Safe on My Phone? Same-Sex Attracted Young People's Negotiations of Intimacy, Visibility, and Risk on Digital Hook-Up Apps

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Abstract

This article draws on focus group interviews with same-sex attracted Australian men and women aged 18-29, to reflect on their accounts of the perceived risks and opportunities offered by hook-up apps such as Grindr, Blendr, and Hornet. Until recently, scholarly accounts of same-sex attracted men hooking up online have primarily focused on measuring the safety of sexual encounters in relation to HIV and "risky" sexual practices. This article extends previous health-related studies by considering the ways that the exchange of sexually explicit digital self-portraits (or selfies) feature within digital sexual negotiations and also exploring same-sex attracted women's perceptions of safety and risk in relation to dating and hook-up apps and websites. It draws on recent scholarship on Grindr and other geo-locative hook-up apps to explore the material role that mobile phones and apps play in establishing a sense of safety, intimacy, and/or risk within flirtations and sexual interactions and the ways that young people's "off-label" (or non-sexual) uses of hook-up apps might facilitate (and diminish) their sense of queer identity and visibility.

Until recently, scholarly accounts of same-sex attracted men hooking up online have primarily focused on measuring the safety of sexual encounters in relation to HIV and "risky" sexual practices. A sizable and emerging literature explicitly frames gay men's use of hook-up apps as a public health issue (Bien et al., 2015; Ems & Gonzales, 2015; Holloway et al., 2014). Much of this literature views these apps through the lens of HIV/sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention efforts, seeming to conflate sexual health risks and digital media risks and to suggest that media practices constitute risk behaviors. To date, most of this literature does not engage with the everyday aspects of using hook-up apps, or the material and/or phenomenological experience of ubiquitous mobile phone usage, in which both apps and phones can be understood as "pocket techno-spaces" that act as "containers" for intimate connections and events (Richardson, 2007, p. 211). With some exceptions (Race, 2015; Rice et al., 2012), there is little consideration of the ways that hook-up and dating apps may contribute to gay men's cultures of intimacy and sexual safety. Additionally, there is little to no attention to same-sex attracted women's use of hook-up apps.

This article extends previous health-related studies by considering the ways that the exchange of sexually explicit pictures feature within digital sexual negotiations and exploring young Australian same-sex attracted men's and women's perceptions of safety and risk in relation to dating and hook-up apps and websites. It draws on recent scholarship on Grindr and other geo-locative hook-up apps (see Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2014) to explore the material role that mobile phones and apps play in establishing a sense of safety, intimacy, and/or risk within flirtations and sexual interactions and the ways that young people's "off-label" (or non-sexual) uses of hook-up apps might facilitate (and diminish) their sense of queer identity and visibility. Mobile hook-up apps could be seen to perform multiple functions for young same-sex attracted men and women: promoting a sense of belonging within

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"queer cartographies" (Batiste, 2013), facilitating intimacy and friendship, and serving as a password-protected "container" for sexual experimentation, picture exchange, and chat. This was clearly not a universally positive or "safe" experience for all users, however. Both male and female app-users negotiated a range of challenges in relation to the risk of being outed, harassed, or physically threatened online.

Mobile Apps as Technologies of Risk

Given that sex and technology are each imbued with discourses of risk, it is unsurprising that the use of mobile phone apps for sexual hook-ups or dating has received attention from health promotion and sexual health researchers. Much of this literature focuses on same-sex attracted men's use of apps such as Grindr and whether or not their use can influence "risk behaviors," such as having unprotected anal intercourse. However, this literature is contradictory—for example, one study found that young men who use Grindr reported higher rates of having unprotected anal intercourse (Landovitz et al., 2013), while another found higher rates of condom use among young men who met sex partners on Grindr (Rice et al., 2012). Other studies explore the nature of user content, relating digital practices such as picture sharing and chat to sexual risk practices. For example, Winetrobe, Rice, Bauermeister, Petering, and Holloway (2014) associate sexual risk-taking with sexualized profile images showing "naked chest/abs" and conclude that "YMSM [young men who have sex with men] who post partially naked profile photos, who have been using the app for at least one year, or who have more Grindr-met partners should be targeted for HIV prevention" (p. 1307).

