

Constructing a Desiring User

Discourse, Rurality, & Design in a
Location-Based Social Network

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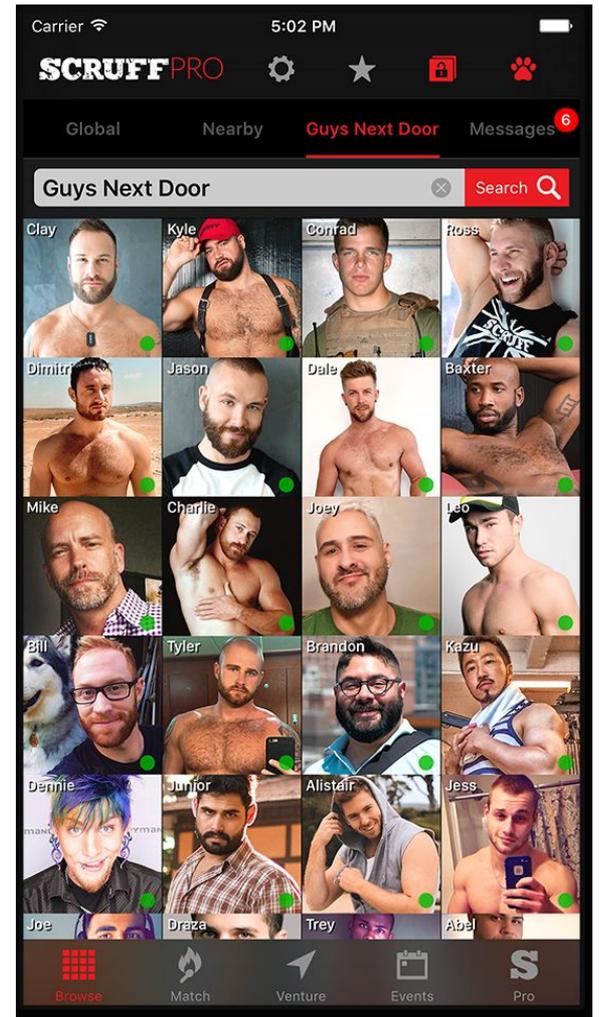
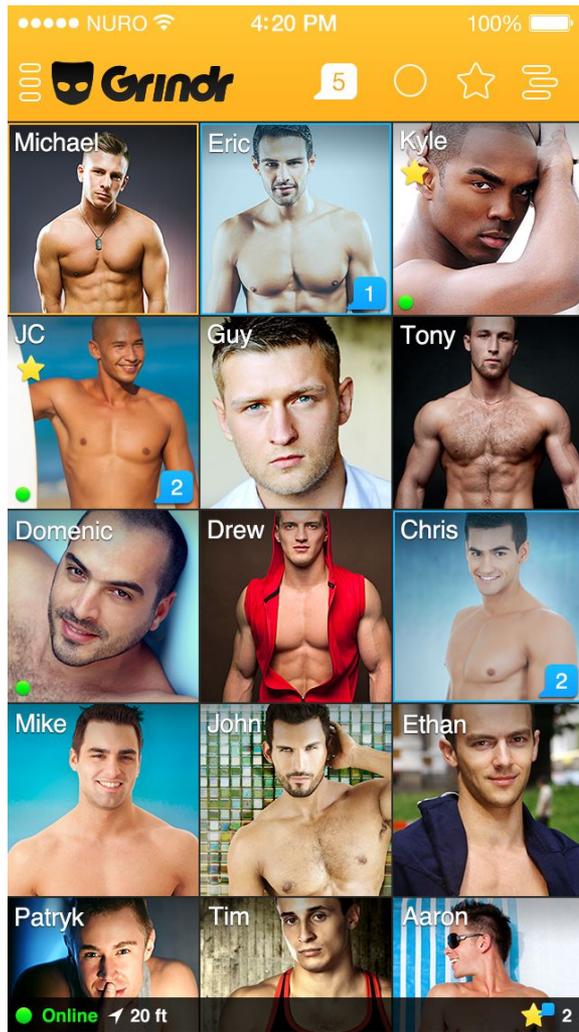
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THE KING OF GRINDR

Tech Insider.

Produced by Will Wei.



“

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-Joel Simkhai, Founder and CEO
of Grindr



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-Charles

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DESIRING USER

a user who expresses,
lives, and ultimately
desires a certain kind of
gay life and sexuality

Inspiration + Methods

Location-based social networks

disclosure, self-presentation, and desired sexual outcomes
and how it changes from location to location

(Birnholtz et al. 2014, Fitzpatrick et al. 2015, Gudelunas
2012, van De Wiele and Tong, 2014)

cultural and social processes, how use is situated to
conceptions of place

(Blackwell et al. 2015, Brubaker et al. 2014, Crooks 2013,
Roth 2014, Schwartz 2011)

**| what and whose sexuality
is produced in the design
and use of these apps?**

Scripts and the construction of the user

Feminist & Queer HCI

Bardzell 2010, Bardzell and Bardzell 2015, Gray 2009, Kannabiran et al. 2012, Light 2011

“We have to go back and forth continually between the designer and user, between the designer’s projected users and the real users, between the world inscribed in the object and the world described by its replacement.”

