Who are you?
Online practices of self-representation of black gay men at Rhodes University on the geosocial networking application Grindr

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how young black gay men at Rhodes University use technology to explore their sexual identity and focuses specifically on their self-representation choices. Incorporating qualitative semi-structured interviews and a walkthrough of Grindr, the research asked participants to share their experiences of using Grindr, a geo-social networking application, and how their self-representation practices on the site contributed to their conception of what it means to be a young black gay man online. Using a thematic analysis of the data collected from five self-identified black gay Rhodes University students, findings indicate that self-representation choices of black gay men on Grindr become a complex experience influenced by overt sexist and racist micro-aggressions in an environment where masculinities operate in a hierarchy of desire, preference, and attractiveness with race operating as an important signifier of these even in a post-Apartheid South Africa that is celebrated for its world-class Constitution.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Black: Used to refer to a range of social groupings who experienced common discrimination under the Apartheid state. I will use 'black' in a political rather than phenotypic sense.

Gay/Gay Identity: Although the terms "gay" and "homosexual" have been used interchangeably, researchers recognise that there are critical differences between the two. The term "homosexual" focuses on a person's sexual behaviour. The term "gay" recognises that sexual orientation is a part of an individual's larger identity. I will use "gay" or "gay identity" throughout the paper to reflect this distinction.

LGBTQ: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

Top: Those who penetrate

Bottom: Those who receive penetration

Versatile (vers): Those who receive and give penetration

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the experiences of black gay South African men within Rhodes University, a historically white institution, on Grindr, the gay dating platform. It aims to understand the choices that these young men make when constructing their online self-representations on Grindr.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Significant research exists on the experiences and identity development of gay students in South Africa and the use of social networking sites by university students in general, but there also exists a missing element in the literature. The experiences of black, gay, university students' use of social networking sites, especially gay-oriented sites have not been explored in South Africa.

Throughout the following research, I explore the experiences of black gay students to understand the dimensions that contribute to South African gay, black university students utilising the gay geosocial networking site Grindr. These include the following: navigation of gay identity in the campus environment, the socio-historical connection of race, gender, sexuality, and their intersection, as well the use of a gay geosocial networking site. Additionally, this research can serve as an important entry into understanding the experiences of gay men of colour in South Africa. Each of these aspects will be explored in further detail in the next chapter.

1.3 Context of the research

The setting of this research is a historically white university in South Africa which provides a rich opportunity for analysing the 'multiple grounds of identity construction' referred to by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). This is because while the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals are protected by the South African Constitution, challenges at the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender persist. As a historically white university, Apartheid legacies such as racism and heterosexism are still

encountered in the post-democracy campus environment, shaping the everyday experiences of LGBTQ individuals. Such racist and homophobic attitudes remain despite the official policy. Rhodes University currently has more than 8 000 registered students and prides itself on the transformation and inclusivity of all people regardless of their class, race, and sexual orientation. In common with many other South African universities, Rhodes University has put in place a range of formal policies that express its commitment to creating an environment for students that is free of discrimination, and many of these policies explicitly mention sexual orientation (Munyuki and Vincent, 2018).

On 10 December 1996, South Africa's new Constitution was signed into effect, making South Africa the first country in the world to include a sexual orientation clause in its Bill of Rights. The Constitution aimed to challenge all practices that oppose the principle of equality. It has been described as one of the most liberal in the world, determined to right the wrongs of apartheid (Graziano, 2004). Since then, the long-standing invisible and silent community of South African gay men and lesbians has become more visible. Despite the new Constitution, the state's capacity to protect gay men and lesbians from social injustices is low. Gay men and lesbians find themselves locked into the status of social deviants regarded by others as potential or actual criminals (Graziano, 2004).

According to Gibson and Macleod (2012), there is a significant gap between the ideals of the South African Constitution and lived reality. Furthermore, the authors assert, there exists persistent evidence of heterosexism at South African universities, despite progressive policymaking and intellectual debate based on liberal human rights and democratic transformation discourses. Although the latter reflects a broader trend to inclusivity within higher education, elsewhere, as others have found, heterosexism continues to be perpetuated within seemingly 'liberal' institutional frameworks (Gibson and Macleod, 2012).

The Internet has become a space for gay men where they can gather as they face all the challenges associated with living in a predominantly heterosexist social environment and Grindr, which launched in 2009, has emerged as one of the most important online social networks for gay men, with users in 192 countries, including South Africa. In this sense, it fulfils the view of McKenna and Bargh (1998) that gay geosocial networking applications play a significant role in the lives of many gay men. For the gay sexual minority, Grindr offers the opportunity to connect with others discreetly, a practice that raises issues regarding the management of online self-representation and identity. Recent research concerns itself

mainly with online identity construction of users in the developed world, a signal that there is room to explore how users choose to navigate their self-representation on Grindr in South Africa.

Although a large body of literature exists on the experiences of LGBTQ students at tertiary education institutions, little of this work has been conducted in South Africa (Munyuki and Vincent, 2017). Most of the existing research conducted at South African institutions of higher education has taken the form of surveys and questionnaires (De Bruin and Arndt, 2010) and these have focused on attitudes towards LGBTQ students. Matebeni and Msibi (2015) suggest that there has been little research in the educational field on the sexual experiences of black queer bodies in South Africa. Studies detailing the experiences of black queer bodies in this country are scant compared with the growing body of knowledge from countries such as the USA and the UK (Matebeni and Msibi, 2015). Entrenched in the invisibility of knowledge of black queer South African experience is the fact that it is mediated by race and therefore has remained largely undocumented, with very few scholars daring to research this (Matebeni and Msibi 2015).

1.4 Significance of the study

This study is of significance because the use of social networking sites by university students is a dominant feature of their everyday lives and this universal adoption and use of social networking sites are having a significant impact on how they develop an identity and interact with others. Not surprisingly, significant research has been conducted to examine how students use these sites and what impact they are having. Studies have also explored the impact of gender differences on social networking site use. However, research has not examined how black gay, university students use and are impacted by gay oriented social networking sites in South Africa. A study that focuses on how black gay, university men use gay geosocial networking sites like Grindr can make three significant contributions: (1) explore and describe what the experience is like for these students, (2) identify common benefits and challenges students experience on Grindr, and (3) offer critical insights into the complex intersection of their gender, racial, and sexual identities in the digital realm in 21st century South Africa.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

As indicated in the previous chapter although there exists some research on the experiences of LGBTQ students at South African universities (Boonzaier and Mhkize, 2018), this research continues to be sparse about historically underrepresented groups such as black gay students. This research has also focused predominantly on attitudes towards students who identify as LGBTQ as well as their identity development and their experiences on university campuses (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). While this offers broad understandings that are useful to the topic under discussion, I would argue that perhaps this focus of the research fails to provide a holistic understanding of gay university students. One omission in understanding the experiences of these students, as indicated in the first chapter, is the absence in the literature of how gay, black university students in South Africa use gay geosocial networking applications.

I approach this section of this work from an intersectional, gendered perspective that foregrounds gendered power together with other forms of oppression. Intersectionality is founded on the idea of the interconnections between multiple experiences and identities. It foregrounds black feminist theorising of gender oppression and how it is imbricated with racism, classism, and other forms of inequity. Collins (2000:228) in Boonzaaier and Mkhize (2018) describes the intersecting identities and experiences of oppression as a matrix of domination, referring to the "overall social organisation within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained". The matrix of domination illustrates how multiple forms of oppression shape and influence each other, and work as a system of oppression (Collins, 2000:228). Intersectionality is a useful framework, not only for the analysis of how power works to shape the experiences of black gay students, but also to analyse how these experiences might be transformed and changed (Boonzaaier and Mkhize, 2018).

2.2 The South African university environment for LGBTQ individuals

On 10 December 1996, South Africa's new Constitution was signed into effect, making South Africa the first country in the world to include a sexual orientation clause in its Bill of Rights.

According to Graziano (2004), the Constitution aimed to challenge all practices that oppose the principle of equality. It has been described as one of the most liberal in the world, determined to right the wrongs of Apartheid. Since then, the long-standing invisible and silent community of South African gay men and lesbians has become more visible. Despite the new Constitution, the state's capacity to protect gay men and lesbians from social injustices is low. Gay men and lesbians face discrimination everywhere – in schools, churches, work environments, and the community as a whole. Gay men and lesbians find themselves locked into the status of social deviants regarded by others as potential or actual criminals (Graziano, 2004).

Gibson and Macleod (2012) write that in the South African context it is important to note that LGBTQ people's sexuality intersects with their positions of class, gender, location, and race, rendering their experience of heterosexism quite distinct. It is worth noting that race in South Africa continues to be a very present form of classification. Statistics South Africa (Census 2011), in the last census completed, asked people to describe themselves in terms of five racial population groups. The figures for these categories were: Black South African at 76.4%, White South African at 9.1%, Coloured South African at 8.9%, Asian South African at 2.5%, and Other/Unspecified at 0.5%.

White LGBTQ people enjoy greater social and economic privilege, owing to the ongoing advantage of their racial identities. Black LGBTQ people on the other hand continue to experience problems such as overcrowding, poverty, and a lower socioeconomic position while gender-based and heterosexist violence remains a considerable problem for black LGBTQ people in South Africa (Gibson and Macleod, 2012).

Against this reality, transformation has become an important task for the country and thus for higher education institutions, especially in the context of a post-colonial and post-Apartheid South Africa (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). Discussions around transformation efforts at South African universities have been centred on gender and race and these discussions have only recently become inclusive of the experiences of LGBTQ individuals within higher education (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). These authors write that issues of racial and sexual

identity appear to still be present in the current struggles around decolonisation in higher education in South Africa. They argue that there are contestations around belonging. Universities were often established as racial, masculinist, patriarchal institutions and these environments would and may even now create an unwelcoming space for LGBTQ individuals (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). There exists persistent evidence of heterosexism at South African universities, despite progressive policymaking and intellectual debate based on liberal human rights and democratic transformation discourses. Although the latter reflects a broader trend to inclusivity within higher education, elsewhere, as others have found, heterosexism continues to be perpetuated within seemingly 'liberal' institutional frameworks (Gibson and Macleod, 2012). Despite an emphasis on LGBTQ visibility, LGBTQ individuals are still navigating overtly heterosexist and heteronormative institutions (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018:82).

Quality of life studies that focus on the experiences of students indicate that heterosexual students rate their quality of life in tertiary education institutions higher than homosexual students rate theirs (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018:82). Heterosexist behaviour on campuses can be in the form of physical violence and verbal threats while micro-aggressions may take the form of deliberate exclusions and LGBTQ students being deliberately ignored (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). Broadly, heterosexism enforces traditional gender roles by normalising negative attitudes towards anyone who disrupts stereotypes of conventional gendered behaviour (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018:82). On university campuses, these invisible and often indirect forms of discrimination are common and although they may be difficult to monitor they exist and, according to the authors, suggest that there is an institutional culture of heteronormativity.

2.3 Hegemonic ideology of gender and gender performativity

Borisoff and Victor (1998:105) discuss hegemony in line with Gramsci's explanation that it refers to the idea of people's cooperation in the formation of the dominant ideology. In other words, the way the power and the ruling class in society can maintain domination without the need to use force to subordinate the less powerful in society.

Gender is seen to be one of the aspects in which power operates in social interactions. Borisoff and Victor (1998:105) write that gender "simultaneously creates expectations about how women and men ought to act and to respond in various contexts and relationships".

Women and men are socially and culturally expected to develop, negotiate, and perform the prescribed scripts of gender in their communications with others. Thus, the hegemonic ideology of what women and men should be and should not be stands at the core of all our interaction and communication.

Society encourages men to communicate with others according to the symbolic performance of hegemonic masculinity, assert Borisoff and Victor (1998), and, to be perceived as masculine, men have to express themselves as heterosexual. Chesebro (2001) writes that people will consider a man less masculine if he has another male sexual partner. This means that gay men are not considered masculine enough because they break what is considered to be the normal boundary of heteronormativity and heterosexuality. Through its regulation of this boundary, which defines heterosexuality to be the foundation of constructing hegemonic masculinity, society pressures gay men to compensate for their same-sex sexual preference and attraction by negotiating who they are according to hegemonic masculinity. Franklin (1984:130) says that if a male chooses another male as a sexual partner, many people will automatically question his masculinity.

Connell (1990) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity emphasises toughness and competitiveness; furthermore, it requires women's subordination and the marginalisation of gay men. Men are expected to play physical sports to develop their physical strength to communicate their masculinity. In this way, physical sports function as a cultural site for producing and reproducing the hegemonic ideology of masculinity (Hughson, 2000).

Connell (1990) also introduces us to what she refers to as the gender order which introduces us to the interconnectedness of gender and power. This conception of gender is central to this thesis as it informs the theoretical framework of the research, and Connell's model of the gender order is particularly useful. She describes the gender order as a patterned system of ideological and material practices, performed by individuals in a society, through which power relations between women and men are made, and remade, as meaningful. It is through the gender order of a society that forms or codes of masculinities and femininities are created and recreated, and relations between them are organised. Connell's 1990 research revealed three major structures of gender relations or the major ways in which the agency or practice of women and men are constrained. The three structures of labour, power, and cathexis (concerned with emotional relationships, including sexuality) constantly interweave with each other creating the ‘gender order’, or the overall structure of gender relations in a

particular society, at a particular time in history. Connell (1990) argues that these relations between women and men are uneven and unequal. Hegemonic masculinity was conceptualised as a configuration of gender practices intending to and resulting in legitimising existing patriarchal hierarchies of female subordination (Aitken, 2017:7). Cultural and individual acts that ensure the dominant position of men and masculinity serve to align all other members of society, ideologically and socially, with this power structure. These practices signify glimpses of a contextually variant ideal of masculinity requiring all men, at some point, to position themselves with this unachievable standard (Aitken, 2017:8).

