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# Hooking up with friends: LGBTQ+ young people, dating apps, friendship and safety

**ABSTRACT** Research exploring digital intimate publics tends to consider social media platforms and dating/hook-up apps separately, implying distance between social and sexual communication practices. This paper troubles that delineation by drawing on LGBTQ+ young people's accounts of negotiating safety and risk in dating/hook-up apps, in which friendship practices are significant. We explore four key themes of friendship that arose in our analysis of interviews and workshop discussions: sharing mutuals (or friends-in-common) with potential dates/hook-ups; making friends through apps; friends supporting app negotiations; and friends' involvement in safety strategies. Through analysis of these data, we firstly argue that friendship is often both an outcome and an organising force of LGBTQ+ young people's uses of dating/hook-up apps, and secondly, that media sites commonly defined as social (e.g. Instagram) or sexual (e.g. Tinder) are imbricated, with friendship contouring queer sex and dating practices.

## Introduction

Scholarly research into digital intimate publics has largely examined the uses of social media platforms and dating/hook-up apps separately, implying a distinct boundary between social and sexual communication practices. With notable exceptions (e.g. Basile and Linne, 2016; Pond and Farvid, 2017) there has been little qualitative attention paid to how existing friendships influence young people's dating/hook-up app use. This paper troubles distinctions between 'digital dating/hooking up' and 'social networking' by exploring how friendship features within LGBTQ+ young people's accounts of dating/hook-up app use.

This paper draws on interviews and workshops conducted with Australian LGBTQ+ app users, with the aim of learning more about what made them feel safer – or less safe – when using apps. The project – which involved partnerships with two sexual health organisations offering both clinical and health promotion services – aimed to inform health promotion practice (Albury et al. 2019). Topics explored include which apps participants used and why; feelings of safety and risk; how app-use relates to a sense of wellbeing (or not); and personal strategies for safer app use. The topic of friendship featured in all workshops and interviews, mostly relating to four key themes: having mutual friends with potential dates/hook-ups; making friends through apps; friends supporting app negotiations; and friends' involvement in safety strategies. Of these, 'mutual friends' and 'making friends' were discussed in greater depth, and these themes are given more attention in this paper. We reflect on these discussions of friendship and safety to consider how digital cultures of intimacy move between dating/hook-up apps and broader social media platform cultures. While friendship has long been an organising feature of LGBTQ+ community, this has, in the past, been more closely linked to shared physical spaces, such as bars (or bookshops) associated with queer subcultures and sexual scenes (Miller, 2015; Weeks, 2007). In this paper, we consider how the less physically bounded structures and uses of dating/hook-up apps have led to LGBTQ+ friendship practices becoming a central organising force in young people's everyday digital negotiations of intimacy, sex, and dating.

### **Background: the social aspects of dating/hook-up apps**

Early scholarship of online dating primarily focused on heterosexuals, and the (hetero) gendered aspects of digital dating (Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Ellison et al., 2006). This literature suggests that negotiating dating sites also involves negotiating gender – one's own, and that of one's potential

partners. Elsewhere, studies of non-heterosexual online dating commonly centred on gay/queer men and their use of Gaydar, Gay.Com, and similar sites. Non-heterosexual dating and hooking-up complicates a focus on heterosexual gender dynamics, provoking different conversations regarding safety, self-presentation and social expectations. Research on gay men's digital intimacies has often considered these in relation to cruising (Mowlabocus, 2010; Race, 2010), suggesting sites/apps as new 'queer spaces' and sometimes comparing these to gay bars (Crooks, 2013; Miller, 2015). Like bars, apps are understood as spaces that can offer a sense of community and shelter from more hostile or uncomfortable environments. The association with 'cruising' also suggests the danger and exhilaration that comes with negotiating queer intimacies in public spaces.

Literature on gay/queer men's digital hooking up has also focused on identity, including how digital cultures inform the practice of gay male sexuality (Campbell, 2004; Mowlabocus, 2010). Researchers in this space explore key themes of self-presentation, the efficacy of digital dating, and the sexual cultures of LGBTQ+ people. Some of this research considers HIV negotiation and prevention, merging public health and cultural studies perspectives (Davis et al., 2006; Race, 2010). Friendship-seeking in apps for queer men has been discussed (Chan, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015), and much literature exploring the overlap between dating sites and social media relate to Chinese apps and their users. For example, many articles on Momo highlight that while it is marketed as a friendship app, it is typically understood and used as a hook-up app (Chan, 2019; Liu, 2016; Solis and Wong, 2019). As Liu discusses, Momo considered its 'sexual nature' an obstacle for its business expansion, therefore hiring a public relations team for 'name-cleaning' (2016: 6-7). Following this, the app was rebranded as a friendship platform (2016), yet users still report using Momo for hooking up as well as for friendship (Chan, 2019). Given the app's multiple orientations, Chan suggests that the brand's promise of being a "platform for 'everything'" may well be accurate (2019: 12). Alongside research on Momo is broader literature on how the use of social media such as LINE (Cassidy and Wang, 2018) and WeChat (Xue et al., 2016) overlap