Akrich, 1992

Ethnography

13 interviews

- Gay-identified men
- Living in rural county as defined by USDA
- 20s-60s
- Six in person, seven over the phone
- Guided walkthrough + questions about use, meeting others, + LGBT friends

100s of hours of observation

- Online (the apps)
- In-person (local shops and restaurants, Pride festival)

Discourse Analysis

a method that is used with existing text or speech to analyze language as a form of social practice

~80 news articles, blog posts, and interviews with the founders and developers of Grindr and SCRUFF

Findings

**SCRUFF & Grindr's
desiring user**

Well-traveled

International

Urban

Whose window?



There are guys that message me in rural areas that have no gay community at all. No clubs, no resources, no support at all, and they're able to go on SCRUFF and find a community, find other people to talk to.

-Johnny Skandros, founder of SCRUFF



Everyone knows everyone

A window into a whole new gay world was not what emerged from our interviews and observations.

Apps make visible rural familiarity

Everyone knows everyone

Dean, 30

Recently moved back to rural Midwest after being away for a decade.

"I'll turn it on to see who's on 'cause there's only about like 30 gays within the region and **I'm friends with half of them.** Then I'll check out who's hot..And see if there's anybody new in town, of course, anybody visiting, obviously. But for the most part in [my region], **it's the same grid.**"

**“THE ONLY GAY IN THE
COUNTY”**

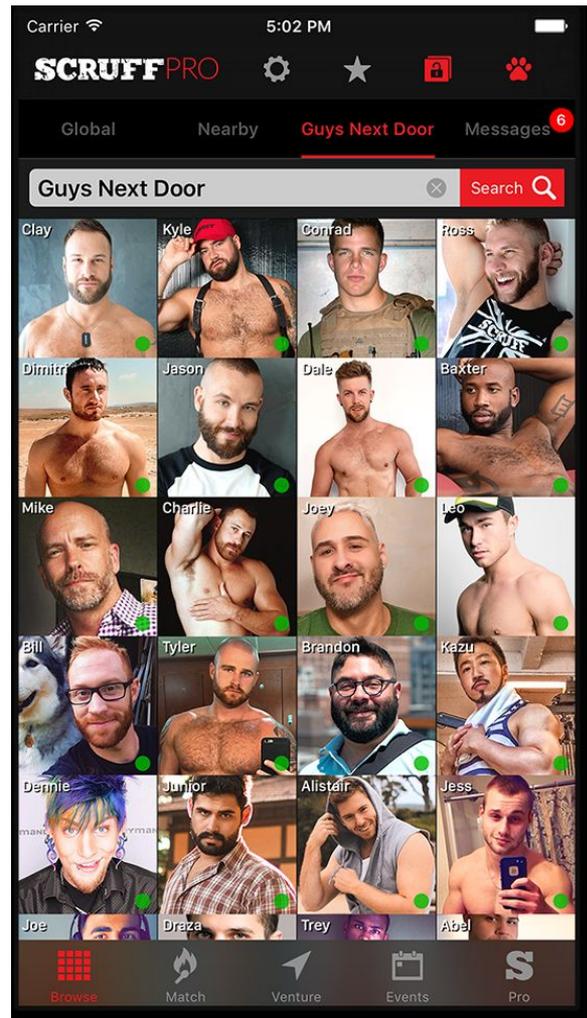
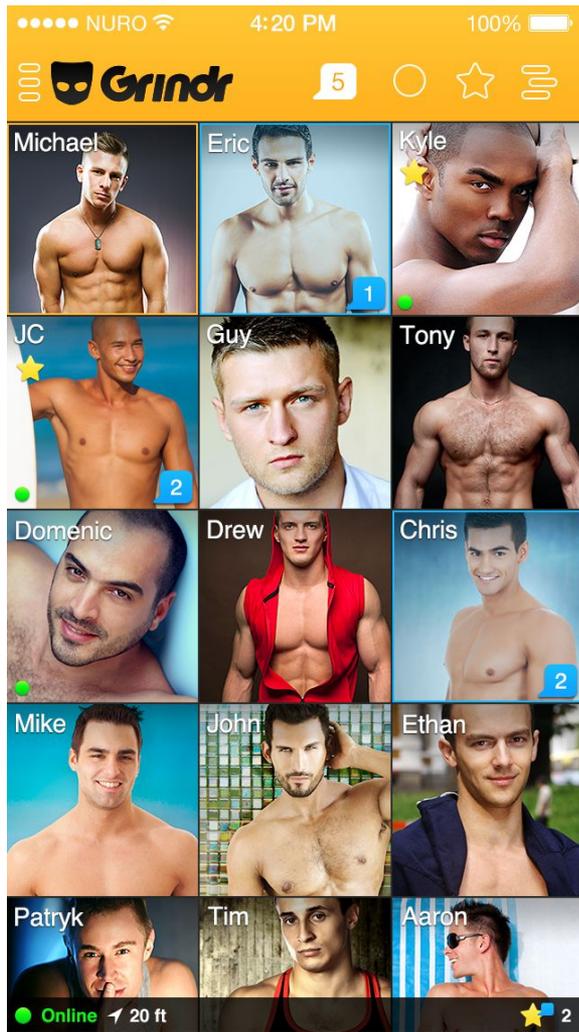
**“BETTER THAN SCRUFF’S GPS
LOCATOR”**