Hegemonic masculinity as a concept was later reworked by Connell and Messerschmidt in 2005, to add further depth by clarifying that "hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force" and needs to be considered relationally within the geography of masculinity (Aitken, 2017:8). Particularly relevant to this thesis, this notion serves to delve further into the experiences of subordinated masculinities within the geography of masculinity. For someone to be understood as having successfully achieved ideal masculinity, clear examples must exist at the opposite end of this ideal. Butler (1993) maintains that the heteronormative system of gender cannot be defined without gay identity, which is seen as subordinate masculinity. The oppositional concept of what a gay man is shapes what a heterosexual man should be. In this sense, the social perception of gay men has been historically associated with their effeminate behavioural performances in social interactions (Edelman, 1994). As a result, gay male stereotypes are linked to traditionally feminine qualities such as physiques, traits, roles, and occupations so that gay men are perceived as feminine, outspoken, sociable, talkative, and concerned about appearance. Therefore, these effeminate stereotypical images play a role in defining what hegemonic masculinity is and what it is not.

Masculine practices and behaviours have been found to convey more symbolic value than those deemed to be feminine or womanly (Miller, 2015: 642). Men are rewarded from an early age when they act tough or unemotional, as boys are told they should, and publicly sanctioned when they behave in ways that culture has labelled as feminine. The men who do not conform to normative gender standards are frequently labelled as female or gay, and while feminine men are labelled as lesser than from outside of the queer community, many gay men have also been found to privilege masculinity over femininity (Miller, 2015, 643). Often, these men promote masculinity as the ideal form of self-representation. Masculinity is also intrinsically linked with race and culture. Masculine performing gay men may also

participate in producing and reproducing the power structure of hegemonic masculinity that eradicates women and subordinates gay men and men of colour (Miller, 2015:642). Therefore, the hegemonic ideology of gender is constantly produced and reproduced through a person's performativity of masculinity and/or femininity in social interactions (Butler, 1990). Therefore, one may argue that gender-performativity is a strong aspect of how gay men negotiate a sense of self in their relationships with others. We can thus see that gender performativity therefore forms a critical part of gay men's identity negotiation process.

Butler (1993) claims that gender is socially constructed as social agents repetitively perform their gender. In particular, she emphasises (1993:2) that ''performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names''. As such, performativity is a communication process in which social agents present a performative mode of gender. Thus, Butler observes that gender is an assignment that communicates the interaction of a gendered body's domination and subordination.

Butler (1993) also discusses the role of sexual identities in theorising gender performativity because the intersection of gender, sexuality, and body constitute to define a normative gender. In her view, the binary notion of heterosexuality and homosexuality discursively combine to characterise the normative script of gender performativity. In particular, social agents are positioned to imitate the normative script of gender to communicate their gender identity. In this process of imitating gender, heterosexuality is necessary to define what normative gender is because we live in a society in which one is expected to desire a different gender.

2.4 Southern /African masculinities

According to Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger (2012:12), Southern Africa's specific history and politics have influenced how hegemonic masculinity as a concept is used locally, arguing that the Southern African patriarchal society has exaggerated racialised and gender inequalities. Hegemonic masculinity was an academic interest in the gendered role of men and became central to gendered literature from the mid-1990s onward (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012). This was used to explain male power and weakness, historical shifts in power and ideal, and the fluidity of and contradictions in constructions of masculinity (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger, 2012). One of the key areas of interest that this research

considers are prevailing South African masculinity and gender relations. Research around gender and masculinity theory has been a popular area of discussion in the academic realm, one of the important theorists being Raewynn Connell whose work this current research draws on strongly. Connell's work has predominantly centred on deconstructing the current power structures in gender relations, which she believes to be unequal (1985).

Highlighting the importance and relevance of applying Connell's theory to this research requires a level of sensitivity to the location of the research. Therefore, it is worth reiterating that this research takes place in the social context of South Africa. It is also worth noting that the current state of gender relations in the South African context is influenced by a multiplicity of factors, such as its social structures, its cultures, and its economy among others.

A suggestion of the current state of gender relations in South Africa can be found in the statistics of rape – where the total recorded reported cases of rape for the period 2019/2020 stands at 42 289 (Africa Check, 2020). It is important to highlight that this terrifying number is just the reported cases of rape, with many cases also going unrecorded because they are not reported. This statistic can be deemed indicative of a pervasive masculinist gender order in South Africa that exists as a structure that influences the social practices of women and men (Connell, 1987).

Connell (1993:602) also argued that as a cultural form it is also almost impossible to study masculinity outside of its social and institutional context and that it cannot be delinked from sexuality, which also forms the centre of the research interest of this project that deals with gay men. Therefore, masculinity is argued by Connell (1993:603) to be constructed and maintained by the social context that it exists in, where it pursues power on behalf of particular interests. This kind of masculinity pursues power for a select few and is what is called hegemonic masculinity, which is a successful strategy that empowers men's interests and subordinates women's (Connell, 1993). Beyond disempowering and subordinating women, hegemonic masculinity also subordinates other masculinities, those that do not embody the interests and standards of hegemonic masculinities.

Here in South Africa hegemonic masculinity can be seen as rooted in the Apartheid and colonial oppression of people of colour (Wood and Jewkes, 2001; Morrell, 2002). For instance, the Apartheid government consisted of Afrikaans-speaking white male figures who

established authoritative masculinity that was institutionalised in schools, the media, and universities (Morrell, 2001:15).

The minority that is the white population also subordinated black men by, for example, using the word 'boy' to describe black working men (Morrell 2002:322). This label served as a disempowering tool used against black men to systematically subordinate their masculinity throughout South Africa during Apartheid.

Although the democracy that South Africa welcomed in 1994 came with a Constitution that no longer discriminates according to race, the ideas around Apartheid's hegemonic masculinity remain prevalent and have contributed to the high number of gender-based violence cases in the country, as well the creation and sustaining of a masculinist gender order (Morrell, 2002; Morrell, 2001; Wood & Jewkes, 2001).

Therefore, in South Africa, masculinity needs to be understood concerning both gender and race, as they are co-constituted by the country's colonial history (Morrell, 2002; Wood & Jewkes, 2001; Morrell, 1998). However, this study keeps its focus narrowly on investigating how South African masculinities are experienced and encountered on Grindr, while bearing in mind the presence of race relations as these intersect with gender on Grindr.

Morrell et al (2012) suggest that in the South African case it is best to use the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the plural. This is because masculinity in South Africa is deeply rooted in different races, classes, and urban and rural realities. South African work on masculinity has a different emphasis compared to the international literature with its preoccupation with race and violence. African men as African subjects are always already implicated in history. African masculinity is problematised through the concept of Africa as a historical and a geopolitical space (Morrel et al, 2012:13), where race is also seen as an ongoing political currency. "Race" still operates in the South African context today as a proxy for culture and advantage, despite efforts to move towards a non-racial society. The authors argue that, historically and institutionally, the ideal forms of masculinity for black and white men had included an acceptance of the use of violence as well as the widespread use of violence. (Morrell et al, 2012:13). Masculinity in Southern Africa has continued to focus on male violence and the link between hegemonic masculinity and violence has largely been unchallenged in this literature (Morrell et al, 2012). African masculinity by definition is contradictory, since colonisation 'denied' African men's masculinity, reducing men to children (boys) or savages. Postcolonial theorists have drawn on ideas of subalternity and

criticised representations/presentations such as 'the colonised', the primitive, dangerous, and diseased as the dominant representation of African men (Morrell, 2007; Ratele, 2008) A one-dimensional approach to social identities and gendered identities, in particular, has the danger of reducing this group of men to the 'barbaric, African other' that is produced through colonial discourses (Ratele, 2008; Morrell, 2007).

Morrell et al (2012:12) argue that one of the reasons the concept of hegemonic masculinity was so enthusiastically taken up was that "it sought to analyse gender *power* in conjunction with issues of male hierarchy, allowing for differentiation between groups of men who had different relations to one another and more or less power in relation to a dominant group". This was particularly useful in the South African context in which colonialism and Apartheid had so clearly divided the political and economic landscape along lines of race and social class. Intersectionality (discussed in the next section of this chapter) provides a way of understanding the multiple realities in which masculinity is produced. African masculinities are a complex matrix of historical, ideological, and material relations of power.

2.5 Being gay and Black – Intersectionality

Race in South Africa continues to shape social environments and social identities in profound ways (Moolman, 2012). However social identity becomes a lot more complex than just including race. Social identities are practiced and performed through broad social processes and solidified through social institutions (Moolman, 2012:94). Social identities such as race, class, ethnicity/culture, sexuality, and gender are lived through everyday micro-practices in a range of social spaces such as work and home. Yet macro-practices of race, class, ethnicity/culture, and sexuality have had a profound (but maybe less visible) shaping of social, gendered identities. South African social identities must be understood and examined with historical discourses of race and Apartheid (Moolman, 2012:94). She argues that contemporary South African identities are linked to this past of Apartheid but at the same are also informed by the substantial political and economic changes and ideals defined in the Constitution (1996). Therefore, South African identities grapple with ambiguity and this becomes evident in the practices of intersectional social identities of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Moolman, 2012:95). In her work, Moolman explores the usefulness of the concept of intersectionality for the framing of South African masculinities. She argues that South Africa as a socio-political space of transition provides the opportunity for the

renegotiation and contestation of taken-for-granted social identities. Intersectionality was initially proposed (or rather, the term was coined) by Kimberle Crenshaw as a way of capturing the complexity of social identities. She proposes the concept of intersectionality as a "discourse about identity that acknowledges how identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions" (Crenshaw, 1991:1299). Intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualising the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege (Moolman, 2012:95).

Research that has considered and examined black identity has revealed that there exist distinct links between individuals' sense of blackness and their sense of self (Hunter, 2010:82). Rooted in discussions of race and racism, research of black identity has suggested that factors such as racial discrimination and prejudice have produced a series of trends concerning racial identity for black people (Hunter, 2010:82). Studies in this area have underscored the dynamics involved in a racial identity for many black people.

Focusing specifically on black gays, Marcus Hunter's work demonstrates how race and sexuality often determine conceptions of community and potential partnering for black gay men (Hunter, 2010: 84). Moore (2006) has argued that the relationship between race and sexuality, blackness and gay-ness, produces a series of trends concerning gender presentation highlighting that these differences in gender presentation have to do with differences in the intersection of race and sexuality, and perhaps because these men are negotiating three (multiple) marginal identities. Despite such headway into the study of the social realities of LGBTQ individuals of colour, Moore (2006:134) concluded her discussion by noting that there is a need to know how individuals conceptualise gay identity in the context of other overlapping identities such as race.

Beyond such discussions, the social realities of black gay men and other LGBTQ individuals of colour receive little to no discussion and most often are implicitly addressed in analyses of conventional male gender roles (Hunter, 2010:82), especially so in South Africa, although there has been made some progress in places such as the US . This thesis aims to respond to this omission by providing an investigation of how black gay men understand and negotiate the simultaneity of gay and black identity, specifically online.

2.6 Masculine identity and the presentation of self on online dating sites

Online dating platforms have become very popular, including among gay men, but have not come without challenges. Many use these platforms to communicate with sympathetic others online and to help ease the pain of loneliness (Lawson and Leck, 2006:189).

While this happens, others have not been as fortunate and have at times become the victims of financial and emotional scams created by individuals they have met through online forms such as dating sites (Buchanan and Whitty, 2014). Thus, trustworthiness and authenticity become challenges for users of online dating platforms. This is because the accuracy of a person's presentation to others online will depend on their honesty with regards to themselves and others (Droge and Voirol, 2011:340). Giddens (1991) writes that the self-identity is not something distinctive, but rather the self is something that is understood reflexively by the person in terms of their biography. If given the opportunity to present your interpretation of yourself before face to face interaction, there is the possibility that this presentation will not align with what others see when they do meet you in person (Droge and Voirol, 2011:340). It, therefore, becomes difficult or even impossible to verify the accuracy of another user's self-presentation in the online environment. There exists a certain degree of scepticism and even distrust between individuals in online communities. The users of online dating sites interpret each other's profiles with the understanding that individuals tend to even slightly misrepresent themselves to present their most attractive self. By doing this they approach interactions with a level of scepticism in deciding whom they will eventually want to meet with (Droge and Voirol, 2011:343).

These kinds of presentation practices warrant the employment of Goffman's (1959) theory of performance and dramaturgy. Goffman's theory suggests that people construct 'front stage' performances to deliver before different audiences that will enhance the positive qualities of their persona which they wish to display. When they do this, they downplay negative qualities by keeping the less attractive aspects of themselves in the 'backstage' that is hidden from the view of others. Geosocial dating applications for gay men can be viewed as functioning both as a front and backstage. As Goffman (1959:126) suggests, "there are many regions which function at one time and in one sense as a front region and at another time and another sense as a back region." With geosocial dating applications, it is the front stage in the sense that the users enact a performance for each other in an attempt to be viewed as attractive and desirable. It can be the backstage in the sense that it is a place where gay men can also let

down their guard and be themselves – they can flirt with other gay men without fear of negative consequences such as homophobia.

The degree to which users represent themselves online authentically determines how viable the development of offline real-life relationships will be (Lawson and Leck, 2006). Droge and Voirol (2011) have found that while the Internet may encourage greater amounts of self-disclosure, other factors can affect the success in offline interactions after encountering each other online, and these factors can impede this success. As a result, the transition between offline and online interaction is rarely as smooth. In the offline environment, users will expect others to idealise the features they displayed online (Droge and Voirol, 2011:340). Users will also tend to project their desires, by using their imagination to fill in the gaps of knowledge and exaggerate positive aspects of the other users' self-presentation and ignore the negative aspects (Droge and Voirol, 2011:342). This in turn creates high expectations that may result in disappointment upon meeting face to face. Lawson and Leck (2006) argue that users will create and invest in a persona online while knowing that it may eventually be destroyed. In response to these, users will develop ways to protect themselves from disappointment in real-life encounters by attempting to control their imaginations and emotions (Droge and Voirol, 2011:342).

Schmitz (2014) writes that on dating applications users will alter their presentations of themselves out of need so they can optimise their profiles according to the expectations of the desires of others on the dating sites.

