



# “They’re the modern-day gay bar”: Exploring the uses and gratifications of social networks for men who have sex with men



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## ABSTRACT

There currently exist many mobile social networks for men who have sex with men (MSM), from stand-alone applications like Grindr and Jack'd, to the on-the-go versions of established websites such as Adam4Adam or Manhunt. It has become increasingly common for MSM to seek out others by means of online social networks, and for a variety of purposes. This paper explores the motivations for MSM-specific social networking use, and the sought gratifications associated with this type of computer-mediated interpersonal interaction. In an online survey yielding 143 participants, men were asked their thoughts about social networking phone applications for gay, bisexual, and other MSM. Using these data, seven categories of sought gratifications were identified: safety, control, easiness, accessibility, mobility, connectivity, and versatility.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's highly digital, immediacy-driven culture, the very idea of dating without technological aid is becoming an increasingly archaic notion. While not all individuals are looking for mates online, many are using new technology to find and maintain romantic or sexual relationships. At the very least, most daters are texting or iMessaging with new suitors, and many others are exchanging photos, having webcam chats, and swapping social media profile information with potential partners. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, the Internet might be even more important, as there are unique barriers to meeting partners in a non-virtual context (e.g. physical safety or determining others' sexual orientation) that LGBTQ people encounter, but heterosexuals do not as often face.

Because of how technology helps to facilitate the initiation of interaction with other LGBTQ individuals, a multitude of queer-based social networking websites have spawned since the Internet's invention. In the last few years, mobile-based applications have begun to dominate, and many queer web-based social networks (e.g. Adam4Adam) have even developed on-the-go apps to keep up with the pace of today's dating and sex-seeking age. While scholars have increasingly begun to explore social networks for men who have sex with men (MSM), focus is often on the sexual health aspects of meeting others online, or on the more negative interpersonal issues that may arise, such as racism or anti-femininity values. It is uncommon for research to examine

the particular reasons behind MSM-specific social network use, and the actual gratifications queer men receive from engaging with others on these digital networks. The current study employs a uses and gratifications theory framework to exploring the motivations behind men's utilization of MSM-based social networking platforms.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Uses and gratifications

An audience-centered approach to media research, uses and gratifications posits that people have inherent needs that the media can satisfy (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Needs are satisfied for an individual when they are fulfilled by specific types of media that meet their expectations (Katz et al., 1974), and focus is on the individual differences of active audience members and their preexistent needs (Haridakis, 2002). According to Palmgreen, Wenner, and Rosengren (1985), the basic function of uses and gratifications theory is to explicate how media consumers' needs and context interact and originate. It aims to establish the social and psychological factors that create needs and that guide behaviors (Katz et al., 1974). These behaviors then frame expectations about perceived or actual media use (Katz et al., 1974; Palmgreen et al., 1985; Rubin, 2009; Sundar & Limperos, 2013), impacting patterns of media exposure or engagement and resulting in need gratifications or other unintended consequences (Katz et al., 1974).

An important distinction has been made between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained, wherein gratifications sought

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are the initial expectations associated with media use and gratifications obtained are the actual fulfillments obtained from the media. Gratifications sought are continually modified by the gratifications that are obtained, which then impacts future gratifications sought in subsequent media use (LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001; Palmgreen et al., 1985). Sundar and Limperos (2013) elucidate the notion that all gratifications obtained by media use are not necessarily innate, suggesting that “the interactivity of most modern media makes possible such a conceptualization whereby users are not always goal-directed at the beginning of their engagement of media, but tend to develop needs during the course of their media interaction” (p. 510).

Sundar and Limperos (2013) recently reviewed 20 uses and gratifications studies, revealing much overlap in gratifications between new and old media. These include gratifications such as escape, arousal, and relaxation. For example, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) identified a number of gratifications for Internet use, including interpersonal reasons, passing time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. Similar gratifications were identified when Haridakis and Hansen (2009) examined YouTube videos. They found that people used this particular type of media for convenient entertainment, interpersonal connection, convenient information seeking, escape, co-viewing, and social interaction.

However, Sundar and Limperos (2013) noted two important trends; first, that new gratifications do emerge alongside new technologies, and second, that newer technologies cause some of the more general gratifications to become more nuanced and exact. While much previous literature has established two dimensions of gratifications – process and content gratifications – for television use, more recent work has illuminated a third dimension of social gratifications that is exclusive to new media (Stafford, Stafford, and Schkade, 2004). For example, Chen (2011) studied Twitter users and identified a need for connection as a driving force behind Twitter usage. The more time a user spent on the medium, the more he or she gratified this need for companionship.

