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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNITY FORMATION IN
TECHNO-SOCIAL SPACES

by
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Identity Construction and Community Formation in Techno-Social Space

Techno-social spaces are spaces of situated identity construction and community formation, which exist within a broader realm of virtual systems. Apps like Grindr, Her, Tinder, and Wapa are spaces where individuals in Beirut articulate their identities and desires. Techno-social spaces have technological and human elements which complement and contradict each other. The technological interface enables and disables forms of human identity construction and interaction. In more technical terms, technological affordances, in the form of member profile construction options, or social interaction options, can shape how humans see themselves, present themselves to others, and interact with others in these techno-social spaces. This means that the technological interface allows or disallows articulations of social and political affiliations through identity construction, community building, and political action, depending on settings and features afforded to the human users of these spaces.

In this project, I study how identity construction and community formation on these geolocative apps are influenced by flows of capital within and beyond the app industry. These geolocative hookup apps enable the commodification of identity markers and notions of 'community' within the techno-social space. This commodification leads to the development of highly fragmented identity formations, and highly regulated communities. This fragmentation and regulation points to what communities look like in the neoliberal era: highly individualized and fragmented, and based on consumer behaviors and needs. This project contributes to existing literature on the role of capital in contemporary forms of identification and community formation. It adds to debates on these phenomena in techno-social spaces by examining how app developers exploit the data inputs by users to generate profits.

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IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN TECHNO-SOCIAL SPACE

A. Introduction

Geolocative hookup apps are techno-social spaces that act as sites of identity formation and community building. Techno-social spaces are spaces of situated identity construction and community formation, which exist within a broader realm of virtual systems. Apps like Grindr, Her, Tinder, and Wapa are spaces where individuals in Beirut articulate their identities and desires. We cannot overdetermine the benefits of techno-social space, but we also cannot deny that, for all their contradictions, techno-social spaces have partially enabled the formation of new publics, different understandings of identity, and potential new forms of community. It is crucial that we study these contradictions in these spaces along with the forms of identity and community that they activate.

Techno-social spaces have technological and human elements which complement and contradict each other. The technological interface enables and disables forms of human identity construction and interaction. In more technical terms, technological affordances, in the form of member profile construction options, or social interaction options, can shape how humans see themselves, present themselves to others, and interact with others in these techno-social spaces. This means that the technological interface allows or disallows articulations of social and political affiliations through identity construction, community building, and political action, depending on settings and features afforded to the human users of these spaces. For example, Grindr gives users the opportunity to identify themselves by 'tribe', another word for gay subculture. Thus, we can surmise that this is an affordance provided by the techno-social space.

Another feature of Grindr gives users the opportunity to filter who they see based on age. This is another affordance provided by the techno-social space. These affordances allow users to shape others' perceptions of them, and to filter who is given access to their iteration of the techno-social space.

These social and political articulations illustrate a form of networked sociality, one which must be understood to define techno-social spaces such as geolocative hookup apps, which exist as 'networked publics'. Boyd describes these 'networked publics' as "space[s] constructed through networked technologies (…) and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the interaction of people, technology, and practice"[1]. This latter 'interaction' is what denotes the networked sociality created by the social and political articulations of users of geolocative hookup apps.

In this project, I investigate this networked sociality. More specifically, I study how identity construction and community formation on these geolocative apps are influenced by flows of capital within and beyond the app industry. These geolocative hookup apps enable the commodification of identity markers and notions of 'community' within the techno-social space. This commodification leads to the development of highly fragmented identity formations, and highly regulated communities. This fragmentation and regulation points to what communities look like in the neoliberal era: highly individualized and fragmented, and based on consumer behaviors and needs. This project contributes to existing literature on the role of capital in contemporary forms of identification and community formation. It adds to debates on these

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[1] boyd, 39.

phenomena in techno-social spaces by examining how app developers exploit the data inputs by users to generate profits.

B. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The social element of the techno-social space relies on the ability of users to make themselves legible within the space and to articulate their identities and their desires to other users. Legibility and clear self-articulation are crucial to facilitating engagement between users in the techno-social space. Legibility, self-articulation, and engagement with other users can be understood through Fuchs' three notions of sociality: cognition, communication, and co-operation. Fuchs defines cognition as a "necessary prerequisite for communication and the precondition for the emergence of co-operation"[2]. He states that cognition relates to the knowledge processes of a single individual. In other words, cognition involves creating oneself, through member profiles or other manifestations of identity construction in techno-social space. The identifiers used in profile construction do not exist beyond 'society'; they emerge from social relations and are enacted by members of society. Constructing member profiles is a cognitive act. This identity construction through member profiles is 'social' in the sense that it makes one's existence as an individual in a (virtual) society legible. The legibility of individuals is the cornerstone of communication: the technological interface of techno-social spaces blocks one from communication and access if they are not legible within the techno-social space. In technical terms, what this means is that one cannot communicate with others in certain techno-social spaces without the creation of a member profile, in which one can be identified by a name, a picture, or otherwise.

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[2] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 42.

In his study of gay hookup apps, Chan claims that hookup app users rely on member profiles for "self-branding". That is, hookup app users use member profiles to make themselves legible – and in this case, desirable – to others. However, the construction of legible and desirable sexual identity is not the only facet of "self-branding". Constructing a political identity is, to many users of these apps, central to underscoring one's legibility in the techno-social space:

> Ben was eager to build up his activist persona and displayed a photo that showed he was an activist. He had been volunteering in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) organization in Los Angeles for a long time. He took his voluntary work extremely seriously. Not only did he convey his activist persona through the photo, but in his Scruff's bio he also wrote, "A connected, passionate, loving, gay person of color being a leader in my vision for the world."[3]

Chan calls member profiles on hookup apps "the connect point" between two users; the same can be said for member profiles across techno-social spaces. In his study of individual self-presentation, Goffman notes that when individuals present themselves before others, "it will be in [their] interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of [that individual]"[4]. The way this is done is through "carriers" or "sign-vehicles"[5] that allow one to "express [oneself] in such a way as to give [others] the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with [the individual's] own plan"[6]. In other words, one caters their expressions of self in the hopes of eliciting specific reactions from her/his peers, using legible "sign-vehicles" that are determined by context and prior usage. On the geolocative hookup app, these "expressions" are manifested either through technological features available in member profile formation, or through other 'sign-vehicles' like emojis.

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[3] Chan, 9.
[4] Goffman, 3.
[5] Ibid., 1.
[6] Ibid., 4.

While Goffman's notes are based on the observation of "social life that is organized within the physical confines of a building or plant"[7], the techno-social space can be thought of as an equally confining space, one that exists in the realm of the virtual. Thus, following the logic outlined by Goffman, we can say that these member profiles determine "the responsive treatment" that one elicits from her/his peers. Here, the "responsive treatment" – the back and forth, or "expressions given and expressions given off" through 'sign-vehicles' used on one's own profile – determines how communication plays out across techno-social spaces.

User profiles, on which these 'sign-vehicles' are used, are conducive to the existence of the techno-social space as a 'networked public', as defined by Warner:

> The idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based – even though publics are increasingly organized around visual or audio texts. Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be.[8]

In the case of the hook-up app as techno-social space, the 'text' that "can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people" are other users profiles, which incorporate the 'sign-vehicles'. The user profiles, and the 'sign-vehicles' that make them legible both to the app and to other users, are essential to the formation of this space as a public. However, the "chicken-and-egg circularity" prevents us from defining user profiles on these apps as the originator of the 'public'. In other words, we cannot say that these user profiles are the starting point of the public, nor can we claim that they are a resultant of the existence of a public. As Warner notes, "the circularity is essential to the phenomenon (…) its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very

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[7] Ibid., xi.
[8] Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", *Public Culture*, 51.

discourse that gives it existence". In other words, both the user profiles and the space on which they are hosted – the techno-social space – are both the starting point and the end result of the text-based public constituted by these apps.