Droge and Voirol (2011:345) say that when looking at misrepresentation online you find that it is not only normalised but also accepted. Users will always come to expect some amount of falsification to the point where few will pay much attention to what could be true about another user or what will be a makeover of their persona (Lawson and Leck, 2006). Lawson and Leck (2006:189) also say that we can view online daters as commodities and dating sites as the market where users may compete and thus will present themselves in the most competitive manner possible. Online users of dating sites will view their self-presentations as honest and authentic but will often not trust those with whom they will interact. Ultimately, when deciding on how to construct their self-representations in the online space, individuals draw on a range of past, present, and future selves to present the most positive versions of themselves (Lawson and Leck, 2006:190). They will also use a wide array of tools to cope

with the high potential of deception and disappointment, such as structuring their profiles in such a way that it will filter out any potential cons (Lawson and Leck, 2006:189).

Important to the online presentation of self for men are the expectations of displaying appropriate hegemonic masculine characteristics. Hegemonic masculinity (as indicated before) can be conceptualised as the 'currently most honoured way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:832). These authors also write that hegemonic masculinity needs the ingredients of cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalisation, and the marginalisation and delegitimation of alternative masculinities. This means that hegemony is not likely to be fully embodied by a single person and needs also the consent of the wider culture for it to be legitimate. The consent given to this binary by culture also makes alternative expressions of masculinity illegitimate (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For gay men exclusion therefore becomes automatic.

Gay men are marginalised because they represent a 'subordinated' masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). They are also stigmatised and denied the full benefits and privilege that comes with hegemonic masculinity and are made very aware of their subordination.

Miller (2015) says this is particularly true on dating applications where so-called 'straight acting' masculine presentations are viewed as desirable and attractive and where effeminacy is shunned. Where this study concerns itself with the rejection of effeminate men on gay dating applications, I propose the use of Judith Halberstam's theory of queer failure (2011) which relates to the experiences of users who fail to meet the standard of dating sites. This failure often happens as a result of their marginalised masculinity positioning, a positioning which includes users who embrace their femininity or who are deemed unattractive because of their physique and body type and even their race on dating applications (Aitken, 2017).As a result, gay men will make extra effort to be recognised as legitimately masculine. These efforts consist of developing strong muscular bodies and demonstrating sexual prowess (Miller, 2015:638). What is interesting, however, is that on these dating apps profiles of gay men are likely to display no face in the profile picture and only the torso area. They are also likely to give a description of themselves as masculine and even state their preference of more masculine qualities in potential partners. Miller (2015: 639) suggests that the latter may occur due to internalised homophobia or a lack of identification with a gay identity. This can also be seen as a reflex whereby stigmatised individuals will internalise the stigmatised images of a group to manage that very stigma.

By doing this, gay men also become able to align themselves with the mainstream of society and in such a way they protect themselves from harmful stereotypes and treatment (Pyke, 2010). This happens, however, at the expense of other gay men. For, as Pyke puts it, when gay men manage stigma, they may also reinforce negative stereotypes about gay men. This rejection of effeminacy online holds a certain irony because, he asserts, the devaluation of femininity in the gay community can also be viewed as similar to sexism which is the ideological foundation for homophobic stigma.

Although the display of hegemonic masculine ideals may be a sound strategy to combat homophobic stigma, this may only be for the short run because, over the long term, this recreates the very weapon that is used in the oppression that gay men want to escape. Miller (2015:638) writes that instead of rejecting the gender ideology that sustains their stigmatisation, gay men still use culturally dominant masculinity definitions to police their gender presentations of both themselves and others and to set the standards for attractiveness desirability in the online space. In this way, gay men do not challenge gender norms that exist but reinforce them, and this is a good display of hegemonic masculinity at work. The cultural consent that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) refer to indeed runs deep, even in the online space of dating applications.

2.6.1 Social networking usage by gay men: Grindr

Gay men experience various challenges in the heteronormative environment and have turned to the Internet as a less threatening space in which to form connections, pursue relationships, and develop their sexual identities. Before the advent of the Internet, gay men connected in various physical spaces, such as community centres, bathhouses, cruising parks, and bathrooms (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1). The challenges associated with these spaces included the potential for violence/rape, police arrest in public venues, or fear of being "outed". Besides, such physical spaces were often less available to men who lived in rural areas. Thus, the Internet gave gay men a much-needed way to connect in a space that is always accessible, publicly available and anonymous (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1).

The Internet is also one of the most popular venues for sexual partner seeking among gay individuals (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1). This practice encourages the use of partner selection criteria in profiles and these specifications often include the preferred age, race/ethnicity, and body type of a partner as well as the desired sexual practices of the individual. In 2013, Grindr, the most popular of these apps, reported that it had six million

users in 192 different countries around the world with 2.5 million new users added in the previous year (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:2). Grindr (and other similar apps) employ global positioning system technology to facilitate connections with other users based on their current location and enables their users to scan for nearby users, chat with them, and meet, sometimes for sexual encounters. These new mobile technologies have generated quicker and easier modes for gay men to meet potential partners based on attraction and physical proximity and, according to Goedel and Duncan (2015:2), use of these apps is commonplace among gay men.

In particular, these authors assert that Grindr has proven to be a popular geosocial networking application among gay men and its immense popularity has given rise to increased scholarly attention. Provoked by such attention, this thesis focuses on user motivations and some of the self-representation practices of black gay Rhodes University students active on Grindr.

2.7 Conclusion

The theoretical framing of this study relied on an intersectional black feminist approach. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the different theoretical perspectives that inform this research as well as the relevant literature that relates to the topic. Intersectional gender theory was specifically considered important as it could show how race and sexuality intersect online, especially since this study is based on the experiences of black gay men in a post-Apartheid democratic and constitutional South African climate that still has prevailing residual racial and gender inequalities.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This chapter identifies and discusses the research methodology as well as the methods used to carry out the research. This entails the philosophical understanding of the qualitative research tradition and its suitability in responding to the research questions. This will be followed by outlining the research design, methods of data collection, data analysis, and data processing procedures.

In addressing the research questions, a multidimensional approach was undertaken consisting of a brief application walkthrough on Grindr, as it is defined and outlined by Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018). The walkthrough assisted with looking at how the design of an application (in this case, Grindr) can play a role in the constructing, privileging, and emphasising of particular 'cultural' norms and practices and also how these might play out and be reproduced within the application. Conducting a brief walkthrough helped to establish an understanding of Grindr and the language used on the application, which in turn helped with developing relevant questions by which to approach the interviews in a way that subjects could best answer the research question. This is followed by semi-structured interviews with Grindr users as participants. The semi-structured interviews helped with providing insight into how the design is understood and interpreted by users and the degree to which it might affect their self-representation choices on the application. The bulk of the findings in the chapter that follows this will therefore rely particularly heavily on the responses from the semi-structured interviews rather than solely the walkthrough of the application. Finally, the ethical considerations along with the limitations of the study are highlighted.

3.2 Research methodology: Why qualitative research?

Qualitative research involves looking at characteristics, or qualities, that cannot easily be reduced to numerical values and typically aims to examine the many nuances and complexities of a particular phenomenon (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001:94).

Babbie and Mouton (2001:270) describe qualitative research as a paradigm that allows the researcher to get an "insider perspective on social action". The authors further describe the primary goal of this research approach as describing and then understanding and interpreting,

as opposed to merely explaining, social action. Given the interpretive and exploratory nature of my topic that seeks to look at the self-representation by black men on Grindr, the qualitative method of interviews allows for the researcher to "provide empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives and practices" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997:140).

In line with Bryman (1984), qualitative methodology and its subsequent research methods were chosen on the grounds of their appropriateness to understanding (as opposed to explaining) the lived realities of the group of students in the research project. Quantitative methodology, on the other hand, is affiliated, as Bryman points out, with positivism which attempts to explain events through making universal law like claims. Debates surrounding triangulation (combining different research methods to verify data and findings) centre on whether researchers view the question of quantitative or qualitative methodology as one of "epistemology (what should constitute knowledge) or technique" (Bryman, 1984: 76). The term *triangulation* refers to the practice of using multiple sources of data or multiple approaches to analysing data to enhance the credibility of a research study. Originating in navigational and surveying contexts, triangulation aligns multiple perspectives and leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Salkind, 2010:1)

According to Bryman, qualitative methodology has its roots in phenomenology housed within the social sciences aimed at analysing socio-cultural phenomena whereas quantitative methodology is affiliated with positivism and the study of the natural world (Bryman, 1984). Positivist social research is in search of the universal 'Truth' which attempts to discover social 'facts' by establishing relationships of cause and effect between social variables, thus quantitative methodology attempts to explain and generalise (rather than understand) observable social phenomena in an attempt to establish universal social laws (nomothetic) governing group behaviour (Creswell, 2013).

The qualitative methodology takes the "actors' perspective as the empirical point of departure" which attempts to "understand and contextualise events which are meaningful to the actors' themselves" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:270). Qualitative research, on the other hand, refers to "a broad set of methodological approaches to the study of social action encompassing a collection of methods and techniques that share certain principles" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:270). These principles include: conducting research in the natural setting of its actors, focusing on the process rather than the outcome, contextualising social action,

utilising inductive research processes, and attempting to capture and develop in-depth descriptions (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Saukko, 2003).

The importance of the emic perspective to the qualitative researcher is linked to naturalism, ethnography, and contextualism as events are observed in their natural setting not reconstructed (Bryman, 1988). This allows for the examination of specific interpretive frameworks of meaning-making from the perspective of the researched which additionally explicates the contextually bound nature of human behaviour (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Bryman, 1988). Thick descriptions help bridge the gap between describing and understanding as "events are placed in a context that is understandable to the actors themselves" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:272). A thick description is a description of human social action that describes not just physical behaviours, but their context as interpreted by the actors as well, so that it can be better understood by an outsider (Hammersley, 2008). Emphasis is placed on understanding events in their natural setting against the background of the whole context and how such a context confers meanings to the events concerned. Qualitative research, therefore, incorporates idiographic research (as opposed to nomothetic) strategies as it looks at a single contextual event and analyses the dynamics surrounding its structural coherence within a larger socio-historical context (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 272). Nomothetic research strategies incorporated within quantitative studies seek to establish universal laws concerning human behaviour in an attempt to generalise and explain, whereas idiographic research endeavours to contextualise and understand (Saukko, 2003).

This project opts for qualitative research methods for their ability to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the researched, specifically, how black gay South African Rhodes University students utilised Grindr in the process of self-representation and identity formation. Thus, the use of a qualitative thematic approach aims to explore the ways that these research participants make sense of their social worlds (and identities) through their interactions with others in an online dating application.

The following section discusses the operationalisation of the research design.

3.3 Introduction to the research process

In order to acquire the relevant data that allowed me to investigate the aforementioned matters, I opted for the qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews, conducted individually and face-to-face and via video call (this was not the preferred approach to the interviews but, as a researcher, I had to adhere to the Covid-19 protocols of social distancing and the nationwide lockdown that had been imposed). Subsequently, each interview was transcribed, coded, and thoroughly examined through the chosen qualitative analysis technique of thematic analysis.

Given the interpretive and exploratory nature of my topic analysing the processes through which gay men construct their identity on Grindr, interviews allow me to "provide empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives and practices" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997:140).

Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of my topic (regarding sexual orientation and sexual practices), my primary goal was to create an atmosphere conducive to mutual trust and respect. By choosing face-to-face semi-structured interviews, I selected interviewees who were in the same geographic location as me. As a gay man who has previously used Grindr, I hoped to be seen as an insider by participants which created a sense of complicity and mutual understanding between us. Additionally, I wanted to conduct the interviews in an intellectually stimulating fashion, aiming to unearth the voices of an often socially stigmatised minority which have been "ignored, misrepresented and suppressed in the past" (Byrne, 2004:182). Finally, as mentioned by Kvale (1996:1), "the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view" which aligns with my interest of understanding gay men's construction of their identity from their perspective, successfully validating the importance of interviewing as a methodology.

The following section begins with an introduction of the research process, semi-structured interviews which generated a wide variety of credible data within this specific context. This data was then thematically analysed and correlations within the data set were generated.

3.4. The research process

The research that forms the basis of this study took place on the Rhodes University campus in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) with black men who identify as gay, who use the

application Grindr, and who have been using or have used the application for more than three months at the time of the research. The first approach to potential research subjects was on the application Grindr. Once they had indicated willingness to continue discussing their participation in the research project, they then shared either their Facebook or WhatsApp contact details with me to establish further contact and take the research discussion further regarding my research. Interviews were conducted in-person, and some were conducted over Internet-based video calls to accommodate the participants' schedules and convenience. After responding to some of the ethical concerns regarding recording the interviews, the right to anonymity and privacy and an agreement of consent was reached the interviews were able to commence.

Participants had been using Grindr for varying amounts of time, from a few months to more than four years. Participants were sent the information sheet and consent form a few days before the interviews, and consent was reconfirmed during the interviews which were scheduled after receiving the consent. Each interview took between 12 and 30 minutes, was recorded and then uploaded to a password-protected digital storage location and removed from the recorder.

At the beginning of each interview, I reminded participants about their right to withdraw at any point and then gave some context for the study. This context included telling participants about my walkthrough on Grindr and assuring them that they were welcome to speak freely about all aspects of Grindr, including sexually explicit interactions, as I had some understanding of how the app functioned and therefore they did not need to mind their use of language very much.

For the reporting of the analysis (see section 3.8.1 of this chapter), participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

3.5 The Grindr App Walkthrough

The app walkthrough methodology used in this research is based on the work of Light et al. (2018) which frames human and non-human interactions through positioning human users as intermediaries, and the non-humans as mediators (Light et al., 2018:883). This method is particularly useful as "a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides

users and shapes their experiences" (Light et al, 2018:882). The core of this method includes the step-by-step observation and documentation of applications' screens, features, and flows of activity to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018). By applying this method to Grindr, I was able to observe the app and its features and discern in what ways its interface design influences the self-representation of black users on the app. By using the walkthrough method, I was able to examine the app and gain an understanding of how its interface was affording and directing users.

Studying the design of the app helped me to understand how the app interface can influence the users' constructions of an online identity. The walkthrough method also incorporates affordance theories (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), which argue that not only are actions and behaviours influenced by environments but that the design of technology directs practices of use through what the design affords. The walkthrough method allows for the examination of these affordances of the app's design, such as navigational menus and profile layouts (Light et al., 2018:882).