The interaction of design & distance

Intersection of design & distance

LSBNs are embedded in a long history of queer sociality that relies on place-based (and often underground) seeking and searching of others.

What happens when urban notions of gay community are designed into these apps and what does that intersection provide for the men we spoke to?

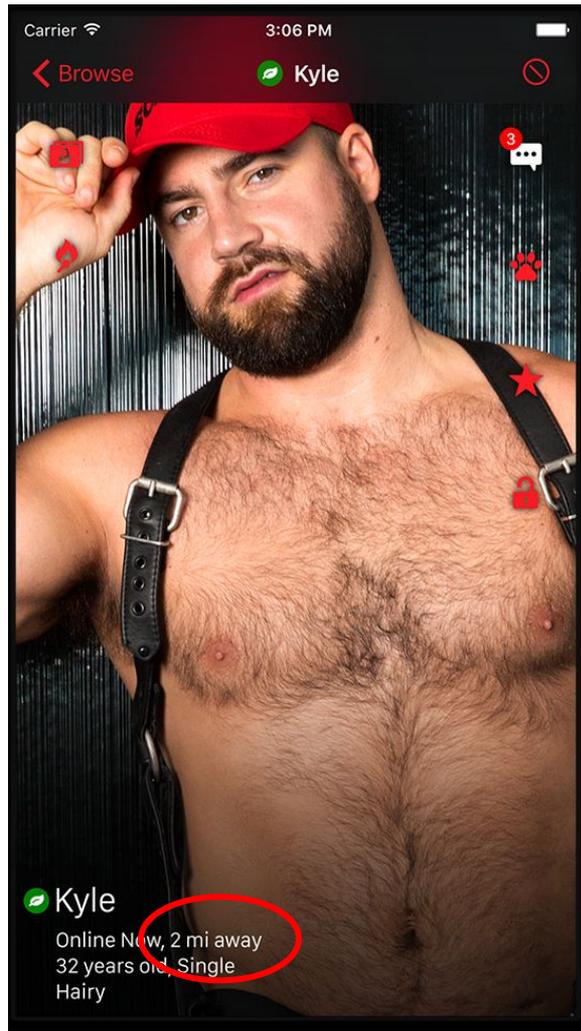
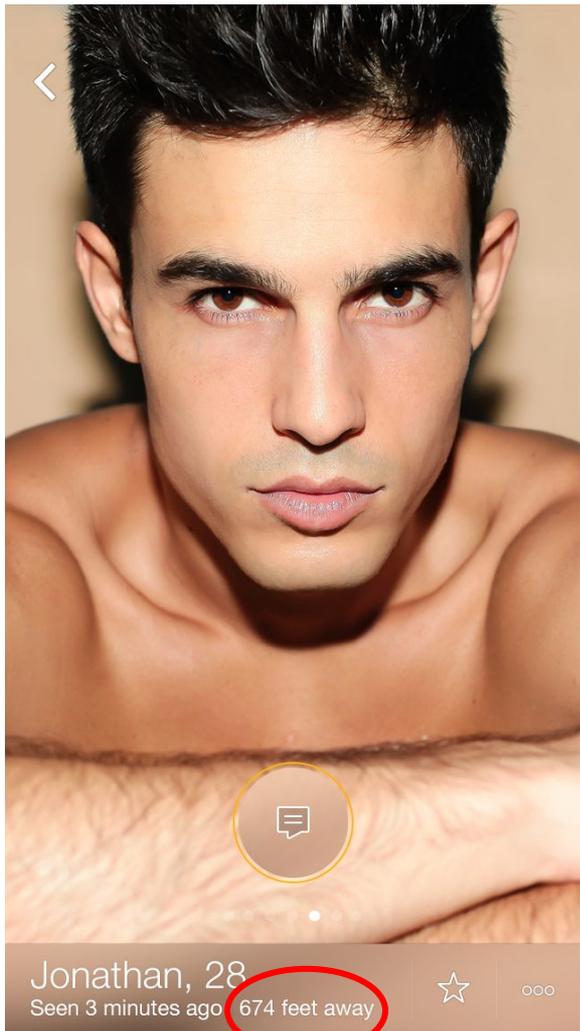




