overtly aspires to heterosexualized conceptualizations of gender identity as the ideal pattern of masculine expression. At the same time, through the multivalent process of establishing a normatively masculine presentation on Grindr that was described in the analysis, we are flagged to the manner in which the codes of heteromascularity that appear to be part-and-parcel of the straight-acting discourse still function within Grindr in significant ways. Furthermore, the situation of Grindr within the frames of queer liberalism implies that this process of standardization is not solely reflective of one's gender expression, but that such is part of a wider process of consolidation toward a 'neutral' conceptualization of self, as predicated upon neoliberalist values. As Duggan (2003) points out, neoliberalism "organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion" (p. 3), yet its fictive distinctions between public and private realities obscure this fact but establishing a 'neutral' subject that is assumed to be 'free' from inequality because inequality is understood as 'private' issue within this discursive logic. To state this differently, neoliberalist discursive regimes work within a logic that understands the public subject as 'neutral', despite the fact that this neutrality is a delusion predicated upon certain systematic biases that project and create their own claims to ahistoricity (Duggan, 2003).

Although I have yet to see other researchers analyze straight-acting with the percepts of queer liberalism in mind, I do think that such a discussion is novel insofar as it places straight-acting within a ethic of self normalization that congeals around Grindr as one specific tool in the 'working-out' of gay subjectivity within this particular historical moment, with a careful awareness to how gayness is often articulated within the terms of normative/abnormal gender expression (Chauncey, 1990; Levine, 1998). We cannot

deny the conflation between a 'normal' performance of (hetero)masculinity with a cultural context that implores subjectivization along lines of sameness and domestic privacy, that in turn informs the logics of development and subsequent use of an app like Grindr. As was pointed out earlier, the uniqueness of the discourse of straight-acting in light of 'masculine' or 'butch' articulates the connection between straight-acting and an app enmeshed within logics of queer liberalism and homonormativity that move queer subjects close to a middle ground of straight, white, middle class, 'normalcy'. This would be one of my main theoretical additions to the already existing literature on straight-acting, providing a layered account of the discourse within its cultural metrics of deployment by combining previous insights regarding the patriarchal flavour of the discourse with a contemporary context of queer liberalism that functions in a manner to orient queer subjects toward straight futures.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that the presence of a normative masculine ethic on Grindr is required as long as gay subjectivity within this particular historical moment is focused upon moving queerness closer to an observable middle-ground, territorialized under the sign of middle-class heterosexuality as 'normal'. Earlier discussions regarding the process of queer actualization along a rights-based trajectory clearly demonstrate this confluence and Grindr's own promotional materials go further to deepen this alignment. The apparent vanishing act of straight-acting from the discursive petri-dish of Grindr implies that normative masculinity is permissible and assumed in this space *as long as it operates without reference to straightness*. To take this further, I contend that the loss of straight-acting as an overt identification in Grindr's discursive space conceals the normalization process indicative of homonormativity (Duggan, 2003), implying that yes, gay men too can be 'authentically' normal and (hetero)masculine, just like their straight counterparts. Through this suggestion, we can observe the erasure of difference along lines of sexuality, class, gender identity, race, and ability, whereby the hat-trick of taking the 'straight' and 'acting' out of 'typical masculinity' erases the leveling process underway in this performative. In an almost bizarre twist of irony, the exclusive quality of the discourse of straight-acting makes evident the process by which bodies are pushed into normative lines that congeal around straightness as a indicator of what it means to be 'normal'; the loss of this signification denies one the vantage point from which to observe how queer subjectivity is eroded into a 'neutral' neoliberalist personhood that appears more and more inevitable within a context of late capitalism. Taking these

observations together, my argument is that the disappearance of straight-acting suggests a partial triumph of queer liberalism and homonormativity to successfully erase the question of difference and imbalances of power and privilege from public life, flattening the very real distinctions that limit the ways in which subjects can access life-paths that are indeed 'livable' and 'significant' within this discursive framework.

