



Digital

*Intimacies*

End of Project Report

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# Introduction

This project sought to explore how queer men in the UK use smartphones to negotiate their cultures of intimacies. We wanted to move beyond current pre-occupations with casual sex and hook up apps, and instead focus on men's wide-ranging smartphone use to capture a multiplicity of intimacies that they practice.

To do this we undertook an interdisciplinary research study, that brought together media and cultural studies, sociology and public health. We used an approach that makes sense of cultural phenomena by situating them within a range of social forces at a specific historical, social and political moment. By taking this approach, we attempted to understand how queer men used smartphones in the context of the different sorts of intimacies made possible since the emergence of this technology in 2007.

## Research Questions

The project was guided by three research questions:

1. What are the material conditions within which queer men are currently engaged in practices of intimacy?
2. What discursive frameworks underpin the popular representations of how queer men use smartphones to negotiate their intimate lives?
3. How do queer men use smartphones to enable and/or maintain intimacies and what are the consequences of this for their wider wellbeing?

## Methods

Working with community partners, we undertook qualitative data collection to answer our research questions. We initially ran focus groups in early 2020 with queer men in London to gain insight into smartphone use, narratives of intimacy and to identify key concerns in relation to queer culture, intimate practices and social and political concerns.

We then undertook in-depth qualitative interviews with queer men in London and in Edinburgh and surrounding areas. We recruited participants through social media, support from our community partners, and advertising on hook-up apps. We also worked with organisations that work across gender, race, disability and cultures to recruit a diverse set of participants. Interviews took place online between July 2020 – January 2021 and were conducted by Dr James Cummings and Dr Ingrid Young.

We then undertook a 'conjunctural analysis', a method developed by Stuart Hall and colleagues, who sought to understand how particular cultural forms, events or practices emerge in relation to their 'conditions of existence'. This means we interpreted the stories and experiences of study participants in relation to the wider historical conditions they were inhabiting during their interviews.

Although we originally began exploring gay and bisexual men's intimacies, we are using the phrase queer men to more accurately describe the wide array of sexual and gender identities amongst the people we interviewed.

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# Study Participants

Participants in our in-depth qualitative interviews reflect a wide range of demographics, communities and geographies. The following describes who we spoke to and how participants self-identified:

## SEXUALITY:

**30** gay men,  
**4** bisexual men,  
**8** queer people &  
**1** queer/  
androssexual/gay  
person

## GEOGRAPHY:

**30** lived in  
London &  
**13** lived in  
Edinburgh and  
the Lothians

## RACE & ETHNICITY:

**29** identified  
as white,  
**5** identified  
as Black,  
**4** identified as  
South Asian,  
**1** identified  
as South East  
Asian &  
**4** identified  
as 'mixed'

## EDUCATION:

**34** had  
some form  
of university  
education &  
**9** had  
secondary  
education

## GENDER:

**33** cis-gender  
men,  
**6** trans men &  
**4** non-binary  
trans masc

## AGE:

Participants  
ranged from  
**21 – 58** years

## DISABILITY:

**8** lived with  
one or more  
disabilities (HIV,  
mental health,  
neurodiversity,  
wheelchair  
users, CP, ME/  
CFS)

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# Key Findings

## 1. Intimacy as vulnerability

A significant finding was that when our participants were asked to define what intimacy meant to them, most used the idea of ‘vulnerability’ in some way.

*“Vulnerability is the key to intimacy for me”*

**THOMAS, WHITE, TRANS MAN, GAY, 21**

*“I think intimacy is you being comfortable with your vulnerabilities with another person”*

**MIGUEL, WHITE, CIS-GAY, 32**

*“Mutual vulnerability”*

**GAVIN, WHITE, CIS-GAY, 47**

These quotes refer to the whole range of intimacies practiced by our participants, whether they were talking about monogamous, open or polyamorous relationships; dates, casual or regular hook ups; or platonic friendships. Some discussed novel forms of intimacy that they practiced. For instance, Kamal (South Asian, cis-gay, 27) talked about threading his eyebrows with a queer South Asian friend as an act of intimacy precisely because white western beauty ideals made them both feel vulnerable about their physical appearances. Whatever form of intimacy our participants practiced many of them talked about those practices in relation to vulnerability.