The grid never changes

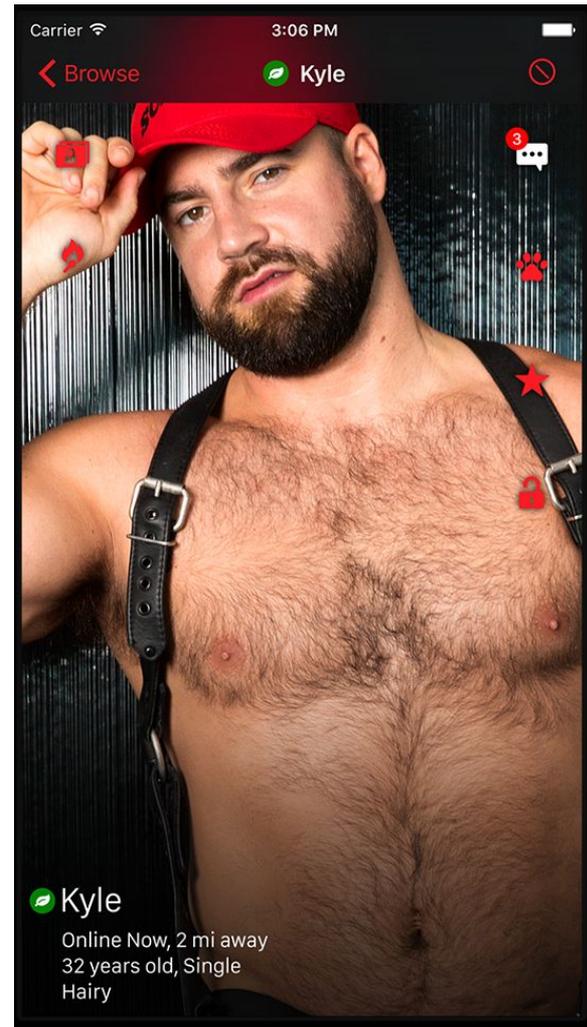
“By the time you get to the second row, it’s already going from users that are six miles away to users that are ten miles away. By the time you’re at the end of the third row, it’s already fifty miles away.”

-Matt



Closer than they appear...

This distance becomes helpful for filtering and prioritizing interactions, but breakdowns in rural areas.



“

I live in the country, up north. So as a bird flies, you're 36 miles away, but why does it take me an hour and a half to get there?

-Joe

Closer than they appear...

"Guys from Canada would appear on the nearby [tab], and they'd be right across the lake, but right across the lake is like 500 miles driving distance or more."

-Caleb



**Why were these apps used
at all?**

Intersection of design & distance

Being able to see so far wasn't always a bad thing :-)

Tom recalled maintaining relationships with those he moved away from:

"We just had been out of touch for so long, so it was just kind of neat to connect like that."

Discussion

Scripting the desiring user

Sexuality is scripted into technology by its creators and users. The desiring user, who expresses, lives, and ultimately desires a certain kind of gay life and sexuality, emerges as someone who is a result of both the companies and the men we spoke to.

“We have to go back and forth continually between the designer and user, between the designer’s projected users and the real users, between the world inscribed in the object and the world described by its replacement.”

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**Rather than a feature, proximity
and distance became a burden.**



What is / can be Queer HCI?

Queering (Light 2011)

“problematizing apparently structural and foundational relationships with critical intent”

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Increasing work in HCI & CSCW on experiences of queer and LGBT users, but we doubt it would fit this definition of Queer HCI.



We believe Queer HCI should...

account for the many ways in which experiences of queer subjectivity through technology happen at the intersection of design decisions and use.

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locate interventions in unexpected times and places.

Conclusion

Desiring user: a user who expresses, lives, and ultimately desires a certain kind of gay life and sexuality

We have demonstrated using ethnography and discourse analysis that the creators of SCRUFF and Grindr **script a universal gay user into their technology that does not align with the experiences of all their users**

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Affordances vs. scripting vs appropriation

Affordances often perceived as neutral middle ground where designer and user meet.

Scripting allows for this sort of back and forth negotiation that shows how multiple parties can insert their own political and subjective meaning into technology.

It's different from appropriation since use is still (for the most part) as intended. Not being appropriated for vastly different purposes.