APP STOLE MY GAYBORHOOD? A TRANSFORMING ETHOS
AT THE INTERSECTION OF QUEER URBAN LIFE
AND CYBERSPACE(S)

Farrell Stucky

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
May 2021

APPROVED:

Steven Wolverton, Committee Chair and
Chair of the Department of Geography
and the Environment
Jara Carrington, Committee Member
Joseph Oppong, Committee Member
Tamara L. Brown, Executive Dean of the
College of Liberal Arts and Social
Sciences
Victor Prybutok, Dean of the Toulouse
Graduate School
This thesis demonstrates a queer perspective stemming from a qualitative analysis of data gathered in interviews with LGBTQ+ people to analyze a transforming ethos of gayborhoods and queer desires. In particular, the research focuses on the interactive relationship between self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) participants; the cyberspace(s) of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating applications (apps); and tangible urban places. The topic of gayborhood demise and whether such places are worth saving has been debated by scholars and journalists for the last decade. The demise of gayborhoods is often thought to be a symptom of neoliberal urban processes such as gentrification within the context of the post-gay era and broader societal acceptance of homosexuality. This means the question of “if the gayborhood is worth saving” is inherently imbedded in an assumption that homosexuality is not viewed or treated as different or lesser than heterosexuality. In this imagined post-gay era, gayborhoods are declining because the dangers posed to the LGBTQ+ population are purported to no longer exist, so there is no longer a need for designated queer and/or safe places. This research destabilizes the assumptions embedded within the conception of the post-gay era by asking whether the gayborhood meets the needs and desires of contemporary queers. Alternatively, are LGBTQ+ mobile-dating apps part of gayborhood decline, and if so how? Therefore, the question of “if the gayborhood is worth saving” is not about assumed queer acceptance in greater society; rather, the question should be grounded in if the gayborhood fulfills the needs and desires of contemporary queers.
Copyright 2021

By

Farrell Stucky
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support, love, and understanding. This thesis would not be possible without both my mom and dad’s belief in me, and I am undoubtedly grateful for their love. I want to thank Katie Krupala who is my best friend and partner for the late night library sessions, intellectual discussions, and encouraging me to never give up. I especially would like to thank my advisor Dr. Steve Wolverton for his comradeship, advice, motivation, and never giving up on me. His unfaltering dedication to all his students, learning, and teaching has been an inspiration for me. I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Jara Carrington for her knowledge, patience, and time. Thank you to Dr. Joseph Oppong for his willingness to be on my committee and help in finalizing my thesis. I want to thank the participants of this study for their candor and vulnerability. Finally, special thanks to my cohort Sher Ali Khan, Sarah Eleazar, Sandra Zarzycka, Melissa Barnett, and Amy Eddins, whose friendships have made it all worth it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Research Questions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Conceptual Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Significance of Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Heterosexualization and Space</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Mobile Queer Cyberspace(s)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3. METHODS</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Research Questions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Interview Data</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Content Analysis of Dating Apps</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 4. RESULTS</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Gayborhoods</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Participation in Gayborhoods</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Gender Differences in Conceptions of Gayborhoods</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Whiteness and Gayborhoods</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Beyond Gay Bars</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Commodification, Capitalism, and “Community”</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Mobile Dating Apps</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Affinity for LGBTQ+ Dating Apps</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9 Gayborhood Reflections in Cyberspace</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10 LGBTQ+ App Features and Making Matches</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11 The Gayborhood Today</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Table 3.1: Domains and codes ...................................................................................................... 19

Figures

Figure 2.1: Grindr Xtra screen shot .............................................................................................. 13
Figure 2.2: Tinder Platinum screen shot ....................................................................................... 13
Figure 2.3: Tinder Super Like screen shot .................................................................................... 13
Figure 2.4: Tinder Boost screen shot ............................................................................................ 13
Figure 4.1: Gayborhood identification word cloud ....................................................................... 22
Figure 4.2: Gayborhood identification bar graph .......................................................................... 22
Figure 4.3: A day in the gayborhood word cloud ......................................................................... 27
Figure 4.4: Typical day in gayborhood bar graph ......................................................................... 28
Figure 4.5: App identification word cloud .................................................................................... 32
Figure 4.6: App identification bar graph ....................................................................................... 32
Figure 4.7: Examples of hypersexual gay man stereotype advertisements .................................. 36
Figure 4.8: Grid format ................................................................................................................. 37
Figure 4.9: Swipe functionality ..................................................................................................... 38
Figure 4.10: Example of match notification .................................................................................. 39
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the Internet in the late 1960s, scholars from a wide-range of disciplines have intellectually contributed to studying and understanding the concept of cyberspace. Author William Gibson is often credited with coining the term in his 1984 science-fiction novel, *Neuromancer*, defining it as a widespread, interconnected digital technology. Today, cyberspace is often used interchangeably with the term Internet, yet the two are not entirely synonymous. In effect, the Internet is an element of cyberspace physically consisting of computers, cables, and routers; while cyberspace is the metaphysical construct of the networked world beyond our computer screens. In other words, cyberspace is the space beyond our physical world brought into existence by interconnected computing devices and computer-mediated-communication (CMC).

As early as the 1990s, scholars from the discipline of geography have dedicated research to and advocated the importance of understanding cyberspace. These scholars recognized a new geography worthy of research and analysis, wherein people define and transform the characteristics of cyberspace by their active choices of use and decisions within (Dodge 1999; Batty & Barr 1994; Kitchin 1998). Their work helped to establish the field of cybergeography as the study of the spatial nature of cyberspace. The research presented in this thesis is situated primarily in the field of cybergeography (Dodge 2001), while also drawing upon knowledge of cities and urban processes from the field of urban geography (e.g., Lees 2002, 2003, 2004). The intersection of cybergeography and urban geography provide a lens through which to study evolving cyberspaces, such as the use of smartphone applications.

The advent, development, and proliferating cyberspaces by the use of mobile dating
applications has sparked the interest of academic researchers. Some scholars have examined the relationship between neoliberalism, use of mobile dating apps, social practices, and identity (Chan 2018; Liu 2016; Finkel et al. 2012; Soliman & Wheatley 2002). Other scholars have examined this relationship through a lens of gender and sexuality (Miles 2017 & 2018; Faris 2018; Sanchez 2016). A scope of inquiry that is important given that in 2009 the first location-based mobile dating application, known as Grindr, was developed initially for a male-seeking-males (MSM) user base. As a result, the LGBTQ+ population is historically intertwined with cyberspaces from advocating for the Internet during its inception, to utilizing desktops (and then laptops) for computer-mediated-communication in online chat rooms and forums. Correspondingly, queer perspective regarding mobilized cyberspaces by dating applications is important for understanding contemporary conditions of queerness.

In this thesis, I demonstrate a queer perspective stemming from a qualitative analysis of data gathered in interviews with my research participants. I then employ this perspective to analyze a transforming ethos of gayborhoods and queer desires. In particular, my research focuses on the interactive relationship between self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) participants in this study; the cyberspace(s) of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating applications (apps); and tangible urban places. In the context of neoliberal urbanism in the United States, the component of tangible urban places is an important inquiry to researching the interactive relationship between the ethos of cyberspace and the ethos of gayborhoods. For the last decade, scholars and journalists alike have been examining what they refer to as a nationwide demise of gayborhoods (Aunspach 2015; Brown 2007; James 2011). Research regarding this urban shift attempts to understand the forces driving this change. On one hand, gayborhood demise is attributed as an economic symptom of neoliberal urban restructuring.
processes such as gentrification (Brown 2007; James 2017). On the other hand, it is attributed to a “post-gay era,” the broadening acceptance and assimilation of homosexuality resulting in a migration (Ghaziani 2015; James 2011). Other scholars propose that the Internet and growing use of mobile dating applications are factors contributing to the demise of gayborhoods (Miles 2017; Gallegos 2016; Aunspach 2015). That is, cyberspaces such as LGBTQ+ mobile-dating apps transcend and change the nature of tangible urban places, such as gayborhoods. This research adds to this discussion and complicates these claims by incorporating a queer perspective based on the experiences of contemporary young adults navigating these places and spaces to understand their lived experiences-or subjectivities-in the context of the shifting cyber- and urban-geographies (e.g., Cover 2004).

1.1 Research Questions

Listed below, is a set of research questions guiding this thesis that look to explore the desires of young adult queers (age 20-27) and how they are embodied in both the urban and online.

1. How do young queers conceive of gayborhood as tangible places?
2. Are apps altering behavior in participation in tangible places, such as gayborhoods?
3. How are gayborhoods as tangible places changing in the age of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating apps?
4. How are gayborhoods as tangible places changing in the “post-gay era”?
5. How are apps influencing queer subjectivities?
6. How are gayborhoods influencing queer subjectivities?