This is striking for two reasons. The first is that the academic writing on intimacy has described it as “innermost thoughts and feelings” (Plummer, 2003), “relationships which are often described as the ‘most important’ to people” (Jamieson, 1998), attachments people depend on for living (Berlant 2000), and ‘the affective encounters with others that often matter most’ (McGlotten, 2013). The term vulnerability only occasionally appears in this writing, but mostly as a secondary term.

The second reason this is important, is because it contradicts the popular stereotype of queer men’s cultures of sex and intimacy. This stereotype depicts queer cultures as full of as many meaningless casual sex encounters as possible, with damaging consequences for queer men’s mental health. There is little room for terms like ‘vulnerability’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘meaningful’ within this conception of queer male intimacy. For our participants, however, being vulnerable with another person was critical to their understandings of their intimate lives, whichever type of intimacy they desired.

*“Ritualised vulnerability”*

**ABEDISI, BLACK, CIS-BISEXUAL, 22**

*“I think I’m experiencing intimacy when I’m really putting myself out there and feeling vulnerable.”*

**LUCA, WHITE, CIS-GAY, 34**

Why was vulnerability so important to our participants’ understandings of intimacy? Given the research approach we are taking, which under-

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stands social and cultural phenomenon as responses to the historical moments in which they have emerged, we began to look at the historical conditions which might make ‘vulnerability’ so meaningful to our participants

Historian Adam Tooze uses ‘poly-crisis’ to describe the current historical moment. A poly-crisis is when a number of interrelated crises occur at the same time. Indeed, since at least the 2008 financial crisis various crises have been set in motion that have made many of us feel vulnerable about the worlds we inhabit. The austerity measures introduced in response to the financial crisis left many of us more vulnerable in an economy already marked by steep inequality. The rise of global populism, ‘culture wars’ and the politics of Brexit are evidence of a more politically hostile world. Increased awareness of the mounting climate crisis has made all of us more aware of our vulnerability to irreversible environmental change. And, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that at the precise moment we were speaking to our participants they were vulnerable to infection, especially those that belong to ‘vulnerable groups’.

*“When I think of new people in my head, like, everyone... anyone that I’ve, kind of, swapped details with, it’s been someone that I can feel like I can trust by that point and if that has been intimate, it’s still been someone that I feel like I could trust.”*

PETER, WHITE, CIS-GAY MAN, LIVING WITH A DISABILITY, 23

So, there is a general sense in which the current historical moment is defined by an over-arching sense of vulnerability. There are ways that

this affects queer communities in particular. For instance, an economy geared towards property speculation combined with austerity measures and pandemic restrictions have led to the reduction and closures of the ‘safe spaces’ that queer communities have historically relied on: bars, nightclubs, sex-on-premises venues, book shops, community spaces and sexual health services. The ‘culture wars’ have been especially brutal for trans folk and people of colour, something we explore in detail below. This has on and offline dimensions, with a concomitant rise in reports of transphobic, homophobic and racial violence across all categories of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Our participants also spoke about feeling vulnerable in relation to the narrowly defined beauty norms that they felt pervaded queer men’s sexual cultures.

## 2. Smartphones and control

Another significant finding was how participants described how their smartphones helped give them a sense of control over the areas of their intimate lives where they felt the most vulnerable. For instance:

*“I see this with my boyfriends, where the topic is really important but represents something for someone that is vulnerable. They would prefer to reach me on WhatsApp because they are more in control on when to stop and when to post... when they have more time to think [about] their words.”*

LUCA, WHITE, CIS-GAY, 34

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Our participants used the different features of their phones – the camera, different hook up and social media applications, MSM, voice notes etc. – to control various aspects of their intimate lives. For example, Peter (Black, cis-gay, 27) used hook up apps anonymously so that he could feel more in control of his coming out process, adding a face picture to his profiles when he felt ready to be publicly gay. Will liked to be able to decide which digital platforms to use, depending on the nature and seriousness of the relationship.