Communication "is the sharing of meaning through the exchange of information"[9]. In this case, the "information" that allows meaning to be shared across the techno-social space is represented by the same 'sign-vehicles', from specific language markers to emojis, that come hand in hand with the techno-social space as a 'public'. In simpler terms, this means that the 'discourse public' identified by Warner comes with an additional dimension: communication, which allows the public to be 'networked'.

Identity construction, manifested in the creation of member profiles, is the fabric of the communication that occurs within these online communities. These profiles, especially on geolocative hookup apps but also in groups or communities on different social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, are a necessary conduit of communication. These profiles are the space in which users make themselves legible through virtual identity markers meant to elicit engagement with other users. As Albury notes, there are potentials for the facilitation of community on geolocative hookup apps[10], through repeated communications between users of the app. The communities formed by these repeated communications are communities in which co-operation can occur.

This co-operation creates the potential for social interaction across networked publics. In other words, communication enables the formation of a community, through which co-operation leading to social, or even political, action can take place. In her study of the Filipino LGBT

[9] Castells, *Communication Power*, 54.
[10] Albury, 20.

activist and political group, *Ladlad*, Soriano notes that the potentials of computer mediated communication "create new venues [for queer individuals] to come together"[11], thus enabling a sense of political community. In this instance, we see legible individuals (Facebook users) coming together through communication within a community (the Facebook group, *Ladlad*) and co-operating to change sociopolitical realities (through *Ladlad*'s repeated attempts to gain Congressional seats in two election cycles).

However, there is a simultaneous process of alienation that exists alongside the communitarian ethos of these techno-social spaces. Geo-locative features can "amplify (…) feelings of disconnection", especially in remote or rural areas[12]; in conjunction with member profiles, they create "headless subjects[,] fragmented and vacated types who mouth seemingly authorless scripts – jumbles of porn dialogue, hip-hop slang, bro-speak, and texting shorthand"[13]. Another constraint, outlined by Soriano in relation to opportunities for political co-operation, is "further segregation and 'ghettoization' as opposed to fostering communication" and a "potential loss of 'real physical community'"[14]. In clearer terms, the alienation of the queer community as a whole, along with the alienation of individuals within the community, is a limitation of techno-social spaces like social networking sites or hookup apps. This dual alienation occurs by moving the struggles of the queer community 'online', and giving individuals a possible alternative to the physical space to discuss these issues: the virtual space.

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[11] Soriano, 22.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Roach, 67.
[14] Soriano, 22.

Thus, networked sociality unfolds along a spectrum of community-alienation. Techno-social spaces constitute realms of possibility[15] through community or hindrance[16] through alienation. This tension between community and alienation in techno-social spaces is a manifestation of the regulative and associative functions of techno-social spaces. These techno-social spaces are largely designed for, or purport to be designed for, subcultural use, and yet they are heavily policed by opaque 'Terms of Service' dictated by app developers interested in regulating subcultural practice. The construction of these techno-social spaces as friendly, 'cyberqueer'[17] spaces aligns with the communitarian facet of these spaces; the heavy regulation through 'Terms of Service' which aim to dictate how queer subjects express their sociopolitical affiliations creates alienation through a disguise of "responsibility" to users[18]. Identity construction and community building in techno-social spaces cannot escape this community-alienation dialectic. In other words, "self-branding" through member profile construction and community building through "connect points" are influenced by the existing community-alienation tension in techno-social spaces. It is crucial to identify and note the features in techno-social spaces that alienate vulnerable individuals and make surveilling them easier to avoid the techno-utopianism that permeates most discussions surrounding virtual worlds and lived sociopolitical change.

Roach claims that users maneuver their way through the imposed neoliberal rationality of these techno-social spaces[19], allowing users to move beyond normative identifiers. This occurs when users attempt to transgress imposed 'Terms of Service'. As Albury notes:

> There may be times, however, when the rules do not matter. Where social media users *do* know and understand the rules, they may still communicate via coded workarounds to signal specific sexual desires and interests, or to signal an interest in exchanging explicit

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[15] Gagne, 169.
[16] Ahlm, 366.
[17] Soriano, 22.
[18] Roth, 421.
[19] Roach, 78.

messages and/or pictures with others, such as the use of eggplant emoji[s] to flag 'dick pics'[20].

Thus, users exhibit conscious attempts to move beyond app developers' regulation of subcultural practice and foster subversive modes of communication. At the same time, users' "self-branding" enables the construction of the self as an alienated commodity, to be "promoted and sold by individual entrepreneurs"[21]. On top of this, the data created by users' creation of member profiles that essentially map the self presents an opportunity for profit-making; the data is bought and sold by tech companies for advertising/surveillance purposes. We can think of member profiles as advertisements for the self as well as data for companies to utilize for profit. These two functions of the member profile reinforce the neoliberal ethos of commodifying everything. Users are aware of these commodifying efforts and subvert attempts to regulate cognitive expressions of the 'self' through Terms of Service by using emojis to make their sexual preferences legible, or by using false information to elude the surveillance mechanism created by the buying and selling of users' data by tech companies.

C. Methodology

In this project, I focus on four geolocative hookup apps: Grindr, Wapa, Tinder, and Her. I analyze the way member profiles are laid out on these apps, along with twenty different member profiles from each, chosen randomly[22]. Since Wapa and HER are rough equivalents to Grindr and Tinder, respectively, but catered towards queer women, I will be juxtaposing Grindr/Wapa and Tinder/Her. I will select member profiles on these apps belonging to individuals located in

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[20] Albury, 10.
[21] Banet-Weiser, quoted in Chan, 12.
[22] The selection criteria will be affected by the proximity of the users in question and whether their profiles are 'available' or not. Member profiles on these apps are notorious for suddenly 'dropping off the map' once the user signs off. Further, some users on Tinder pay for a premium membership which allows them to 'check in' to different locations across the globe: since this study is focused on app usage in Beirut, I aim to at least limit the profiles to people who are present in Lebanon.

Beirut and the surrounding suburbs by limiting the distance of these geolocative apps to roughly 20-21 kilometers and accessing the app solely from the AUB campus. With apps that have no option to limit distance (Grindr/Wapa), I simply do not incorporate profiles that go beyond 21 kilometers away from my phone's location. Thus, the member profiles I incorporate in this study are selected only within a radius of 20-21 kilometers in all directions, stopping right before Jounieh to the north, Na'ameh to the south, and Aley to the east of Beirut. Limiting the distance allows me to access profiles within the bounds of the city of Beirut and the surrounding suburbs. To ensure that the radius and circumference of access remain the same throughout my investigation, I only access the apps for this study from the AUB campus.

Focusing on the way the member profiles are laid out on the apps for others to see is crucial to understanding the type of community building that is underway: for example, on Grindr and Wapa, the profiles are laid out in a grid format, with several profile thumbnails on display at once, while Tinder and HER 'stack' profiles individually, meaning that a single member profile takes up the screen until it is 'selected' or scrolled past. The layout of the member profiles informs how the public and 'imagined collective' are constructed through the features made available on the apps.

Studying individual member profiles reveals how 'structured' or 'unstructured' the member profiles are on different apps, thus answering the question of how identities are formed and imagined on the different apps. To cite a concrete example again: on Grindr, member profiles are structured like forms, with a box to type in one's name and a short description followed by an array of categories one must select from a drop-down menu or insert a numerical value for. These categories are organized under three axes: stats (age, height, weight, ethnicity,

body type, position, 'tribes'[23], relationship status, 'looking for'[24]), identity (gender, pronouns), sexual health (HIV status, last tested date). One could search for other men using "basic features" filters that are limited to age, 'tribes', and 'looking for'. In order to limit the search for users using even more filters (i.e. to limit the pool of visible users by desirable height, weight, ethnicity, body type, [sexual] position, or relationship status) and access additional features, one must pay between 15,000LBP (10USD) for a monthly subscription or 72,500LBP (approximately 50USD) per year. Wapa also allows users to fill in 'form'-like profile boxes after filling in one's name and a short description, but unlike Grindr there are only three basic categories: age, weight, and height. Users cannot search for women by age, weight, or height, and a premium subscription enables additional features like being able to make face images private and getting rid of advertisements. The subscriptions are also significantly cheaper, with a monthly subscription costing 4,250LBP (less than 3USD) and a yearly subscription costing 35,000LBP (23USD).