Each of these questions unpacks the complexity of the interaction between cyberspaces and tangible urban places in queer communities. The following section provides a conceptual framework that situates these questions into broader theoretical and disciplinary contexts.
1.2 Conceptual Background

The explanatory framework for this study integrates three theoretical fields of inquiry: heterosexualization and space, neoliberal subjects, and queer cyberspaces. The literature around these theoretical fields guides my qualitative analysis, and is important to setting up the historical material conditions of contemporary queer young adults. These theoretical fields of inquiry are introduced below, and an exploration of the literature in greater detail is presented in Chapter 2.

1.3 Significance of Study

Given the context presented above, this thesis adds to the discussion of a shifting queer urban landscape in the United States. Its broader implication is towards contributing a contemporary queer perspective for developing a more comprehensive understanding of queer desires and their embodiment in both urban place and online space. In this thesis, Chapter 2 expands upon the concepts of the explanatory theoretical framework, and explains the research methodology. Chapter 3 presents the results and data analysis. Finally, Chapter 4 summarizes the findings, discusses the social implications and intellectual merits, and concludes this thesis suggesting questions of further inquiry for future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this section I look at the literature surrounding space, neoliberalism, and queer cyberspaces. First, I provide historical context to the normalization of heterosexuality, the creation of gayborhoods, and introduce the circumstances and theories surrounding the demise of these designated gay urban spaces. Second, I examine the literature regarding queer mobile dating applications, which is the cyberspace I focus on in this research. Next, I cover the methods used in this research. Finally, I present the results from the interviews conducted.

2.2 Heterosexualization and Space

The theorizing of space/place is one of the longstanding debates in Geography. One of the most popular and pervasive theorizations follows a Cartesian logic of space as being mechanical—meaning, space is conceived as being a mere container, a vacuum, awaiting its contents to be filled. This logic denies intrinsic value as well as the interrelation of objects and subject(s). Instead, it allots a subject(s) with the projective power to assign value. This promotes an anthropocentric way of being in the world, by which space only becomes place when subjects begin assigning value to the objects in the space, thereby filling the contents of that space’s container. This logic fosters a separation of mental, physical, and social space. It denies space as being a place which is always embodied by object(s)/subject(s) and is always, then, being produced by their relations. As a result, the dialectical relationship between power relations, bodies, and spaces cannot be perceived. It is within the workings of what is being denied and the separation of these spaces where a “banal ‘consensus’” of absolute knowledge occurs and hegemony resides, thus “society as a whole continues in subjection to political practice- that is,
to state power” (Lefebvre 2016, p. 8).

It is important to understand the Cartesian logic of space to understand how heterosexuality has become normalized in society, and how the hetero/homosexual binary was created. Many studies of sexuality refer to the Victorian era as the period in which heterosexuality became absolute, normalized (Marcuse, 2009). The repressive hypothesis, akin to Cartesian logic due to its dichotomous or binary reasoning, suggests sexuality was repressed during this era by equating a subject’s sexuality with their morality. Specifically, certain sexual relations were deemed moral while others were deemed immoral, and thus, repressed. Foucault (1978) theorizes how “technologies of power”—by which he meant social conventions of power that influence people, literally their bodies (Behrent 2013)—produced these particular moral knowledges of sexuality, which was then spread and reinforced through a variety of institutions such as medicine, psychiatry, and the law. This meant, technologies of power harnessed the moral constitution of sexuality and remapped a subject’s desires as the essence of oneself, thus, essentializing sexuality (Foucault 1978). In fact, Foucault is arguing against the repressive hypothesis by suggesting sexuality during the Victorian era was not repressed, but indeed, discourse about sexuality proliferated as a direct result of technologies of power’s dissemination of what is moral/immoral relations. It is within this discourse that the binary of moral/immoral sexual relations became categorized as hetero/homosexual; thus, heterosexual becomes essentialized as normal (e.g., heteronormative). Under this logical framework, homosexuality is not repressed; rather it is set dichotomously as immoral against the view that heteronormativity is moral whether or not a person represses their sexuality. Repression is a behavior, not a norm.

By arguing against the repressive hypothesis and recognizing the moral/immoral binary, Foucault is challenging the Cartesian logic of space. He is recognizing an active production of a
moral sexual knowledge that is then embodied by the state’s subjects’ behaviors and relations. This means, sexuality is not essential. Rather, sexuality as it is understood today within a moral binary of hetero/homosexual exists as a dialectical relationship between the bodies of subjects, politics, and power relations (Foucault 1978). In pushing back against the repressive hypothesis, Foucault aligns himself with more progressive theorizations of space/place that recognize “more even than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit” (Casey 1996, p 19). It is only by rejecting the Cartesian logic of space that one can begin to understand “space is not naturally authentically ‘straight’ but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized” (Oswin 2008, p. 90; McCann 1999; Rifkin 2011). As such, society’s current normalization of heterosexuality, also known as heteronormativity, has a specific historical context.

Lefebvre’s (2016) theory of the right to the city also rejects a Cartesian logic of space, aligning with Foucauldian thought to build upon how space is actively heterosexualized. Put simply, space is produced, and therefore having a right to the city “involves two principle rights for urban inhabitants: the right to participation, and the right to appropriation” (Purcell 2002, p. 102). These principles center inhabitants with the right to the city in key decision making regarding their urban space, and allow for their access and occupation of the urban space. Thus, the right to the city is necessarily the right to the production of space, and “is always hotly contested and only grudgingly given by those in power…[so] rights over and to public space are never guaranteed once and for all” (Mitchell 2003, p. 14).

Foucault’s technologies of power and Lefebvre’s right to the city converged prior to World War II because many people were constrained within relations determined by the bonds of marriage and Victorian-era morality. This hegemonic morality of sexuality limited most
homosexuals’ right to the city. Yet, the war “disrupted family stability and social relations between the sexes. It uprooted tens of millions of American men and women, many of them young, and deposited them in a variety of non-familial, often sex-segregated environments” (D’Emilio 1983, p. 23). This mobilization of the population for the war effort simultaneously congregated people with homosexual desires within those sex-segregated environments (e.g., work environments, such as factories). This same phenomenon was occurring in the military, and in efforts to disband the rising militant homo-population thousands of military men and women perceived or known to be homosexual were discharged from the armed forces (Ghaziani 2014; D’Emilio 1983). Contrary to the intentions of the disbandment, the influx of discharged homosexuals from the armed forces came home to a “mobilized society allow[ing] homosexual desire to be expressed more easily in action...creat[ing] something of a nationwide coming out experience” (D’Emilio 1983, p. 24). The result was a new configuration of space and power; however, by congregating within specific areas of the city, groups of homosexuals exercised their right to the city and reaffirmed a Victorian era gay imaginary, “or a perception that they comprised a people who were culturally distinct from heterosexuals” (Ghaziani 2014, p. 16). Thus, gayborhoods as socio-spatial entities were formally created and “the federal government began to constitute homosexuals as an explicit category to be regulated in immigration, welfare, and military policy” (Hanhardt 2013, p. 13).

Gayborhoods remained distinct until around the 2000s, when the “new gay paradigm” emerged, defined by overarching acceptance and assimilation of homosexuality. This shift is also known as the “post-gay era” (Ghaziani 2014; D’Emilio 1983). This era is accompanied by uneven assimilation of homosexuality into hegemonic identity constructs (Blow 2010; Brown, G. 2009), thus blurring the lines of a once “culturally distinct” identity of the gayborhoods and their
physical borders. As a result, gayborhoods across the nation have been rapidly declining (Brown, M. 2014; Ghaziani 2015). This includes the nation’s oldest gayborhood, “The Castro” in San Francisco (Lesher 2008; Brown, 2007; James, 2011 & 2017).

The post-gay era is directly related to the dawn of neoliberalism in the late 1980s and 90s, and the accompanying sexual politics of homonormativity. Neoliberalism is a term “used to characterize the resurgence of market-based institutional shifts and policy realignments across the world economy” (Brenner & Theodore 2005, p. 101). Although neoliberalism is associated mostly with economic and trade policy, a sexual politics does exist. Lisa Duggan (2002) theorizes this sexual politics as homonormativity. She states homonormativity “is 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. 179). In other words, homonormativity ascribes heteronormative constructs to the queer population and privileges those who embody its ideals. For example, cis-gendered, monogamous, white couples would be more socially acceptable than other identities and relationships that further challenge the heteronormative status quo. As such homonormativity encourages the reproduction of heterosexual values and culture within the queer population. Homonormativity is, at once, a process producing the accepted neoliberal-homosexual identity and a “rhetorical remapping of public/private boundaries designed to shrink gay public spheres and redefine gay equality against the ‘civil rights agenda’ and ‘liberationism,’ as access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism” (Duggan 2002, p. 179).