This study draws on this methodology to provide an appropriate framework to examine the broader social context in which apps are designed, and the infrastructure they use that help to inform how users can create their online identities. Through combining the brief walkthrough with interviews, it allowed me to gain some form of insight into the interface of Grindr and how its affordances influence a user's identity and their self -representation practices.

3.6 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate strategy for data gathering as they allow a significant amount of flexibility in structuring questions. Indeed, as Corbetta (2003:270) argues, "the interviewer is free to conduct the conversation as he thinks, to ask the questions he deems appropriate in the words he considers best" allowing for each interview to be unique, for unexpected themes to flow and for new meanings to be produced.

With this in mind, a quantitative method would not have been consistent with my aim to thoroughly interpret the meaning articulated by participants. As the primary goal of quantitative approaches is to measure a population's characteristics, compare different groups of people, and generalise a group of individual's opinions and behaviours (Fowler, 2008), such a method was not consistent with my aim to thoroughly interpret meaning articulated by

my interviewees. I also eliminated focus groups which, despite being qualitative, would have been inappropriate considering the intimate theme of my topic. Indeed, Gibbs (1997) argues that focus groups obstruct interviewees to fully self-disclose private information in an environment shared with other people.

3.7 The interview guide and my role as the researcher

To generate the most accurate data I created interview questions for individual semi-structured interviews to ensure that the conversations with the participants concentrate on the themes and issues relevant to my overall research question. The basic interview questions are attached in Appendix A.

Another important factor was including an explicit discussion of ethical considerations regarding the walkthrough. This aspect is important due to how data is collected in the often-changing nature of digital spaces. While methodologies such as interviews have well established ethical protocols, often rigorously covered by governing ethics councils and review boards, ethical practices in digital spaces are less well established, warranting explicit discussion of processes undertaken during research. To complete the walkthrough of Grindr, I required a profile on the platform. I decided that my profile should be as minimal as possible. This meant that I would only include what I was required or prompted to include by Grindr, and while I would examine all available features, I would not update any features on my profile unless directed by formal instructional requirements. My profile included no information about myself, as well as no sections of the profile filled out. By creating a blank profile, it was believed that I would cause less disruption to other app users, as I would be just one of the many minimalist profiles that are present on Grindr.

3.8 Sampling and recruiting of the participants

3.8.1 Sample Selection

Given my familiarity with Grindr, and in line with the qualitative nature of the study, I utilised a purposive sampling technique to select participants for the individual semi-structured interviews. After spending extended periods of time on the application, I

gained the necessary insight to enable the selection of a range of students based on ethnicity and relative activity on the application.

The pool of participants I focused on interviewing included a range of students who study different subjects but share three features: they identified themselves as black gay men and have used Grindr and are currently affiliated with Rhodes University. I chose these criteria because they translated into a research project that was achievable and relevant. The goal of this study is not to be representative of all gay men and Grindr users, rather I intended to recruit five interviewees from the same ethnical background i.e. black. As a result, the minimum age was 18 for legal purposes but there was no restriction as to the maximum age.

The five participants in this research all identify as black and gay (gay is used interchangeably with queer) and are currently situated in Makhanda. For ethical reasons including rights to privacy and anonymity the participants have requested pseudonyms instead of their real names being used, and the request is granted, specifically considering the sensitive nature of discussions about their sexuality and identity.

In this research:

- Participant One, a final year LLB student, will be referred to as T.
- Participant Two, a first-year Fine Arts student, will be referred to as O.
- Participant Three, a final year Journalism student, will be referred to as J.
- Participant Four, a Rhodes graduate and resident of Makhanda, will be referred to as A.
- Participant Five, a final year Psychology major, will be referred to as D.

3.9 An analytical method for data analysis

By choosing thematic analysis as the analytical method for the interviews collected, I was able to ‘identify, analyse, and report patterns’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006) within the discourses articulated by the interviewees. This strategy allowed me to outline general themes that emerged from the data while simultaneously relying on the literature explored in the theoretical framework, thus helping me to navigate my way through the data. Moreover, pursuing ‘meaning’ rather than ‘truth’, I was able to thoroughly investigate answers that appeared similar, grouping them together and finally ‘identifying a thematic framework by writing memos in the margin of the text in the form of short phrases, ideas or concepts arising

from the texts and beginning to develop categories'. As I wanted to apply the data on existing concepts as well as identify new hypotheses, I used both inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Ferriday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), constantly interplaying between the data extracted from the participants and the codes identified through their discourses. Additionally, I examined how the themes correlated and the emerging themes will be further investigated below in the data analysis and discussion chapter.

3.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore how black gay men at Rhodes University make use of the gay oriented social networking site Grindr. Given the central research questions a qualitative approach was isolated as best suited in order to unearth meaningful engagement, conversation and responses from the participants. Specifically, the research relied on an interface study of Grindr conducted through a walkthrough method which could give me as the researcher sense of how the application operated and, secondly, it also employed semi-structured interviews which were important in helping the participants answer questions and also helping me as the researcher to ask follow up questions where appropriate. With a relatively small sample size of five self-identified black gay men the results that follow in the next chapter are by no means generalisable and are not intended to represent the experience of all black gay Rhodes university students at the time of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to examine how black gay men at Rhodes University navigate the gay geo-social networking site Grindr, with the research question asking: What choices do these men make when constructing their self-representations on Grindr?

Overall, the objective was to investigate the navigation of a black gay identity, the related socio-historical inter-connections of race, gender and sexuality, and ways in which they intersect on Grindr.

This section of the thesis draws primarily on Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management and the theory of self-representation and how users compose their identity online. Goffman's theory of dramaturgy helps to explain how self-representation works, as it speaks to the idea of performance. Regarding this project, his study contributes to an understanding of choices of self-representation that these men make on Grindr – in a sense, how they 'perform' their Grindr identity online.

It then draws on Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality in relation to race and sexuality and Butler's (1993) gender performativity to expand this understanding.

Focusing on black homosexual identity, the research surfaces three main points: that within the sample, in disclosing aspects of their gay identity, participants carefully monitored all their outputs on Grindr; that because of their race as black men, participants have a unique and complex experience on the application and this influences their choices of self-representation; and, lastly, that all five participants experienced the renunciation of effeminacy.

Regarding the first of these points, this careful management also stemmed from a fear which prompted participants to increasingly view Grindr as a hypersexualised, often racist, sexist and homophobic space due to the way that users interact with each other.

Grindr presents itself as a venue for gay men to meet for friendship, dating, long term relationships, and sexual liaisons. As a venue for meeting people, Grindr is increasingly

popular (Miller, 2015) and has proved to be a popular geosocial networking application among gay men where they can organise themselves and interact with others from their community.

For some gay men Grindr is their primary locale for interaction with other gay men. As such, online social networking sites become an important environment in which to examine racialisation in an online sexual setting, to investigate the language used, and understand some of the ways race is performed in online sexual contexts. The research also indicates that black men have a unique and complex experience on the application because of their race and that this influences their choices of self-representation.

In this section of the chapter, the following themes are outlined:

(a) Finding and understanding Grindr,
(b) Prevailing notions of hegemonic masculinity on Grindr,
(c) Gay racism and the intersecting politics of race and sexuality on Grindr
(d) Grindr as a safe space for self-expression, and
(e) Lessons learnt from using Grindr.

These emerging themes are discussed in the analysis that follows.

4.2 Finding and understanding Grindr

A critical aspect of using social networking sites like Grindr is the development and display of an online profile for others to view and engage with. One cannot therefore begin to understand the experience of men using gay-oriented social networking platforms such as Grindr without first examining how they develop their online profile. Implicit in this digital representation is men's understanding of themselves and how others view them. In this section, I briefly review how the research subjects found Grindr as a site. After completing a brief walkthrough of the application's interface, I also review key components of the online profile I established on Grindr. Further, I explore how the five research participants negotiated the act of impression management in constructing and updating their profiles, and how much of their identity they share with other users. I also give a brief indication of what informs and motivates the use of Grindr by these men.

4.2.1 Grindr's interface

To render the walkthrough more realistic and meaningful, I set about constructing a user profile on the app. The interface of Grindr is simple. You open the application to see a grid of profile images with names of other users. From the left side of the screen, users can create their own profile. Users are prompted to upload one or more profile images and choose how to present themselves to others on the grid. Spaces for filling out the profile include display name and biography, where users may write whatever they wish. The remaining spaces for biographical information contain drop-down menus, from which users can select which pieces of information they opt to share about themselves. These options include age, weight, height, ethnicity, position, "tribe," gender identity and pronouns, STI/STD status and last tested date. The only mandatory item to supply is age, but users have the option of whether or not to show this to others. All other categories are optional, including name, bio, and profile image. Because Grindr allows users the choice of what to display to others, users may keep their profile 'blank', showing only a grey box and online status. In the application's settings, users can opt whether or not to show their physical distance from others. Allowing this information to be visible means the GPS will locate you in relation to the other users viewing your profile. Users have the option to omit this from their profiles.

After inserting any desired profile information, users return to the home screen to see which other users are nearby. The bottom row of the screen shows icons that lead to the user's profile information and settings, the home grid, an "Explore" page, private chats, and a "Favourites" page. The home grid of images and blank icons is arranged by physical proximity, so the first icon leads to the profile of the user closest to you.

Grindr policy states that the standard membership to Grindr allows users to see up to one hundred profiles as they scroll. For a monthly fee the "Unlimited" option allows users access to an unlimited number of profiles.

Clicking on a photo icon opens the chosen profile in full. At the top right of the profile, two icons rest, indicating options to "Block" the user and to add them to one's "Favourites". The selected user's full profile photo and display name, as well as any of the above information as chosen by the creator of the profile, are available here. The short biography (the "bio") may share a range of information such as a user's sexual preferences, social and cultural interests, hobbies, employment, and quotes or catchphrases. The bio provides the most space for personalisation on the profile where users can show more information about themselves.

Before or after reviewing the profile, a user may click the word bubble icon, the symbol that indicates the option to send this person a message. Doing so opens a private chat window between you and the other user. These messages remain private, though users have had the ability to take screenshots of them to disseminate in other spaces. The "Explore" page allows you to choose a location other than your current one and see profiles in that area. One must purchase a membership in order to engage with these profiles. Finally, the "Favourites" page shows all the profiles a user has saved, a function which allows for easy access to the profiles selected to "favourite". This layout features dark backgrounds and white text with orange accents.

4.2.2 User motivations and initial impression of Grindr

As indicated in Chapter Two, because gay men encounter challenges in the heteronormative environment they have turned to the Internet as a less threatening space in which to form connections, pursue relationships, and develop their personal sexual identities. Before the advent of the Internet, gay men connected in various physical spaces, such as community centres, bathhouses, cruising parks, and bathrooms (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1). The challenges that are associated with these spaces included the potential for violence/rape, police arrest in public venues, or fear of being "outed". In addition, such physical spaces were often less available to men who lived in rural areas. Thus, the Internet has given gay men a much-needed way to connect in a space that is always accessible, publicly available, and anonymous (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1). The Internet is also one of the most popular venues for sexual partner seeking among gay individuals (Goedel and Duncan, 2015:1). In relation to this, this research found that it was important to not make any assumptions, but rather hear from South African black gay men how they came to know of the app and also the motivating factors that led them to using it. This was important for establishing holistic context for the research.

T says they came to know of the application through a friend who had used it. They'd be frequently active on the application, for instance weekly or every weekend. Through the conversation with their friend who introduced them to the application T had certain expectations. "I thought I would meet like-minded, intellectual people who were sensitive and authentic". Instead, T found it has become more like a hook-up site, "like a sex place". "There's not really any emotional connection that you can expect from Grindr, whereas I went there thinking that's where people meet potential partners."

As indicated in the literature review, dating applications are often used by people who try to get over loneliness and meet sympathetic others. O says they downloaded Grindr because they felt lonely and they wanted to meet people. Their activity on the app is daily and for the purposes of meeting new people and hooking up (meeting up to have sex).

J says they were introduced to Grindr after looking through the Google Play Store:

> I think I was introduced to it through the Internet when I was very, very young. I was just looking through the Google Play Store. I think I must have been in grade 10. And I was like, 'gay chat app'. And I found Grindr, and I downloaded it and then I went from there. I mean, as a young person in high school, I had more optimistic hopes for it. Oh, I'm going to have a space where I can meet people like me, people that are around me. I get to talk to other queer people. I get to maybe find a boyfriend. Like, when I started on the app my intentions were not really physical and sexual like they are now. There, it was just very 'Oh my God, I get to find a community!' and that opportunity was very, very exciting for me.
>
> I've been quite active. I've been most active specifically like when I'm in Joburg, because there are a lot of more people, and specifically when I am really horny. I think monthly – monthly, like so every two weeks to monthly right now – is the best description of my current activity right now.

A was introduced to Grindr in his second year at Rhodes in 2016. He is active weekly:

> It depends on whether I want somebody. It depends if I'm horny and if I want to have sex. Because that's basically what I see the app as. It's just a sex app. Just to have casual sex. So, I feel like that's a place where all the gay men could come together if you're looking for a companion. I don't think there's a space for you to go there and go find a boyfriend.

D was introduced to Grindr in 2017 when he heard about it on a TV show and says that he is active on the app almost daily especially when he is bored:

> My main focus for joining the app was to meet new people and to find companionship. As gay people living in a small town, you don't get exposed to other gay people. When you see your friends being in relationships, living happy lives and just being in relationships, you also want to experience that. So why not join Grindr to meet similar people to yourself and find that relationship and companionship that you

> want. That's why I joined the app in the first place, to meet new people and find companionship.

From these responses, it becomes clear that all five research participants joined Grindr to meet others. The aim of some participants, however, has shifted from meeting new people to sex-seeking and hook-ups though friendship and companionship remain a common intention.

4.2.3 The creation of a Grindr profile

The concept of creating a profile for a social networking site was not an unfamiliar one for all the participants in this study as all of them at some point have downloaded social media applications before. After being introduced to Grindr, the men were faced with creating profiles, a process that required them to be self-reflective and consider how they wanted to present themselves to other users. For the participants in this study, successfully portraying themselves on Grindr proved to be a complex task that required them to make important decisions about the information they shared and the ways in which they wanted to be received.