By comparison, Tinder and HER are minimalist in their member profile structure, with little or no categories, leaving users free to categorize themselves with a descriptive paragraph or emojis. Analyzing these member profile structures vis-à-vis the categorizations offered (or not offered) reveals how identity construction occurs on these apps, and what types of individuals are imagined to be users of these apps.

The reason I have chosen these apps and not others is simple: out of all the existent geolocative hookup apps, Tinder and Grindr have some of the most expansive coverage in the literature on hookup apps in digital media studies scholarship and are most cited in casual

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[23] Sexual 'tribes', such as bear, leather, etc.
[24] What the user in question is interested in: a relationship, a sexual encounter, friendship, or otherwise.

conversations with other queer interlocuters in Beirut. Her, while less prevalent, is still relatively popular among queer women in Beirut despite the difficulties involved in gaining access to this techno-social space in Lebanon[25], and is the only app geared exclusively towards queer women the literature I am using. Wapa is notably absent in the literature I have drawn on for this study, and despite extensive research I have not been able to find any academic engagement with this particular app.

These geolocative hookup apps reshape local modes of sociality and self-presentation. They enable the commodification of identity markers and techno-social space. It is crucial to study how these apps reshape different modes of sociality and the new forms of profit-generation that they enable in a city like Beirut. The transnational expansion of tech markets has interesting consequences for Beirut. Understanding the impact of this market expansion on local modes of sociality and self-presentation, on understandings of community and networking. In focusing on Beirut, this project fixates on the 'transnational' in transnational American Studies. Much of the literature on these apps is focused on a United States (US) context, since the apps themselves are either conceptualized or developed, to some degree, within the US. Trying to understand the social and economic impact of these apps within geographic bounds outside the US gives this project a transnational angle.

The analysis of app layouts and member profiles will be accompanied with brief overviews of each of the apps, focusing on the 'Terms of Service' which shape how users use the public profile format to 'display' themselves (through either reaffirmation or subversion of the stipulated terms). I am collecting data about the apps and the member profiles on them by

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[25] HER is not available in Lebanese app stores; I used a VPN (virtual private network) to download the app – the VPN connected my device to a server in a country where HER is available, allowing me to download the app in Lebanon.

creating member profiles on each where I clearly indicate that I am a student researcher writing my thesis on hookup apps. As I noted in the literature review, the technological interface of these techno-social spaces would block my ability to communicate or even access the space if I am not legible by the app's terms; this has meant creating my own member profile to study the space. Even this legibility has consequences for identity creation and community building within the app. Becoming legible within each of these apps means, to some degree, identifying using language chosen by the apps' developers. Users are given the illusion of choice by being given access to a drop-down menu for some aspects of their identity, such as "[sexual] position" on Grindr or "relationship status" on HER, but are forced to choose from a list provided by the app. Further, it means giving the app access to information one may not want to share on the apps, such as age on Tinder, which is taken straight from the user's Facebook profile. Further, listing these identity markers on one's profile means that users can filter them out. For example, if a user lists their 'tribe' on Grindr as "Bear", this means that another user can decide to filter them out by not including "bear" in their list of desirable markers. This means that different users have access to different pools of users, which has interesting consequences for the formation of community on these apps.
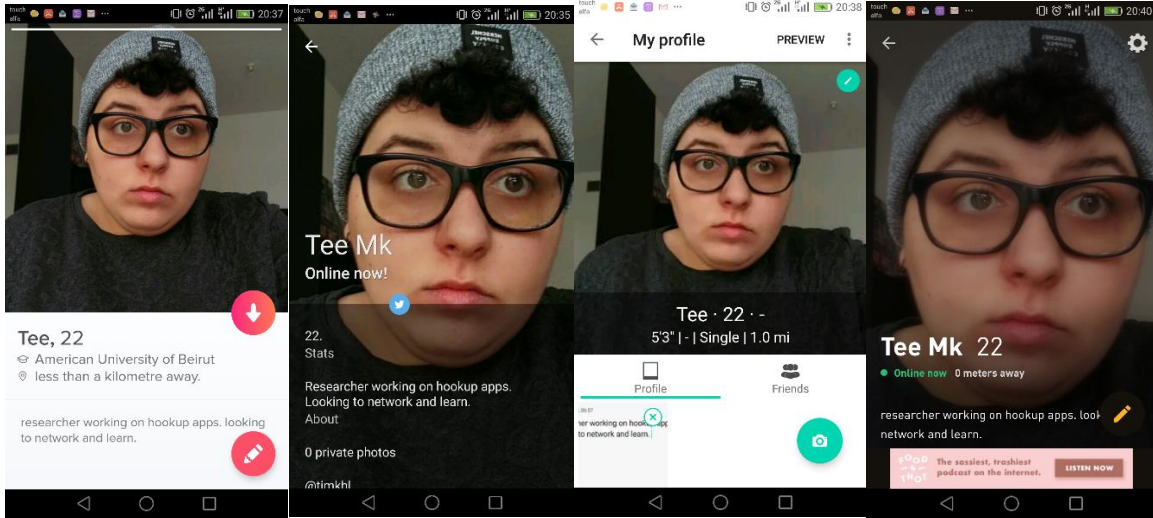
Fig. 1. From left to right: User profiles on Tinder, Wapa, Her, and Grindr. Screenshots taken on March 16, 2018

Finally, it is important to lay out the public/private nexus that these apps exist within. As they are 'gated' communities, that cannot be accessed by those who are not legible within the space, many consider these apps to be 'private' techno-social spaces, especially apps like Grindr, Her, or Wapa, which are geared towards subcultural use by queer communities. However, access to these apps is by no means restricted; one need only have an email, Facebook account, or phone number in order to create their own profile, as evidenced by the astounding number of heterosexual men found in queer women's spaces (which I discuss in later sections of this project). Thus, it is also safe to say that these apps are 'public', in the sense that they are easy to access. Further, as discussed in section (B), these apps constitute 'discourse publics', whereby the 'sign-vehicles' and their scaffolding are circulated and consumed by users of the apps.

This 'grey zone' has made it useful to study not only the app features and member profiles on these apps but also the way users have engaged with my presence in these respective techno-social spaces. The engagement has varied across apps, with notable differences emerging between those on apps catered to queer men or heterosexuals versus apps catered to queer women. As I discuss in later sections of the project, these reactions reveal highly gendered

understandings of 'public versus private' space and engagement in the immediate vicinity of

Beirut and its surrounding suburbs.

CHAPTER II

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GEOLOCATIVE HOOKUP APPS

A. Introduction

Humans have been using techno-social space as a tool to find love, companionship, and sex since virtual worlds became accessible to the public. Online chat services like AOL, MSN, and ICQ created a new form of techno-social space that allowed people to connect with each other through computer screens, to either play games, chat, and/or meet potential romantic and sexual partners. The advent of the smartphone from the late 00's onwards led to the creation of techno-social spaces 'on the go'. Speculations about the growth of mobile dating services began as early as 2005, with one writer observing that "mobile dating is the next big leap in online socializing (…) [which will] catch on with a generation increasingly dependent on its cell phones and handheld devices"[26].

While the virtual element of the computer accessible chatroom and the geolocative hookup app are relatively similar, there are several key differences. Some of these geolocative hookup apps even organize members based on proximity, from closest to farthest. Others allow caps on distance. Exploring other parts of the world on these apps is only available through premium packages that one pays for. Second, anonymity is not a rarity, as it was on older iterations of techno-social spaces geared towards hookups and dating. While in the past it was encouraged to keep other spheres of their lives separate from the techno-social space, now there are features that allow one to connect their Facebook and Instagram accounts to the hookup app.