Increasingly, scholars and activists have turned their focus to the shrinking of these gay public spheres over the last decade (Brown, 2007; James 2011 & 2017; Blow 2010; Ghaziani
decline is attributed to neoliberalism’s “post-gay era” and the broadening acceptance and assimilation of homosexual identities (Ghaziani 2015; James 2011; Blow 2010). On the other hand, the disappearance of gayborhoods is explained as a symptom of neoliberal urban processes of gentrification (Brown, 2007; James 2017). Both processes occur within the framework of assimilation during the Post Gay Era. In the context of these socially dynamic, geographic shifts, the advent of LGBTQ mobile dating apps—resulting in rapidly growing participation of LGBTQ peoples in queer cyber-geographies—presents an interesting point of inquiry as a simultaneous potential contributor to urban gayborhood decline and creator of cyber-gayborhoods. My research aims to understand the interactions of young, contemporary queer people in these cyber-spaces, their relations in designated gay spaces, and the (perhaps subtle, yet key) interrelations occurring across and within the two. I turn my attention to these mobile queer cyberspaces in the following section.

2.3 Mobile Queer Cyberspace(s)

The implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s galvanized privatization and promoted entrepreneurialism and market solutions as the way forward in economies at all scales, worldwide (Brenner & Theodore 2005). Urban issues such as traffic, transportation, food security, education, and so on were outsourced to the realm of tech companies who could provide a technical solution. Specifically, neoliberal economics have tremendously aided tech businesses engaging in smart city urbanization, creating the infrastructure and the opportunity to expand internet business ventures (Calzada 2016; Calzada & Cobo 2015). My research focuses on the particular internet business of mobile dating app technologies, made possible in part by smartphone technology’s implantation of virtual mobility, as well as the venture capital made
The internet and the LGBTQ community are inextricably intertwined, and “gay and bisexual men in particular have historically been early adopters of internet technology” (Miles 2018, p. 1). Cyber-geographies present the queer community with a multitude of spaces for their own lived experiences, affordances that heterosexualized and gentrified urban spaces often did not have (Miles 2018). Today, queer cyber-geographies are being revolutionized by mobilization as engineered by smartphone technology. Released in 2009, Grindr became the first LGBTQ mobile dating app, as well as the first mobile dating app to utilize geolocation technologies (Tulio 2005). Apps utilizing geolocation technologies are able to “determin[ine] the coordinates of an object on the surface of the earth” (Soliman & Wheatley 2002, p. 235). In the case of Grindr, it offers a geolocational service that can measure the distance between two users to the nearest foot at any given time, blurring the boundaries between the digital and the material (Aunspach 2015). Geolocational mobile dating apps connect billions of users at once, regardless of physical proximity, and deploy user profile data to facilitate matches between users potentiating instant communication (Finkel et al. 2012). Thereby, by compressing time and space these apps gain business privilege and longevity in our increasingly globalizing world.

Prior research of Grindr (Aunspach 2015) explores how queer mobile dating apps, in particular, “Grindr mark a congealment of a slow-moving shift in the relationship between…gayness, technology, mobility, and identity” (p. 2). Aunspach (2015) conducted a media analysis of Grindr’s interface to demonstrate how homonormativity is embedded within the programming of these apps through rhetoric, thus influencing the identity performance of its users.

To begin, he compared the visual interface of the app to online shopping spaces (e.g.,
spaces of consumption). He noted the inability of users to personalize the scaling of their profile pictures, thus creating within the app a homogenous stream of photos for individuals to shop through in menu-like fashion. Furthermore, since Grindr is an application that mobilizes users’ profiles by GPS triangulation, it necessitates a desire to consistently open and check the application producing individuals who are “subsumed [by a] curiosity of who or what may be 0 feet away” (Aunspach 2015, p. 28) at any given time, blurring the boundaries between the digital and the material. The exploitation of user curiosity promoting app participation is compounded by the fact that these apps are heavily inlaid with advertisements, predominantly of sexual nature (see Figure 4.7). These advertisements inherently promote Grindr as a space wherein sexual promiscuity is a core tenet of how users should be engaging with the app. Promiscuity, therein, brings us back (in this case literally) to technologies of power, as “being promiscuous” connects to a deep moral binary in Western, particularly American, society. Such represents a key manner in which neoliberal modes of producing cyber-space represent covert mechanisms of assimilation in the Post Gay Era.

To attract a user base, the advertisements for these dating apps in the media indicate their facilitative dating success. Yet, these types of advertisements are also present within the apps’ interface as well. For the price of a premium profile (pricing varies per app), a user is promised: better chances of matching, prioritization of your profile to be displayed first instead of others in your area, unlimited profiles displayed to you, and/or the ability to see who is viewing your profile (see Figures 2.1-2.3). Some apps, like Tinder, advertise to users the ability to “boost” their profile (meaning, a user’s profile receives a temporary display priority per each boost) for a one-time fee which varies depending on the amount of “boosts” a user wants to purchase (see Figure 2.4). These ads, coupled with smart city urbanization and virtual mobility, garner and
maintain immense user participation particularly for LGBTQ+ peoples.
A 2012 study cited by Blackwell et al (2014) found 70% of same-sex couples met online compared to a 2010 cited by Finkel et al (2012) where only 22% of heterosexual couples within the study’s participants have met online between the years 2007-2009. Clearly, a large number of homosexuals are actively connecting with each other through queer cyberspaces “contribut[ing] to a larger shift from queer publics to encounter in the private space of the home, brokered via apps” (Miles 2017, p. 1607). Furthermore, some researchers note the LGBTQ+ mobile dating apps’ design reaffirms homonormative identity conceptions defined by consumption (Faris 2018; Aunspach 2015; Ong 2017; Sanchez 2016; Miles 2017; Murray & Ankerson 2016). These researchers argue mobile dating apps provide an avenue to enforce homonormative ideologies by producing particular queer identities and spaces.

The theoretical framework presented above provides an important historical context for the present material conditions of urban queer life. I then focus on the intersection between this historical context and the rise of use in mobile dating applications by those identifying as LGBTQ+. I am able to explicate the desires and perspective of young queer adults navigating this intersection. In turn, this thesis adds to the debate which questions “what is happening to and if the gayborhood needs saving.” The following sections of this chapter outline my research methodology and present the results from the interviews conducted. I connect themes from the theoretical framework with the results from the interviews, which is important for expanding theoretical knowledge and an understanding of the queer perspective represented in this thesis.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This research seeks to understand a queer perspective of the transforming ethos of the gayborhood. I approached this project from a cyber-geography perspective, using LGBTQ+ mobile-dating applications as a point of inquiry to explore their role within this change. The field of cybergeography is defined as the study of the spatial nature of cyberspace (Dodge 2001). The use of dating apps within gayborhoods and by LGBTQ+ people brings together, at once, the public and private spheres in a novel way; this interaction between the cyber, the personal, and the public gives rise to many potential futures in the course of queer history. These potentials include, but are not limited to: enhancing safety with travel apps providing neighborhood and city safety rankings for LGBTQ+; promoting inclusivity with websites/apps providing information and education about LGBTQ+; providing online communities in forums for LGBTQ+; providing avenues for LGBTQ+ to create and share content. My research questions aim to interrogate how LGBTQ+ dating apps are used in relation to gayborhoods, as well as how these applications reinforce, or not, homonormative identities and contribute to the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships.

3.1 Research Questions

1. How do young queers conceive of gayborhood as tangible places?
2. Are apps altering behavior in participation in tangible places, such as gayborhoods?
3. How are gayborhoods as tangible places changing in the age of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating apps?
4. How are gayborhoods as tangible places changing in the “post-gay era”?
5. How are apps influencing queer subjectivities?
6. How are gayborhoods influencing queer subjectivities?
The research questions pose the main themes explored in the literature review. Both were addressed by collecting primary and secondary data, with approval from UNT IRB project #IRB-19-630. These datasets were analyzed by a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Primary data collection was conducted by participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis, which recognizes “language and words, as a system of signs, [that] are in themselves essentially meaningless; it is through the shared, mutually agreed on use of language that meaning is created. Language both mediates and constructs our understanding of reality…[defining] the social roles that are available to individuals and serves as the primary means through which they enact their identities” (Starks & Trinidad 2007, p. 1374). I expand upon how I used these methods to address the research questions in more detail below.