Public health studies also discuss hook-up and dating apps as potentially useful tools for the promotion of sexual health to "risk populations," particularly young people, and men who have sex with men (Ems & Gonzales, 2015; Holloway et al., 2014; Rendina, Jimenez, Grov, Ventuneac, & Parsons, 2013). This literature explores public health researchers' use of apps for recruiting research participants (Burrell et al., 2012; Goedel & Duncan, 2015; Landovitz et al., 2013) or for undertaking public health surveillance (Delaney, Kramer, Waller, Flanders, & Sullivan, 2014). For example, Landovitz et al. (2013) used Grindr to recruit Los Angeles–based "Grindr users" for a computer-assisted survey "to characterize the epidemiology, sexual risk behaviors, HIV serostatus and testing behavior, and uptake of biomedical HIV prevention strategies" (p. 730). In this context, hook-up apps are framed as "novel technologies" for sexual health research and health promotion (Beymer et al., 2014). Many such studies consider both the risk and promise of apps in the context of other social networking sites:

> While SNS have the potential to be powerful tools to promote sexual health, sex positivity, disease prevention, and linkage to care and treatment, they also have the capacity to become risky environments that can compromise interpersonal skills, promote risky norms around sexual behaviors, and foster disease spread. (Holloway et al., 2014, p. 225-226)

This literature suggests that social networking sites are intrinsically risky environments for sexual health, and therefore, public health intervention into these spaces is necessary.

Men's risk of HIV infection has been historically measured in relation to sites or venues they attend for sex or for meeting sex partners, such as the gay sauna or bathhouse (Bien et al., 2015; Disman, 2003; McKusick, Horstman, & Coates, 1985). A precedent for associating "risk practices" with sexual sites can be traced back to the early 1980s, when McKusick et al. (1985) compared the sexual risks of San Francisco gay men who met partners at a bathhouse to those of men who met in public bars. It should be noted that the Australian response to HIV has also taken account of the sites in which gay men meet; however, Australian HIV prevention strategies have focused more on specific behaviors within these spaces—such as condom use—rather than the sites themselves (see Sendziuk, 2003). However, a site-specific risk focus is still central to public health HIV/STI concerns in Australia and elsewhere, leading to continuing public health surveillance of gay men's sex-seeking "sites" (e.g., online communities, sex on premises venues, or apps like Grindr). This suggests that not just sexual behaviors but also partner seeking practices may be contextualized as risk behaviors, based on statistical and population-based associations between these sites and the sexual practices that follow their use. This site-based research connects with a history of early AIDS containment strategies (Disman, 2003), whereby risk sites were identified and surveilled, as public health authorities attempted to regulate their risk properties. For example, while acknowledging that there is "tension in the literature" regarding a causal link between online hook-ups and unprotected sex, Grosskopf, LeVasseur, and Glaser (2014) argue that online spaces (understood as risky venues) may be a factor in HIV transmission:

> There may be differences in men who use the Internet to seek sexual partners compared to men who do not. For example, the venue by which men meet their sexual partners may explain rising HIV infection rates. Specifically, it is thought that choice of venue may relate to greater sexual risk-taking. (p. 511)

This literature implies correlation between hook-up apps and a range of historical sites where men meet other men for sex and relationships. These apps, too, also reference historical cultures of hooking up, as Race (2015) notes when pointing out that "design features of online hook-up devices can only really be understood with reference to preceding infrastructures and environments that have shaped gay sexual practices and desires historically" (p. 499). Yet Race (2015) also argues that these devices are "producing transformations in these practices and relations" (p. 499).

To more critically engage with cultures of practice and dominant research frames around hook-up apps, these transformations need greater attention. Our aim, therefore, is to further explore young people's cultures of practice, including their accounts of negotiating risk and safety in dating and hook-up apps.

Significantly, lesbians and other same-sex attracted women seldom feature in studies of "risky" sexual environments, although (implicitly young, White, and heterosexual) women and girls are the focus of much of the literature on cybersafety and sexting, where they are predominantly framed as "at-risk" subjects[1] (Albury & Byron, 2014; Hasinoff, 2012; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). A neglected attention to same-sex attracted young women's use of digital media for sex and relationships is symptomatic of research cultures that prioritize the study of "risky groups" (Shoveller & Johnson, 2006) or that consider digital cultures as risky to heterosexual norms (Dobson & Ringrose, 2015).

A public health conflation of HIV risk with digital media risks can overshadow the ways in which online and digital media afford same-sex attracted young people the opportunity to explore and develop their identities through digital media (Pingel, Bauermeister, Johns, Eisenberg, & Leslie-Santana, 2013). In relation to young people's sexual health, a risk-focused research agenda that prioritizes condom use as the only strategy for safety fails to engage with young people's own narratives of negotiating sexual risks (Attwood & Smith, 2011; Bale, 2011; Bishop, 2011). Similarly, risk-based approaches to young people's cybersafety often overlook how young people narrate digital media risks and affordances (Livingstone, 2008). Discussing adolescents' exposure to sexual materials online, Livingstone and Görzig (2014) disentangle the concepts of risk and harm, arguing that some exposure to risk is necessary for young people to develop resilience in digital media environments. Acknowledging that the use of digital media can be harmful, they argue that harm is not a likely or inevitable outcome of young people's risky experiences online and that another outcome can be pleasure (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014, p. 9).