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[26] Ryan Kim, "Hey, baby, want a date? / New mobile dating services allow people to browse profiles via cell phone and message potential matches -- even on the spot", *SFGATE*, Jul 23 2005. Accessed Feb 15 2018 https://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Hey-baby-want-a-date-New-mobile-dating-2653653.php

B. Smartphones and the "App Economy"

The hookup app is part of a broader app economy that has flourished in the past decade. Goldsmith writes that the origins of the app industry we know today lie in the video-games industry. The 2008 financial crisis led to the reformulation of video-game development, with freelance developers preferring to redirect their energy to casual, mobile game apps instead[27]. The flourishing of this industry would have been impossible without the advent of smartphones. Goldsmith notes that "the dominance of Android [predominantly through Samsung phones, but increasingly through other Android devices as well] and iOS [through iPhones] is both a reflection of and catalyst for the positive feedback loop in the mobile applications market". The "positive feedback loop" Goldsmith refers to is evident in the circulatory relationship between new apps and new markets, where the potential of breaking into new markets fuels app developers' production of new apps, and the presence of new apps leads to the generation of new markets.

In the Lebanese context, sixty percent of Alfa users had acquired smartphones by 2011[28]. As of 2017, smartphones have reached saturation level in Lebanon. In 2012, ACT (The App Association) published its first report on the app economy, projecting a $70 billion growth between 2012 ($30 billion revenue) and 2015 ($100 billion revenue)[29]. In 2017, ACT published its fifth report, claiming that the app economy is now worth around $143 billion, and that apps have transformed from "consumer products" to an "ecosystem" that "provide a product and an

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[27] Goldsmith, in x, 172.

[28] Quoted in Jared McCormick, "The Whispers of Whatsapp: Beyond Facebook and Twitter in the Middle East", *Jadaliyya*, Dec 9 2013. Accessed Feb 2 2018 http://middleeastdigest.com/pages/index/15495/the-whispers-of-whatsapp_beyond-facebook-and-twitt

[29] ACT, "Apps Across America: The Economics and Ecosystem of the Mobile App Market", Jul 18 2012. Accessed Mar 20 2018 http://actonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Apps-Across-America_new.pdf

interface to enable real-time access to a seemingly infinite amount of data"[30]. Looking at

projected numbers published in another report, we can see that this unprecedented growth will

not stop anytime soon:

> Given increasing investments in mobile and specifically in apps by companies across industries and in mobile's ever-expanding centrality in our daily lives, we project the app economy will add more than $5 trillion in value over the next five years, resulting in a $6 trillion app economy by 2021[31]

Hookup apps are a small part of this mammoth app economy. The alarming size of the

revenues generated by the app industry make it pertinent to consider the stakes of geolocative

hookup apps. As Albury et. al. note, "data collection [on hookup apps] can begin as early as sign

up"[32], with apps like Tinder allowing users to create their profiles with Facebook or their phone

numbers, thus enabling the import of data from other apps and the user's smartphone. The

collection of this data along with location disclosure enabled by geolocative hookup apps allow

for the association of an "information rich data pool"[33] with every single user.

C. Data as Labor/Commodity and Hookup Apps' Privacy Policies

Geolocative hookup apps' data aggregation is a key element of their profitability. Fuchs

notes that corporate social media platforms "accumulate capital with the help of targeted

advertising that is tailored to individual user data and behavior"[34]. While hookup apps are

distinct from the social media platforms Fuchs is referring to, there is no doubt that one of the

reasons for data aggregation on hookup apps is to enable tailored advertisements that are location

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[30] ACT, "State of the App Economy: Fifth Edition", 2017. Accessed Mar 20 2018 http://actonline.org/wp-content/uploads/App_Economy_Report_2017_Digital.pdf

[31] App Annie, "The App Economy Forecast: $6 Trillion in New Value", 2017. Accessed Mar 20 2018

[32] Kath Albury et. al, "Data cultures of mobile dating and hook-up apps: Emerging issues for critical social science research", *Big Data & Society*, 2017, 3.

[33] Ibid., 4.

[34] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 105.

specific. Further, many geolocative hookup apps are closely tied to the social networking sites

Fuchs is specifically referring to. For example, Tinder can integrate a user's Facebook account

into their Tinder profile with the click of a button, allowing them to use images and provide

information already present on their Facebook accounts.

With data breaches as substantial as Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal occurring at

the time of writing, it becomes crucial to investigate, or at least acknowledge, the weight of

sharing one's data within the techno-social space. Data sharing is what gives these techno-social

spaces their social edge. To construct a member profile on any social networking app or hookup

app, one must share data about themselves – their name, a profile picture, and depending on the

app, different criteria that would help other users identify whether or not they want to connect

with this person. As noted in the previous section, these member profiles are both used for modes

of "self-branding" as well as connect points between different users of these techno-social

spaces. Yet the data used to construct these profiles and allow users to self-brand and connect

with others does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, as the exponential increase in revenues shows,

data shared on apps is deeply implicated in the circulation of capital and circulation of profits

enabled by the app industry.

On hookup apps, sharing one's data is even more precarious. First, the nature of the data

itself could compromise the user if it is leaked, especially in contexts where 'transgressive'

sexual activity is deemed a legal breach. Second, as Albury et. al. note, "in terms of user ability

to control the context in which location information is shared, neither [Tinder nor Grindr]

provide especially detailed instructions for users"[35]. Further, the information one shares on these

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[35] Albury et. al., 4.

two apps alone can be shared with service providers and partner/parent companies. This means that any user who shares data on Tinder also shares it with Tinder's parent company, InterActive Corp (IAC). IAC defines itself as a "leading media and Internet company comprised of widely known consumer brands"[36], including Match Group, which owns seven other hookup app 'brands'; Investopedia, which offers "timely, trusted and actionable financial information for every investor"; and other "brands", including travel websites, health websites, personal finance websites, and so forth.

This data aggregation is regulated differently in different jurisdictions. For example, data protection laws force any company operating in the EU to disclose the personal data about any individual who asks them for it. Judith Duportail, a correspondent for *The Guardian*, writes about her experience reading the data aggregated about her by Tinder:

> Some 800 pages came back containing information such as my Facebook "likes", links to where my Instagram photos would have been had I not previously deleted the associated account, my education, the age-rank of men I was interested in, how many Facebook friends I had, when and where every online conversation with every single one of my matches happened … the list goes on (…) What will happen if this treasure trove of data gets hacked, is made public or simply bought by another company? I can almost feel the shame I would experience. The thought that, before sending me these 800 pages, someone at Tinder might have read them already makes me cringe[37].

Paul-Oliver Dehaye, another correspondent for *The Guardian* who helped Duportail get her data from Tinder, notes that "your personal data affects who you see first on Tinder (…) but also what job offers you have access to on LinkedIn, how much you will pay for insuring your car, which ads you will see in the tube and if you can subscribe to a loan"[38]. While Tinder details that users' data will be shared with its partner companies in its privacy policy, which every user must agree

[36] IAC, "Overview". Accessed Mar 22 2018 http://iac.com/about/overview
[37] Judith Duportail, "I asked Tinder for my data. It sent me 800 pages of my deepest, darkest secrets", *The Guardian*, Sept 26 2017. Accessed Mar 22 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/26/tinder-personal-data-dating-app-messages-hacked-sold
[38] Quoted in ibid.

to before signing up to use the app, these privacy policies are not necessarily legible or accessible to everyday tech users. As Dehaye notes: "who has the illusion that they still have some power in a relationship, when they are reduced to clicking a box at the bottom of dozens of pages of a 'privacy policy'?" Further, Grindr, Tinder, and undoubtedly other hookup apps, note explicitly that they can share user data with third party advertisers. As noted earlier in this chapter, revenues from advertising form a large portion of overall revenues generated by the app economy.