3.2 Interview Data

Primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ identifying individuals age 18 and older. A commonly used method in human geography, “interviewing is the process of finding, contacting, and meeting with research participants with the purpose of asking questions about their experiences and knowledge, and then listening- in open and nonjudgmental ways- to what they say…to find, interpret, and discuss qualitative findings” (Phillips & Johns 2012, p. 145-146). I conducted eleven interviews with sixteen participants ranging from between 40 minutes to 80 minutes in duration. All participants were selected using convenience sampling, “meaning they were selected from a group conveniently accessible to the researcher” (Schensul & LeCompte 2013, p. 284). The convenience sample relies on previously established relationships. The participants of this study all have some degree of higher education which should be accounted for when considering the responses. This sample largely represents a Western educated positionality. The qualitative analysis of this study provides a queer
perspective with depth rather than breadth. It should be noted this is not to generalize the perspectives or positionalities of the entire queer population based on the sampling, and the size of the sample.

Using an open-ended questionnaire participants self-identified their gender and sexuality as the following: cis-female, bisexual (leans more towards women); cis-female, pansexual; non-binary, gay (male seeking male); cis-female, queer-bisexual (leans more towards women); cis-female, queer; cis-male, homosexual; cis-female, bisexual; cis-female, lesbian; cis-male, gay; cis-male, queer; lesbian, lesbian; trans-woman, bisexual. Some participants included qualifiers as shown in parentheses.

I used the following set of prompts and questions as a guide for the interview and as a starting point for open-ended conversation:

1. Age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity
2. Do you identify with a gayborhood/s? Why? Where?
3. What are the characteristics that draw you there? How did you get started in the community/gayborhood? Do you live in the gayborhood, or do you consider it by proxy?
4. As you have identified with a gayborhood(s), can you describe a typical day/outing as it relates to these spaces?
5. Can you describe a typical day/outing of you and your peers in the gayborhood as it relates to the use of LGBTQ+ dating applications?
6. What LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications do you use? How often? Do you pay for any?
7. How do the applications provide a framework enabling you to express yourself/identity? How do the applications provide a framework enabling you to match with identities of your attraction?
8. Being a user of these applications, could you describe a typical day as it relates to your online activity?
9. If you have never used a dating app or website what are your reasons for not?
10. Whether you have used online dating or not, what do you perceive to be the potential benefits? What are your concerns? Do the benefits or concerns outweigh?

11. How many times in the last month, would you estimate, matching with a person online and then meeting them in person?

12. From matching online to meeting in person, do gayborhoods act as a significant locality to meet as compared to others?

13. What is your perception and feelings of spending money in a gayborhood, and spending money in an online LGBTQ+ platform?

Each interview was recorded and later transcribed. I then analyzed the conversations in order to identify themes and patterns by focusing on repetition, similarities and differences (Schensul et al. 2013). To do this, I gave each type of experience a code to streamline the responses from the interviewees. I initially started with a broad code list based on the interview questions. This initial list included the following domains: demographics, gayborhood identification, process of gayborhood identification, mobile-application identification, process of mobile-application identification, money perceptions, inclusivity, and future necessity. I then refined the codes and organized them as factors under the domain groups as patterns emerged. The code list allowed me to analyze the data from all interviews using the same criteria, leading to clearer insights. Table 3.1 shows domains and their corresponding codes. An explanation and definition of each domain group with corresponding codes can be found in the appendix.

To visualize the occurrence of themes (codes), I color coded the transcribed interviews and organized the selected quotes accordingly. I not only analyzed the occurrence of codes, but also the overlap of codes (code co-occurrence) or overlap between themes. To further visualize and illustrate the occurrence plus the co-occurrence (or lack thereof) of themes, I imported selected quotes by theme into a word cloud generator (see Figs. 4.1, 4.3, and 4.5). I omitted non-descriptive, filler words such as: like, if, and, the, etc. I then used the coded data to establish factors, subfactors, and variables of the queer perspective regarding their relationship and
interaction with gayborhoods and LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications. Each word cloud is paired with a bar graph illustrating the ten most frequent words spoken across the responses (see Figs. 4.2, 4.4, and 4.6). These interviews provide a queer perspective to address my claim of the transforming ethos of the gayborhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1: Domains and codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domains</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayborhood identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of gayborhood identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile-application identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of application identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future necessity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Content Analysis of Dating Apps

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, primary data was also collected by participant observation and content analysis within select LGBTQ+ mobile-dating applications. Critical to qualitative research, participant observation is the direct engagement of a researcher via the observation and/or participation in the activities within the field, community, or individuals of research; thus, participant observation provides a material context from which a researcher is able to develop and refine their ideas, goals, and conclusions (Schensul et al. 2012). Content analysis is important in ascertaining how specific contexts of mobile dating applications communicate and influence sexual identities, engagements and interactions. For example,
LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications that do not allow users the ability for multiple matches to create group chats, propagate heteronormativity by a monogamous conception of sexuality. Thus, LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications lacking in this functionality reject queer polyamorous sexualities, and therefore facilitate identities of neoliberal homonormativity. Another manner in which LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications can qualify as neoliberal homonormative is by engaging only with normative binaries of identification, such as male/female and/or masculine/feminine.

I downloaded the following applications based upon the interviewee responses: Tinder, Grindr, Bumble, OkCupid, Her, Hornet, Lesly, Just She, Scruff. I created profiles for each application under a pseudonym in order to understand the process and requirements for each application. For example, I noted whether or not the app prompted me to enable “push” notifications, or what the identity options are under “gender.” I spent around 30 minutes on each app. I observed each application’s unique interface, noting the amount and types of advertisements that popped up, any automated prompts from the apps themselves, and the messages I received on my profile. I did not contact anyone directly through the apps for ethical and privacy reasons. The following chapter contains the results with a brief analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the content analysis of the apps.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Gayborhoods

It is imperative to understand how the participants of this study conceive of “gayborhoods,” before the interactive relationship of LGBTQ+ mobile dating app users and tangible queer space can be analyzed. Accordingly, the following section presents data to address the research questions: how do young adult queers (age 20-27) conceive of gayborhood as tangible places?; how are gayborhoods influencing queer subjectivities?; and how are gayborhoods as tangible places changing in the “post-gay era”? This section adds to the literature by asking the question, “is the gayborhood worth saving”? Based on interview data, I argue young adult queers do not explicitly identify with gayborhood places. There is a disconnect between the idea of gayborhoods as a community place and people’s feelings of inclusion within them.

Figure 4.1 is a word cloud visualization with an accompanying bar graph (Figure 4.2) of the participant responses to the beginning of the interview asking if they identify with any particular gayborhood or queer space.

As gleaned from the visual, the participants of this study acknowledged known gayborhoods/queer places such as Oak Lawn in Dallas, Tx, Glitterbomb in Denton, Tx, and the warehouse district in Austin, Tx. However, despite this acknowledgment they expressed low affinity for or identification with gayborhoods or designated queer spaces. This low affinity is illustrated by the high usage of “don’t gayborhood” among responses. The low identification with gayborhoods is interesting considering that most participants acknowledged their participation within these spaces.
4.2 Participation in Gayborhoods

How people conceive of their participation in gayborhoods is a common theme in the interview responses. Chris, a 22-year-old white gay male, for instance, stated “no, I personally don’t identify with any gayborhood. I go to a lot of gay bars and I guess the gayborhood for
Austin would be the warehouse district. But, it isn’t a full on gayborhood, just more or less small streets.” I wanted to unpack why these young queer people have such a low identification with gayborhoods or designated queer spaces even though they participate in these spaces. To unpack this relationship I focused my interview towards the reasons/influences regarding choices to participate in these spaces, feelings about these places, and descriptions of designated queer spaces.

All of the participants reported living outside of the area encompassing the nearby queer places or gayborhood. As a result, participation are periodic social experiences rather than parts of peoples’ everyday lives. When talking about Oak Lawn in Dallas, Tx George, a 22-year-old white gay male, expressed, “our friends go there a lot. So, we go there a lot, only because our friends are going.” His partner Jose, a 25-year-old Latinx gay male, added that lately, however, neither of them had been going out in Oak Lawn as much. When pressed further about the reason George mentioned it being “schedule related,” and Jose agreed alluding to “the proximity” while elaborating they “want to be able to go to something closer.” Other participants also spoke of their experiences as a social experience with their fraternity, sorority, or friend group.

In the interviews safety and comfort/discomfort were commonly mentioned when participants were asked how they felt in a gayborhood/designated queer places. Shelly a 26-year-old bisexual “black Caribbean woman” spoke at length of how she “never felt uncomfortable or unsafe in Boystown,” a predominantly male gayborhood of Chicago. For her, the “main thing was being comfortable...[and] how everyone was so free.” She contrasted her experience in America with her experience in the Bahamas: “where LGBTQ is concerned, we are a little bit behind.” For Shelly being able to fully express herself without fear of danger or judgment drew her to Boystown initially and is the reason she kept going back.
I asked Shelly if she ever went to Andersonville, otherwise known as Girlstown, a once predominantly lesbian neighborhood in Chicago. Shelly responded with a quizzical look on her face, and I soon realized she was not aware of Girlstown. Josh McGhee (2016) traces the history of Girlstown from the 1990’s when it “became a lady-centric bookend to Boystown—where lesbian couples flocked due to the neighborhood’s reputation as a haven of acceptance.”