Despite this position, I do think this shift away from the discourse of straight-acting could be a partly encouraging innovation for the simple fact that a de-emphasis upon the alleged 'inherent' straightness of a particular normative style of masculinity opens itself toward possibilities of gay masculinities that do not overtly function within a paradigm of sexual binarism. As many users of *StraightActing.com* have argued (Carpenter, 2005; 2006; 2008), a straight-acting masculinity can in part challenge cultural assumptions regarding the inherent effeminacy of gay men, and while this argument has multiple blind-spots in its subscription to a rhetoric of masculinism, this situation does allow one to consider gay masculinity as a complex and yet-to-be-settled-upon phenomenon, as opposed to a widespread, interiorized 'fact'. Underscoring this position for relevance, a major take-away from this research lies in its discussions and explorations of the inherently unstable and fluctuating quality of gay masculinity as a historical-discursive phenomenon, and implied by the excavation of both Chauncey (1990) and Levine's (1998) work, along with my original research undertaken on the specific discourse of straight-acting and its disappearance from Grindr. In this way, my particular research process clearly demonstrates the pace at which codes and styles of gay masculinity shift and change, providing a salient dialogue on the unsettled quality of being and becoming gendered/sexualized, flagging one to how these assumptions of interiority are subject to historical shifts that alter cultural categories of masculinity and femininity that are never final, settled-down, or exhaustive. The disappearing act of straight-acting that has been evidenced through this research suggests how the cultural identifications and performances that indicate a 'queer masculinity' are open-ended, readily redefined, and reconsidered in light of unstable cultural discourse/s and shifts within queer subjectivity at large.

However, this opportunity to contemplate the culturally-mediated quality of gender and sexual expression must be augmented by the observation that normative masculinity is something that is highly desirable and encouraged within the specific discursive field produced by Grindr, echoing larger cultural logics that still place gay men

in a precarious position when it comes to demonstrating an 'authentic' masculinity within this historical moment. My time in Grindr confirmed certain assumptions regarding this struggle, in the sense that some gay men appear to believe that their assertion of their own masculine character mediates anxieties around a perceived threat of inevitable internal effeminacy, which was discussed by Chauncey (1990), Levine (1998), and the previous literature on the phenomenon of straight-acting (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008; Payne, 2007; Eguchi, 2009). Because Grindr is a reflection of the cultural systems of value that it is produced within, certain normative assumptions and styles are reproduced within the four-corners of the virtual space, dashing the wide-eyed optimism that such a digital environment could successfully evade its cultural mechanics of deployment. The implied worth of masculinity and normalcy within the app goes far to prove this anxiety, haunted by the fear of conflation with the image of the fairy or flamer, not dissimilar to the observations made by Clarkson (2005) on straight-acting in a differing digital context.

With this in mind, I argue that this gendered anxiety signals wider cultural logics of heteropatriarchy and the devaluation of femininity, which play out in particular ways for subjects who find themselves in discursive positions that are 'nearer' to feminine identification. While avoiding the distillation of the entire project down to a universal principle, it does appear that the emphasis placed on an 'authentic' masculine subjectivity does work within a wider cultural logic that affords privileges to those that abide by these normative, masculinist arrangements, which the previous literature on straight-acting (Clarkson, 2005; 2006; 2008; Burke, 2016; Eguchi, 2009) has demonstrated through the careful and significant demonstration of the confluence between hegemonic masculinity and straight-acting as a cultural struggle for privileged positions. My goal here is to hold this observation in consideration of the ways in which straight-acting is a discourse that both confirms and troubles normative arrangements and how this signifier implies and rejects certain aspects of gay essentialism, all the while sitting within the messiness that is revealed by its performative contradiction. However, I would balance this observation with the points made above, chiefly in the regard that the fragmented quality of normative masculinity within Grindr seems to cover its tracks more easily, implying that one's gender, race (Eng, 2010), class, and ability are not significant factors in influencing how one can move through the world in a context of neoliberalist late capitalism. We cannot forget the significant feedback between the



percepts of queer liberalism toward the aspiration of a 'normal (straight) life', the style of masculinity that is implied by straight-acting, and the aspects of self-work evident in Grindr, as this cultivation is not free from the structures of inequality that pervade our current Western context.