with hook-up apps – for example, WeChat’s ‘people nearby’ function affords the potential for hooking up with strangers (Xue et al., 2016). These examples highlight a need for hook-up app researchers to expand our understanding of dating/hook-up app practices beyond specific apps and consider how a range of connections are forged through a multitude of platforms – generating connections based on sex, friendship, or indeed both.

In their study of the political economies of dating apps, Wilken et al. (2019) observe that a capacity to facilitate non-sexual social networking can be fundamental to dating app’s business models. Along with apps being rebranded as social networking sites to avoid moral censorship (Liu, 2016; Wu and Ward, 2018), Wilken et al. note how many apps have promoted themselves as social networking platforms in a deliberate attempt to maximise opportunities for monetisation within data markets (2019). For example, after reviewing subscribers’ patterns of use, Grindr re-positioned itself as ‘the world’s LGBT largest social networking app’ (Yue, 2018). Having observed users’ non-sexual activities on the site, Grindr reoriented its marketing as a ‘broader gay lifestyle platform’ that facilitates activities such as ‘travel’ and ‘socialising’ (VB Staff, 2016).

This business model is not unique to LGBTQ+ apps. Bumble (a ‘female friendly’ app primarily marketed to heterosexuals) similarly promotes itself as ‘a social networking app that facilitates dating’ (Wilken et al., 2019), hosting live networking events, and including additional channels within the app, such as ‘Bumble BFF’ – a women’s friend-finder channel accessed via the app’s central settings page. Another example of apps seeking to accommodate friendship/social practices is the now defunct Tinder Social – where friends using Tinder could arrange group dates or social events. Beyond the efforts of app companies to bridge a perceived social/dating gap, there is much evidence that dating/hook-up apps, through ongoing updates that respond to user practices, have become more ‘social media like’, sharing a range of features and affordances, as well as cross-platform linking (e.g. the now common practice of

users adding links to Instagram and other social media profiles to their dating app profiles). The above aspects – from app design and marketing to user practices – highlight an ongoing blur between dating/hook-up apps and social media platforms. This is important context through which to consider the role of friendship in current uses of dating/hook-up apps.

A growing literature on dating/hook-up app use in situations of migration, tourism, and trans-global employment or aid work, also highlights an expansion of app use beyond simply seeking dates or hook-ups. This includes research on Grindr use among locals and foreign aid workers in the Philippines (Ong, 2017), recent migrant experiences of Grindr in Denmark (Shield, 2018), the cosmopolitanism of migrant uses of Grindr in Belgium (Dhoest, 2018), and the use of Hornet in Turkey for connections between locals and tourists (Phua, 2020). In such examples as these, ‘the hook-up app’ is used as a tool for connecting to community, finding local information, making friends, and gaining a sense of local cultures. In such practices, there are wider opportunities for friendships to emerge, or for interactions to resemble friendship communication more so than cruising. Aside from these examples, few researchers have considered the overlap between digital communications relating to sex and friendship, and much of this is specific to gay/queer men and Grindr. Additionally, literature on the digital dating practices of lesbian/bi/queer women has been slower to emerge, partly reflecting fewer digital dating spaces dedicated to women seeking women, as well as a lack of attention to queer women in public health research (an impetus for much Grindr research).

Historically, literature on queer women’s sex and dating practices has considered the use of popular social media platforms such as MySpace (Crowley, 2010) or has offered more general discussions of digital media and an increased visibility of queerness (Gray, 2009). Literature on queer women’s use of dating apps is recent, and Duguay’s research participants commonly experienced Tinder as offering a scarcity of space for queer women (2019). This vastly differs to Grindr research, where many users

report a heightened perception of queer space through their use of such apps (Batiste, 2013; Blackwell et al., 2014). However, research on the Hong Kong lesbian app Butterfly (Tang, 2017; Choy, 2018) demonstrates how queer women's app experiences vary geographically, particularly in densely populated cities. Choy (2018: 103) shows how co-situated Butterfly users navigate visibility on the app alongside public invisibility, employing a "tactical reimagination" of heteronormative public spaces in their use of the app's affordances, which range from dating to LGBTQ+ social media and entertainment features.