Andersonville was enticing, however, for more than it’s accepting reputation. At the time, it was much cheaper than its counterpart, Boystown, which lasted until the mid-2000s–2010 when the new gay paradigm, referred to as the post-gay era emerged (Ghaziani 2014; Blow 2010).

According to McGhee (2016), as gentrification efforts in Boystown accelerated, some same-sex couples, predominatley male, were priced out of the neighborhood. As a result, the predominately male same-sex couples of Boystown migrated to Girlstown and “affordability [became] one major issue for lesbian couples.” Steadily, long standing female owned businesses catering to the local lesbian population closed down and were replaced by corporate businesses such as Gap, or businesses catering more towards the blooming gay male population.

The changing dynamics of Girlstown is one reason Shelly may never have heard of the neighborhood. Yet, Shelly did not express a need to seek out a different place because for her, as a bisexual, Boystown provided “an equal balance of lesbian and gay bars” representing options within a “multi-use” neighborhood. Her characterization of Boystown as being “multi-use” and “hybrid” echoes the impact of neoliberal gentrification within the gayborhood. Shelly expressed how “fortunate” she felt to have the opportunity to experience lesbian spaces in Chicago as compared to her “misfortunate” experience in the DFW area. Specifically, Shelly mentions a Dallas gayborhood, Oak Lawn. She stated she had “been to Oak Lawn a few times and it’s like ‘where are we going to go?’...I have felt the frustration of not being able to meet women as
easily, right? Because of the lack of lesbian spaces in the Dallas area. I can still go and have a
good time, but if I want to meet a nice lady where can I go? All the bars in Oak Lawn, except
one, are for gay guys, and mostly filled with gay guys.”

4.3 Gender Differences in Conceptions of Gayborhoods

Over the course of the interviews, a gendered difference emerged amongst the
participants regarding feelings of inclusion or exclusion within gayborhoods. Specifically, men
more commonly reported feelings of inclusion than did women participants. Dawn, a 26-year-old
lesbian Hispanic woman, and her partner Suzy, a 22-year-old bisexual white woman, echoed
Shelly’s feelings of exclusion in the DFW area. When I asked if they identified with any
gayborhood/designated queer space Dawn reflected

I feel I don’t really have one. There are a lot of gay bars in Fort Worth, but they cater to a
very specific type of gay person- almost exclusively gay men. I feel when people make a
gayborhood, a lot of the time lesbians are excluded, we are the minority in it and there is
not as much space specifically for us. When people think of the gayborhood they are
thinking of a space that specifically caters to gay men by default.

Dawn elaborated beyond her gender and sexuality to discuss the intersectionality of being
a Hispanic person, which led her to feel even more marginalized from gayborhoods. Yet, she
conferred that the attraction of a gayborhood in the first place is grounded in being a minority
amongst other minorities and, “having a lot of things about yourself that you don’t have to
explain.” Suzy expanded upon Dawn’s sentiments of exclusion, “and in terms of what gay means
to a lot of people it is white gay men, you see it in TV shows and in the media.” These feelings
of exclusion and recognition of their own subjectivities as less visible—or invisible—in
gayborhoods and the media reflects underlying sexual politics of homonormativity and post-gay
era assimilation.

4.4 Whiteness and Gayborhoods
Some participants recognized communal inclusion through gayborhoods but others’ simultaneous exclusion. Arturo, a 24-year-old gay non-binary Latinx person, conveyed that gayborhoods seem to embody a facade of safety that in reality is ascribed only to cis-white gay men. He suggested an inextricable connection between gayborhoods and cis-white gay men stating, “I think gayborhoods are an aspect of gentrification and only focus on the livelihoods of the white cis gay men.” In his telling, Arturo then paused and reflected further, retracting his statement slightly saying instead “well it is not necessarily just white, but gay men. Because it is gay men who have the power to regenerate and put a new face to things in regards to adopting spaces from people who aren’t as privileged.” This occurrence of adopting spaces is what Josh McGhee (2016) reported as happening in Girlstown. Amin Ghaziani (2014) also reported similar findings of such migratory occurrences in the post-gay era.

This aspect of whiteness was present in other responses that centered on inclusivity. Marsha, a 23-year-old Asian bisexual transwoman, spoke in depth of her experiences in the gayborhood as a trans person of color. She explained, “I don’t really ever feel spaces belong to me. I always run into the issue if I am in a space designated to at least one of my identities it is probably uncomfortable with, or at the very least, does not give a shit for my other identities. But that is the nature of being in a position of an overlapping axis of minority identity. It is something I have just gotten used to. There is always, though, some part of me that is wondering ‘why the fuck is everyone here white’”? It is clear from these responses that gayborhood spaces are not demonstratively inclusive of the diversity within the LGBTQ+ population.

4.5 Beyond Gay Bars

In fact, there is a desire for queer spaces of diversity from the participants in the study. Lenny, a 20-year-old homosexual white male, said:
I wish they had different types of bars because they are all just gay bars. I wish they had a lesbian bar, a transgender bar, you know? Where it feeds to those certain groups, because it is just gay guys. I feel when people think about the LGBTQ+ community, they mostly think about gay guys. They’re the most popular ones in the media from the queer community. I feel it would be good to have bars that accommodate the diversity of being queer.

To truly accommodate the experience of being queer, however, gayborhoods must expand beyond the bar scene. George, who does not drink, wished for more options for entertainment in the gay scene beyond bars. It became clear during the study that queer people who do not drink or partake in illicit drugs, such as recovering addicts, may not easily find a place to participate in gayborhood social life.

As previously noted when I asked the participants to describe the reasons why they would go to a gayborhood they often spoke of safety. However, when I reframed the question in terms of describing a typical day/outing in the gayborhood their answers revealed potential risks associated with types of activities primarily happening within the gayborhood. Figure 4.3 is a word cloud created from these responses, with an accompanying bar graph (Figure 4.4).
Figure 4.4: Typical day in gayborhood bar graph

The frequency of responses discussing a culture of partying and drug use complicate the narrative of the gayborhood being a place of safety. When asked to describe an outing in the gayborhood Lenny did not hesitate in saying, “Obviously if you are going out ,you are going to be getting drunk and probably going to smoke up, you know do some drugs. Then we go out and party.” George had a similar response to Lenny’s stating, “I never once knew of a queer space that didn’t involve some varying degree of drugs, sex, and alcohol. So going to the club, especially S4 in Dallas, it is about getting really drunk and maybe a little high for the purpose of having sex and having a good night.” Unlike the responses regarding inclusion/exclusion, ones describing a typical day/outing in the gayborhood did not vary across gender. Dawn and Suzy shared the same sentiments as Lenny and George. Dawn described a typical outing as “involving copious amounts of drinking anytime I go into a gayborhood. It is all around being really fucked up.” Suzy curtly replied “partying” with Dawn interjecting “yeah, partying. I have never been to a gayborhood that just had a park or something. They are not very family friendly, which is a problem for me as a lesbian who wants to one day have a family. I would like to take my kids to the gayborhood.”

Arturo zoomed into contexts within the gayborhood and described more secluded, dark
spaces where “people just do shit, it’s bareback, they do needles, and they do drugs. I’m all for it, people can do what they want, I just personally do not want to be in those particular spaces.” He went on to share with me a past traumatic experience of his where he was raped in the gayborhood. For this reason, he “felt really unsafe in gay bits for a while.” In fact, Arturo sought out queer spaces outside of the gayborhood “that were not so mainstream.” He mentioned vogueing and sewing classes, as he called it “more ‘feminine’ activities other than the [male-centric] bars of the gayborhood.” Arturo had to look beyond the gayborhood for these activities because the gayborhood is “separated along lines of sexism and racism, which trickled down from heterosexual society.” These secluded spaces within the gayborhood where dangerous activities occur—along with the rampant drug use—contradict a narrative of perceived safety the participants initially gave.

4.6 Commodification, Capitalism, and “Community”

Another aspect of the gayborhoods revealed in this study is an undeniable feeling of commodification, which did not vary across gender. Dawn spoke of “the amount of unabashed capitalism endemic in these spaces.” She felt like “we are the target for advertising a lot. I wish gay spaces were more about art and a lot less about magnum condoms, Visa with a rainbow logo, partying, and shit like that.” George also contended, specifically about the Pride Parade, one of the “biggest queer events you can participate in, is just so fucking corporate.” The corporate nature of these events was his “big thing [he] did not like.” He was highly critical of “all these big corporations who are like ‘here’s our Pride float, we accept diversity’ but in reality they actually don’t.”