### **5.3. Routes Forward: Re-Thinking Straight-Acting and the Possibilities for Subversion**

So where can we go from here? As the prior discussion suggests, we are back to the argument that straight-acting is a dangerous discourse within gay culture, seen as both a process of normalization within the frames of queer liberalism and the "recuperat[ion] of a necessary status" of masculinist power and privilege (Payne, 2007, p. 535). As I had stated at the beginning of this project, I am not aiming to ignore or deny this deployment and I think it is obvious at this point that straight-acting *is* a discourse that incorporates and functions with these biases and privileges in mind, all the while aiming to recoup certain benefits afforded to men (gay or otherwise) within a patriarchal culture. The research undertaken here does confirm this function, running alongside previous studies of straight-acting (Carpenter, 2005; 2006; 2008; Eguchi, 2009), while departing from these studies by situating straight-acting within a lineage of gay masculine styles and under the purview of queer liberalism at this particular moment in time.

Yet the discovery that straight-acting was a dead signifier within the sample of Grindr under analysis provided a particular point of departure that was not immediately evident when I had assumed that I would 'find' straight-actors and uncover in their performance of heteromascularity certain styles and practices that would overtly challenge heterosexuality as natural fact. The loss of this coherent 'evidence' provided new possibilities and, in my opinion, more intriguing and relevant insights to the function of normative masculinity within gay culture at this particular juncture. Stated clearly, the relative *lack* of straight-actors allowed me to consider how the grip of normal selfhood had deepened beyond a 'confirmation-by-association' discursive confluence, revealing in its place an erasure that denied the performative quality of this normalized subjectivity as informed by the particular logics of worth and value that are indicative of the current climate of queer liberalism and homonormativity. As this reality sank in, it seemed more and more likely that I would be unable to locate the golden nugget(s) of transgression

that I had been searching for, as the research process displayed a situation that was in some ways contradictory to this goal. With that being said, this reality pushed me in a direction that shed light on the precarious situation of normative masculinity within Grindr when we lose the distinctly performative and anti-naturalistic flavour of straight-acting, positioned here as a threat to a system of heterosexual primacy. I discovered that the loss of the disruptive potential of straight-acting appeared to signal a shift toward a neutral 'normalcy' that offered little resistance to the power of the norm as both 'good' and 'inevitable'.

The intellectual tug of war implied by this discussion, along with my own steadfast grip upon the mission to 'prove' that straight-acting is subversive in some tangible form beyond linguistic slipperiness, held me in a particular space that turned my gaze away from the reality of straight-acting as something that is perhaps not tangibly subversive in its current form, repositioning myself toward the actual liveness of straight-acting as a discursive phenomenon. Once I let go of my conviction to proving this hypothesis with concrete evidence, more salient and intriguing observations appeared and I began to view straight-acting in its fullness at this particular juncture, guided by the actual research process and not predetermined expectations. At this point in time, I do not feel the need to tangibly 'prove' that straight-acting is subversive in its articulation by particular subjects; I am confident that my argument regarding the discursive complexity of the signifier does justice to my own perspective, supplying the reader with the required amount of food for thought when it comes to the subversive potential of straight-acting as a discursive phenomenon. The subversive positioning argued in this research understands straight-acting as a phenomenon troubles the pervasive logic of the heterosexual matrix as a system that consolidates sex-gender-desire in a fashion that appears ahistorical, through its positioning of queer bodies that 'look' and 'act' just as 'straight' as straight bodies. Straight-acting challenges the biologism of this synchronization, argued here to be an illogical identification that dislodges the 'natural' lining up of gender and sexual desire within the logic of the heterosexual matrix. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, once I had let go of the conviction I had in 'proving' this argument, I actually did find a salient example of the re-signification of straight-acting almost by accident, augmenting this research with a 'real world' example of the process of recoding straight-acting for subversive ends. I find it particularly comforting that once I

surrendered to the actual data available and let myself be taken away by the research process I was able to almost serendipitously find that which I was seeking.