## **Our project**

In late 2018, we held four workshops with LGBTQ+ young people (18-35 years) (N=23), and in 2019 we conducted interviews with dating/hook-up app users, including nine young people who are LGBTQ+. Participants were recruited mostly via our LGBTQ+ health partner organisations - thus, they are by no means a representative sample, but rather, young people with an active interest in discussing hook-up apps and safety. For some, their participation in these organisations' LGBTQ+ networks suggested a higher literacy around health and LGBTQ+ issues, which was an asset to our research and helped to inform the agendas of the partner organisations.

Participant ages across the total sample (N=32) ranged from 19-35 years, with a mean age of 27.6 years. Of these participants, 18 are male, 11 are female,<sup>i</sup> and 3 are non-binary. Four participants indicated that they are transgender and the remainder either indicated cisgender status (N=4) or did not disclose this (N=24).<sup>ii</sup> Twenty-one participants were from Sydney and eleven were from regional cities. When asked to identify their cultural background, most indicated that they are white/Caucasian (N=21), seven participants indicated backgrounds from Asia, the Pacific, and Middle Eastern regions, one participant is Aboriginal and mixed race, and four participants did not disclose their cultural background. Most

participants who indicated their educational background had completed, or were currently enrolled in, a tertiary degree. Apps most commonly used among these participants were Tinder, Grindr, HER, and Scruff. Many also indicated personal preferences for less commonly used apps. Interviews and workshops were transcribed and coded by two researchers, using NVivo software.

Rather than pre-define the gender of workshop participants, we recruited two groups of 'LGBTQ+ people who use apps like Grindr' and two groups of 'LGBTQ+ people who use apps like HER' - one of each in Sydney and a regional city in New South Wales (NSW).). In relation to data from workshop participants (N=23), it should be noted that in most cases these involved a group of strangers, meeting to discuss and participate in exercises around app use and negotiations of safety and risk. Workshops ran for two hours on weeknight evenings, hosted at venues of our partner organisation (ACON). Many participants were familiar with these settings, but not each other, which likely limited the amount of personal disclosure. We did not invite nor expect detailed personal disclosures, as our primary aim was to elicit discussion of dating/hook-up app negotiations of safety, for discursive and thematic analysis that would support the work of our partner organisations. Workshops drew on creative methods to elicit discussions of strategies and practices relating to safety and risk associated with app-use.

Participants were invited to design 'maps' of app use, offer 'top-tips' for app use, and respond to hypothetical scenarios (e.g. designing a profile for a well-known celebrity, and talking about good/bad profile and messaging practices). Consequently, participants rarely discussed or revealed details of their own identities, or the intersections of sexual identity and aspects of class, race, and more. However, many compared their own experiences to those of their straight friends.

In the interviews however, which ran for up to one hour, the focus was more personal, and participants discussed intersectional aspects of being LGBTQ+ and also being: a person of colour; of a certain age; negotiating mental health; living in rural or regional settings; and/or being a sex worker. Some



interviewees discussed personal experiences of racism on apps, including race-sorting and fetishisation. Where these discussions did not also reflect on friends or friendship practices they are not explored in this paper. However, although never explicitly stated, it is likely that these discussions gesture towards the importance of friendship as a mediator of both 'safety' and 'risk' for sex and dating.

Across the interviews and workshops, stories about 'a friend' were common, positioning the speaker's own experience of app use as either 'typical' or more particular and nuanced than other app users they know. Often app users discovered apps through friends, and many indicated that they used similar apps to their friends. In workshop discussions, stories about friends' app experiences often emerged as a kind of warning to others about what might go wrong, as per Lee (26, gay male), in the urban Grindr workshop, who stated:

I had a friend once who had a guy over and he got robbed, so just put your laptop in your drawer, your phone under the bed or something.

Our thematic analysis of discussions of friendship looked for patterns across participant discourse. We did not centre our work in social scientific understandings of identity and practice as directly informing each other, but looked for the discursive aspects that can also cut across and muddy such correlations. That is, we do not presume to 'know' nor understand our participants based on their markers of class and race, and our intersectional approach seeks to leave room for this complexity. The topic of friendship appeared to be significant in that it featured across all workshop and interviews transcripts, with primary sub-themes relating to: the role that mutual friends play in app-users' comfort with potential dates/hook-ups; the ways that apps help users make new friends; how friends support each other's app use practices; and how friendships support app-users' safety strategies. The following sections explore each of these key themes.