*“If you move Grindr to WhatsApp, you’ve graduated. That means that, actually, you’re wanting to, kind of, chat a bit more... and if you’re really, really in to them or if you really do see them part of your circle, they go on your Facebook profile. And then you’d speak to them on Messenger...”*

**WILL, WHITE, CIS-GAY, 31**

Similarly, different participants talked about curating different versions of themselves on their profiles of different apps and then deciding when to send the different profiles to potential partners so they could control what they revealed about themselves. Peter (white, cis-gay, 23) uses a wheelchair and talked about wanting to have control over when he reveals this about himself, so does not include a picture where his wheelchair is visible on the public pictures on his hook up app profiles. Gareth (white, cis-gay, 37) relished being able to use the chat functions of different hook up apps to establish the boundaries of the BDSM encounters he enjoyed organising. Many of our trans masc participants as well as the participants of colour we spoke to, all described using the block and report functions of social media ap-

plications as a way of feeling in control of the racism and transphobia they experienced on these applications something we discuss in more detail below.

These findings importantly contradict popular stereotypes of queer men’s digital media use being out of control, especially in relation to sex and intimacy. It has become a commonplace in discussions of gay men’s sex lives in popular books, magazines, films and on social media that hook up apps often contribute to destructive, addictive and out-of-control behaviours (e.g. Todd, 2016). This may be the case for some queer men, but what our findings show is that queer men’s use of digital media can do precisely the opposite: it can help these men to feel like they are more in control of their sexual and intimate lives.

### 3. Trans and non-binary intimacies

When seeking and maintaining intimacies online, trans gay men and queer masc non-binary folk experience many of the same joys and pains as cis men (assigned ‘male’ at birth, still identifying as men). However, their experiences are also shaped by gender normativity and ignorance of gender diversity on hookup apps and in other spaces of digital intimacy.

Our trans and non-binary participants recognised that apps such as Grindr, Scruff and Hinge are predominantly occupied by and marketed towards cis gay men. They were sometimes unsure about whether



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these spaces were for them, how inclusive or transphobic they would be and what possibilities they would present for finding satisfying and nourishing intimate connections.

*“[Grindr] was quite a stressful place to be because I wasn’t as confident or secure in my sense of self and there was a lot more transphobic behaviour ... so there was period of time where I had all of those apps but was quite tentative about using them”*

**ELLIOT, QUEER, NON-BINARY, 31**

By the same token, claiming the right to occupy these spaces could be affirming and was an important way in which trans and non-binary participants explored their gender and sexual identities. Interest in using conventionally cis gay digital spaces to connect with other men often grew alongside participants’ growing confidence in their own masculine identifications.

*“I was at a place in my transition that I started to feel comfortable exploring that aspect of my sexuality ... I was able to create the life that I wanted [and] to start exploring that and it was almost like a coming of age thing, there was no-one telling me I can’t do this”*

**THOMAS, GAY TRANS MAN, 25**

While participants did recount common experiences of transphobia in these digital spaces, they also discussed an increased sense of safety when connecting with others online compared to in-person interactions. Risks of transphobic violence were seen to be reduced by making one’s trans or non-binary status clear on digital profiles and there-

by ‘weeding-out’ transphobes. Blocking functions could also be used to shutdown unwanted interactions, including transphobic aggressions and with users who fetishized trans and non-binary identities.

*“As a trans guy, for my own safety, I would out myself to guys before meeting them. All sorts of things would happen then, either invasive questions or some sort of invalidating remarks or obsessive curiosity, things that would immediately make me go, ‘no, I don’t want to see that guy”*

**JACOB, QUEER, TRANS MAN, 36**

Alongside transphobia and fetishization, general ignorance of gender diversity among cis men often left trans and non-binary participants feeling exhausted by their digital interactions. Many had spent time and energy responding to prying questions about their bodies and identities in the hope of raising others’ understandings of what it means to be trans or non-binary. However, fed up and exhausted, some sought to limit their encounters with ignorant cis men and perused more meaningful and fulfilling connections with other queer, trans and non-binary folk.