Many participants reflected on the cost of being gay. For example, there is a recognized dichotomy between the cost of gay and straight bars. Lenny spoke of the cover fees at most gay
bars in Austin and how “drinks at gay bars are a lot more expensive compared to the straight bars on sixth street.” Specifically, he mentioned drinks at a gay bar can run seven to nine dollars, while on sixth street similar drinks may cost only four or five dollars. In this vein, Chris expressed, “I feel much more incentivized to go to a non-queer space because everything is at a premium. Everything. Whereas, a straight bar on Sixth Street a drink is going to cost you 3/4/5 dollars. But if you go to Rain or Highland, god forbid, it could be upwards of 15 dollars.” Moreover, Chris felt it was great to support gay bars but questioned if the “premium is really worth it for the space” and concluded that for him it was not. He also acknowledged that many people would not be able to afford the experience gay bars and thus excluded from the gayborhood.

Clearly, the gayborhood experience is not homogenous in terms of inclusivity and equity. Across the interviews, confusion about the nature and meaning of gayborhoods is expressed. Arturo exemplified this confusion in saying,

Talking about the gayborhood it’s like ‘what is the gayborhood”? People constantly say this is the LGBTQ+ community, and I feel we are not a community - we are a population of people because we are not supporting each other...We create our own norms as exposed by the gayborhoods. So, there is hope that other aspects of the queer population could be as culturally accepted. But it is not happening fast enough.

The lack of community feeling and no clear recognition of collective norms in the gayborhood is intriguing; correspondingly, I asked about it with multiple participants, and their responses aligned with Arturo’s. For example, Chris stated:

There are definitely all these different types of bars in the gayborhood, and the nuances of who you are determines where you go. We are a population, not a community. Everyone is different. Every time Pride comes around it is very much the queer community, but in reality we really are not. Everything is pretty segregated in terms of day to day life. Only certain people are going to go to certain bars, and you very much know your place around town. You really start learning where you fit in based on varying attributes whether it be physical, sexual preferences, stuff like that.
A limitation of this study is a low participation rate of women in interviews, which reflects the lack of community described above. Since women are not significant place makers in most gayborhoods, the norms represented by the types of bars (bear, leather, twink, etc.) does not apply to them or their sexuality. Interestingly, the expressions of gayborhood norms, exclusion, and commodification portrayed in this study, mirror the formats of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating-apps.

4.7 Mobile Dating Apps

The following section addresses three research questions. First, are apps altering participation behaviors in tangible places, such as gayborhoods? Second, how are gayborhoods changing as tangible places in the age of LGBTQ+ mobile-dating apps? Third, how are apps influencing queer subjectivities? Results presented in this section clarify the relationship between users in the cyberspaces of LGBTQ+ mobile dating applications and the impact of those relations on tangible urban queer space. Based on the interview data, I argue LGBTQ+ mobile dating apps affect the integrity of gayborhoods by potentiating the ways queer people can connect, communicate, and behave across time and space. As shown in Figures 4.5 and 4.6, participants in this study expressed a high identification with and use of LGBTQ+ mobile dating apps, conveying that they are a significant part of their daily lives.

Not only is there a high identification with and use of apps, but there is also a wide variety of apps being used. It is important for the purposes here to uncover participants’ perceptions of these apps as well as how their use of these apps relates to their everyday lives in time and space. Arturo, for instance states, “I use Grindr, twitter, Instagram, bumble, hinge, and snapchat. I am on those apps 24/7, nonstop. Those are all gay shit, gays sell themselves on
everything, even whatsapp. Anything is a gay app now it is ridiculous. On the internet everything is the gayborhood. I did not realize queerness expanded so much, but it does.”

Figure 4.5: App identification word cloud

Figure 4.6: App identification bar graph
4.8 Affinity for LGBTQ+ Dating Apps

For women who participated in this study—who largely feel excluded from the gayborhood—the apps are a necessity. Dawn and Shelly, however, reported that the app options for women are limited due to antiquated notions regarding the ways in which women date and/or have sex. Dawn drew comparisons to the app options for men. They referred specifically to Grindr an app for gay men colloquially known and designed as a hook-up app but not a relationship app. Lenny spoke of the regulations across the various dating platforms making it clear apps such as Tinder and Bumble have strict policies regarding nudity. Unlike Grindr where “you can send nudes, photos, and even voice messages, … Grindr is definitely designed to be a hook-up app, it is definitely designed to be a sex app.” While some apps that are geared towards relationship building are available for women, Dawn says “there is not a lot for women. There is definitely not any space for women who want to have casual sex, or kinky sex. There is no female Grindr version.” The gender gap in app options for women might be due to the gender gap in the tech industry where women account for just 25% of the jobs (White 2020).

Male participants, who generally feel included in the gayborhood scene, also expressed that apps are necessary. Chris discussed meeting his partners online is “how [he] always assumed it would be, so [he] always use[s] apps. Everyone [he] has ever dated has come from some online platform.” Similarly, Lenny conveyed, “it is 2020 and LGBTQ is so much more accepted now. But at the same time, we still are not because I feel we are suppressed to these dating apps and a lot of people still do not feel comfortable to go out and just express themselves fully or even to go out and just talk to someone.” Chris’s and Lenny’s perceptions reflects reality as 70 percent of same sex couple meet online compared to only 22 percent of heterosexual couples (Blackwell et al., 2014; & Finkel et al. 2012) indicating that we are not in a post-gay era.
It is not surprising that participants expressed such a high affinity for mobile dating apps because they are designed to keep people coming back. Lenny communicated that he feels addicted to the apps; he could not resist checking each notification. In fact, he feels so addicted that at the time of our interview he deleted every app on his phone. Many of the participants suggest their interaction with the apps as being like a video game. Other participants report that maintaining their profiles across different platforms is laborious, akin to a job. Chris states that using the apps is “kind of like using a CarFax. When you are buying a car you go look at it in person but, it is always good to have a history of it.” Carfax is an accurate metaphor, as the study participants consistently alluded to the need to market their profiles and sell themselves in the online dating world. Arlene, a 20 year-old Mexican-American pansexual woman, for instance mentions “using the apps is like sifting through produce.” These transactional feelings erode a sense of intimacy for the participants, and in some cases affect the resulting relationships. Chris mentions how the availability of partners and potential for matching presented by the apps makes relationships not seem as “big of a deal. There is a greater sense of apathy. If you do not like it, just ship it back.” The transactional nature of the apps means the users are simultaneously the consumer and the product.

4.9 Gayborhood Reflections in Cyberspace

For gay men cyberspace is more likely to mirror the tangible spaces of gayborhoods. A common form of mirroring, for example, is what gay men, and other participants, refer to as “tribes.” Earlier when Chris spoke of “all these different types of bars in the gayborhood, and the nuances of who you are determines where you go,” he was alluding to the tribal categories toward which bars are themed. Such tribes are the “norms as exposed by gayborhoods” referred to by Arturo, including (but not limited to) bear, jock, leather, rugged, and twink. There are
certain apps—like the bars—that theme themselves after one or more of these tribes. Scruff, for instance, intends to mimic the bear tribe, with users having lots of body hair or being those seeking this type of partner. On Grindr, users have the option to select from a predetermined list of tribes to be displayed on their profile. For many users this can make matching with partners easier because the “stats” (traits/preferences) of the individual is searchable and easily viewed. Some participants feel that predetermined tribes or gender options can be constricting, leading them to manually write tribe and gender information into the biography on their profile(s) rather than use the filters provided by apps. Other participants do not find the app tribes and gender filters constricting; as Jose says he “always fit the tribes.” Similarly, George mentions he “appreciates the inclusion of the tribes, but maybe not as predetermined categories. In a way they are an homage to the gay lingo of the past” deriving from norms established within the gayborhood.

Another “norm” or stereotype the apps mimic in their advertisements is the hypersexual gay man (see Figure 4.7). Many gay male participants took issue with this. George states, “it is interesting phenomenon that all of the business targeting is towards gay men and this conception of gay men as hypersexual creatures who will impulsively purchase things on the app. Whereas women I guess they think will not, or do not have any need for it. It is business driven. It is not made to actually help women, or non-binary people or whomever are or feel excluded. Those demographics do not get targeted. It is not to help them, it is to make money, and gay men are the ones who also demographically probably have more money to spend.” Much like women participants who feel the apps represent an antiquated notion of how women date and have sex, male participants feel that the rampant hyper-sexuality imbedded in the apps through advertisements represents an antiquated notion of gay men.
Figure 4.7: Examples of hypersexual gay man stereotype advertisements
4.10 LGBTQ+ App Features and Making Matches

Tribe designations on user profiles and other stats within apps represent one aspect of their framework. Another characteristic of LGBTQ+ dating apps is whether a grid or a swipe feature is used for matching partners. The grid format (see Figure 4.8) displays multiple profiles at once that a user can manually scroll through to select profile pictures they wish to consider.