Participants engaged in the process of constructing a Grindr profile using two forms of media: text and photographs, although some of them used the latter less. The research question that related to the development of a Grindr profile was as follows: *What do you think of the identifiers that Grindr uses when you download and create a profile?* This referred to points such as height, age, race, weight and tribe that users are required to fill out when creating a profile (as indicated in section 4.1).

T refers to these as indicators:

> I think they … are indicatory of how gay people relate to each other, specifically on the app, and how gay people divide each other based on types and ascribe belonging. And, it's a power thing, as well – something that I think has historical power within the queer community.

J said that this makes them feel two ways: they understand that there is a need to categorise, but they take issue with the fact that creating a profile makes him feel like he is simply ticking boxes. They say that these identifiers don't really describe them and they do not affiliate them with any real community. "The identifiers felt very limiting," J said.

D, on the other hand, while agreeing that the process felt like box-ticking, felt that these identifiers speak to the idea that the gay community has become so prone to labelling themselves that these labels are imposed on the application. “The tribes identifying as jock, a twink, whatever you may call it, but those are labels that [the] community have imposed on themselves.

According to O, most identifiers, such as HIV status, are useful:

> That's something people you sleep with have to know. But I think things such as race and your body type… opens up problematic things such as fat shaming and racism.

A has indicated that he doesn’t answer all the questions that are required:

> For example, they would ask, ‘how tall are you, what is your age?’ I feel like if you state your real age you’re going to be excluded from the fun that is happening on the app, and that is why a lot of people catfish and lie about their age or HIV status – because they want to be included in being attractive and chosen by other people.

4.2.4 Self-representation on Grindr: Managing how others see you

Once profiles have been created, Grindr users not only display information regarding identity but their profiles, now active, are being engaged with. It is at this point that participants start learning how to adapt to the norms of Grindr, in order to present the best version of themselves to other users. By doing this they participate in what Erving Goffman (1959) referred to as acts of ‘impression management”. The research question in relation to this aspect asked the participants: *Which aspects of their own identity they share with others on the application as well as what they have learnt about identity through their interaction with other user*s. The research found that, for these participants, the skill of communicating their identity was important but, to a certain degree, so was managing how others would see them.

Catfishing emerged as a primary identity management concern for some research participants who often felt pressured to be dishonest about certain aspects of their identity in order to be appealing to other users. A second major identity management consideration relates to users’ university status and this explored in some detail below. Degrees of closeness to other users were also raised by some participants where they referred to establishing a level of trust with other users before they would share particular aspects of their identity with them.

Having presented this overview of some of the primary aspects that influence the management of identity of the participants, I will provide specific accounts illustrating how they set about that management.

A says that he does not share a great deal of his own personal identity on the application with other users but that he would probably share his location based on whether the other user wants to meet with him. He also goes on to say:

> I felt like at times I needed to also partake in catfishing because there were times when I would get catfished.

He further says he would understand why fat people would catfish because of the rife fatphobia on Grindr, and that people want to be found attractive.

D says that he would share information about studying at the university and, unlike A, while never sharing his location, he would declare his age. As A does, D alerts us to the topic of catfishing saying that he is careful of sharing his location because he never knows who might be catfishing him. He has seen in real life that there are people who join Grindr just to find out who are the gay people in their community, to "kind of expose or attack them". He shares every other aspect of himself on the application, in order to be more authentic, so other users can get to know him for who he is.

O says that he doesn't share much with other people he meets on the application unless he grows closer to them as time goes by:

> Not much, really. Unless we're getting into a relationship. I only tell them what I'm studying and what not. But other than that, we don't talk much about my life or, like, any other personal stuff.

J says that they do not have any memorable experiences that came from sharing their identity with others on Grindr hence they do not share much with other users:

> It does kind of make me sad because it's not really (a place) I should want to share myself on or find the need to share myself because, because I used to be quite sharing and quite open about myself. Like a long bio detailing exactly who I am. (With) as much as however many characters can and, you know, actually chatting with people, actually engaging and, or more so, sharing and giving more of myself. Um, but that's really cool in a way because I think it's more because it hasn't been received very

> well. By received, it's like if we're all there for sex, no one really cares about my relationship with my mother, or what I'm going through academically, no one cares about all of these very specific things that I care about and that people in my real-life care about and that people who I actually meet out in the world would care about. We are all just there for one thing.

T indicates that he has had an experience where he felt pressured to behave in ways that he wouldn't necessarily in other circumstances. He speaks of the pressure to dumb down:

> I think dumbing down. It depends on what the mood was that day or what kind of person you try to attract and they are trying to attract. If you want to attract a Xhosa top, dumbing down is a good tool and sort of augmenting the sense of you (the Xhosa man) are a man and I'm your little protective honourable feat. It's like, there's roles. And you speak to the power of the person that you're talking to. So, there's the adaptations that take place there. So if you want to keep the conversation going, if you want to get a certain response, I find that it helps to have certain cues. And so being too intense about your issues, and if you are a politically astute person that wants to play, that wants to win a debate and an argument, that is not going to get you a conversation that will last. But dumbing down and not knowing and choosing to be led will.

4.2.5. Conclusion

It becomes evident from responses to the research question investigating self-representation that the management of information catalyses realisations about identity in the online space. The development of a Grindr profile and the amount of information shared with others on the application arguably serves as a point for learning about online identity. In particular, creating a Grindr profile provided the participants with an introduction to the virtual gay community. Goffman's theory of impression management (1959) offers particularly useful insights here as it becomes clear that participants enacted a performance in terms of the choices regarding what to share with other users. This chapter argues that, for these participants, the process that gay men engage in when creating their Grindr profile and then how they engage with that and with others online, is best understood as a multifaceted and prolonged, evolving experience. The creation of profiles laid the initial foundation allowing participants to engage and make connections with others on the site but, I argue, these acts simultaneously lead to self-knowledge regarding personal identity. Following this section, which explores the

establishment of a Grindr profile, the next section begins to unpack specific aspects of these identities.

4.3 Prevailing notions of hegemonic masculinity on Grindr

As indicated in previous chapters, online dating platforms have become very popular. However, as Lawson and Leck (2006:189) point out, this practice has not come without its challenges. Many – including gay men – use these platforms to communicate with sympathetic others online and to help ease the pain of loneliness.

While this does come to pass, some users of online dating applications have at times become the victims of financial and emotional scams created by individuals they have met through online forums such as dating sites (Buchanan and Whitty, 2014). Thus, trustworthiness and authenticity become challenges for users of online dating platforms. The accuracy of a person's presentation to others online will depend on their honesty with regards to themselves and others (Droge and Voirol, 2011:340) as online dating sites provide users with complete control over their self-representation. Since the contact between users of these sites is mediated by the Internet they present themselves in the most flattering ways. This reality means that Internet dating sites will allow users an opportunity to construct an online version of a social front. It therefore becomes difficult or even impossible to verify the accuracy of another user's self-presentation in the online environment. Constructing social fronts is of course not unique to the Internet, but their form is defined by the medium and, for the purposes of this research, the medium is Grindr.

An Internet social front typically includes one's gender and age, usually as listed in a profile filed with whatever Web institution hosts the social interaction. It may include a Web page containing edited pictures, prose, and in some cases animation and music to project the desired self. These pieces of what Goffman (1959) calls sign equipment are intended to convey something readily recognisable to the respondent. Users of online dating sites interpret each other's profiles with the understanding that individuals tend to even slightly misrepresent themselves to present their most attractive self (Droge and Voirol, 2011:343)

Beyond this built-in opportunity for modified self -representation afforded by online dating sites, they also offer individuals the scope to explore their sexual identities. Miller (2015)

says this is particularly true on dating applications such as Grindr where so-called ‘straight acting’ masculine presentations are viewed as desirable and attractive and where effeminacy is shunned. As a result, gay men will make extra effort to be recognised as legitimately masculine. These efforts consist of developing strong muscular bodies and demonstrating sexual prowess (Miller, 2015:638). It is worth noting, however, that on these dating apps profiles of gay men are likely to display profile pictures that don’t show their faces and feature only the torso area. Through visual clues such as this, gay men are likely to describe themselves as masculine and even state their preference of more masculine qualities in potential partners. Miller (2015:639) suggests that this overcompensation of masculinity may occur due to internalised homophobia or a lack of identification with a gay identity. This can also be seen as a reflex whereby stigmatised individuals will internalise the stigmatised images of a group to manage that very stigma.

Concerning authenticity and the projection of different versions of self on online dating sites, this research will now reveal findings drawn from the project’s participants. Here, the five black gay men compare their online identities and offline identities, and also reflect on what they have learned about their own identities and intentions since they have been active on the Grindr application. What their responses demonstrate is that to a certain degree they have all been implicated in what I refer to as visual digital hegemonic masculinity.

Performing a ‘masculine’ role was something that all participants agreed was a common feature among other users and something that they all criticised. The practise results in two consequences: on the one hand, dishonesty and disappointment led the group of subjects to be even more apprehensive and sceptical when it came to interacting with other users who portrayed themselves as ‘masculine’ and rejected femininity. On the other hand, one can argue that this reinforces the idea that a gay man who falls in the ‘masculine’ category is compensated with social gratification and seen as superior in the Grindr space – almost as something to strive for – and which promotes the ticking of boxes and the dumbing down that A alerts us to.

In this section concerning hegemonic masculinity, this research found that the participants predominantly refer to rules that accept and reject you when you are on Grindr. There is a degree of ranking about who and what is found desirable and attractive on the application according to the participants. The findings that follow here indicate that the rankings relating

to masculinity and femininity are often referred to as preferences and that the language around these ‘preferences’ is often perceived as violent by the participants.

The ‘no fats’ and ‘no femmes’ cited by the participants can therefore be deemed as a language of violence because such comments are often made in a manner that is extremely prejudiced against effeminate men. Further, it can also be seen as a form of legitimation between what is acceptable in the geography of hegemonic masculinities and what is rejected. Participants describe constructions of preference on Grindr which assumes some people as desirable and others not. This influences how successful interactions on Grindr are for the participants. Moreover, these preferences of making distinctions on Grindr reproduces power relations of masculinity and femininity that already exist in the broader society.

Another interpretation of these participants' experiences on Grindr – in particular, the rejection of effeminate men and the upholding of hypermasculinity – is that one can view it as the expression of an explicit form of misogyny. This is because effeminate gay men are not discriminated against just because they don’t meet the standards of the ideal Grindr male; they are seen as inferior in ways akin to women would be seen in broader society. What one learns from the findings is that there exists a hegemonic notion of the ideal male on Grindr and that this ideal privileges and reinforces traditional masculinity performance and condemns effeminacy. This may have its roots in the social pressure encouraging men to communicate with others according to the symbolic performance of hegemonic masculinity.

In the section below, participants account for their experiences of being implicated in the visual digital hegemonic masculinity that is upheld on Grindr.

When I asked A to outline what he has learned about identity since he has been on Grindr, he said that people on Grindr will always have a sexy Instagram-ready guy with a beautifully built body as a profile pic. This aligns with Miller’s (2015) claim that these kinds of profiles are rooted in hegemonic ideas of masculinity which encourage men on dating sites to make extra effort to be recognised as legitimately masculine. These efforts consist of developing strong muscular bodies to demonstrate sexual prowess; men on Grindr frequently display profile pictures that don't have a face and show only the torso area. They are also more likely to just describe themselves as masculine and even state their preferences of more masculine partners (Miller, 2015).

A goes on to outline what he has learned from being active on Grindr:

> I feel like there's no space for black, dark-skinned, fat people to be on the app and to exist and to find love and be accepted because there's always disclaimers and requirements and tick boxes for people just to have sex with you. You need to constantly dumb yourself down and trying to squeeze yourself into the system that's built for the light-skinned skinny beautifully built Instagram guy.

He continues:

> "I was also shocked a bit when I first got on the app and saw people with their requirements of things. Like for example a lot of people say like, 'Oh I only want white people'. 'I only want skinny people.' 'I don't want fat people.' And 'no femmes' as well.
>
> "They only want a particular size of the body or your age, and your ass needs to be in particular shape as well. I was shocked to find that out. But later on, it was like it was normalised. So whatever people want, you need to be able to accept the fact that sometimes you're not going to be what people want. You're not going to be what people desire, and you need to go and find someone else that's going to want you as well. I think that's where the aspect of catfishing comes in as well…because people feel like they're excluded from being attractive as well."

A's experience relates directly to the presentation of self and self-image on Grindr. What emerges from his experience is the ranking idea that exists on Grindr with expressions of 'I am not/I don't like'. The idea of preference, which is accompanied by a vocabulary of violence, tends to be femmephobic, racist, and fatphobic. This form of language is arguably a form of legitimation of what bodies are acceptable and what bodies get rejected in terms of the hegemonic standards of masculinity and beauty as played out on Grindr. A's case also demonstrates explicit misogyny, since he's effeminate. He's not just discriminated against because he doesn't match the male ideal, he's regarded as inferior as women would be in the broader society. His experience illustrates that every kind of feature that associates a gay man with a woman on Grindr automatically lowers him according to the platform's implicit ranking.

As indicated earlier on, beyond just meeting sexual partners, dating sites such as Grindr also afford users the opportunity to learn and come to terms with their sexual identities. This is

what D experienced: he has learned about his identity, in terms of what he wants and what he does not want. He expresses this with self-assurance:

> I've learned about the things that I want and the things that I don't want because the majority of the men on Grindr are discriminatory on the app. They will tell you no femmes, straight acting. You have to be white, you have to be black.

With respect to this, Aitken (2017) writes that in a racialised non-heterosexual identified space gay men are contending with a culture of white supremacy and homophobia which places them both in situations of racism and notions of toxic masculinity. Aitken (2017) says that race and masculinity in the online space function similarly with many users attributing harmful stereotypes bound up within race and masculinity. Miller (2015) also suggests that in the online space, instead of rejecting the gender ideology that sustains their oppression and stigmatisation, gay men still use culturally dominant masculinity definitions to police their gender representations of both themselves and others and set the standards for attractiveness and desirability in the online space.