To put this alarming amount of data aggregation and data sharing into perspective, we must return to the nature of the data being shared on these apps – both what it is and what it is made up of. Fuchs notes that "the emergence of online platforms has intensified the historical trend that boundaries between play and labour, work time and leisure time, production and consumption, the factor and the household, public and private life tend to blur"[39]. He suggests that most capitalist social media networks are purely financed by advertising. In the case of geolocative hookup apps, this is only partially true. There are three ways that geolocative hookup apps are profitable: subscription plans, as seen on all four geolocative hookup apps (Grindr, Wapa, Tinder Her); advertising; and single purchases. All four apps follow a freemium model, where one can use the basic functions of the app and then pay for extra features[40], such as checking into other locations in the world (Tinder), accessing 'premium' filters (Grindr), rewinding profiles (Her, Tinder), getting rid of advertisements, or access to privacy features (Wapa).

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[39] Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*, 118.
[40] Julia Dorofeeva, "How Do Dating Apps Make Money", *DatingPro*, Oct 23 2017. Accessed Mar 28 2018 http://www.datingpro.com/blog/how-do-dating-apps-make-money/

Users of these apps, much like users and audiences of "commercial media companies"[41], are prosumers – both productive workers whose labor is exploited, and consumers of the commodity that is produced by those exploited workers. In this case, the product being produced and consumed is data. Through the input of user data into geolocative hookup apps' member profiles, users are producing a commodity: their own data. By looking at other users' member profiles, users are consuming the commodity produced by other 'workers'; thus, they are consuming data. Further, any action one performs on these apps creates even more data: viewing another user's profile, swiping left or right, sending them a message or 'tapping' them – these are all actions that are stored by the apps as data[42]. The mere presence of active users on these apps generates profit because it exposes the user to advertisements. Also, signing up for any of the four listed geolocative hookup apps (and many other social networking sites and apps) means agreeing to terms and conditions that allow those apps to share swathes of data with third parties, including advertisers. Thus, the labor (input of data) and the ensuing commodity (data)[43] has a twofold, circulatory purpose: the work put into these apps by users creates a commodity that is used by advertising companies, who use that data to enable personalized advertisements based on users' interests.

On Grindr, we are likely to find explicit and detailed information about queer men's sexual preferences, gender identification, their body stats, ethnicity, and their sexual health. As noted in Grindr's privacy policy, this data may be shared with third party tracking companies, third party service providers, or "in response to subpoenas, warrants, or court orders, or in connection with

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[41] Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Digital Media*, 152.
[42] Judith Duportail, "I asked Tinder for my data. It sent me 800 pages of my deepest, darkest secrets", *The Guardian*, Sept 26 2017. Accessed Mar 22 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/26/tinder-personal-data-dating-app-messages-hacked-sold
[43] Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Digital Media*, 156.

any legal process, or to comply with relevant laws"[44]. All the other hookup apps that are a part of this study (Tinder, Her, and Wapa) have similar stipulations in their privacy policies. In other words, the data aggregated by these apps – information about sexual preferences, messages sent to other users, and so forth – could be made available to state authorities, thus exposing queer communities using these apps to further scrutiny by governments that deem non-normative, non-hetero sexual acts to be "unnatural"[45]. This also applies to Tinder and Wapa. Her's case is ambiguous because, unlike Grindr, Wapa, and Tinder, it is not available on Lebanese app stores, meaning it does not necessarily have to submit to Lebanese law.

D. The 'Gay Market': An Overview

In *Business Not Politics*, Sender elaborates on the construction of the gay market as a consumer niche, noting that marketers make endless attempts to separate business from politics, whereby marketers can "appeal to a liberal-utilitarian economic model in which financial decisions can be made free of political motivations or ramifications"[46]. However, the previous section made clear that the data aggregation that occurs on geolocative hookup apps – especially those like Grindr, Wapa, and Her, which are explicitly catered towards MSM (male seeking males) and WSW (women seeking women) – has political consequences. For example, Grindr has been used by Egyptian police forces to crack down on queer individuals in public places, either through an undercover identity or by pinpointing one's location through the app.

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[44] Grindr Privacy Policy. Accessed Mar 22 2018, via app.
[45] I am directly referencing Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which criminalizes 'unnatural sexual intercourse'. Anal penetration and other non-hetero sexual acts can be characterized as 'unnatural', and they often have in the past.
[46] Katherine Sender, *Business Not Politics*, 3.

These instances of state surveillance have led Grindr to formulate an internal safety message that appears as a pop-up as soon as individuals download the app in Lebanon:

Fig. 2. Safety message on Grindr. Screenshots taken on January 15, 2018

The message is available in both English and Arabic[47]. The preamble to these steps, which are framed as precautionary measures, states: "If you live someplace where being LGBTQ puts you in danger, here are some important steps you can take to ensure your safety while using Grindr." The Grindr Safety pop-up, which only appears when one downloads the app in places where being LGBTQ is 'dangerous,' is distinct from the safety tips found in Grindr's online Help Center[48], specifically in the perception of state authorities:

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[47] English version of "Grindr Safety". Accessed Mar 27 2018 https://www.grindr.com/safety/english/
[48] Grindr Help Center, "Safety Tips". Accessed Mar 27 2018 https://help.grindr.com/hc/en-us/articles/217955357-Safety-Tips

5. If you get arrested, *never ever confess or admit to anything***.** Even if they have proof, staying silent is your best bet[49]

Report any threats to law enforcement. If things go wrong, report it to the police. *Give them all the facts[50]*

These different perceptions of law enforcement are politically charged. The implication of one's data in these perceptions is not simply "business not politics", as the saying goes, but business and politics together. Grindr is predicated on the existence of what Sender calls a "relation[ship] between gay men's sexual culture and commerce"[51]; and yet, there are political considerations involved in the creation of the "Grindr Safety" disclaimer. The disclaimer is an attempt to avoid liability for any crackdowns or arrests that may occur because of the app, and the data collected by it. Further, the two safety documents illustrate how blame is allocated differently based on location; in potentially 'dangerous' places, the onus is placed on users to keep themselves safe from malicious people, from homophobic state authorities, and so forth. In 'safe' places, on the other hand, state authorities are understood as 'neutral' figures that are interested in the well-being of marginal communities.

The safety documents circulated by Grindr illustrate how the notion of "business, not politics" is a myth, and further, the disintegration and reformulation of the gay market in the contemporary age. First, as discussed above, the varying understandings of state authorities and law enforcements' attitudes towards and uses of one's information betrays an inherently political understanding of those entities. Further, the mere existence of different types of safety documents, that are made available based on location, illustrates the implication of data

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[49] English version of "Grindr Safety". Accessed Mar 27 2018 https://www.grindr.com/safety/english/. Italics added by author.
[50] Grindr Help Center, "Safety Tips". Accessed Mar 27 2018 https://help.grindr.com/hc/en-us/articles/217955357-Safety-Tips. Italics added by author.
[51] Sender, 200.

aggregation practiced by Grindr and other geolocative hookup apps[52] in state surveillance, in perpetuating individual instances of violence against MSM and WSW, and so forth. Thus, there is no separation between business and politics in the "gay market"; as Sender rightly notes, "all economic activity has political effects", and the case of Grindr and other geolocative hookup apps is no exception.