## Having mutual friends

The reassurance of having mutual friends with potential dates/hook-ups was discussed in all the workshops and interviews. 'Mutuals' were most frequently discussed by Tinder users, reflecting Tinder's (now historical) practice of populating profiles based on imported Facebook data (Duguay, 2017).

Indeed, some participants expressed dissatisfaction that Tinder no longer shows Facebook mutuals in the way it used to. Amy (29, queer female) noted, "that was always a good conversation starter." Lauren (age unknown, lesbian female) agreed, adding: "If I notice(d) if I had mutual friends with someone I'd be heaps more likely to swipe right."

As Duguay (2019) found, lesbian, queer and bisexual women face particular challenges when seeking interaction with other queer women on apps. As per Duguay's research, our participants undertook 'close reading' of Tinder profiles in an attempt to filter out deceptive or 'catfishing' users. 'Straight-appearing' women's profiles were sometimes read as catfish accounts for cisgender couples deceptively seeking to negotiate threesomes. When engaging with matches on Tinder, having mutuals (among other factors) also helped participants to determine if a match was actually queer.

Amy: Rainbow emojis are also handy, especially if you are not visibly queer presenting, for all the problems that that entails.

Claire: And having mutual friends help with that too.

Amy: Yeah.

Claire: Because I could be, oh, you're friends with all these people, you're *definitely gay*.

Further to this, Amy discussed figuring out mutual connections as ‘fun’, suggesting that this can also be an intimacy building aspect of initial chat. Some participants noted Instagram links on app profiles offered more information about that person, including the ability to check for mutuals. Chelsea (19, bisexual female) suggested that having mutuals offers a sense of ‘knowing’ the person: “Normally if I don't know them – mutual friend wise – I'll video call them [before agreeing to meet].” Alex (26, lesbian, non-binary) indicated that they always screened people through Facebook Messenger before going on a date, and checking for mutuals was part of this:

I've never met up with someone off the apps who I haven't interacted [with] through Facebook Messenger... I always, okay, let's continue it to Facebook so I can really see who you are, see who their friends are.

Having mutuals was not always seen as a good thing, however, and attitudes towards the practice of linking out from dating apps to Instagram and other social media accounts were similarly ambivalent. One workshop group (HER, urban) agreed that there was greater safety in accessing mutuals through Tinder (during the period when mutual Facebook friends were visible on the app) rather than sharing Instagram accounts which can feel like “an invasion of privacy”. Elsewhere, Ruby (29, bisexual female), who uses Bumble with her male partner to find other women to date together, discussed the discomfort of meeting people who shared mutual friends. This was based on her and her partner’s separation of their (non-monogamous) dating life from their social life. She said:

I think it takes away your opportunity to set the scene and set the conversation and set the direction, because things have already been established and perhaps I've heard about that person through one of our mutual friends or they've heard about me and then what? It just - I don't know – removes some of the mystery, I think.

For Ruby, the ideal dating scenario involves meeting new people: “if I wanted to meet a mutual friend, then I'd go out with friends and meet a mutual friend.” Similar expressions of ambivalence emerged in the urban Grindr workshop:

Mike: ...so you find out that you're talking to someone [on a dating/hook-up app] maybe 10-15 minutes and you get their Instagram or their Facebook and you realise they know 50 to 60 other mutual friends – how does that make you feel?

Adam: I live [in an outer suburb] and that's a bubble and that happens, so...

[Laughter]

Charles: That's usually a bit of an ‘oh shit’ moment, do you know what I mean?

Group: Yeah.

Charles: I don't know, it's – I think in my head, they are definitely two different spaces and I don't necessarily want my circle of friends to overlap with my circle of fuckbuddies.

Jeff: Yeah, that's an ‘oh shit’ moment.

Laughter throughout this discussion indicates that these awkward ‘oh shit’ moments were common, and usually arose when a conversation moved to other platforms such as Facebook Messenger or Instagram. As Jeff later indicated, the “Oh, how do you know this guy?” conversation is likely to come up at some point. He further stated:

Jeff: ...everyone talks, everyone knows who slept with who.

Adam: And you only just met them like five minutes ago?

Jeff: Exactly...

The presence of mutuals was taken for granted by some users. For example, Miles (26, gay/queer male) expressed comfort with overlapping social and sexual networks:

I grew up in [regional city] where you could see the entire gay scene on free Grindr and it was the fun game we would play with friends about like, you would draw your mind maps of who you've slept with and you're like oh okay, yeah, no it's all the same people...

Some participants discussed side-stepping dating apps and using social media – mostly Facebook and Instagram – to initiate flirtations with their friends' friends. In our regional HER workshop, Chelsea (19, bisexual female) discussed how she had messaged mutual friends through social media platforms:

...like if I find someone that's attractive, I'll message them and let them know and that's turned into relationships and things like that. Same thing if I see someone on Instagram and find them attractive – I'll let them know and see how that goes, kind of thing.