Studies of online dating websites that preceded hook-up apps have given valuable accounts of gay men's negotiations of safety. In researching gay men's perceived risks of meeting sex partners online, as well as their strategies for offsetting these risks, Bauermeister, Giguere, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, and Eisenberg (2010) found that the most commonly perceived risk was physical violence rather than sexual health risk. These risks were negotiated through a range of strategies including screening through online chat, arranging to meet in public places, and advising friends of arranged meetings (Bauermeister et al., 2010). While negotiating violence was not explicitly discussed by our participants, we find Bauermeister et al.'s observation that public health campaigns could expand their viewpoint of risks and safeties to be particularly salient in relation to our data.

Our approach does not seek to reject the notion of risk outright, but aims to expand narrow, medicalized definitions of risk deployed in sexual health research. Doing so better accommodates young people's everyday negotiations of risk and security/safety within mobile, online, and offline ecologies. Consequently, this article draws on three focus group interviews with young same-sex attracted men and women (aged 18-29) in Sydney, Australia.[2] All participants were over 18 and could therefore relate experiences of their own image production and sharing without falling foul of Australian laws (which potentially classify all "sexually suggestive" images of under-18s as child pornography). As the age of consent in New South Wales (NSW) is 16, the research team acknowledged the possibility that focus group participants would be likely to have younger friends and/or sexual partners. Consequently, we provided each participant with a plain English fact sheet (provided by the National Children's and Youth Law Centre) explaining State and Commonwealth laws relating to the production and sharing of sexual images—including sharing images with those aged under 18.

Our recruitment partner, the AIDS Council of NSW, runs a 6-week *Getting It Online* program, as part of a suite of sexual health outreach activities targeting 18- to 26-year-olds. These workshops address a range of health and safety issues associated with the use of dating and hook-up apps (including HIV stigma and racism in online chat forums) within a sex-positive peer education format. The participants in our focus groups were not directly asked about their use of hook-up apps or websites, however, but were invited to respond to popular discussions of sexting in educational materials and popular media texts, including "cybersafety" messages. The discussion that ensued morphed into a critical reflection on the participants' own picture sharing practices and the ways these practices (and those of their friends) diverged from mainstream accounts of "online risk." These young people also described their experiences of using dating and hook-up apps in ways that departed from the prevailing sexual health discourse. Their perceptions of risks and safety seemed to be influenced not just by specific practices (such as picture exchange and chat) but also by the affordances of the various apps and social networking platforms they used and the materiality of digital technologies themselves.

For participants in these groups, "risk" was not framed by HIV or sexual health, but discussed with reference to unwanted sexual contact or sexual harassment, the risk of outing in potentially unsafe settings (such as one's university or workplace), or risks of deception by "time-wasters" (in the best-case scenario) or sexual predators (in the worst-case scenario). The risk of a picture being shared without consent (which tends to be the central risk within sexting literature) was mentioned by both men and women, although it was not framed as the primary risk or concern for those who used hook-up apps. Participants deployed a range of strategies for managing these risks, including observing personal codes of conduct or "guidelines" which relied on a range of

technologies including close reading of profiles, negotiation via in-app picture-sharing, and staging conversations across online and offline spaces. Furthermore, the privacy or intimacy of the mobile phone itself (and the capacity to "contain" interactions within mobile apps) was seen to afford a sense of security to app-users.

Apps, Affordances, and Rules

While apps such as Brenda, Qrusher, Grindr, and Scruff are commonly understood as dating and hook-up apps, their uses are not necessarily restricted to facilitating online "matches," but are imbricated within a range of "offline" features, including geography, temporality, and social context. For example, Brubaker et al. (2014) observe that while Grindr can (in some circumstances) present users with a proliferation of erotic possibilities, in other contexts it can concretize an "absence of connection"—for example, in intensifying a sense of isolation within sparsely populated rural areas (p. 5). However, it was clear that our participants relied on the affordances of geo-locative apps to facilitate more than hook-ups. For example, one male participant discussed a friend's use of a hook-up app to co-ordinate (non-sexual) meetings—rather than texting friends who might be running late for an appointment, he used the geo-locative capacity of Grindr to map their proximity.