At the same time, the "gay market" has disintegrated and been reformulated over the past decade. In a keynote paper delivered at Advertising & Society Quarterly's inaugural Advertising and Society Colloquium, Sender notes:

> Gay consumers have left the bubble, "the gay ghetto."(…) Advertisers have turned to other means of collecting data on consumers that do not require them to be targetable through the language of identity markets (…) The language of identity dropped out of predictive marketing in favor of predictive algorithms based on what choices we had made in the past, who our friendship networks were made up of (…) Tinder doesn't offer potential dates on the basis of identity criteria, but rather on current location, previous swipes, and contacts. The app matches possible partners according to these data as they are processed through a proprietary algorithm.[53]

What this shows is that the 'gay market' has morphed over time, into a broader marketplace that exists based on users' previous behavior. Identity markers are not less relevant; however, they are not the primary relevant factor in how marketers imagine the audiences they are marketing to. Rather, identity markers become one of many factors, including online social circles, previous liked posts or retweeted tweets, sexual preferences, height, weight, body type, 'looking for', location, and so forth. This is illustrated on Grindr, which does not assume that all its users are men, despite being popularly perceived as a 'gay men's app'; further, Grindr goes beyond simple identity markers, asking for users' body measurements, ethnicity, preferred sexual position,

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[52] With the stakes being higher for Grindr, as discussed in the following chapter.
[53] Katherine Sender, "The Gay Market is Dead, Long Live the Gay Market: From Identity to Algorithm in Predicting Consumer Behavior", *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 2017.

relationship status, 'tribe', what the user is looking for, what gender the user identifies as and what pronouns they use, their HIV status and last tested date, and so forth. Thus, there is a wide array of data that is used in conjunction with the user's identity to cater advertisements and future partners to that specific user, based on all this aggregated data. The political implication lies in the fact that this data can be exploited in any way deemed fit by Grindr and any third-party user authorized to use the data, including state authorities (by court order), advertising companies, and so forth. The same is true for other geolocative hookup apps.

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY OR ALIENATION?

A. Introduction

In my personal use of geolocative hookup apps in Beirut, I have found myself drawn to questions about the identity construction fostered and enabled on these apps, and to the notion of community. On many of these apps, especially those conceptualized as catering to a 'subcultural' audience, developers try to foster a sense of community between app users.

As discussed in chapter I, interaction between users via 'connect points', in this case user profiles, is the very basis of 'community'. The geolocative hookup apps I survey here can be imagined as an iteration of what Merabet calls "zones of encounter"[54] in Beirut. While he defines these zones as spaces where "mostly young men from different horizons interact on the very basis of a common erotic desire", the hookup app as a zone of encounter differs slightly in that, as stated in the previous chapter, the 'zone' can be constructed based on each individual user's prior behavior online (especially on apps connected to one's Facebook account, like Tinder and HER).

Thus, these hookup apps facilitate interaction between individuals not only based on common erotic desire, but also based on prior online behavior, the user's filters, and so forth. Further, as my survey of individuals' profile descriptions shows, users do not necessarily access this space solely to find others who share a common erotic desire. In the case of queer women's hookup apps, these spaces are also frequented by gay men from different sects in Beirut seeking

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[54] Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, 67.

'coverup' relationships or marriages. As there is no civil marriage code in Lebanon, and as personal status laws make inter-sectarian marriage incredibly difficult, many of these gay male users will specify their sect if they are looking for coverup marriages (Fig. 3b, 3c).
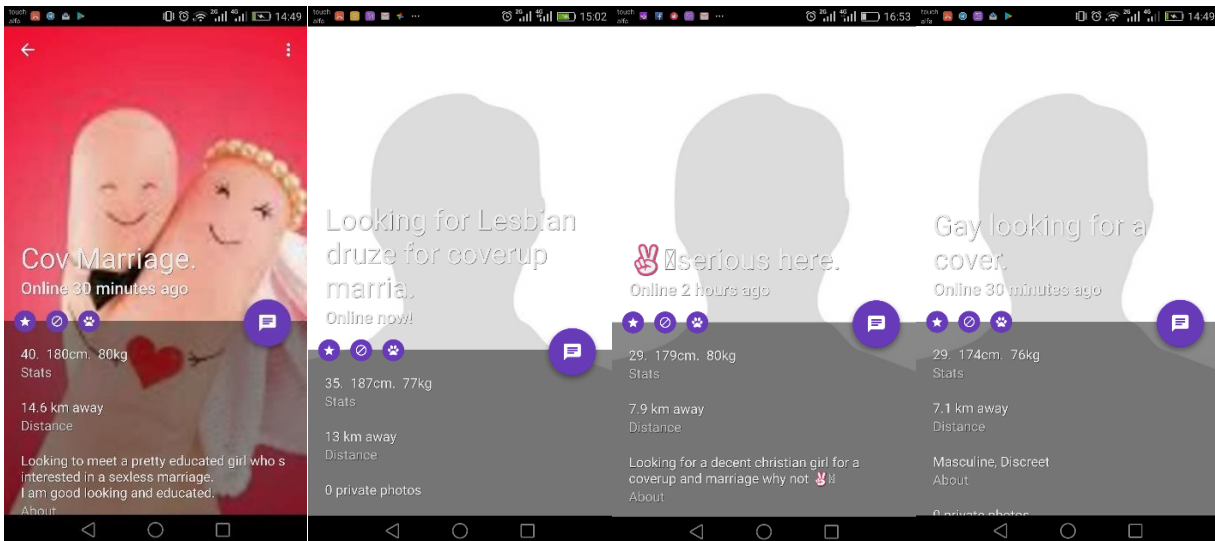

Fig. 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d. (left to right)

Examples of gay male users on Wapa looking for 'coverups'. Screenshots taken between February and April 2018

Thus, the hookup app becomes a zone of encounter for individuals based on common needs beyond the consummation of erotic desire. Some also use these hookup apps as networking apps to make friends or contacts. Grindr defines itself as "the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people"[55], and indeed some users of both Grindr and Wapa indicated in their profiles that they were looking to network and meet new people.

The only social interaction afforded on most of these apps is individual, one-on-one communication. The only exception is Her, which has a Feed feature that is branded as "the social and community based [sic] part of the app [which shows] content that has been shared by

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[55] Grindr website, accessed Apr 20 2018 https://www.grindr.com/

other members of the HER community"[56]. The Feed has three tabs: global, which displays posts

from HER users around the world; local, which displays posts from the area; and events, which

advertises local events 'suited to the HER community'. The posts in the global and local feeds

resemble posts on Facebook, with users posting images, status updates, and other forms of

multimedia. The HER team also have a "Question of the Day" series, where they post daily

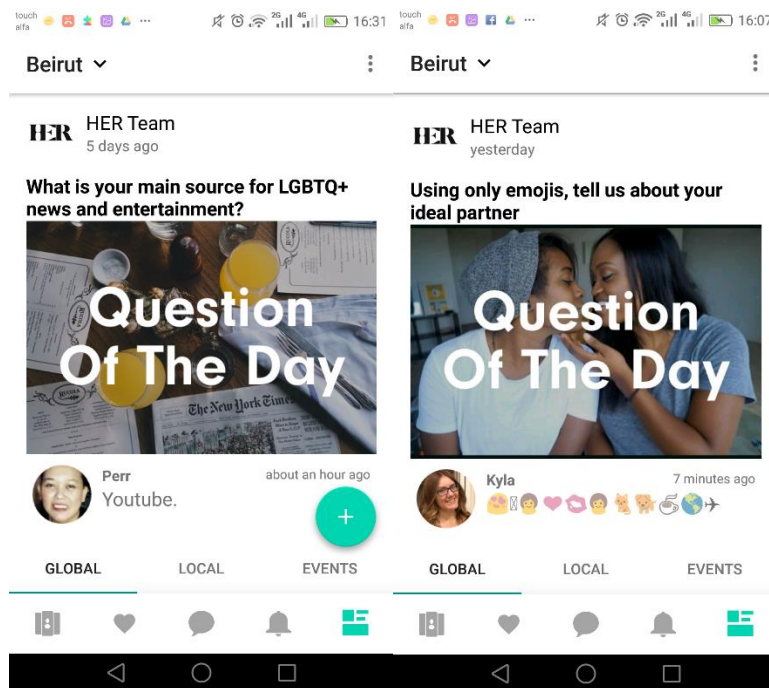questions in the 'global' section of the Feed (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Examples of HER team's "Question of the day", posted in the global tab of Her's feed. Screenshots taken Apr 22 2018

App developers have made numerous attempts to enhance the social elements of the apps. In

2017, Grindr launched an online magazine that "consist[s] of articles, videos, photography, and

other content that represents the LGBTQ world"[57]; Grindr is also an important platform for

[56] HER, "Support", Accessed Apr 11 2018 http://support.weareher.com/en/support/solutions/articles/12000010668-the-feed-feature-global-local-and-events

[57] Marianne Eloise, "Grindr is launching an online magazine", *Dazed*, Mar 29 2017. Accessed Apr 11 2018 http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35323/1/grindr-is-launching-an-online-magazine?utm_source=Link&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=RSSFeed&utm_term=grindr-is-launching-an-online-magazine

providing sexual health advice, with a new feature to provide users with reminders to get tested for HIV and STIs.