## **Making friends**

As many dating/hook-up app researchers have noted, dating apps are not exclusively used to form sexual and romantic connections, but are also used by LGBTQ+ people to meet new friends and establish social networks (Author removed, 2016; Chan, 2019; Duguay, 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Pond and Farvid, 2017). Although regional workshop participants discussed the small size of the LGBTQ+ 'dating pool' within their city, many also recognised it as a hub for LGBTQ+ young people relocating from more rural areas to connect with community. In the regional Grindr workshop, Max (23, queer, non-binary transmasculine) described Tinder as a valuable platform for befriending other trans people, noting that it was "pretty fucking scary" being out as trans in their regional city. Jackie (22, bisexual female) said in

an interview that although she wasn't excluding the possibility of sex and relationships, friendship would be the basis for these activities:

Yeah, my profile says only friendships. I'm only looking for friends right now. I took away all the options for long-term, short-term, marriage, all that was out of the picture for me because if you can just be my friend first without all the extra shit, let's do it. But if you really try to go straight there, I don't have time.

Alex (26, lesbian, non-binary) also sought friendship on apps. They preferred using Pink Cupid because it was used by "more older women" and "more people who just want to meet people." They also spoke of a preference for "snuggle buddy" relationships, and how they have found these through apps.

Throughout the interview, Alex expressed a clear preference to meet before determining the contours of a connection – to "just meet-ups and see what happens", as opposed to negotiating sex or dating:

I'm a sex worker so I don't feel the necessity to do that. I more use them to just engage with people within the community who I wouldn't see at events that I would be at or people who don't really come to queer events. So it's just like, you know, go out for coffee, meet new people, go to the beach, have a swim, you know, just interact with people who you wouldn't normally meet.

Other participants, such as Gabriel (31, gay male), indicated that seeking friends on dating/hook-up apps was difficult:

I used [Grindr] for friends once upon a time when me and my partner were monogamous and I wanted to meet new people because I didn't know how to. It's either at work or friends of

friends or Grindr. So I put on my Grindr profile 'friends only' and a lot of people didn't care about what I said, they just either glossed through it or didn't read it at all. You can tell if they want friends-only based on the first two minutes of chatting, if you're talking about your weekend and interests and hobbies, that's friendship talk, but if the first minute or two, they send you or they ask for more pics, then it's not.

More commonly, making friends through apps was unintentional, and sometimes these connections were more difficult to define than either sexual or 'just friends', combining elements of both, as indicated by Amy (29, queer female) in the urban HER workshop:

I had my first hook up on Tinder, which turned into a Facebook and Instagram connection. I say connection, as opposed to friendship, because we've never seen each other again, but we're still friends and she sent me nudes via email.

Amy identified this person as a 'connection', yet still referred to them as a friend, perhaps in reference to the platform linguistics of (Facebook) friends. She said that she had also developed several friendships through Tinder matches.

Sylvan (33, queer male) discussed his use of Scruff in similarly ambivalent terms. At the time of our interview he was taking a break from apps, but indicated that he was likely to return on account of losing connection with some of his friends:

I probably will turn Scruff back on because, again – it's the pen-pal thing. Even though I have their numbers and stuff, I have some friends, particularly in the US, but also throughout Europe, that are on those platforms.

Elaborating on his pen pal relationships, Sylvan stated that they're "hardly G-rated." These were typically long-distance sexual relationships that centred on friendship: "I'm a big fan of sexual friends and friends with benefits." He further indicated that friendships found through apps often related to a shared interest in gaming:

I think Scruff allows me, as someone that's geeky – I'm a video gamer and I love tabletop gaming and things like that – it allowed me to find people like that very easily. I think there's even geek and gamer tabs or tags on Scruff profiles too.

### ***Blurring sex and friendship***

The blurring of boundaries between sexual and non-sexual friendships described by Amy, Ruby, Alex, Gabriel and Sylvan extended beyond in-app communication to other social media platforms. In the urban Grindr workshop, a discussion about the awkwardness of seeing one's mutual friends on apps transitioned into an appreciation of the pleasures of seeing one's friends naked on social media platforms like Tumblr. Miles (26, gay/queer male) reflected on Tumblr's (then new) censorship of not-safe-for-work content, expressing sadness that he could no longer see his friends naked. This discussion reflected the everyday overlap between social and sexual media use that emerged in other stages of our research, highlighting how sexualised images of friends circulate in social media outside the context of hooking-up.