*“In my Scruff bio, I have something like, ‘... currently not teaching trans 101’. I just don’t want those questions. ... I’m not there to educate other people, I’m there for the reason everyone else is. ... I sometimes have in my bio, depending on my mood, ‘mainly trans for trans’, or I’ll be like, ‘I’m more picky about cis dudes’, as a warning so that people don’t expect as much in their replies.”*

**ALEX, QUEER, NON-BINARY, 27**

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## 4. Race & racism

In contrast to most of the white cis gay men in this study, queer participants of colour all spoke about the ways in which they purposefully thought about and curated their digital presentations of identity, especially around race.

*“I just thought, I should put down [on Grindr] that I am South Asian, they need to know my ethnicity at least” ...I put that up because I think, well that’s who I am. And, you know, I’m Scottish, and I’m Asian, and I feel that people need to know that, that’s a part of my identity that exists, and it’s something that I can’t change, physically, or in any way, any shape or form. But don’t get me wrong, people have asked me, where are you from, and when I say I’m from Scotland, they’re almost shocked at that, because they’ve never ever met a Scottish person who’s Asian.”*

**RAJ, SOUTH ASIAN, CIS-GAY, 39**

Discussions around presentation of race were especially raised during the increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, and the increasing awareness – and criticism – of Grindr’s ethnicity filter. Where there was largely anger that this mechanism was built into the app’s architecture, there were also some discussions about how digital tools that identify race can, in some instances, prevent racist encounters.

*“I’m glad they removed [Grindr’s ethnicity filter] but they only removed it because people were complaining, they don’t actually care. But at the same time, like, if racists want to weed me out to not talk to me, I want them to do that. So it serves a purpose. But I think the context*

*of an ethnicity filter on a dating and hook-up app in 2020 is ridiculous and very outdated.”*

**DAVID, ‘MIXED’ CIS-BISEXUAL, 21**

Irrespective of the presence of ethnicity or race ‘filters’, most participants of colour described both subtle and overt forms of racism through digital platforms. Stephen depicted the subtle but powerful forms of racism and exclusion he experienced and described how he felt these digital tools were acting more as something to separate communities of queer men, rather than to connect them.

*“That really speaks for itself. Lack of response and because people will see a picture of you, that’s the first thing that they will see about you...I have seen profiles that really shock me, people very openly saying, no Asians and then in brackets, sorry guys or, you know, like British guys only...I just find it very toxic and very kind of like very aggressive, there’s like a level of aggression, you know, verbally, microaggression.”*

**STEPHEN, BLACK, CIS-GAY MAN, 45**

However, participant outlined how the apps, and smartphones more generally, also served to facilitate connections with other queer men of colour. Specific social media groups and hook-up apps helped them to identify and link into existing communities of colour that were seen as ‘safer’, especially for those men who were new to the city – or country – and how making connections through digital platforms as a first step to creating and sustaining intimate communities.

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## 5. Pandemic intimacies

Participants spoke at length about their experiences of COVID-19 and the decisions they made in relation to recommended public health measures (e.g. lockdown, social distancing) and harm reduction practices. Many participants described the significant and long-lasting effect the pandemic has had on their intimate relationships, including both friendships, sexual encounters and longer-term partnerships. This included ending recently started relationships due to lack of physical contact, consolidating precarious relationships to navigate housing needs, and developing new intimate connections with friends and partners as a result of changing digital practices.

All participants described their concerted efforts to adhere to some form of COVID-19 harm reduction practices. The vast majority of participants adhered to strict social-distancing advice and slowly navigated new physical connections when that became possible.

*“We agreed in August when some of the restrictions were being lifted and the bubbles were coming in... he was like, ‘I’m on my own for a week, you’re on your own for a week, let’s just, kind of, quarantine and then we can see each other.”*

**WILL, WHITE, CIS-GAY MAN, 31**

Others described struggling with largely heteronormative policies of bubbles/extended households, which assumed a single sexual partner and did not accommodate other queer sexual practices.