Notably, Tinder, which is not catered towards subcultural use, does not have the extra 'perks' that come with apps like Grindr and Her; I will discuss this further in the subsequent section. Wapa, which is the least technologically sophisticated of these apps, also does not provide users with these extra features that explicitly foster a sense of community, but there are subtle nuances that illustrate how the app developers think of their users as a community that do not exist on Tinder. For example, the tab that takes one to the home page where they can see users is called 'Girls', while Tinder does not use gendered community terms for its users.

Despite all these features and accommodations, these apps' data aggregation methods add a sinister tinge to the perceived 'communitarian' element that developers try to foster. Recent data breach scandals have brought these data aggregation and sharing aspects to the fore, but the truth is that they have always been a part of these apps' functionality. Most recently, Norwegian nonprofit SINTEF reported that Grindr has been sharing users' HIV status, last tested date, tribe, and other data points with two third party apps:

> The gay hookup app Grindr, which has more than 3.6 million daily active users across the world, has been providing its users' HIV status to two other companies (…) because the HIV information is sent together with users' GPS data, phone ID, and email, it could identify specific users and their HIV status[58]

The two companies Grindr has been sharing data with, Apptimize and Localytics, are app optimization platforms that "make the app better"[59]. According to a Grindr representative, these apps provide Grindr with a service. The data is not being sold; Grindr pays these apps to

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[58] Azeen Ghorayshi and Sri Ray, "Grindr is letting other companies see user HIV status and location data", *Buzzfeed News*, Apr 3 2018. Accessed Apr 18 2018 https://www.buzzfeed.com/azeenghorayshi/grindr-hiv-status-privacy?utm_term=.pkDJmedmE1#.mgznzNoz4l
[59] Ibid.

'optimize' and improve on the app's functionality and features. Even so, the use of personal data in a transactional manner – regardless of who is deriving services from whom – shrouds the perceived 'community' aspect of these apps. Ghorayshi and Ray emphasize that Grindr has been branding itself as the "go-to app for (…) gay cultural content", and much has been written on Grindr's existence as a 'safe space'. Following data breaches, many users come forward to condemn the sharing of their personal data with third parties as a contradiction of app developers' perception of these apps as safe and trustworthy spaces. For example, two days after the Grindr scandal, Brian Moylan lamented Grindr's "betrayal"[60] and the loss of the app as a 'safe space'. This reaction to the scandal indicates that some users of Grindr believe in the image of Grindr as a community space. However, the comments section below *The Guardian* article alone indicate that Moylan is not a unanimous representative of other users of the app. User 'coloradosprings' argues that Grindr "has always been a wretched hive of sex work, drug dealing, and headless torsos demanding dick pics (…) it's most definitely not a safe space". User 'sayitjustsayit' claims that "Grindr has never been a safe space (…) its [sic] as safe a space as a room without a door", going on to say that Grindr is not a safe space for non-white, fat, or feminine men. User 'tyrunn' calls Grindr "a rancid pit of racial hatred, bi-phobia, homophobia, and people who lie about their HIV status".

My time on these apps as an observer and a researcher has cast doubt on the notion of these techno-social spaces – the spaces created by Grindr, Wapa, Tinder, and HER – as safe spaces, or community spaces. Indeed, these apps provide ample space for one to be a silent observer of others, but no real community space. The only app that attempts to provide a space

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[60] Brian Moylan, "Grindr was a safe space for gay men. Its HIV status leaked betrayed us", *The Guardian*, Apr 4 2018. Accessed Apr 18 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/04/grindr-gay-men-hiv-status-leak-app

akin to a 'community' space is Her, which features a 'Feed' that hosts posts by 'global' and 'local' users, as well as an 'events' tab that features events 'suited to the HER community'.

These hookup apps facilitate one-on-one conversations between individual users. They do so following two different formats. Grindr and Wapa display individual profiles as thumbnails on a grid. One can click on any thumbnail on the grid to view a profile and speak to that user; there is no screening or filtering process provided by the app to limit who users can or cannot speak to. HER and Tinder consist of a pool of profiles that are shown to users one by one. Users can choose to swipe left or right on each profile. Swiping left means the profile is discarded, while swiping right means that the user 'liked' the profile. One-on-one conversations are only fostered between users that have swiped right on each other; in other words, users can only chat with users that they like who also like them. This means that on Grindr and Wapa, a user can connect with anyone who has a profile on the app, while on Tinder and Her, the process of limiting the pool of users to speak to is limited by one's inability to speak to anyone who did not swipe right on them. Further, once one has swiped left or right on a profile, that profile is lost, thus creating an atmosphere that places pressure on the user to make the correct split-second decision.

This primary variation in platforms led me to surmise that these apps should not be studied individually, but rather as two subgroups: Grindr and Wapa, which utilize the grid function and allow users to fill in similar types of data on their profiles, and Tinder and Her, which allow users to view others' profiles on an individual basis. These apps function in similar ways, but their core audiences are different. Even so, there are parallels between the data users choose to share on their profiles and the way these users use the apps. The data users share on their profiles indicates how identity construction occurs on these apps, while the functionalities

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enabled by the apps and their features shed light on whether we can accurately say that 'community' is fostered on these apps.

B. Grindr/Wapa

As stated, Grindr and Wapa both utilize a grid structure, which allows users to see each other based on nearest proximity. While Wapa's developers clearly envision the app as being for "gay, bi, or curious girls"[61], Grindr is cited as "the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people"[62]. These developer perceptions of the app are reflected in profile options: Wapa does not have any option for gender identity and pronouns; the default assumption is that any user of the app is a woman. On the other hand, Grindr's profile options allow users to set their own gender identity and pronouns; the diversity in pronoun and identity options are part of Grindr's recent efforts to brand themselves as a "global leader"[63] of the LGBTQ community.

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[61] Wapa website, accessed Apr 20 2018 http://wapa-app.com/
[62] Grindr website, accessed Apr 20 2018 https://www.grindr.com/
[63] Curtis Wong, "Grindr Unveils New Options for Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Users", *Huffington Post*, Nov 22 2017. Accessed Apr 20 2018 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/grindr-transgender-dating-options_us_5a136f53e4b0aa32975d688f
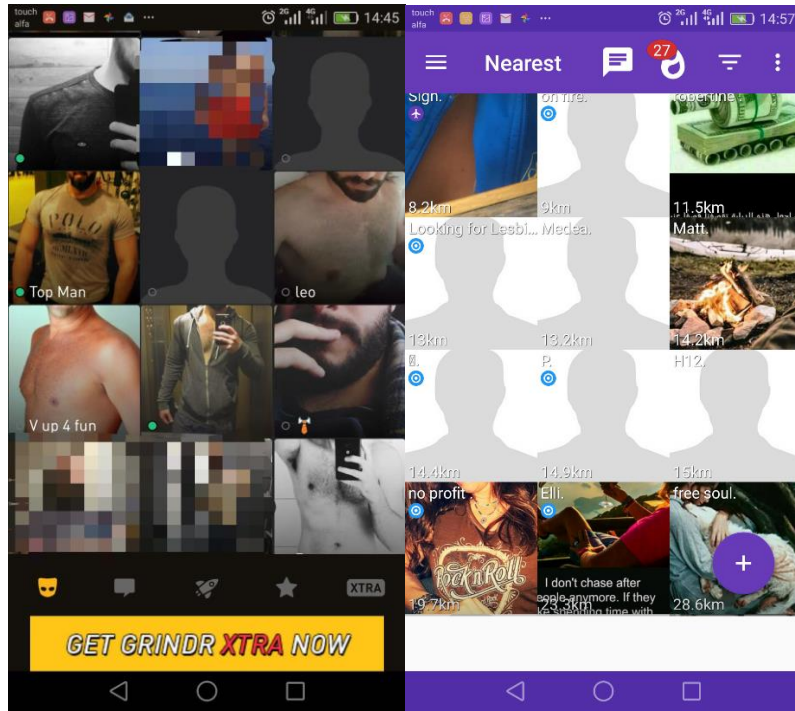
Fig. 5. Grindr and Wapa's grids