Ruby (29, bisexual female), found that using Bumble with her male partner inadvertently led to making new friends. Ruby's friendships developed on the basis of chatting and finding similar interests or just 'getting along'. She described group friendships generated through a shared interest in motorcycles:



“Then we started a girl gang and it had nothing to do with dating. We'd just go and have beers and go for a ride.”

Sam (23, pansexual, non-binary), also described experiences of developing friendships on apps, saying “we were dating for a bit... and then we just sort of agreed [to be] friends.” Sam stated, “since being on dating apps my social circles and my close friendships have expanded a lot and strengthened.” This blurring of dating and friendship was not initially a deliberate choice for Sam, but impacted on their ongoing decisions regarding app use:

Even when I was in a monogamous relationship I just put on my profile, ‘I'm in a relationship, I'm not using this.’ Because I wanted to – I thought my profile that I wrote was good and everything and I already had matches and friends in there and I didn't want to lose them.

Finding new friendships through dating/hook-up apps was more complicated for gay/queer male participants than for most others, seemingly due to a tendency to differentiate sexual from social communication, or the cultural norms of Grindr and similar apps. Participants in the urban Grindr workshop (all cisgender and gay/queer) discussed these tensions most, where the discovery of mutuals with potential hook-ups or dates were often read as sexual histories – i.e. if they're Facebook friends, they probably hooked up, as previously discussed. This tension also emerged in discussing profile content and (non-)disclosure of sexual interests or fetishes. It was felt that certain information that would be useful for sex partners would be ‘too much information’ for potential friends, reflecting participants’ negotiation of different audiences.

A small number of participants, such as Wei (29, gay male) had not made friends on dating/hook-up apps, and believed that app-users who claimed to be seeking friends were likely being deceptive:

I don't believe in friendships from the apps, because I have enough friendships in person... I don't necessarily think that people use dating sites to make friends. I don't quite believe how genuine people are when they say that.

This disbelief was contextualised by a story Wei told about being alone in London and meeting someone from Gaydar to go out with as a friend. Despite telling this man that he wasn't interested in sex, he states, "there were advances that evening that I did not want."

In the urban HER workshop, participants' tendencies to view apps as spaces for friendship, as well as dating and hooking up, sometimes made app use emotionally fraught. Tessa (age unknown, lesbian female) mentioned that returning to Tinder after her last relationship was daunting, and she felt that swiping right or left might be easier when you're only looking for sex or a relationship, but this becomes difficult if you're also open to friendship. She described the process as feeling "quite mean", on account of dismissing people who, for all she knew, would make great friends.

Cisgender male participants who primarily used Grindr and *had* made friends through such apps also indicated that this was uncommon and "outside of the norm." Sylvan, who recounted a positive experience of making friends with other gamers on Scruff, noted that this experience was not universally shared: "I like sexual intimacy and being emotionally connected and supportive to people [but] that's not always the culture of hook-up apps". Notably, Sylvan was more comfortable than most gay/queer male participants in terms of mixing sexual and social networks:

**Sylvan:** I get a lot of questions, being a porn performer, people saying, 'what if your friends see your porn.' I'm like, 'I want them – yes. They should see my porn. They should get off on it.'

There's all this taboo stuff around friendship and sex and things like that but, I don't know, if you can't – I think sex is – it's a bit corny but, sex is really an act of kindness and being nice to someone. Giving someone pleasure and sharing pleasure is a nice thing. I don't know, I like being nice to my friends.

Many participants spoke about their preference for certain apps that enable the user to specify the types of connections and intimacies they are seeking within the profile structure – e.g. sex, dates, friends, or something else. These affordances were built into the apps most commonly used by gay/queer male app-users (e.g. Grindr and Scruff), but there was greater diversity among apps predominantly used by queer women such as Anna (29, lesbian female) who commented:

I haven't come across anything on HER where you can put if you're looking for a relationship or if you're just looking for a friendship, but then that's what I like about PlentyOfFish – that you can select what you're looking for, so friends or relationship or just the casual hook-up.

Notably, PlentyOfFish (like OkCupid and other apps more commonly used by female and non-binary participants) includes text boxes for users to expand upon that information and offer more details about themselves and what they seek. Alex (26, lesbian, non-binary) indicated that they liked this about the Pink Cupid app. They also discussed using a broader age filter on that app on account of using it for finding friends.

I've got up to [age] 60 on the Pink Cupid app because you can still be friends with someone who is like 50, 55. With the Pink Cupid app you can say friendship, casual, dating, marriage, you can put all those things, which is good.