Blackwell et al.'s (2015) study found similar uses of Grindr by their interviewees, further observing that geo-locative features offered a possibility of "layering" experiences of sexuality and community within geographical spaces. The authors observe that Grindr (and by extension other hook-up apps targeting same-sex attracted people) offers unprecedented opportunities to "see and be seen." This process of "seeing" refers not only to one's visibility within a particular geographic location but also to visibility as a person expressing specific desires (i.e., to have sex with men). Within this context, app-users are "co-situated" not only as geographically proximate but also as potentially desiring (and potentially at risk of rejection, or stigmatization). As Blackwell et al. (2015) observe, this co-situation requires each app-user to deploy a range of resources (including profile pictures and strategies for chat) to clarify their "intentions" toward others (p. 1121).

For example, one participant believed that apps were not just for hooking up but to find new friends:

> The app, for same-sex attracted people, was a way of making friends when they were just coming out . . . I know my friend who just moved to [a new city], he got straight on there. He has a partner of like, years, but he got straight on Grindr when he went down there to meet gay guys who could be his friends down there. So I guess yeah, I think we use it more for friendship than straight people a little bit, if that's possible. (Leah)

This account echoes Blackwell et al.'s (2015) study, which observes that while Grindr was, in the past, primarily seen as a sexual hook-up app, strict rules around profiles and picture sharing both limit its possibilities for overt sexual use and emphasize the app's friend-finder and chat functions (p. 1120). Participants in our focus groups reported using apps for a range of "off-label"[3] purposes, including one aspiring dancer who used Grindr for professional networking.

For some of our participants, the use of an app facilitated participation in "gay space," even when the app-user occupied an ostensibly heterosexual physical environment (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 1127). Indeed, as Roth (2014) observes, "coding spaces as 'gay' or 'straight' becomes less important when an application's grids of nearby profiles can be overlaid atop any space where a user has a cellular data connection" (p. 2127).

For example, Leah described using geo-locative apps in a playful or "funny" way to foster a sense of pleasurable belonging by making the presence of other same-sex attracted people visible (while not directly interacting with them). This practice not only evokes Blackwell et al.'s model of "co-situation" but also aligns with forms of app use that Hjorth and Lim (2012) describe as mobile intimacy or "the overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social" (p. 478). It also resonates with the practices of Grindr usage that Batiste (2013) has termed "queer cartography":

Leah: It's funny when I go with friends to somewhere like out of the way, like I was in [a capital city] on the weekend, and it was like, wow, let's see who's around . . .

Rosie: [Laughing] "Who's in [capital city]?"

Leah: Just out of curiosity so it would be funny, right. I don't know if it [the hookup app] was designed for that purpose or it was just designed for like, you know, finding other queer identifying people in the area. Because that to me, coming from outer suburbia, is a fun thing, because I turn it on when I'm at my mum's place in [outer West suburb] and it's like, "Other young, other queer girls in [outer West suburb]!" . . . There's way more now, but growing up certainly I didn't feel that way.

As in Blackwell et al.'s (2015) study, geo-location was viewed as a risk factor by some participants, making app-users visible to others in spaces where they were not "out" (p. 1133):

> A friend of me who is a teacher, he's always afraid to connect when at school, he'd only connect if very far from school. He's afraid . . . (Luc)

> My friend is so scared of being outed that he—because he's always on the application and you always know which 500 people are the closest proximity to him at all times. Sometimes he'll be at university and he'll see someone in the same classroom with him. And if they're online he just hides his profile or blocks that person instantly . . . (Lauren)

One participant was concerned not so much with being seen within the app, but being seen offline by others while chatting on Grindr (several participants in this group remarked on the distinctive visibility of the bright orange Grindr and Hornet logos):

> I've actually been seen, because I have it on my phone and I've actually been seen on it by someone, and someone said "oh, what's that?" I'm like "Oh, it's just a talking app like Facebook" . . . so I'm, like, phew. (Nathan)

It seems clear that while seeing and being seen using hook-up apps can be a means of establishing a sense of belonging, pleasure, or safety for some users, for others, being seen in the wrong setting or context can be perceived as risky. It is unsurprising then that participants told stories of strategies they (and their friends) had developed to minimize their exposure in settings where they did not want to be identified as queer. This strategic deployment of queer visibility resonates with Gray's (2009) accounts of young people's negotiation of safety and visibility in the rural US state of Kentucky. Just as Gray's (2009) informants reported making the strategic choice to display a rainbow flag decal on their car window in "safer" locations only to remove it in others (pp. 165-166), young people in our study appeared to engage in contextual risk-assessment processes around the use of apps.