![Image of Grid Format](image)

**Figure 4.8: Grid format**

Swipe functionality relies on an algorithm to display one profile at a time; the user has the option to swipe left to reject a potential match or swipe right to accept a potential match (see
Figure 4.9). Grid functionality allows the user to freely message any user profiled within the grid, unless the user has been blocked by the person profiled. In contrast, the swipe feature only allows users to message one another if they both swipe right on each other’s profiles. Some participants feel swiping is laborious compared to viewing a grid, which presents many options at once. Other participants, such as Summer, a 24 year-old lesbian white woman, “like the design of the swipe because when you swipe right and it pops up that it is a match it feels like you have won a scratch off.”

![Swipe functionality](image-url)
In fact, the swipe feature is designed to feel like a scratch off or a slot machine. Each swipe is a gamble on a potential match; when a match is made the app immediately notifies the user triggering the reward center of the brain, and causing dopamine to release (see Figure 4.10). This is the same reaction the brain has when playing slots at a casino, or when hitting jackpot (Keaton 2020). This explains why so many participants reported feelings of addiction or that the apps are similar to video games.

![Figure 4.10: Example of match notification](image)

Another important aspect of mobile dating apps is the use of geolocation technology to “determine the coordinates of an object on the surface of the earth” (Soliman & Wheatley 2002, p. 235). In the case of mobile dating apps the “object” is the app user. Some apps such as Tinder show the locations of users down to the nearest mile, while other apps such as Grindr show location to the nearest foot. Geolocation impacts the ways users interact with each other in urban places. Male participants report that apps locating to the nearest foot (e.g., Grindr) are popular. Use of such near-location apps means gay men can open the app in a public place and
check the profiles and “stats” of the people within a few feet, say, within in a gay bar. Such precision in location makes their use a social and public experience.

The act of checking apps such as Grindr in public is transforming the ways in which queer people interact in urban places. Chris reports if he finds someone attractive in public he always checks Grindr first and messages them on the platform before speaking with them in person. He says “it is a good way of vetting people, and seeing who would be mutually interested rather than going up to someone randomly.” In fact, all male study participants report that this is how they interact with people they find attractive in public places now—within or outside of the gayborhood. Facilitation of meeting others through apps precludes the purpose of gayborhoods to facilitate queers meeting other queers. It also enables the expansion of queer public life by allowing people to see if someone at a “straight” bar, or even the grocery store, is queer or not. Yet, app use to filter interactions can limit the types of connections queer people make. The compulsion to check the “stats” of someone in public prior to speaking with them, for example, might prevent people from meeting. As George acknowledges “the fact you even need to know the stats of a person in the first place has been trained by Grindr. That is not something I would have done or sought out to do prior to Grindr. The fact I feel the urge to get on and check the stats of a person in public is a problem generated by the app itself. Otherwise, prior to Grindr they would just be another gay person I should probably talk to regardless of if their stats are my preference or not.” George’s statement exemplifies that dating app interactions in cyberspace have important impacts on people’s experiences in tangible spaces, such as gayborhoods.

Women participants in this study experience cyberspace differently than men, centering on the fact that the apps available to them geolocate to the nearest mile. The coarse geospatial resolution does not afford women the same potential for expanding queer life in public because
they are not able to check stats in the same manner or to determine if someone is queer in their vicinity. Study participants also express that their use of mobile dating apps is an individual activity primarily taking place in the privacy of their own homes. This finding aligns with Stefanie Duguay’s (2019) research which also found queer women are more likely to use mobile dating apps at home.

4.11 The Gayborhood Today

Despite the differences app experience within the queer population, men and women participants expressed an empowered and transformative view of what it is meant by “gayborhood” today. Some participants report their circle of friends or workplace as places that act as a gayborhood. Dawn even asserts that “the gayborhood is inside me, I bring it with me everywhere I go.” Arturo articulates the possibilities beyond the gayborhood like this: “the gayborhood controls you. The expectations of queer life and people’s preconceived notions of gay people control you...When you realize you do not need to live up to these societal expectations, such as homonormativity, the idea of the gayborhood becomes an entire world of possibility. You find queerness in everything.”

These empowered and transformative experiences are in part facilitated by the expansion of queer life in public though use of dating apps. I asked all of the participants when they match with a profile, do gayborhoods or designated queer places act as a significant locality for meeting the other person? Each participant responded with a resounding no; the apps do not traffic queers into the gayborhood—they enable queers to meet without the gayborhood. The very notion of two or more queer people meeting outside of the gayborhood via app, is in fact queering places usually considered heteronormative or “straight.” Moreover, many participants acknowledge that apps empower and connect queer folks who do not use substances, who have social anxiety, who
do not feel included within gayborhoods, or who are unable to connect and communicate for other reasons. Unlike gayborhoods, which are not seen by the participants as a necessity for the future, the apps are becoming essential. There is an overarching desire expressed by the participants not for more designated queer places, like gayborhoods, but for most places to become safe places for queers. The delineation between heterosexual and homosexual fostered by the creation of gayborhoods in WWII is a boundary the participants of this study wish to reimagine. As Summer aptly states,

Being gay is not a condition for suffering. It is a condition for producing a minority individual, and being a minority is the condition for suffering. Unless we do something to tackle the fundamental systems and institutions causing people to suffer as a result of who they are, it is not going to matter if we make it okay to be gay.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The topic of gayborhood demise and whether these places are worth saving has been debated by scholars and journalists for the last decade. The demise is often attributed as a symptom of neoliberal urban processes such as gentrification, within the context of the post-gay era and broader societal acceptance of homosexuality. This means the question of “if the gayborhood is worth saving” is inherently imbedded in the assumption that homosexuality is not viewed or treated as different or lesser than heterosexuality. In this imagined post-gay era, gayborhoods are declining because the dangers posed to the LGBTQ+ population are purported to no longer exist, so there is no longer a need for designated queer and/or safe places. This research destabilizes the assumptions entailed in the meaning of the post-gay era by forcing the question to be reframed in terms of whether the gayborhood meets the needs and desires of contemporary queers. By focusing on the intersection between tangible queer urban space and queer cyberspaces, through the lens of mobile dating applications, this thesis contributes to the debate regarding the role of the internet and gayborhood demise. Through semi-structured interviews with a diverse participant group of young adult queers aged 20-27, a transforming ethos of the gayborhood becomes visible.

The participants of this study do not have an affinity for or strong identification with gayborhoods, or the concept of gayborhood. In fact, many expressed confusion about what defines a gayborhood or not. There is a disconnect between the idea of a gayborhood being a community place, and LGBTQ+ peoples’ feelings of inclusion within them. Participants feel the gayborhood does not reflect or embody the diversity constituting the LGBTQ+ population. This lack of diversity relates to gayborhoods being largely centered on the lives’ of cis-gendered
white gay men. As a result, male study participants expressed more feelings of inclusion than women participants. Yet, for all participants there is a strong desire for diversity of not only representation, but also for a range of available activities in gayborhoods. Participants remarked that gayborhoods have a strong culture of partying and drug use. This culture is precluded by a landscape dominated by bars, which lead some study participants to avoid gayborhoods as they may not be safe spaces and/or may not be family friendly. Similarly, some participants lamented the lack of sober urban places available for queers with an expressed desire for activities and places not involving the use of substances.

Despite these reservations, study participants acknowledge their participation in gayborhoods with the qualifier that alternative queer places are few. Contemporary gayborhoods fulfil only a fraction of the needs and desires of queers. The desire for a greater number and variety safe places rather than designated queer places means the study participants do not feel that they live in an era in which homosexuality is accepted without consequence. Therefore, the question of “if the gayborhood is worth saving” is not about assumed queer acceptance in greater society; rather, the question should be grounded in if the gayborhood fulfills the needs and desires of contemporary queers.

5.1 Intellectual Merits within Critical Geography

This study brings the theoretical lens of critical geography to the intersection of cyberspaces and tangible spaces, revealing how new technologies in the form of geolocation mobile dating applications create new mobilities and potentials for queering beyond the gayborhood. The ways by which these apps are used in everyday life render them as a spatial media. They change the ways queer people interact with each other, and with space itself by creating new, user generated spatial knowledges effecting the material spatial aspects of tangible
space. The ability to create new geographies through the use of spatial media, such as mobile dating apps, constitutes new queer relational geographies.