## **Friends' support for app negotiation**

Many interview participants spoke about first trying dating apps after witnessing friends finding partners through apps and realising it was possible; or in response to friends' advice. Several participants spoke of friends helping them set up their profile. In the regional HER workshop, Kat (34, bisexual female) described seeking advice from a lesbian friend who had had success with dating apps. She noted that "it's good when you're just starting out to have somebody to ask those questions." Participants also gave advice to friends on their photos and profiles. For example, Dan (24, gay male) from the regional Grindr workshop said "I have to help my straight friends a lot more with their profiles than gay friends. That would be taking photos, then just choosing the photos, and then the bios." Kat also discussed specific advice received from friends:

I find that I'm influenced by my friends – I've had a friend that just said, 'don't spend too long chatting, it gets awkward and you run out of things to talk about and you just think I don't really like this person because now we've got nothing to talk about.'

Zoe (19, bisexual female) who was also in the regional HER workshop commented that app use was not difficult and that most people know the format. She observed that friendship support for app use was more oriented towards discussing the cultures of specific apps, as opposed to teaching friends how to set up profiles.

Many participants compared their own experiences of app use to the ways their straight friends, or their friends of a different gender, used apps. Discussions like this explored diverse app uses, at once reflecting on app cultures (e.g. Grindr), sexual cultures (e.g. gay men), and aspects of gender, safety, and

urban life, and how these constrain or facilitate different cultures of intimacy. For example, Jackie's (22, bisexual female) entry to dating apps came through her awareness of Grindr:

Because I'd heard of Grindr and some of my close friends had Grindr. I was like, that's not fair. I want a Grindr. I knew about those things so I was like, let me see if I can find one. But none of them, women, we don't, I don't know. We don't, I felt like Tinder was my best shot for women.

### **Friends' involvement in safety strategies**

Participants reported that they commonly discussed their dates and hook-ups with friends, and shared details about who they're chatting to or meeting up with. When meeting someone from an app, some participants shared their location with friends, or had friends 'on stand-by' in case they needed an excuse to leave. For Anna (29, lesbian female), messaging her friends about sport (which she hated) was her code to let friends know to call her:

...if at any point I send [my friends] a message about sport, they know that shit is going down... [Group laughter]. That's like our code that we have because I don't ever talk about sport ever. So if I send them a thing being like 'How is the football going?' they know to call me...

As highlighted by Ruby (29, bisexual female) below, friends who were involved in strategies for app safety were also typically using apps:

...there was a few of us that were using the apps at the same time... and we have a group chat, so we'd let the group chat know where we were going and then we could always use the group chat if we were having a terrible date or something shifty was happening. Nothing like that ever

happened. We had a couple of bad dates, but none of us ever needed rescuing, which was good. But I suppose it was just having that space there...

Some participants in the HER workshops, such as Tessa (age unknown) compared their own relative lack of concern for safety when dating women to their heterosexual friends' practices:

My straight girlfriends, when I said I was dating again, they're like, 'oh, when you're going on dates do you need us to text you? Do you need a phone number? Do you need an emergency just in case?' I was like, 'what?'

Some trans and non-binary participants said that being raised as female instilled a sense of danger, and therefore meeting a stranger in a public place was 'normal' practice, even when they did not perceive a sense of physical danger. Among cis male participants, safety arrangements were less common, and telling one's friends about an impending hook-up often depended on one's 'gut feeling.' Charles (34, gay/queer male) noted that if he felt uneasy about a hook-up he'd still probably go through with it, but would also send a location screenshot to a friend.

### **Other friendship encounters**

While this article focuses on four main themes of friendship discussed in interviews and workshops, it is important to note that these are not the only scenes of friendship. Other examples of friendship's involvement in young LGBTQ+ participants' app use included: friends using dating apps together; ongoing comparison of one's experiences of apps to those of one's friends; debate around whether profiles should include photos with one's friends or not (some participants expressed concern about people seeming 'friendless'); having curious friends who like to watch or browse dating apps on a user's

phone; and broader discussions of dating/hook-up apps as one of many sites of connection with friends and community across a range of digital and non-digital settings.

Along with the themes explored, the above experiences illustrate that dating/hook-up app use is an everyday aspect of media use for many LGBTQ+ young people. As such, it integrates with social networks and friendships – being supported by existing friendships but also supporting the development of new friendships, as well as new practices of friendship with existing friends.