Some participants described these strategies in relation to personal codes of conduct or "rules" to be deployed when chatting or exchanging pictures or when deciding to meet a new partner offline. These rules were deployed both to help users negotiate the co-situated environment of the app and to establish boundaries (and safety-nets) for in-person meetings. As Josh put it, "There's risks, but you counteract them with your own set of guidelines that you have." Similarly, Nathan observed, "There's just certain rules that you have to kick in and go, I'm not going to talk to anyone with a blank profile." These rules and guidelines seem to rely on what Farman (2012) terms "the construction of embodied space" via mobile technologies (p. 21). Users developed a sense of the trustworthiness of a potential partner through a reciprocal process of in-app text and image exchange, that might then connect with other forms of sensory exchange (such as Skype or voice calls) and possibly (but not necessarily) a face-to-face meeting. As Nathan elaborated, his personal guidelines for establishing trust and safety with a new sexual partner involved a staged series of online and offline interactions, across a range of networked platforms and spaces that might, following van Dijck (2013), be described as an intimate culture of connectivity:

> I try to sometimes stick to a three-step thing. Which . . . I meet them on Grindr or whatever, then talk to them on Skype or Snapchat, whatever, and then I, we meet in a public place.

> Because, I mean, like I said before, those people that just meet at someone's house, you don't know who's going to be there or anything. (Nathan)

Nathan clarified that these guidelines were flexible and not always followed. Interestingly, this group of male participants observed that they were less likely to follow precautions when meeting a new partner through an app, as opposed to when they met people from dating and hook-up websites. Interestingly, no participants explicitly mentioned the mobile as a safety device in terms of being able to call for help if necessary, although Cumiskey and Brewster (2012) observe that the association of mobiles with safety is common among young heterosexual women. Rather, it seemed that the perceived sense of intimacy and control attributed to apps and mobile phones contributed to users' sense of security and control:

> When I was younger [I was afraid] to find, on a dating website, to find homophobic people hidden behind a profile . . . With the apps, we go to meet very quickly. (Luc)

> It feels more personal. It feels like you have a lot—a little bit more control over the phone than online. (Josh)

"Photos Should be Made Mandatory": Pictures, Authenticity, and Trust

Some participants attributed their sense of security to their use of mobile phone apps in general, and in-app picture-sharing in particular. While picture-sharing was mentioned as a risk factor in terms of potential outing/exposure, it was explicitly or implicitly described by all groups as "what apps are for." As in Blackwell et al.'s (2015) study, our participants did not simply seek pictures for purposes of arousal, but relied heavily on their interpretation of other users' images in order to navigate the layered in-app space where multiple goals (e.g., sex, friendship, chat, or in worst-case scenarios, exploitation, or deception) might co-exist (p. 1129).

Male participants in particular described the advantages and disadvantages of different hook-up apps in terms of their barriers to sharing images. Pictures were obviously an aspect of erotic negotiation (and entertainment), but were seen as a crucial means of establishing trust with a potential partner—as Luc put it, "If people don't send [photos], it seems weird." Participants particularly factored profile pictures into their assessments of which partners might be safe (where safety might be measured by perceptions of "authenticity") and which users might be risky/fake. Face pictures were particularly valued in this respect:

> I always ask for someone's age and a face picture, before I end up talking to them, because that kind of gives me a little bit of security knowing that it's an actual person. Then I go back to

their display picture and if the pictures aren't the same, then I go, well, something's going on here. Bye. (Nathan)

It was clear that for most participants, picture exchange through apps was not simply useful; it was an essential step for establishing trustworthiness within sexual negotiations. When asked to describe the elements of a "fake" picture and/or profile, the all-male focus group responded as follows:

Josh: The fake photo just kind of comes down to what it looks like. If it looks like it's from a website, if it doesn't look like someone like that would actually exist in the normal world, chances are they probably don't. So—or if that's the only photo they've got and they've got no information . . .
Nathan: Yeah.
Josh: They've got no blurb. It's just a photo, my instinct kicks in. I'm like, yep cool, next, fake!
Nathan: Or even those with no photo at all.
Josh: Yeah. Those ones. I love those ones.
Nathan: Yeah. I mean, that's stupid. Photos should be made mandatory.
Josh: Yeah.
Nathan: I mean, that's why, like, before meeting someone, even as a friend, I'll say can you send a face picture and then they do. I mean, some of them think a face picture means down there, but—that's what they think. It's really—so I just go "block."
Josh: Yeah. No it is true. Like, there's even pictures of dogs and bridges . . .
Nathan: I know. It's . . .
Josh: You're like, it's an iPhone. I know you have a camera. What are you hiding?