*“I... reached out to one of my friends who I thought was most likely to... be up for creating a bubble, but then again I know that they*

*live with somebody and... they... also have... other people that they would... maybe consider for... similar set-ups so... I didn’t want to... come on too hard... That didn’t happen... The people that I surround myself with are mostly queer and mostly kind of relatively polyamorous or polysexual... so obviously that eliminated that person from the list and I didn’t really see any... other people that I would either want to or... they would be in a position to.”*

**JACOB, WHITE, QUEER TRANS MAN, 36**

A small minority of participants described establishing their own harm reduction rules with a handful of sexual partners.

*“... in terms of sexual intimacy... it’s now a smaller cohort of five people... where we sort of agreed going into lockdown... it’s not really realistic to trust ourselves to not have sexual contact. That’s going to be a massive challenge... There was a level of contract with them all of, ‘do we buddy up?’ or I think bubbles were discussed at one point... look this is probably against the rules, in fact I think it is unequivocally against the rules to have more than one buddy. But, you know, we have different desires that we satisfy... At the moment there are five different individuals we still continue to play sexually. We all contracted that that means we have very limited other playmates, and we do this under the guise that we, we avoid shops, we avoid public transport etc.”*

**GARETH, WHITE, CIS GAY MAN 37**

What was central to all participants’ accounts of the pandemic was how they sought to care for themselves and others, both in relation to COVID-19 prevention as well in attending to the need for intimacy and connection.

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# Conclusion

This report only begins to convey some of the rich findings from our study participants who shared their stories with us. However, we would like to highlight a number of key areas that have implications for queer communities, but also the community, third sector and health organisation who work with these communities.

## **CONTROL**

Queer men use different aspects of their smartphones to give them a sense of control over their intimate lives. This can include making connections in a new space, city or country, supporting coming out processes by dipping a toe in the queer world, and establishing and maintaining friendships with other queer men.

## **NAVIGATING DIGITAL STIGMA, PREJUDICE AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES**

Trans, people of colour and people living with disabilities can and do use hook-up apps to support their practices of intimacy. However, navigating stigma, prejudice and discrimination can make these platforms much more difficult to use. Being attentive to the experiences of these communities, we need to develop strategies of solidarity not only to tackle transphobia, racism and ablism, but recognize and respond to how these forms of discrimination can be built into digital spaces themselves.

We would encourage community, third sector and health partners to consider these findings in their own work. In particular our study shows how queer men are adept at creatively using smartphones and digital platforms to attend to their health and wellbeing needs. We can learn from these strategies and thoughtful reflections to build and sustain better, more appropriate forms of support and care.

## **MULTIPLICITY OF INTIMACIES**

We found a wide spectrum of intimacy, including friends with benefits, open marriages, queer friendships, political solidarities as intimacy etc. We need to be attentive to where and how these intimacies emerge and are sustained, especially those that do not 'fit' social expectations.

## **CREATIVE COMMUNITIES OF CARE**

Queer cultures of intimacy are complex, nuanced, creative, ethical and full of care. This was especially seen in the context of COVID-19 but has further implications for other public health and social crises in terms of identifying and supporting creative harm reduction and caring practices.

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## PARTICIPANT MEDIA WATCH LIST

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- (2015) *Banana*. Created by: Russell T Davies. Channel 4.
- (2015) *Tofu*. Created by: Russell T Davies. Channel 4.
- (2014 – 2015) *Looking*. Created by: Michael Lannan. HBO.
- (2015 – 2020) *Schitt’s Creek*. Created by: Dan Levy. Netflix.
- (2019 – 2021) *Sex Education*. Created by: Laurie Nunn. Netflix.
- (2019) *Special*. Created by: Ryan O’Connell. Netflix.
- (2019) *Tales of the City*. Created by: Armistead Maupin. Netflix.
- (2020) *The Boys in the Band*. Created by: Mart Crowley. Netflix.
- (2019) *The L Word: Generation Q*. Created by: Ilene Chaiken, Kathy Greenberg, Michele Abbott. Showtime.
- (2020) *I May Destroy You*. Created by: Michaela Coel. BBC One
- (1999 – 2000) *Queer as Folk*. Created by: Russel T Davies Channel 4