Embodying this position, J has been on the receiving end of rejection and has learned about their femininity in quite harsh ways in the online space:

> I have learned a lot about myself. I don't know if it's because of Grindr. But it was more from the interaction, I would try to engage with someone who very clearly has ‘no femmes’ on their profile. It would be at a time when I didn't think of myself as feminine. I just thought of myself as J. And receiving responses from people like, ‘Oh, no, you're femme. I'm not going to engage with that.’ But one example of learning was just coming to terms of my femininity or coming to terms that other people read it as femininity, and I just read it as being J.

J also speaks openly about pressures they have experienced since being on Grindr – in their case, resulting from the hypermasculine nature of the application.

> I think, like I was saying before, trying to act less feminine to attract the attention of a specific man and acting more sexual to attract men. What I am saying is: hearing everything out loud and having to think about these makes me realise how much of a push and pull Grindr is and how much of a compromise it is just to be there. No

> matter what it is you're looking for, no matter what it is you're searching for, you're compromising something.

This speaks to Miller's (2016) argument regarding increased pressures around hypermasculinity and instances of femmephobia on Grindr. J's experience bears out Miller's similar research regarding the use of femmephobia textual elements on Grindr negatively impacting a user's perceptions of potential mates, which might thus limit dating and friendship pools and create tension within these online communities.

J's experience also transfers Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to the online space that is Grindr. Butler (1993) argued that in society we are forced to perform gender in polarity because there exists an agency in a society that constructed a gender binary that is determinate. What makes Butler's theory of performativity even more relevant to J's experience on Grindr is that she argues that the gender division/binary is also filled with rampant unequal power relations. As effeminate gay men, J and others occupy a marginalised form of masculinity. Butler says (concerning performativity) that the female's performance is subordinate to men's performance. On Grindr, effeminate gay men face this very subordination in a space that privileges and encourages a degree of heteronormativity and hegemonic standards of masculinity. But Butler also says since these gender binaries are not necessarily fixed and they are societal constructions, meaning that they can be challenged. Butler argues that social expectations confine the gender acts that people can 'perform', but these can also be challenged. When people like J are vocal about their oppression and confident in their effeminate gay identity, they arguably become such challengers, helping to undercut societal norms.

These societal norms are based on masculine practices and behaviours which have been found to convey more symbolic value than those practised by women and have been used to oppress and confine women and effeminate men. Generally, men are rewarded from an early age when they act tough or unemotional, as boys are told they should, and publicly sanctioned when they behave in ways that culture has labelled as feminine. The men who do not conform to normative gender standards are frequently labelled as female or gay, encouraging many gay men to privilege masculinity over femininity (Miller, 2015:643).

Masculine performing gay men may also participate in producing and reproducing the power structure of hegemonic masculinity that eradicates women and subordinates gay men and

men of colour (Miller, 2015:642). In this way, the hegemonic ideology of gender is constantly produced and reproduced through a person's performativity of masculinity and/or femininity in social interactions (Butler, 1990). Therefore, one may argue that gender-performativity is a strong aspect of how gay men negotiate a sense of self in their relationships with others, bearing out Miller's (2015) assertion that on dating applications there is privileging of so-called straight acting gay men and a shunning of feminine gay men.

Miller (2015) argues that the resulting internalised homophobia can be seen as a reflex: gay individuals can internalise the stigmatised images of the group to manage that very stigma. With this said, however, it is important to note that when gay men project internalised homophobia they are also in a sense able to align themselves with mainstream society and in such a way protect themselves from harmful stereotypes and treatment. However, this tends to happen at the expense of other gay men. Pyke (2010) writes that when gay men manage stigma through the projection of internalised homophobia, they also unknowingly reinforce the negative stereotypes of gay men that exist in broader society. So, in a sense, this rejection of gay effeminacy on Grindr and in other online spaces holds a certain irony because the devaluation of femininity in the gay community can also be viewed as sexism which is the very ideological foundation for homophobic stigma (Pyke, 2010).

Even though J admits to conforming to expressions of internalised homophobia, they also explain how different they are in real life from their Grindr self:

> I'm like, 'Hi, I would very much like to engage in sexual affiliations,' 'Hi, I'm here to engage in sex.' I don't think of myself as that direct in real life. That is because in real life you kind of have to ask before you can fuck or not. You need to ask people's consent before you do that, but I don't know the playing field in real life. On Grindr I know that everyone here is going to be on some level attracted to me in terms of sexuality, and in real life that kind of falls away, and I have to do a lot of guessing around that. I think that's, that's the one thing that's more, more different.

Similarly, A suggests that they are a lot more explicit because they don't feel censored. A says:

> I feel very explicit on Grindr because I'm not censored. I'm covered behind the profile. I don't send out pictures to people. I state on my profile that I'm not willing to send a picture. I'm very straightforward about it. I'm a completely different person in

> real life because, in real life, I need to censor myself to fit into a society that's built for heterosexual people. And the way our families also raised us, you will not be accepted into the family where I am going to bring shame to the family if I am the same explicit sexual person that I am on that app.

O is honest about some of the microaggressions mentioned in the previous section. He says this is what he has learned about himself from being on Grindr:

> I have learned that I do fat shame. I don't like people outside of people of colour.

Like T, who reported that emotion is completely removed from sex, O says:

> I've learned that Grindr is not a great place because you start thinking of sex as that thing that you can just get right now rather than something to form a connection with someone else.

D also says:

> Majority of the other men on Grindr are sexual beings. And I mean sexual as in sexual. They would greet you with a dick pic. No 'Hi'. No 'How are you?' No name. Nothing, just a dick pic and they expect you to follow up a conversation with that. How the hell do you do that? The majority of them on there do that and I had one occasion where one person didn't even greet me or anything.

While data from T and D demonstrate that Grindr has become an avenue for sexual partner seeking, and that certain criteria guide the selection/rejection of those partners, sexual practice preferences also emerge as a factor.

O reports interactions with people displaying paedophiliac tendencies:

> They are [paedophiles] because I had to change my age from 19 to 21. Just so old, white men couldn't act like creeps.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the challenges they encountered on Grindr, these men report that they have learned about their own identities too. For D, being active on Grindr has taught him what he does and does not want:

> I've learned about the things that I want and the things that I don't want because the majority of the men on Grindr are discriminatory on the app. They will tell you no femmes, straight acting. You have to be white, you have to be black. You have to be this, you have to be that. They don't want to get to know the people. And that's something I've learned about myself. I don't care about your body size, your race, your age, or whatever it may be, I care about the person and how you treat the person. That is the main focus for me that I've learned on the app for myself over the years of being on the app. As for the whole sexual thing as well, I've learned it. I am a sexual being, it's part of human nature. But I do not see myself as sending dick pics, just for someone to like me, or acting a particular way, just so someone would like me on that app. Because why would I subject myself to someone else's opinion, whom I do not know? And those are some of the things that I've learned from the app. I am in control of myself. And I am in control of how I choose to represent myself in the world and on that app.

For T, the self-knowledge gained from his Grindr experience includes levels of strategy to achieve what he does and does not want. These include dumbing down to be more appealing to others:

> If you want to attract a Xhosa top, dumbing down is a good tool and sort of augmenting the sense that they are a man, and you are their honourable feat. There are roles. And you speak to the power of the person that you're talking to. There are the adaptations that take place there. If you want to keep the conversation going, if you want to get certain responsiveness, I find that it helps to have certain cues. So being too intense about your issues….is not going to get you a conversation that will last. But dumbing down and not knowing things and choosing to be led in the Xhosa environment (will get you a conversation).

4.3. Conclusion

Most of the participants indicate that they have learned about their own identities as a result of being active on Grindr, and all refer to the existence of a racialised femmephobic attitude as a feature of that activity. They describe a space where other gay men still use culturally dominant masculinity definitions to police their gender presentations and to set the standards

for attractiveness and desirability on Grindr. In the next section, I unpack the intersecting politics of race and masculinity on Grindr in more detail as experienced by these participants.

4.4 Gay racism: The intersecting politics of race and sexuality on Grindr

As mentioned in previous chapters gay men are marginalised in society because they represent a 'subordinated' masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). They are also stigmatised and denied the full benefits and privilege that come with hegemonic masculinity and are made very aware of their subordination. In this section of the findings, I reveal that not only are these men marginalised on Grindr according to hegemonic masculinity standards that prevail on the application, but also in terms of their race. This section of the findings now starts speaking to Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality (1989) whereby these men face a double oppression not only because some of them are marginalised because of their effeminacy, but also by race.

This section of the findings speaks to Crenshaw's thesis by taking an intersectional, black feminist perspective that foregrounds gendered power together with other forms of oppression. Intersectionality is a useful framework, not only for the analysis of how power works to shape the experiences of black gay students, but also to analyse how these experiences might be transformed and changed.

This double oppression happens against the backdrop of South Africa's world-class Constitution which enshrines the rights of all people regardless of their skin colour or their sexuality. This research demonstrates that spaces such as Grindr can reinforce racist and sexist norms and operate as a microcosm of a broader society that does not necessarily prove itself to be as tolerant of black gay men as the Constitution promises. Findings thus highlight the intersectional challenges these men face, both digitally and in society at large.

'No Blacks.' This is not language taken from a segregation era, but from democratic South Africa where this dating preference is listed on some gay men's Grindr profiles. It is worth mentioning that up until 2020 Grindr made race a central feature of their online profile by encouraging users to identify with one of several racial labels in their ethnicity dropdown menu, including Black, White, Asian, Eastern, Mixed and Other. Despite Grindr's apparent obliviousness to racism on the application in the past, it is worth noting that they have launched various efforts including removing ethnicity filters (BBC, 2020) to combat racism

on the platform. However, there is little existing research on how this form of racism impacts young men of colour, even more so in the South African context that still faces lingering Apartheid-racialised residual experience. There is not even a way to measure the impacts of this kind of racism in general, because most research on young black gay men focuses on HIV/AIDS susceptibility and online identity construction and reception of homophobia in the social context. Additionally, such research is predominantly conducted in the west while neglecting other important areas of study such as the intersectional sexual and racial challenges faced by black gay men in relatively young democratic states such as South Africa. The findings from this thesis in this section suggest that most of the men at Rhodes University in this project have undergone some kind of experience that involved their race.

Focusing specifically on black gays, Hunter's work demonstrates how race and sexuality intersect, finding that race often determines conceptions of community and potential partnering for black gay men (Hunter, 2010:84). Moore (2006) has argued that the relationship between race and sexuality, blackness and gayness produces a series of trends concerning gender presentation highlighting that these differences in gender presentation have to do with differences in the intersection of race and sexuality, and perhaps because these men are negotiating three (multiple) marginal identities. These three multiple identities, I argue, based on the findings of this thesis, are related firstly to the fact that these men identify as gay; secondly, they identify as black; and thirdly they describe their experiences of femmephobia as black gay men on Grindr as the result of prevailing hegemonic masculinity standards. Despite such headway into the study of the social realities of LGBTQ individuals of colour, Moore (2006:134) concludes her discussion by noting that there is a need to know how individuals conceptualise gay identity in the context of other overlapping identities.

According to Hunter (2010:82), the social realities of black gay men and other LGBTQ individuals of colour receive little to no discussion and most often are implicitly addressed in analyses of conventional male gender roles. The present study not only offers a contribution to the literature by answering some basic questions about what it means to occupy the black gay position in an online context: by studying how these gay men think about and encounter racialised issues, the study also explores in its findings the practices that implicate race. This exploration not only reveals discrimination rooted in preferences and attitudes in general but it will also cast light on the complexities of the devaluation faced by black gay men due to these problematic preferences encountered on Grindr.

Below I give brief narratives of each of this project's five subjects in which they state clearly how race, even in 2020, plays a significant role in platforms such as Grindr.

T says it would have been beautiful if people's preferences on Grindr had evolved beyond racial identity:

> To say that it doesn't play a role, like, well, I wish that that wasn't my answer. It would be beautiful in 2020 if everyone had evolved to a stage where their preferences were not shaped around race, and racial identity in particular. In the same way that I spoke about people that say no femmes, no fats, no poor guys, no unemployed guys.
>
> And then some people say 'whites-only': a little – very – Apartheid, post-colonial wickedness kind of like shit.
>
> That is like the equivalent of a placard on a bed that is saying black people can't sit there. So, yes, there are people who are not even willing to start a conversation with people from other races. Someone that you would be interested in starting a conversation with and seeing if it could lead to anything, but they are completely unwilling just because you are black. So, I have had those experiences.

O, on the other hand, suggests that he cannot speak of race as irrelevant on Grindr as he has encountered older white men fetishising him and telling him that they have not been with a black person before. He makes an intentional decision to purposely exclude all white people from the application. Concerning the relevance of race on Grindr he says:

> Well, it is not irrelevant to me. When I am on the app, I purposefully exclude all white people. I guess other people have had experiences where white people were like, 'Oh, I don't date black people'.

O who intentionally filters out white people on Grindr says:

> I don't like white people and I don't want to be with white people in that way. I don't want to hook up with white people. I don't want to be in a relationship with them.
>
> I guess I haven't felt any racism coming from the direction. I haven't felt any, other than creepy old men saying: "I've never been with the black person.

J says they thinks race is very relevant on Grindr, because it is the first thing people see about you, it is inscribed in who you attract:

> I think race is very relevant to the platform on specifically white men's profiles. No blacks, no femmes, no fat, that kind of thing. Your race is very much inscribed in whom you're going to attract because, in some way, it's the first thing people see about you.
>
> It's on my skin. The black is on my skin. I can't hide the fact that I'm black. I cannot bleach away my black. I can't. It's there. If my pictures are up on Grindr, and if my little race thing says 'black', the racists are going to avoid me, or they're going to attack me. Either way.
>
> Yes, I think race plays a very important role in Grindr. I have had a lot of experiences with specifically white men who've either fetishised me for my race or discarded me for my race.

J says that even in casual conversations race comes to play a role:

> There was this one Grindr profile that I was messaging at some point and they called me the K-word in response. So not only have they responded to a nice person saying nice things in a vulgar way, they were racist now. And it feels so obvious to say it, but racism on Grindr is real and it's rife. And I know that I'm probably not going to get a reply from a white man. And I know that I probably shouldn't be texting them. But I also know that when I do get a reply from a white man, or text them that there's this very weird and uncomfortable rush inside me.