Illuminating this discovery for the reader, I decided to conduct a search on Facebook for references to straight-acting near the end of my study, pondering if I could discover examples of the discourse at this particular moment in time, as I had meager returns on Grindr. I was thrilled when I come across a monthly queer performance event in Brooklyn that goes under the name ‘Straight Acting’, positioned as a push back against the normative use of the term on gay hook-up apps. Overtly playing with the images and language common on these apps, the event promotes itself with mock Grindr profiles that challenge the normative deployment of the term (Nichols, 2015 October 16). Functionally speaking, the monthly showcase is predicated upon establishing an inclusive space for non-conforming artists to perform in a context that holds the “celebration of feminized gender expression – and fluidity – among the queer community” (Nichols, 2015, para. 8). Rify Royalty, founder of the event, demonstrates a clear awareness of the loaded quality of the phrase, describing the night as an opportunity to

wake people up in our community. I was tired of hearing ‘Masc4Masc’ and ‘No Fems’ on apps that were designed for queer people to meet one another. That dialogue was becoming a joke, but no one was doing anything about it so I figured I would. I knew calling the party ‘Straight Acting’ would stir the pot a bit and it did. I figured it was controversial enough to be effective. I was never trying to ‘masc shame’ anyone, there’s nothing wrong with being masculine (whatever that means) but I was really trying to be more fem celebrating. As a society in general, masculinity is at the top of the hierarchy but something about that spilling over to a community that’s already had to fight for acceptance didn’t sit right with me. On the other hand, I wanted to create a show/party for non-conforming artists to showcase their work in a safe space. (Nichols, 2015, para. 10)

Royalty’s comments are significant as they place emphasis on a resignification of straight-acting in a fashion that recalls the negative connotations of the term, yet utilizes the trace of those meanings to recentre the discourse in a way that places emphasis upon literal performance and the use of the term within a context of inclusivity, while challenging the patriarchal and masculinist implications of the discourse. This redoubling of the phrase does not aim to simply poke fun at the phenomenon by aligning it with performers who eschew typical performances of masculinity or ‘passable’ drag

performances as an embodiment of an ideal of femininity (as Royalty confirms, “I was really inspired by London nightlife – party spaces where everyone came together. Drag wasn’t necessarily about impersonating women but about developing individual drag identities and performance. ‘Masculine’ men were more willing to embrace the idea of dress up” [Nichols, 2015, para. 12]); it deploys the signifier in the service of creating a safe haven for queer individuals who do not fit within the sometimes strict politics of respectability that can take place in gay nightlife spaces by focusing on the fluidity of gender and sexual expression. Royalty’s resignification of the term reminds me of Ahmed’s (2006b) concept of sticky signs, and if we think of straight-acting as a sticky sign, we could understand this resignification process as method by which new meanings become stuck to straight-acting as it moves through time. Quite literally, Royalty’s use of straight-acting implies the stuck-togetherness that Ahmed refers to, albeit in a different fashion than how normatively masculine bodies stick together under the usual deployment of the discourse of straight-acting. To this point, the night does not discriminate against masculine-positioned individuals, which is evidenced by images of party-goers on the Instagram page promoting the monthly event ([http://instagram.com/straight\\_acting](http://instagram.com/straight_acting)) that can be illuminated by Royalty’s own inclusive attitude when it comes to Straight Acting:

I originally set out to create a party for boys who put on heels and dress up and not worry about masculinity or being ‘passable drag queens’ and I was seeking that in my performers as well. I also figured I’d include cis women as well since they, too, have had their obstacles in society’s acceptance of how a ‘woman should behave’. Eventually, the party kind of organically blossomed and all kinds of performers hit the stage from different gender, racial, and performance backgrounds. (para. 12)

We can see through Royalty’s comments the manner in which the resignification of straight-acting within this context produces effects that point toward an awareness of the utter complexity and diversity of queer masculinities and femininities, recognizing the vitality of queer life as an embrace of difference toward new possibilities of subjectivity that transcend binary logics. Highlighting this embrace, the monthly event has also showcased performances by notable drag queens such as Sasha Velour, the recent winner of season nine of the hugely popular television program *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-present), who transcends passable drag identities in favour of more fluid, androgynous personas (it is worth noting that Velour impersonated Judith Butler in one of the episodes of the series, implying a post-queer theory awareness and political

understanding of drag as radical possibility). With this in mind, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Royalty's resignification of straight-acting lies in the event's layered deployment of the term, in which straight-acting is used to identify the hierarchies of gendered desire and performances within queer culture by resignifying straight-acting as a space to gather in ways that transgress and subvert the usual normative implications of the discourse, all the while championing that which is disavowed by the typical use of the phrase. The inclusive, non-discriminatory flavour of Royalty's intentions for the event open up straight-acting to mean something totally exterior to its usual deployment as a term of exclusive privilege, challenging the politics of respectability and normalcy that are implied by the discourse, while placing emphasis upon the signifier's performative possibilities.