Young women also used pictures to measure authenticity. As Lauren observed, "sometimes it'll be men" who are "sending pictures of naked women and saying send us your pic now." This was also noted in another group:

Rosie: I'm always suspicious if there's some really hot Photoshopped babe on a same-sex attracted site. I'm like, you know what, it's just a straight guy being like, "show me your boobs."
Leah: Especially if there's only one picture.
Rosie: Yeah, always.

Female participants expressed frustration that women's hook-up apps were not moderated more strictly to exclude heterosexual men. Rosie recounted an incident of sexual harassment, in which she received an unsolicited picture when using a women-only app:

I had a horrible experience where I was on an all-female, female identifying app, and just got this like cock and I was like, oh my God, that's so unnecessary. (Rosie)

As the above anecdote illustrates, picture-sharing plays an essential role in establishing trust within in-app conversations and flirtations and also amplifies breaches of trust and goodwill. These breaches do not always involve outright deception (e.g., heterosexual men posing as women); trust can also be breached when photos are sent or received "at the wrong time," or in such a way that the recipient is surprised or "caught out":

Some people will just start with a message—hey sexy, or hey cutie or hey honey or something, and then like 10 seconds later they've sent you their nude pic. It's like, I didn't ask for this yet. I didn't want to wake up to that . . . (Lauren)

You're like, Jesus, it's nine o'clock in the morning. I'm on my way to work. Thanks. (Nathan)

It's funny, but there are instances when you get caught out. Like, I kept my sexuality very hidden at work, so to have that happen [receive an unsolicited nude] at a new job, I freaked out. (Josh)

Participants reported a range of personal safety rules one might follow when sharing pictures—for example, being careful not to include one's face in a sexually explicit selfie. One young woman had a policy of only sending sexual photos after intimacy had been established:

If I've been physically intimate with them I feel I can trust them enough with the photos, that that's not going to go around the internet. Because if I've gone that far then it means that I already know their personality enough to trust them with it. (Lauren)

Several participants discussed their partners' wishes and desires as a factor in their decision to share (or not share) pictures. For example, Bec discusses an agreement within her polyamorous relationships:

Both of the relationships that I'm in have both forbidden me from sending any like, explicit pictures to anyone and including themselves. Because they lack the trust—in just humanity as a whole including themselves—to believe that it's not going to end up somewhere that's going to end up damaging to me. (Bec)

Nathan had a policy of immediately deleting his photos so that they could not be discovered on his phone:

But yeah, I mean, in the rare event that I'd send one—I mean, I rarely do it, because I know that once it's out there, it's out there forever, but yeah, I would delete it from my phone immediately, because that's very personal. (Nathan)

Materiality, Mobile Intimacy, and Safety

The materiality of the mobile phone (and mobile apps) was intrinsic to participants' perceptions of risk. Nathan, who is 18 years old, emphasized the safety of the phone in relation to his ability to control other people's access to information regarding his sexuality. While the (shared) home computer was a risky space for chatting and sharing pictures, his phone could not be accessed by his parents. The privacy and intimacy of the password-protected phone were described by both male and female participants as promoting a sense of safety and security that would not have been there "ten years ago on Gaydar"—although, as one participant put it, this could also be seen as a "false sense of security":

Nathan: Yeah. Like, with your history and everything, you don't necessarily—well, you can easily get rid of the history and everything.
Josh: Yeah. No. It's the same. Like, being at that home PC thing and I had a computer in my room, when I was a kid, and you're always clearing your browser history in case Dad wanted to come on, or Mum wanted to come home. Especially when you were still experimenting and you didn't know. Well, my phone is password locked. No one knows it. No one touches my phone, so it's a lot—you think you're safe, but in reality . . .
Nathan: You're not really, no.

Apps were particularly valued as "containers" for sexually explicit pictures and chat, a metaphor we adapted from Richardson's (2007) phenomenological exploration of mobile gaming practices. Richardson (2007) observes that while much of the literature on mobile media focuses on images and image-sharing, many of her ethnographic subjects chose not to share images via MMS or SMS, but used their phone image libraries as a personal archive or "private reminders of places and people" (p. 212). Where they did choose to share a personally meaningful image from their archive, Richardson's (2007) subjects physically handed their phone/container to those they trusted (p. 212). The metaphor of containment seemed to us to be useful within our research, as it helped us reflect on the ways that our participants described their phones, and apps themselves, as physical boundaries that promoted a sense of privacy and interiority, as well as providing a means of social or sexual connection with others.