A agrees that race is very relevant on Grindr:

> I think it's very relevant because I don't want to have encounters with white people. Even when a white person says hi to me I tell him straight: 'I am not what you're looking for. I'm not skinny, I am a fat fuck. I'm not what you are looking for. Please go'.
>
> I tell them in advance because I feel like as a fat person, you quite constantly need to tell people like 'I'm not skinny, I'm not white, I'm not what you're looking for'. So that they can know exactly what they're dealing with, and [I] constantly put out trigger

> warnings to tell people what I'm looking for. A lot of people prefer to have encounters with blacks only. And I respect it. Some people prefer to have encounters with Indian people only.
>
> So, race plays a big role in terms of what people want – desirability. And what people want in the preferences they have, because a lot of people mask racism under preferences as well.

D says race is not irrelevant saying, by way of example, that he prefers black men. He recounts his experience as someone who identifies as a black man but is light-skinned:

> I prefer black men. That's a preference of mine. But, like I said, I'm open to different races.
>
> I would say that race is not irrelevant, because I've had multiple instances where people would look at my face. What I've experienced is because I'm light-skinned, and it says so on my profile, and people have seen my profile picture. The majority of the black men that I try and talk to end up not responding because I am light-skinned.
>
> I would message them and they would end up replying with ’you are not my type. You're a yellow bone. I want black’.

He speaks further of racism from white men:

> And even with white people, the majority of them would always have that, ‘Whites only, blacks only, Indians only, decent only.
>
> And I don't know what they mean by ‘decent’ specifically. Or ‘clean’, but it's always inserted in the bio where it indicates race. And I have never understood that…what they mean by ‘decent’, ‘clean’ when it comes to the topic of race.

He tells of specific experiences:

> I would say because I carry myself as a highly educated, queer person on the app, I have noticed that most of the black people on the app that aren't as educated tend to

feel intimidated by the fact that I'm yellow bone[1] and I carry myself in a specific way. I've noticed this by the way they talk.

There was this one incident where I was talking to this black guy. And the conversation was flowing. But somehow, I don't know where and when, the conversation just flipped. And he started swearing at me: 'You yellow bones, you think you're the shit?' And I thought to myself, where did this even come in? As far as I'm concerned, we're all human beings. We are part of a human race before we are part of the black race, the white race, the coloured race, the Indian race, and the Asian race, whatever the case may be. We are humans before we are anything else. And I couldn't even understand why race on the app would be such a big issue. Especially because the majority of the people I've noticed on the app are black. And some of them tend to not want other black people. They prefer whites or they prefer Indians. I don't know what that means. But for me specifically, I've had instances where people would bash me for being yellow bone and it's something that I have no power over. But it is a topic on the app.

4.4. Conclusion

These findings suggest, as in the previous section, that masculinities on Grindr operate in a hierarchy of desire, preference, and attractiveness with race operating as an important signifier of these and that the intersections of these realities magnify the Grindr experience for these users.

4.5 Grindr as a safe space for self-expression?

In previous sections, this thesis explored racial and sexual identities and their intersectional nature on Grindr. One can argue that gender as much as race in South Africa continues to shape social environments and social identities in profound ways (Moolman, 2012). However, social identity is a more complex matter than just race and gender. Social identities are practiced and performed through broad social processes and solidified through social institutions (Moolman, 2012:94). Social identities such as race, class, ethnicity/culture, sexuality, and gender are lived through everyday micro-practices in a range of social spaces

[1] Yellow Bone refers to a person who identifies racially as black but is light-skinned in complexion.

such as work and home. Yet macro-practices of race, class, ethnicity/culture, and sexuality have had a profound (but arguably less visible) shaping of social, gendered identities. South African social identities in particular, in line with Moolman (2012:94), must be understood and examined in relation to historical discourses of race and Apartheid. Bearing this in mind, this thesis will now look at how its participants have negotiated their expression of their identity on Grindr, and what challenges and opportunities of self-expression they have encountered while active there.

Grindr has been associated with a sense of convenience, control, mobility, and connectivity because the app is seen to allow its users with a position of choice (Miller, 2015). As we have also seen previously, Grindr has been credited by the users as a space that allows for the possibility of fast, non-commitment sexual and romantic relations, and is also seen as increasingly attractive through its affordance of safety, because you don't need to leave home (see Miller, 2015). Physical safety notwithstanding, how does Grindr rate regarding safety surrounding self-expression? Most respondents were sceptical about this possibility.

An overarching theme emerging from responses is the idea that self-expression is limited by the hegemonic standards of masculinity and race. Below I give an account of each of the five participants and how they describe and experience self-expression on Grindr as black gay men in South Africa in 2020.

A believes Grindr offers him a certain degree of safety when it comes to expressing himself.

> I feel like I can be someone else when I am on there. I can be my explicit sexual being on that app.

He does, however, refer to the Grindr duality:

> So it kind of creates a safe space, but at the same time it’s also very violent as well ….because that's where I experienced racism, fatphobia, the no femmes and stuff like that. So yes, it does offer you comfort and discreetness to a certain point, but at the same time, you also need to dumb yourself down to fit into the little box and tick boxes that people have created for you.

D explains that the platform offers a safe space for some people but not others, especially for those who identify as discreet on the application (there is an option to state whether you are discreet or not). For him, the issues of being discreet on Grindr are complex:

> Some people end up talking to these discreet guys, married guys specifically who are married to a woman. These guys would send those pictures, messages, dick pics, and all these other things that they would not normally disclose in public.

Discussing screenshots as a major risk, he continues:

> The people always run the risk of screenshots because that is what has become a new culture in society. Let me screenshot this, I need to show this to someone else. And that's part of the lack of freedoms that one has on the app because technology has made it so easy for people to just screenshot something and send it to someone else. And disregarding someone else's consent for having such information disclosed to the public. Other than that, the app is a safe space. You can express yourself the way you want to because it's a space for queer people to come together.

O briefly states that it is a safe space for expression for him, but not so much for other individuals:

> Yes, because I can be who I am on the app….For bigger people who are fat, for feminine people, for people looking for relationships, not so much.

T, on the other hand, is emphatic:

> NO, IT IS NOT! I never felt safe. I felt excited at the possibility of meeting someone, excited at the possibility of a heated hook-up that maybe leads to something more, but it’s not a space for that. In the sense that you are always on your toes, you constantly find yourself getting a mixed bag of reactions. Sometimes the reactions will be good, sometimes it will be hurtful reactions, and someone will say something that you didn’t even expect to be said.
>
> I think it just encourages a certain performance to be hypersexualised, high performance. I think the sexualised nature of it is also within certain rules: a top behaves this way; a versatile person behaves this way.

Here he speaks to the rules and pressures of moving between masculine and feminine roles, which he describes as two worlds. He says it's about taking power and giving power when moving between these the worlds of feminine and masculine. Ultimately, regarding Grindr being a safe space, he concludes:

> So no, it's not at all.

For J, there is no freedom:

> I don't think there's any freedom to express who I am on that app. Because going back to the app is not for expressing myself. I see it now as a place where I can go when I'm horny. Just a place where I can go to get sex. I don't feel like I can express myself because I'm afraid of encountering racists. I'm afraid of encountering people who aren't going to accept or acknowledge, or even respect the fullness of my queerness: the fact that I don't identify as a man, I don't want to be referred to as a man. The fact that I am comfortable wearing acrylics and being seen as feminine. I need to feel comfortable doing those things and I don't feel comfortable doing those things on Grindr. So, I don't feel safe there.

4.5. Conclusion

Reiterating findings of previous sections, participants describe in this section how femmephobic and racist language on the site negatively impacts their experience there as well as their perceptions of potential partners. This, in turn, can limit the potential of successfully connecting with others and building offline relationships. Consequently, it can be argued that Grindr's anti-effeminacy and racist climate promotes self-censorship leading to potentially harmful effects on the self-esteem, self-representation, and interactions of these men.

4.6 Lessons learnt from using Grindr

In this section of the thesis, my research indicated that Grindr was still a microcosm of disparities and inequalities that exist among gay individuals in the real world. These findings further indicated an exacerbation of existing norms which privilege white, muscular,

masculine and able-bodied men, at the expense other gay individuals who find themselves outside of this spectrum of privilege. This section asks the participants to reflect on this marginalisation, and findings throughout suggest that the participants are highly vocal about being marginalised in and on Grindr as black gay /queer men.

All these findings from previous sections, I believe, warrant a concluding reflection by the participants on what I term an evolving perception of Grindr.

The participants were asked whether they would recommend the application to other users who might have an interest in the application.

A says that he would recommend that others use the application but calls for transparency around the challenges that come with being an active user of Grindr. He says when he downloaded and started using Grindr, he didn't know who he was and often felt pressures to change who he was and participate in a catfishing culture just so that he could fit into the Grindr culture:

> Yes, I do (recommend Grindr), but at the same time also tell people about the horror stories and the reality of the application and how they need to know exactly who they are. When I got on it, I didn't know who I was. And for so long I literally felt pressure to also partake in a catfishing culture to fit in.

A reflects on a particular incident that shocked him:

> This one guy wanted me to have sex with him, but we not supposed to see each other's faces. He wanted to come to my residence, and I need to leave my door open, then he's going to come in, I need to lay in a bed, with my legs open, ready for him to come in and not look at what he looks like. I was very shocked by that. I was shocked that people would do that.

He explains that to some degree he understands the reasons as to why some users would behave in this fashion:

> I understand that people want to be discreet and everything but I feel like if you are discreet you shouldn't partake in any of the things that would bring you out of the closet. So, I was very shocked by that as well.

Like A, T also says that in recommending the application to others it is important to tell them what to expect once they're active on the application:

> Would I have recommended it to myself, years back? No, I wouldn't recommend it to myself. Would I recommend it to someone else? Maybe. It looks like there are people who have enjoyed it. People who look for quick sex. If that's your sort of thing and if you know want to get quick sex and that's all you're looking for that I'll definitely (recommend Grindr). I would recommend it by providing very clear caveats of what people should expect is going on there.

A further warns against some of the risks regarding sharing aspects of your identity with others on the application:

> And also, the whole idea of where people would actually ask for your picture. And then would send you a wrong picture (of themselves) so they can find out who you are, and later send you their real picture because they feel like they need to hide their identity.

Overall, A explains that he more or less understands Grindr's culture of catfishing and concealing of identities which is often seen as normalised:

> I understand the fact that they also want to partake in sexual pleasure. They also want to please their sexual desires as well. But at the same time, if you are in the closet and you feel the need to catfish, then you shouldn't be on an app because that app requires people to meet. For you to actually get these people at the end you're going to have to meet the people.
>
> So, I think I might see the app as a sexual app. I only go there to go find someone with a big dick for example, but there might be someone out there that actually uses the app to go and find love … find someone, maybe a friend, because there's a lot of lonely and isolated gay people out there that actually want friendships and affection in any shape way or form.

Like A, D says he would recommend the application:

> “Definitely. But I feel like once they have downloaded the app, and they've started to participate in the app, they should just be authentically themselves. Just disclose what you want and what you don't want and take it from there. I've met some really decent people on that app. I still talk to them to this day. Other people, I would not be caught dead being seen with them in public because of the way they portrayed themselves on the app. But I would definitely recommend it to other people. It's a way to get to know each other, network, meet friends, and find companionship as well.

On the other hand, some of the participants say that they wouldn’t recommend the application to others. J says they wouldn’t actively recommend it, but wouldn’t shy away from recommending it either, saying that in some way, shape, or form Grindr has become part of the queer experience, but they do not really approve of what a big part it has become of the community highlighting particularly the harsh experiences around race and Grindr:

> I hate it but it is part of how we are able to organise and get together. As much as most of my stories from Grindr or horror stories. I have a lot of beautiful stories too. I made a few lovely friends there. I met my ex there. I've had lots of pleasant chats with people. I have a lot of people that I still talk to now. It's not a complete train smash.
>
> “I do think that the problems with Grindr are very real, very apparent, and very ripe from the moment you open it. Just because it's an online space and just because it's a space where you're not face to face interacting with people, you’re actually interacting with profiles as opposed to people, but it doesn't take out the human aspect of it, those are still people. People coming from wherever they come from, from the racist home, from a non-racist home. They're coming on to the online space with all of that. And some people can deal with that, and some people can't. So, I wouldn't actively recommend that.

O says:

> No. I don't think Grindr is a great place for people who have just come out of the closet. I do not think Grindr is a safe space for people who are emotionally attached to other people. I don't think Grindr is a safe space for someone who just lost their virginity. I don't think Grindr is a safe space for people who are younger. I honestly think Grindr is a place for guys who know that they're just there to hook up. Because if you are there for a relationship, someone could fool you into thinking they also

> want a relationship. In the end, they just use you. If you're there for a meaningful connection or friendship, or like a long term hook-up, someone could sleep with you once and then just drop you.

4.6. Conclusion

What one learns from this section and the reflections of the participants is that there exists in essence a prevailing sense of heteronormativity on a site that is geared towards homosexual users. When examining these reflections, one gets the sense that Grindr as a dating app has the potential to provide a new perspective to understand sexuality and although certain real-world hegemonies are kept in place there, one gets to understand how these hegemonies operate in the virtual sphere, opening up additional possibilities for understanding sexuality in the virtual realm.

4.7 Conclusion of Findings

Data for this study was gathered by utilising individual semi-structured interviews with five self-identified black, gay students currently affiliated with Rhodes University. This thesis aims to respond to the omission in existing literature of black gay men's experiences on Grindr by providing an investigation of how black gay men understand and negotiate the intersectionality of gay and black identity, specifically on Grindr. The sample included men from undergraduate and postgraduate years, and a variety of academic course backgrounds. Each of the men in this study identified as gay and were using or have used Grindr. Each of the men participated in one 12- to 30-minute interview where they were asked a variety of questions to reflect on their lived experiences on Grindr. Given that there were no previous South African studies conducted on the experience of black gay university students' experience of gay-oriented social networking sites like Grindr, several key findings emerged. The major findings relate to the following: the motives for connecting with others was varied, and these included social interaction, sex-seeking, and social inclusion, as well as entertainment and dating. The discovery was that other users were most often interested in just developing friendships, but that the hypersexualised climate on Grindr meant people were often looking for hook-ups and casual sex, and the possibility of long-lasting relationships was not guaranteed.