I find that the use of straight-acting within this subversive context points toward the liveness of discourse that I referred to earlier, demonstrating the potential for the productive and subversive taking-up of available discourses by subjects in order to create new possibilities of meaning. Royalty's monthly event is just one example of this and is an important recognition of the active negotiation of available discourses on the part of subjects, who have the ability to work with these structures in a manner that reconfigures these systems of meaning toward a racial openness that takes into account their unsettled and uncompleted potentiality. I would contend that this research is another example of this process of play, working through the contradictions and messiness of the discourse of straight-acting in the hopes of demonstrating routes into a re-reading of straight-acting that takes into account its subversive potential. Returning to the specific site of analysis, I would hope that we could eventually see this playful potential expanded to include apps like Grindr, with users deliberately taking up certain signifiers and patterns within the app in the service of altering the normative structure of these technologies, despite the demonstrated restraints on users and the generally normative and consumerist pressures of Grindr as digital space. There is a great potential for Grindr to become a more creative, less conformist place, which is evidenced by a minority of users that I came across who questioned the app and its culture of normativity:

User 38: "if your profile states that I should be this or that, do me a favor and block me...who knew that gays could be such close-minded people?!"

User 39: “I’m not ‘masculine’ by lumberyard standards: (ie: I’m gay like springtime). UB2!;)”

User 40: “No body shaming , no misogynists, no racists”

User 41: “ONLY into Australian, Black, Muslim, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Middle Eastern, Polish, Russian, Portuguese, Brazilian, European, Serbian, Persian, Palestinian, Turkish, German, French & White guys”

These quotations demonstrate that the popular discourses around Grindr as exclusive space are in fact engaged with by users in the hopes of dislodging their association from this assumption, turning toward possibilities of use that do not congeal around a process of exclusion and exclusivity. I would imagine that the use of Grindr beyond its coded purposes of consumption could involve a reterritorialization of physical and digital space in a fashion that could promote queer organization and understanding between users who identify with a wide range of significations. After all, Grindr is a tool for queer orientation and self-work within this particular historical moment through connecting gay men to other near-by gay men, yet this connectivity need not solely be thought of in terms of hooking-up for personal gratification. Royalty’s subversive event seems to be the physical manifestation of this process, reengaging with the discourse of straight-acting and adding to its meaning as a playful and significant turn toward radical inclusion and the experimentation of subjectivity beyond pervasively normative, binary interpretations. I hope that this project follows a similar path of creative (self-)exploration, opening the discourse of straight-acting toward renewed possibilities of meaning and signification.

#### **5.4. Tentative Conclusions: Where we’ve been and Where we Could be Heading**

Bringing this project back home, I want to reemphasize the potential that straight-acting allows us to consider of the performativity of heterosexual subjectivities, that on the surface, appear to be natural manifestations of an interior ‘straightness’. In particular, I want to reexamine how the signifier demonstrates an acknowledgment of how masculinity has been coded as the ‘property’ of straight bodies, emanating from some interior source of ‘authentic’ expression. Because the alignment of queer bodies to normative logics of straight masculinity presents these performances as ‘identical’ to their ‘naturalized’ counterparts, the discourse of straight-acting allows for an observable