Ezumah (2013) examined the uses and gratifications associated with four popular social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and LinkedIn. Participants chose Facebook as their preferred social network because of its ease of navigation, user-friendliness, popularity, interactivity, universal scope, and eclectic set of possible functions. In a slightly different tactic, Pai and Arnott (2013) took a value-focused approach to researching social networks, identifying four main values obtained from social networking site adoption: belonging, hedonism, self-esteem, and reciprocity. A number of other gratifications have also been identified in relation to new media, including mobility (Kim, Sundar, & Park, 2011; Wei & Lo, 2006), personal identity enhancement (Joinson, 2008), photo sharing (Ezumah, 2013; Joinson, 2008), agency (Sundar, Oh, Bellur, Jia, & Kim, 2012), keeping in touch with friends and family (Ezumah, 2013) and interactivity (Sundar, 2008).

## 2.2. MSM-specific social networking

As a newer medium, mobile applications have not been studied as widely as websites designed for social networking, both generally and in a queer context. Nevertheless, there exists a body of research that is useful for analyzing online interaction and social networking for MSM. For example, Rhodes (2004) identified MSM-specific social networks as a hospitable environment for HIV/AIDS prevention. Indeed, much of the literature on Grindr and like applications stems from the perspective of analyzing sexual behavior, the outcome, rather than the motivations for using MSM-specific social networking applications in the first place

(e.g. Burrell et al., 2012; Grosskopf, LeVasseur, & Glaser, 2014; Holloway et al., 2013; Landovitz et al., 2013; Rendina, Jimenez, Grov, Ventuneac, & Parsons, 2014). Nonetheless, others have begun to explore the ways in which MSM use social networks, and the purposes for which they seek out these online spaces.

Gudelunas (2012) conducted an exploratory study that discovered gay men used social networks for the dual purpose of finding social and sexual contacts. In his study, Gudelunas (2012) points to anonymity, which he views as falling on a spectrum, as an important factor in men's use of social networks. He postulates that, “One of the unique gratifications of gay-specific SNSs like Grindr is the sliding scale of anonymity provided. For some, this choice to conceal their identity had to do with safety, and for others it had to do with simply not wanting to be recognized on a sexseeking SNS” (Gudelunas, 2012, p. 362). Men were found to disclose more about themselves on sex-specific social networking sites than on general audience sites (Gudelunas, 2012).

Social networking websites have also been determined to be a resource for LGBTQ teenagers considering suicide (Silenzio et al., 2009), particularly because younger sexual minorities tend to use online communities more for social support than older queer people, who use them more for sexual gratification (Baams, Jonas, Utz, Bos, & Van Der Vuurst, 2011). Other studies have examined everything from the management of privacy on Gaydar (Cassidy, 2013) to online images as cultural currency for MSM (Mowlabocus, 2010) to constructions of the body on Internet Relay Chat rooms for bears and muscle men (Campbell, 2004). However, as newer mobile applications increase in popularity, researchers are provided with a consistently new set of online spaces to discover. Therefore, the current study focused on overall MSM-specific application use rather than a specific application such as Grindr or Scruff.

Two specific benefits of online networks facilitating a queer sense of belonging are the anonymity of computer-mediated space and the ease of connection between likeminded people (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Anonymity and straightforwardness are two concepts that frame much of the arguments in this paper, though the research also draws on the previous literature concerning the uses and gratifications of new technology in a more mainstream context. It is important to note that the focus here is on the *sought* gratifications; whether these gratifications are consistently obtained is beyond the scope of this paper. As will be considered in the discussion section of this paper, the data implies that men are likely not obtaining the gratifications they seek with regularity – at least, not all men.

## 3. Method procedure

Data for this study were collected in fall 2013 as part of a larger survey. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method; but efforts were also undertaken to achieve a random sample of men by recruiting in Facebook groups, on Twitter, in an online queer forum, and in e-mails sent to LGBTQ community members involved in queer organizations. For the purposes of this study, men were asked to answer a number of demographic questions, as well as closed-ended questions about their frequency of MSM-specific social networking phone and website use, which popular MSM-specific social networks they utilized, and their practices on these networks. The survey was anonymous, and no IP addresses or identifying data were retained about participants. Four open-ended questions were used to determine the specific uses and gratifications associated with MSM-specific social networking, which resulted in 28 pages of single-spaced data that were then thematically analyzed.

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