## **Conclusions**

While our project began with a focus on participants' understandings of safety and risks associated with dating apps, our data offers a broader account of app use negotiations as everyday and somewhat mundane. Throughout discussions of 'safety', participants often centred their friendships – whether through a focus on establishing if a person has mutual friends or not, telling friends about a forthcoming date or hook-up, sharing meet-up details to establish a sense of safety, or to build better strategies for safer dating and hooking up. Young people's friendships are evidently an important aspect of safer app use, and friendships are repeatedly drawn into spaces that we might assume to be private sexual communications. Yet this is not unexpected, following a history of queer friendships built on shared sexual identities, communities, and struggles (Weeks, 2007; Weston, 1991). As well as friends actively supporting each other, their absent presence (as 'mutuals' among app users) indicates not only safety, but the likelihood of connection, affinity, and common interests.

While researchers have reported that LGBTQ+ dating/hook-up apps effectively re-map space, neighbourhoods, and cities to seem more queer than otherwise experienced (Batiste, 2013), we suggest that this re-mapping extends to how social networks operate and transcend a range of mediascapes,

corrupting but also extending the 'nature' of apps. As the commonly used terms 'dating app' or 'hook-up app' suggest, there is an anticipated focus on apps such as Grindr, HER, and Tinder. Yet, it was common among many of our participants, from urban and regional cities, that friendships also developed through the use of these apps. Further to this, friendship intimacies offered support to app use, including support for creating and updating app profiles, managing feelings and uncertainty, and negotiating safety through being 'on-call'. Friendship intimacies further offered models for app use and the kinds of relationships that could emerge, getting feedback on profiles and interactions through sharing screengrabs, and everyday friend-based chat around experiences of sex, dating, and relationships.

Since dating/hook-up apps are just one of many sites of connection for our participants, and often integrate with other social media and non-digital networks, this speaks to the diversity of possible connections that can be forged and strengthened through these media. As some participants indicated, seeing friends or distant peers on apps can offer an opportunity to deepen or shift an existing relationship. In such interactions, friendships might become sexual, or non-sexual friendships could be developed. What was noticeable across these stories, is that many participants, through their use of apps over many years, had developed an openness to a range of encounters, including different forms of friendship.

Our participants engaged in a variety of what Kane Race has discussed as 'cross-platform practices' to establish infrastructures of intimacy and support that were capable of preventing unwanted risks and enabling pleasure (2017: 179-80), but these were heterogeneous. In discussing queer events and their cultures (such as Mardi Gras), Race considers 'context collapse' as a common but also productive 'collision', where "worlds and bodies, the public and the private, the social and the sexual unpredictably collide" (2017: 175). Reporting on his research with app users, Race states:



this collision of different social worlds elicited considerable apprehension among participants. Sometimes it generated feelings of humiliation associated with unwanted exposure. But it also created new occasions for self-disclosure, communal pleasure, care, understanding and support; unlikely friendships and intimacies, playfulness, hilarity and gossip. (2017: 175)

While using a single platform for friend-based and sex/dating communication may suggest a pathway to context collapse, for some users this can offer valuable context collusion, as opposed to collision (Davis and Jurgenson 2014). In other words, opportunities through which friendships can be sexual, or offer sexual potential, can be more available and more seamlessly negotiated in platforms with less rigid user expectations. Indeed, many scholars have researched the use of popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, for sex and dating (Aziz, 2014; Basile and Linne, 2016; Miguel, 2016; Wen, 2016).

In this paper, we have focused on friendship as an organising force in young people's dating/hook-up app practices and presented a case for greater attention to the porousness of media sites commonly defined as social (e.g. Instagram) or sexual (e.g. Grindr/Tinder). We encourage further research that addresses the central role of friendship in negotiations of dating/hook-up apps, including parallel negotiations of friendship and sexual health (as is the focus of our partner organisations). In many LGBTQ+ health settings, 'community' has been an ongoing focus (Pym et al. 2020). A deeper engagement with the ways friendship may influence practices and feelings of safety can elaborate on this work. For many LGBTQ+ young people, finding friends is not a primary motivation for app use. Despite this, everyday app use is negotiated and contextualised through broader friendship-based 'mediations' of sex, dating and relationships. Significantly, most of our LGBTQ+ participants had made friends through their use of dating/hook-up apps, even when they were not directly sought. As an unanticipated outcome of app-use, new friendships generated a sense of broader possibilities for the scope of connections forged through dating and hookup-apps, and this opens space for new research

questions and approaches to LGBTQ+ young people's understandings and negotiations of safety and sexual health.

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<sup>i</sup> Two participants in our urban HER workshop did not provide demographic information, but we have assumed they are female and lesbian-identifying based on their contributions within the workshop.

<sup>ii</sup> Given common tendencies to disclose trans status but not cis status, we presume those 24 participants are cisgender.