App-users appreciated the sense of safety afforded by exchanging pictures within apps as opposed to text or picture messaging via their phone. As Josh put it, "I personally confine everything to an app. I very rarely give out my number." Additionally, both men and women were prepared to block other app-users if they experienced unwanted contact:

If I was to do it [send a nude picture], I would probably do it more so on an app than I would on my own phone number. That's because I don't want these people having my phone number, so—and that's security, as well. I don't want them having a number and then that harassment kind of start. (Josh)

This was not presented as a fool-proof strategy—indeed, the group recounted stories of unwanted contacts from app-users they had blocked, who had later contacted them from a newly created profile. Apps were still seen as resources that might "contain" harassment, however, because they could be entirely deleted if necessary, leaving no opportunities for ongoing contact:

I know that if it's all confined to an app . . . I can either delete the app or I can block them. And the moment I can delete the app or I block it, from what I know, my history is gone. They can't see me any more on those things or those pictures are gone, unless they've saved them. The chat history's gone and everything like that. So that's kind of a precaution, as well. (Josh)

Several participants implied that once a relationship was established, picture-sharing might (or even should) take place via phone, rather than app—in fact one young woman demanded that her partners delete any dating and hook-up apps once a (monogamous) relationship was established since they constituted "temptation." These accounts suggest that the privacy and safety that users invested in a hook-up app were interdependent with (and contingent upon) the sense of security the app-user invested in their mobile phone. As de Souza e Silva and Frith (2012) note, mobile phone technologies challenge traditional notions of "public" and "private" space. In order for mobiles to remain private within the context of partner relationships, users "must rely on trust and . . . an expectation of how others will behave" (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 74). Similarly, Lasén and Casado (2012) observe that mobile phone and app use can reveal the tension and "controversies" within intimate relationships, by amplifying the potential for both connection and separation/autonomy. Expectations regarding the privacy on mobiles are not universally shared, and can cause conflict between friends and partners:

I was in a couple, in a relationship with [a guy], and one day he investigated on my phone, he found that I was chatting around. And so we breakup because of that, so after I put the code, and now I'll always close my phone, because I say, it's private. (Luc)

Both male and female participants recounted stories of occasions where the boundary of the password-protected mobile was breached, and a sexy selfie was inadvertently or almost seen by a friend or family member:

Ashleigh: My dad loves to look at my photos. He goes "show me your photos of your trip" and just like picks up my phone. I'm like "Can you not? I wouldn't look on there if I were you."

Bec:	(laughing) I am showing you one photo on my phone, one photo!
Lauren:	(laughing) Don't swipe left or right. I think that kind of almost should become an unwritten social rule.
Ashleigh:	Yeah. I think it is. I wouldn't just go through someone's photos.
Josh:	Yeah, it's kind of a taboo. Like, I don't go into anyone's photos, gay or straight, on a phone, for that particular reason. I've got girlfriends that do the sexting and everything like that.
Nathan:	Yeah.
Josh:	I don't want be, Look! (mimes swiping) Baby, baby, holiday, holiday, boob.

These stories resonate with Lasén's (2004, 2013) account of mobile phones as "affective technologies," which are not only touched intimately and held close to the user's body, but are invested with their users' desires and emotions. As extensions of their users' embodied sexual subjectivities (in the form of hook-up apps, chat, and selfies), mobiles are also subject to bodily taboo. That said, as Lasén (2013) suggests, the ubiquity of picture-sharing practices among hook-up app-users creates conditions that can mitigate embarrassment when pictures are shared accidentally with the sense that users are "all in this together" (p. 95). Certainly, participants in our focus groups expressed a combined sense of embarrassment and good humor in relation to their own accounts of inadvertent oversharing or seeing "too much" of a close friend's profile or pictures when using an app.