moment by which we can observe the performative quality of straight masculinities. This was what drew me into the discourse from the beginning, as straight-acting provides us with the rare opportunity to see the fullness of the invisibility of performative straight subjectivities that, like other forms of normative selfhood, often slip by one's gaze undetected. Such an awareness also flags us to the boundedness of the tripartite of sex-gender-desire within a cultural context that functions upon the assumption of the indisputability of the heterosexual matrix, fastening together biology, gender expression, and desire in a seemingly ahistorical, deterministic fashion. I consider straight-acting to be an intervention into this logic, subverting the assumption of conflation between sex/gender and one's sexual desires. To this point, the crucial inclusion of the situation of queer liberalism in this research provides us with the opportunity to understand straight-acting as a discursive phenomenon within a specific historical moment, retaining some aspects of prior forms of gay masculine subjectivities while turning toward altered styles due to its unique situation within a cultural context of neoliberalism and late capitalist ideological supremacy. While some aspects of the heterosexual matrix (the alignment between sex-gender and desire particularly) are troubled by straight-acting, the relative steadfastness of the logic holds together within a moment of queer liberalism, in which gay subjects are allowed particular freedoms along with 'permissible' transgressions of desire, contingent on one's ability to work within the purview of 'neutral' neoliberal selfhood. By situating straight-acting within the frames of queer liberalism, we are able to observe the manner in which the discourse provides the fruits of its own labour, allowing subjects to position themselves to futures that are in fact 'worth living', despite the erasure of difference, the reality of inherent inequality, and the loss of paths that could lead to more inclusive, imaginative futures.

Speculating on the potential for future research, I am confident to describe this project as the turning toward a larger exploration that would seek to find the possibility of transgression and inclusive arrangements that come under the sign of straight-acting, activating its subversive potential in a way that produces tangible results. I see this project as the starting point of a larger work, demonstrating the theoretical heavy-lifting and the grappling with complex contradictions needed in the undertaking of a project that attempts to uncover uses for straight-acting beyond its typical deployment as normative aspiration. I am optimistic that evidence of this disruption is not only locatable, but already underway with cultural events like Rify Royalty's monthly event. Furthermore, I

hope that this project allows for a reconsideration of ‘settled upon’ subjectivities and discourses that appear contradictory and inherently ‘dangerous’ or regressive at first glance. As a devotee to the liveness and possibility afforded by Foucault’s (1990) understanding of discourse and its potential for resistance and reconfiguration, I have held this intention close throughout this project, inspiring a theoretical position that looks to unpack and excavate a seemingly ‘obvious’ discourse with surprising subversive results.

The limitations of this research are evident and mostly related to the closedness of the research process, the relatively short span of time spent in the field, and my own perhaps limited capabilities of reflection and self-interrogation. However, I am confident that the findings presented here can sit comfortably in their undeterminedness, positioned not as a detraction, but as a strength that points toward the possibility for future reconsideration and revision. Although I had hoped to uncover examples of the subversive potential of straight-acting while within Grindr, the lack of such paved the way for different considerations in the critical exploration of Grindr as a discrete node of discursive complexity within contemporary gay culture during a moment of queer liberalism. With that being said, I am optimistic that expanding awareness and future engagement with the app may result in a shift that reorganizes the normative logic of the app and aims to trouble this normalcy, opening up possibilities for use beyond typical deployments.

I am similarly hopeful of the resignification of straight-acting for transgressive and subversive ends, even if the discourse has to move out of Grindr and a context of queer liberalism in order to realize this potential. Surprisingly, the relative disappearance of the discrete term ‘straight-acting’ from my research pool provided a creative opening that turned the signifier toward those who choose to engage with it, either for its normative confirmations or for its nod to the performativity of gender and sexual identity, along with permutations and interpretations that transcend this either/or predicament. This is partly evidenced by Royalty’s playful and political reexamination of the term, and I would hope that this re-interrogation would continue forward in unconsidered ways. I am confident to situate this research as carrying this impetus onward, by setting out preliminary stepping stones in the direction toward radical openness regarding the ways in which categories of gender and sexuality need not function along lines of normativity in order to appear livable and significant. Because this research has demonstrated the literal grappling with



the discourse of straight-acting in all of its complexity, I refuse to say goodbye now, as this process will not end with the last page of this document. Rather, I urge readers to continue forward with the categories and identifications that impress themselves onto their specific skin, interrogating the manifold ways that these densely significant and layered identifications are both paths that lead backward and forward, opening up toward future possibilities yet to be imagined.

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