Yet, it is important to consider the implications of using spatial media as subjects of technologies of power. In what ways are spatial media being used by subjects within pre-existing social conventions of power, and in what ways are these social conventions of power being resisted or reworked by spatial media? For example, the apps reflection of gayborhood tribes reproduce constricted notions of what is meant to be queer as a gay man. On the other hand, the use of personalized biographies potentiate queer embodiment beyond these social conventions. The initial lack of hook-up style apps available for women attempted to maintain already constituted boundaries of women’s sexuality. However, women’s use of relationship oriented apps with the intention and success of hooking up subverts their subjection. More recently, hook-up style apps have become more available to women as a response to their demands. This is not only a resistance to the antiquated conceptions regarding how women date or have sex, but also resulted in a reworking of the material spatial aspects of women’s lives. In resisting the traditional conception of the post-war gayborhood, my participants rejected space that is homogenous in class and race, but also in culture and identity. This resistance comes from a desire to destabilize homonormative subjectivities, and to resist homonormative sexual politics of depoliticisation, demobilization, and privatization. There exists within the participants of this study a cognizant acknowledgment of their embroilment within this sexual politics, and their simultaneous efforts to resist them. In this way, the participants of this study challenge Duggan’s (2002) claim of a passive queer subjectivity in the era of neoliberalism.

5.2 Social Implications

In addition to the theoretical implications of this study, the social implications of critical
research at the intersection of cyberspaces and tangible space is important in a world where places are already, or increasingly becoming, digitally mediated spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic did not establish a world existing predominantly behind screens, it merely accelerated these material conditions out of survival. Regardless, critical research of this kind is more pressing now than ever before to understand emerging subjectivities, identities, and inequalities brought forth by a digitally mediated world. Of particular importance is the social implications arising from the commodification of location by spatial media which entangles all moments of life within capitalist exploitation. These technologies enable queer people opportunities for connecting, communicating, and creating new spatialities beyond the gayborhood. This is not a utopian idealization of digital mediation, rather queer people, such as the participants of this study, are consistently resisting and reworking the sexual politics constituting their particular queer subjectivities to ensure these opportunities for themselves. This is to say, advancements in technology is not a solution to issues of social justice and does not innately challenge the systems which produce minorities and inequality. In fact, it can and does reproduce social conventions of power. Yet, in navigating the actually existing digitally mediated world, we can look to the queer experience for understanding of and potential resistance efforts to emerging subjectivities, identities, and inequalities at this intersection.

5.3 Conclusion

It is difficult to prove mobile dating apps are a direct cause of gayborhood demise; however, it is evident that apps expand the lives of queers beyond the gayborhood. Study participants do not identify closely with gayborhoods, but they express a high affinity for use of mobile dating apps. Women participants find the use of mobile dating apps to be a necessity due to the scarcity of places for women in gayborhoods. However, they noted that the apps are poorly
designed, reflecting antiquated notions of how women date because the apps prioritize a culture for hooking-up. Interestingly, even though male participants felt more included in gayborhoods they also see the apps as a necessity, but they took issue with the feeling of commodification that resulted from app use. Indeed, many participants likened app use to playing a video game or even shopping online, indicating a lack of social intimacy. The apps are transforming queer interactions within the gayborhood as the primary means of connecting and meeting queers at bars via geolocation technology. In addition, the apps preclude the original purpose of the gayborhood, which was to meet other queers, by changing the boundary of what is inside and outside the gayborhood. Participants noted how utilizing the apps in a “straight” place has a queering effect by revealing the existence of other queers around them. This simultaneously poses a risk by revealing their location to predators, or those seeking to harm queer people. This further reinforces the fact that we are not in a post-gay era.

There are limitations to this study. A qualitative study of this nature based upon a convenience sample provides depth and personal perspectives that are nuanced. This is often what is missing from quantitative studies that emphasize representativeness of a well-defined population. Here such definition and sampling control is exchanged for personal narratives that reveal the subtle and richer experiences of those who were interviewed. Undoubtedly, addition of informants would bolster some of the claims supported in this study, but such expansion would also reveal new contradictions and widen the research into a more expansive set of personal narratives. Such will have to be the topic of future research and can be cast against what was learned from this study. This study is also limited by the two year time-frame of the master’s degree program. In future research, having more time to conduct interviews with a larger sample size would be beneficial.
Contemporary gayborhoods are a want for some but not a need for all. LGBTQ+ dating apps provide novel ways for queers to connect and communicate and represent a key factor in the participants’ conception of queer spaces. In a sense use of the apps transcends and expands the boundaries of gayborhoods, which empowers participants to reimagine the boundary between homosexual and heterosexual life. In doing so, saving the gayborhood is not about the bars and streets, but rather is about systematically protecting queer life outside of designated queer places.

The main contribution of this thesis is in providing a queer perspective to the study of gayborhood decline. Other avenues of research that can emerge from this study include continuing to understand and map queer geographies of the urban and online. Additional research could address the subjectivity of the many ways that cyberspaces intersect with tangible spaces among queers. As new forms of technology continue to be integrated into everyday life, it is important to examine the impact it may have on queer life.
APPENDIX

EXPLANATION AND DEFINITION OF EACH DOMAIN GROUP WITH CORRESPONDING CODES
1. For the purposes of this study it was important to gather demographic information for each participant. This information included their age, gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, in which each participant self-identified each variable. These demographics are important to ascertain to understand the scope of diversity represented within the study.

2. I broke the varying levels of the participants’ identification with or acknowledgment of gayborhood(s) into low, medium, and high. Meaning, if participants express a lack of identifying with a gayborhood, or very minor, their response is coded as low. If participants express their participation in gayborhood(s) and somewhat identify with the space their response is coded as medium. If participants express a strong participation and acknowledge the space as their home or main hub for a gay experience their response is coded as high.

3. It was important to ascertain the various factors influencing a participant’s process of identifying gayborhood(s), and the way in which they conceive of gayborhood(s). These factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Age; gender; sexuality; race/ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayborhood identification</td>
<td>Low; medium; high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of gayborhood identification</td>
<td>Influences; reasons; feelings; live inside/live outside; characteristics; typical outing; impact; community; benefits/concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile-application identification</td>
<td>Low; medium; high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of application identification</td>
<td>Influences; reasons; feelings; characteristics/interface; typical daily use; impacts; benefits/concerns; matching and meeting; meeting localities; community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money perceptions</td>
<td>Spent in gayborhood/application; pay for applications; benefits in gayborhood/application; concerns in gayborhood/applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>In gayborhood; in applications; reasons; feelings; benefits/concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future necessity</td>
<td>Of designated gay space; of applications; feelings gayborhood/applications; benefits/concerns; impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
include the influences which might have brought them to the space to begin with. The reasons why they might go to or choose to go to a gayborhood space. Their general feelings about gayborhood spaces. The way participants characterize the space. Whether the participants live inside the gayborhood, or outside. What a typical outing in the gayborhood entails. The impact of the gayborhood on them, their friends, or general society. If they perceive the gayborhood as a community space or not, and/or one that enriches a community. What they perceive as the benefits of the gayborhood, or their concerns.

4. I broke the varying levels of the participants’ use of mobile dating applications into low, medium, and high. Meaning, if participants express a lack of using the apps, or very minor use, their response is coded as low. If participants express somewhat or occasionally using apps their response is coded as medium. If participants express a use of apps every day, multiple times a day, their response is coded as high.

5. It is important to ascertain the various factors influencing a participant’s use of mobile dating applications, and the way in which they conceive of these apps. These factors include the influences which might have caused them to download, use, and return to the apps. The reasons they use, need, or do not need the use of apps. Their general feelings about the apps themselves and their use of them. Their opinions regarding the actual interface, characteristics, and interaction with the apps on the screen. Their description of a typical day using the apps. The impacts the apps have on their lives, and those around them. If they perceive the apps as a community space or not, and/or one that enriches a community. What they perceive as benefits of the apps, or concerns. The rates of people they match with online and actually meet in person. The places which act as significant localities for meeting people in person from the apps, and if the gayborhood is one of these localities.
6. It is important to understand how each participant feels and perceives the money that is generated or spent within the apps and/or the gayborhood. For the apps, I asked each participant if they pay for any of their profiles, and if they did not how they see their participation on the app as generating money. Regarding the money spent or generated, I was curious to know what the participants saw as the potential benefits or concerns to having money be spent in the gayborhood vs. the apps.

7. How do each of the participants perceive the gayborhood and apps as inclusive spaces, or not. The reasons/influences they feel either are inclusive or not. What are the benefits to the level of inclusivity, and what are their concerns.

8. It is also important to ascertain from each participant how they perceive the necessity of gayborhoods and apps for the future. What are their feelings about why or not each space is necessitated. The benefits to their necessity, and potential concerns. As well as, the impact of each spaces potential necessity on them and general society.
REFERENCES