In terms of user risks, Nathan raised his concern regarding the significant legal risk that might arise for him if he unknowingly chatted or exchanged sexual images with under-aged app-users who used a false birthdate to establish a profile. Aged 18, he was particularly concerned because he knew that he had himself "faked" his profile when he was not yet legally able to join Grindr.[4] An older participant also discussed this risk:

It happens sometimes, I mean, [I met a] guy on apps who's 18 and he told me after, he was under-18, but he said, because he said when he put under-18 nobody exchanged with him, so that's why he [changed his age] . . . People between sixteen and eighteen, if they cannot action pictures [on an app], they feel out of the community, because now it's an important way of meeting someone. (Luc)

Conclusion

It was clear that both mobiles and apps contributed to participants' perceptions of safety and risk when flirting, or meeting with new sexual partners. This was not expressed as it has been in literature on mobiles and personal safety, where the phone provides a means to call for help in a dangerous situation (Cumiskey & Brewster, 2012; Ling, 2004). Rather, the phone was seen as a means of managing intimate encounters (including messaging and picture exchange) across different settings and contexts. Apps were used to map "queer cartographies" onto familiar and unfamiliar spaces (Batiste, 2013), and to maintain personal security when exchanging pictures. If containment represented a key safety strategy, then the mobile could be seen to contain the app, and the app itself contained one's pictures and chat histories. Users strategically engaged with the security features of apps to block unwanted approaches, to conceal themselves in spaces where they were not "out," and to manage privacy concerns when interacting with potential sex partners. Of course, this was not a fool-proof strategy, and participants clearly did not view it as such. The geo-locative capacity of mobile apps meant that users might encounter "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011) within these spaces, by accidentally accessing explicit details of their (platonic) friends' sexual representations and preferences via their profiles. Both mobiles and apps were clearly permeable in places, and vulnerable to different kinds of leakage—this is where personal rules and codes of conduct were brought into play as an additional protective device.

Lasén's (2013) discussion of the sense that users are "all in this together" (p. 95), along with participants' shared sense of embarrassment and humor in their use of dating and hook-up apps, relates to Warner's (2000) observation of queer culture as having a shared politics of shame: "If sex is a kind of indignity, then we're all in it together" (p. 36). Warner discusses this "dignity in shame" as a key aspect of same-sex attracted communities, enforcing a sense of shared cultural spaces that can challenge dominant sexual cultures. It might therefore be said that "new" queer practices of digital intimacy emerging from the use of geo-locative hook-up apps involve creative and political practices of sexual subjectification. As noted by Race (2015), sexual relations are "taking new forms, assuming new genres and proceeding through new avenues in their encounter with digital media" (p. 503).

The aim of this article is not to judge whether our participants' strategies for using apps were "truly" safe or risky. Reflecting on Race's (2015) discussion of gay men's digital practices as "speculative pragmatism and intimate arrangements," we are interested in the ways that same-sex attracted men and women are negotiating the perceptions of safety and risk associated with hooking up and dating. While participants identified a range of strategies (including picture-sharing) for gauging the "authenticity" of potential partners, the process of establishing a sense of safety was always contingent, and subject to the re-negotiation of personal strategies, including rules and guidelines. As Race (2015) puts it, "digital devices are affording novel ways of arranging sex, intimacy and sexual community with their own qualities and limitations." making it "necessary to develop modes of research and education that grasp the performativity of these objects and remain open to these virtualities" (p. 508). Our aim, therefore, is not to dismiss sexual health promotion's current risk framings (which provide a necessary motivator for certain kinds of funding and community practice), but to

extend this understanding of risk (and safety) to better account for emerging practices of young people's digital intimacies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The authors explore the discursive construction of "sexting" and risk as it applies to young heterosexual women at length in Albury, Crawford, Byron, and Mathews (2013) and Albury and Byron (2014).
2. These group discussions formed part of the *Young People and Sexting in Australia* project, funded by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation, with the support of the National Children's and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC). In the first year of the project, 16- and 17-year-olds were invited to share their perspective on legal, educational, and popular media discourses relating to sexting (or the digital practice of sharing naked and semi-naked pictures). In the second year, we partnered with the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON), in order to tease out what the research team identified as implicitly and explicitly heteronormative assumptions within Australian "sext education." This second stage of research was approved by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Ethics Committee (Approval no. HC12050) and the ACON Research Ethics Review Committee.
3. The term "off-label" is most often applied to alternative therapeutic uses of drugs that have been prescribed to treat a specific medical condition. We have adopted the use of the term to refer to creative uses of hook-up and dating apps for purposes other than those "prescribed" by the app's developers and promoters. Our use of this term is derived from a 2014 Forbes article by tech journalist Jeff Bercovici (2014), which documents a range of off-label uses for apps, websites, and gaming platforms, including the use of Tinder for business networking; LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram for dating; Couchsurfer for hook-ups; and World of Warcraft for "secret" messaging.
4. It should be noted that it is unlikely that an 18-year old would face charges in New South Wales for chatting or exchanging pictures with a 16- or 17-year old—but legally, there is a possibility that this could occur.

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