The biggest crux of the findings emerged from the fact that where these men's profiles indicated that they are black this is not often well-received on the site and provoked a level of hostility, prejudice, and sometimes blatant racism. The participants of this project were very vocal about their experiences with other users on Grindr and explained how they were often cast aside simply because they were black gay men. They spoke about how normalised it was for other users to simply tell you they are not interested because you're black and how this form of racism negatively affected how they chose to interact with other users on the side. However, this was not the only form of prejudice and marginalisation that participants highlighted. There was also rampant and ever-present femmephobia and heteronormativity and these influenced and affected their experience on Grindr.

The findings show that masculinity and heteronormativity, while normalised as a preference on the site, created great discomfort for the participants. The findings also illustrate ways in which this discomfort impacts the possibility for building friendships and successful relationships on the site. Some of the participants had to dumb themselves down and/or downplay their effeminacy and the cause of such responses tended to impact their self-esteem, their self-image, and how they engage with others both online and offline.

Ultimately, the bulk of the findings point to the fact that self-representation on Grindr is influenced by the intersections that happen across race, sexuality and gender. This is borne out by how vocal and candid the participants were around issues of racism, femmephobia, internalised homophobia and being marginalised through these on Grindr.

The presence of femmephobic, racist language shows how perception works on Grindr: that black, femme men are often ranked lower in the hierarchy of desirability on Grindr. They can’t compete with the hegemony of the ideal Grindr male who is white, able-bodied, and muscular. So, based on what the participants in this study have said, one can then conclude that in South Africa black and femme gay users of Grindr are perpetually implicated in a hierarchy of hegemonic racial and masculine tensions that are exacerbated on Grindr. The privileging of whiteness and masculinity, and the demeaning of femininity and blackness, continue to be problematic for the gay population on Grindr. This study has helped to explore the experiences of these oppressive issues.

The purpose of this chapter was to present and analyse the data that was collected during fieldwork in relation to the objectives of this research and to link the data to the theory,

discussed in Chapter Two, that supports the framing of the research topic. The sample used was small because the project was engaging in qualitative research through semi-structured interviews and because many people were not comfortable being engaged on this topic. As a result, the findings provided do not claim to be a full representation of the entire Rhodes University black gay community. The findings are participants' opinions and subjective perspectives regarding their involvement on and experience of Grindr. Therefore, the data that was analysed in this chapter is not generalised but rather compared to see if the majority of these participants had the same opinions and perspectives. With that being said, the majority of the participants believed that Grindr is a space that is masculinist and racist that renounces effeminacy and blackness.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study set out to describe the experiences on Grindr of five young self-identified black gay men at Rhodes University in South Africa. It sought to discover their self-representation choices on the application as well as how they use it to conceptualise and explore their sexual identities, taking into account the unique gendered and racial South African history that influences the contemporary South African socio-cultural context.

Through using a mixed method qualitative approach that relied on a walkthrough of Grindr as well as semi-structured interviews, this research surfaced what it entails to create a profile on Grindr, and how factors such as gender and race influence choices of self-representation. In the interviews, the participants discussed how they chose to self-represent as well as how they used Grindr, a popular geosocial networking application for gay men, to make sense of their sexual identities.

Previous research conducted internationally has generated some information regarding how technology-mediated interaction has helped to foster interaction and relationships for sexual minorities, but none of these studies has been conducted in South Africa, a country and a context with its own unique history. Previous research supports the idea that Internet technologies often play a role in gay men's identity and identity development processes, taking into account that these online digital spaces are also often grounds of contention for these sexual minorities.

In South Africa, in relation to the experiences of black gay university students which were the essential identities under study in this thesis, research has focused predominantly on attitudes towards students who identify as LGBTQ as well as their identity development and their experiences on university campuses (Boonzaier and Mkhize, 2018). While this helped to offer some broad understandings useful to the topic under discussion, my research argued that perhaps this focus of existing research fails to provide a holistic understanding of gay university students. A review of available literature revealed one omission as understanding the experiences of these men as gay, black university students in South Africa and how they utilise gay geosocial networking applications such as Grindr.

As a guiding framework, this research primarily employed an intersectional, black feminist approach that foregrounds gendered power together with other forms of oppression. Intersectionality is founded on the idea of the interconnections between multiple experiences and identities. It foregrounds black feminist theorising of gender oppression and how it is imbricated with racism, classism, and other forms of inequity (Crenshaw, 1989). In this particular study, two factors surfaced as having affected how participants' self-representation choices played out on Grindr. They are affected by unique masculinist and racial orders that manifest themselves on the application and affect how these South African black gay men choose to present themselves on Grindr. It also appears that this masculinist and racial order affected the expectations and impressions of Grindr by the participants in this study. Through the responses of the participants the research suggests that men on Grindr are capable of performing and enforcing misogyny, encouraging the performing and enforcing of femmephobia and that this amounts to a lethal form of hegemonic masculinity prevailing on the site.

Participants' responses of how they used Grindr revealed four overarching motives: They have the desire to engage with other gay men, the desire to talk to and make friends with other gay men, they want to engage and establish relationships that function on both intimate and friendship levels, and they wish to establish relationships influenced by preferences concerning attractiveness and desirability.

The accumulation of experiences of the five participants suggest that in their experiences of using Grindr to meet and interact with other gay men and an avenue for quick sex, they encountered myriad other issues relating specifically to race and masculinity. These include an online form of sexism, misogyny, internalised homophobia, body types and racism experienced by the participants. They explicitly refer to these as 'no fats', 'no femmes', ' no blacks'. Experiences such as these by these South African black men suggest that, although Grindr is an avenue for gay men seeking interaction as an alternative to other public spaces which affect their safety, it has proved somewhat inadequate, coming with its own unique challenges. Often Grindr proved to be a microcosm of what these black gay men experience offline, for example the persistent and overt racist and masculinist gender order that prevails despite South Africa's world-class Constitution boasting equality and freedom of expression for all South African citizens regardless of race and sexuality.

Ultimately this research has showcased experiences of marginalisation on Grindr, particularly in terms of how marginalisation manifests itself as a result of discrimination based on race and masculinity. The study highlighted that even on Grindr other users have access to both racial and hegemonic masculine privilege. This privilege is used by other users to place effeminate and black gay users of Grindr in a subordinated position where they have to contend with femmephobia, homophobia and racism, factors which in turn affect their choices of self-representation. In addition to influencing their self-representation choices, the realities of racism, homophobia, and femmephobia made it difficult for black, larger, effeminate gay men to feel desirable in relation to finding sex on Grindr, as they often had to deal with particular criteria of what is deemed sexually desirable and attractive on Grindr by users who occupy a privileged racial and masculine position on the application. This study adds to the limited amount of research that examines how black gay South African men use gay social networking sites, especially in terms of how it relates to understandings of masculinity and race in the local sociocultural context.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conclude the thesis component of this research project. This chapter is divided into three parts. Firstly, a summary of the main sections aims to link the various aspects of the thesis to provide a coherent overview. Secondly, it provides an overview of the findings analysed in Chapter Four and discussed in Chapter Five. Lastly, a summary of the discussions and inferences arising from the data will lead to a conclusion as well as provide recommendations for future research.

6.2 Summary of main sections

This research was motivated by my observation that there was a gap in detailing the digital experiences of black LGBTQ South African individuals. Compared to Western countries such research was sparse in the global South. As a contribution to filling this research gap, my research focused on investigating how black gay South Africans make use and represent themselves on Grindr, a gay geosocial networking application.

In Chapter One, I introduced the context of the research, which included the experiences of black gay men in historically white institutions such as Rhodes University. This chapter notes the need for research that relates to gay students' digital experiences as most research conducted in South Africa was mainly through surveys that attempted to uncover attitudes towards gay students.

Chapter Two covered the relevant literature that could inform and support the topic. I focused specifically on taking a gendered, racial, intersectional approach, which relied heavily on the works of Crenshaw, Connell, Butler, and Goffman. These works provided me with a foundation on which I could establish the complex intersection of race and gender and how these could be linked to gender performativity and self-representation online.

The methodology used in this thesis is discussed in Chapter Three. Because this topic required deep and meaningful engagement with the participants of this research, the method

used was qualitative, relying primarily on semi-structured interviews with all participants. The questions were semi-structured to allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions. In terms of data analysis, the tool used was thematic analysis through coding to locate themes that link to the research topic and the objectives of the research. Chapter Four provided the diverse perspectives and opinions provided by participants during their interviews.

Chapter Five provided me with an opportunity to discuss the data analysed in Chapter Four and make some inferences. I return to these in the concluding section of this chapter.

6.3 Conclusion and recommendations for future research

This study suggests that there exists a need for a more holistic view of how black sexual identity is explored and conceptualised in South Africa. Results of the research under discussion are by no means generalisable, but they can give an indication of how emergent technologies such as Grindr can influence sexual identity. Furthermore, this research also provides an indication of the digital experiences and pressures faced by black sexual minorities. In particular, this study indicates that because of their race these black South African men have a unique experience of self-representation on Grindr where participation is often influenced by racism, misogyny, sexism and internalised homophobia and femmephobia. The results show how race can serve as a signifier of desire and attractiveness for these men on Grindr and how, as identifying gay men, they were not only marginalised according to their race, but also according to their perceived effeminacy.

Beyond this, the narratives of these participants revealed that they understood their sexual identity on multiple levels, emphasising the importance of navigating their relationships with others, establishing a sense of community and companionship with those they interact with on Grindr, and maintaining a sense of being true to themselves.

The narratives from the participants also indicate a need to conceptualise how media technologies such as Grindr do not operate merely as neutral tools but can be argued to be helping the participants to gain insight into their own nuanced sexual identities.

Although the small sample size of this study as well as its qualitative nature limits its generalisability, the narratives of these black gay men at Rhodes University revealed that sites

such as Grindr could play a critical role in addressing the concerns of the black gay South African experience. The participants used Grindr as a reference and instrument to explore their sexual identity. Despite the limitations of this study, I believe the data from this study are significant enough to start pointing out the visible issues and complex phenomena of sexual identity that South African black gay men experience in the online realm.

But the biggest crux of the findings is suggested by the fact that these men's profiles often indicated that they are black and that this is often not well-received on the site. Indeed, this information was responded to with a level of hostility, prejudice, and sometimes blatant racism. The participants of this project were very vocal about their experiences interacting with other users on Grindr and explained how they were often cast aside simply because they were black men. They spoke about how normalised it was for other users to say they are not interested in them because they are black and how this form of racism negatively affected how they chose to interact with other users. However, this was not the only form of prejudice and marginalisation that these black men repeatedly highlighted during the interviews. There was also the rampant and ever-present femmephobia and heteronormativity that influenced and affected their experience on (and of) Grindr.

While they had joined Grindr to establish friendships and extend their network of other gay men, what took place proved testing for the participants in this study. The findings show that masculinity and heteronormativity like prevailing racial attitudes on the app, came through in the vocabulary users shared online. For instance, 'no femmes, no blacks' was normalised as a preference on the site, a practice which created great discomfort for the participants in this study. The findings of this study not only show the intense discomfort and marginalisation that these men experienced due to femmephobia on the site but also show that this impacts the possibility of building friendships and successful relationships on the site. Some of the participants had to dumb themselves down and/or downplay their effeminacy, responses to a norm which risks impacting their self-esteem, their self-image, and how they engage with others both online and offline.

Ultimately, the bulk of the findings from this research show that self-representation on Grindr is influenced by the intersection that happens at racial, sexual, and gender levels and which is highlighted by how vocal and candid the participants were regarding the topics of racism, femmephobia, internalised homophobia and being marginalised through these on Grindr.

The presence of femmephobic, racist language illustrates how perception works on Grindr: that black, femme men are often ranked lower in the hierarchy of desirability on Grindr. They therefore cannot compete with the hegemony of the ideal Grindr male revealed by this study to be white, able-bodied, and muscular.

So based on what the participants in this study have said, which is by no means generalisable, one can then conclude that in South Africa black and femme gay users of Grindr are perpetually implicated in a hierarchy of hegemonic racial and masculine tensions that are exacerbated on Grindr. In view of the prevalence of these norms and the devastating impact that they can have on users of online platforms like Grindr, there is scope for an investigation into what motivates the perpetrators of oppressive preferences.

Another recommendation for future possible research is based on the fact that my study confined itself to Rhodes University – a university in a small town with a small population of students. This provides scope for a comparative study into how black gay men at larger universities in metropolitan centres use Grindr to interact with other gay users.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions.

1. What is your name? (personal details)*
2. Do you self-identify as a black gay man currently affiliated with Rhodes University?
3. When & How were you introduced to the application Grindr?
4. How long have you been active on the application?
5. How often are you active on the application? E.g daily weekly etc.
6. Why did you join the application? In other words, what were some of the motivating factors?
7. What do you think of the identifiers on the application? I'm referring here to the registration menu with sections headed Race, Type, HIV Status, Tribe etc.
8. Do you feel you can be yourself on the application? Can you name aspects of your Grindr self that may not be evident in real life.
9. Which aspects of your personal identity do you share on the application?
10. What have you learnt about your own) identity since you have been on the application?
11. What have you learnt about identity from observations of other users on Grindr?
12. When you are active on the application, has there been any kind of pressure to behave in a way that you would not normally behave?
13. I'd like to explore the role of race. As a black man, have you had any experiences on Grindr that implicate your race? If no can we talk about race as being irrelevant on this platform?
14. Based on your experience would you say a black man faces particular challenges on Grindr? If so, what are they?
15. Does Grindr offer a safe space for you to express who you are? Comment on the freedom (or absence of freedom) you feel Grindr offers.
16. What have you learnt about online identity through your interaction with other users on the application?
17. Would you recommend the application to other homosexual men? Please explain your answer.
18. Are there any topics we could discuss that have not been covered by my questions and our discussion?

Please note: Your identity as a subject will be protected. Personal details are for record keeping purposes only. As a subject you are not compelled to divulge any personal details. Subjects are offered the option to remain anonymous however may be contacted again if necessary. Subjects have the right to withdraw from the project at any time and can dictate how much of their personal identity they want to share.