However, apps are rarely ever used in the way developers imagine they will be. Most non-blank profiles[64] I encountered on Grindr were presented as men's profiles. On Wapa, however, there were several gay male users looking for 'coverup' relationships or marriages (Fig. 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d)[65]. Sect plays a role in the construction of profiles belonging to gay men looking for coverup marriages (Fig. 3b, 3c), but users also use other descriptors, such as "masculine" (Fig. 3d) or "good looking" (Fig. 3a). The phenomenon of a 'coverup' marriage or relationship did not come up on any profile I surveyed on Grindr, nor did it come up on Her, another queer women's hookup app. Notably, Grindr and Wapa do not require Facebook or phone number verification, while HER and Tinder[66] require one or the other. Grindr and Wapa activate new accounts based on email verification; it is much easier for users to create a new email than it is for them to create

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[64] Profiles with a picture and data fields filled in.

[65] A more quantitative evaluation is required to evaluate the proportion of Wapa users that are gay men seeking coverup marriages – whether it is a high degree of users, or whether they are a niche group on the app.

[66] Tinder recently changed its settings so one can create an account with their phone number, instead of their Facebook account. HER, however, still primarily relies on Facebook accounts for verification.

a new Facebook account, or to get a new phone number. The difficulty of creating 'fake' or alternate profiles on HER might explain why the phenomenon of gay men looking for coverup marriages is rare on that app.

The lack of women explicitly[67] looking for coverup marriages on Grindr illustrates different levels of comfort accessing 'foreign' spaces. Wapa and Grindr are generally imagined as spaces for queer women and men respectively. In fact, Grindr's developers have invested time and effort into making the app seem more inclusive, while Wapa has not. Grindr uses gender neutral terms to refer to its users, and makes accommodations for different pronouns and gender identities, while Wapa has no option to change the default pronoun ("her") and refers to its users as "girls". Gay men's comfort asserting their needs in a space designed to be exclusively for women parallels gendered dynamics that exist in a myriad of domains. This is not to say that there are no women in Beirut seeking coverup marriages too, but rather that this desire to seek out a coverup marriage is never articulated by women at the 'connect-point' of the techno-social space. These variations in context have implications on the sense of community that exists (or does not) on these apps, and especially on an app like Wapa, which are especially vulnerable to male encroachment and violence. For one, neither of these apps provide a feature that allows users to communicate with each other in groups, nor do they have any features that parallel the 'Feed' feature on Her. While Grindr attempts to brand itself as a community leader through its online magazine, sexual health initiatives, and so forth, the reality is that both Grindr and Wapa are highly fragmented spaces, that allow users access to a filtered pool of potential interlocuters.

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[67] There are a number of blank profiles in the corpus of profiles that I surveyed. There is no way for me to know simply by viewing these profiles whether the users behind them are women looking for coverup marriages.

On these apps, filtering occurs in one of two ways. The first way is by changing filtering settings on the app. Grindr allows basic users to filter based on "my type", "online now", and "photos only". "Online now" means that Grindr will only show the user other users who are active on the app at that moment. "Photos only" means that Grindr will only display users with pictures on the grid. "My type" has nine sub-categories, three of which are available for basic users: "age", "tribes", and "looking for". The other six sub-categories – height, weight, ethnicity, body type, position, and relationship states – are only available for users who pay for a membership which ranges between 19,000 LBP per month to approximately 90,000 LBP per year. Wapa allows users to filter out offline users and blocked users and allows one to set an age range. One can also choose to show their 'favorites' at the top of the grid, rather than have them be shown by distance. Wapa does not have any other filtering features, nor does paying for premium membership give users access to more filters.

The second way to filter is through the profile description. Users specify what they want – a specific body type, gender expression, age, or otherwise – in their profile descriptions. For example, Grindr User A specifies in his profile description that he is "looking for top for dating or fun.. Vers and bottoms stay away not interested" (Fig. 5). Grindr User B specifies in their profile that they are a "sexy hot manly educated decent looking discreet" man "looking for same + fit and muscular guys".
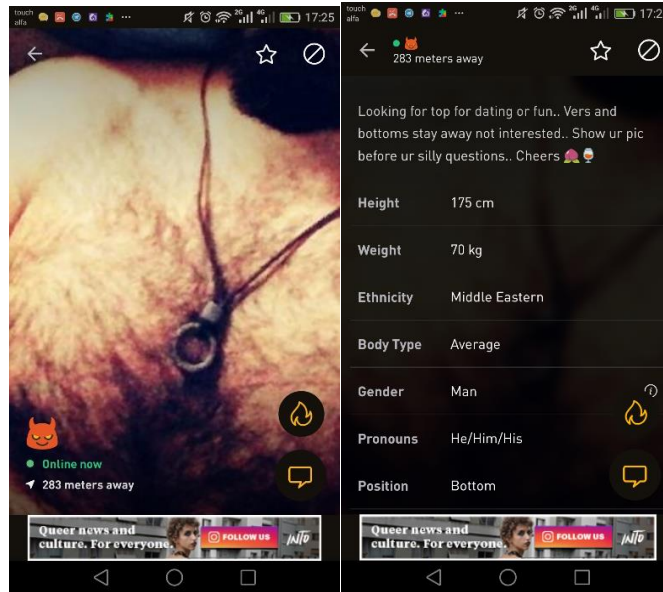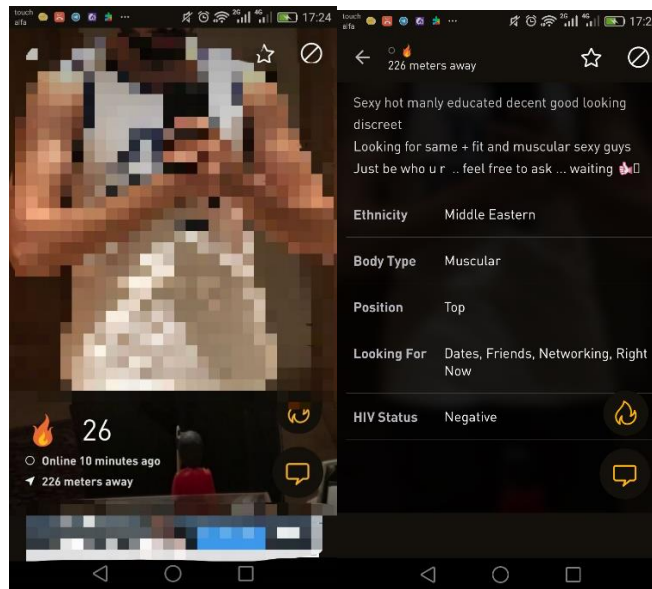
Fig. 6. Grindr User A

Fig. 7. Grindr User B

These types of filtering exist across the apps, in varying forms, but filtering through

profile descriptions is meant to dissuade those who do not fit the user's requirements from

engaging with them. While using the app's filters restricts who one sees on the grid, filtering out

potential interlocutors through one's profile description limits who initiates conversation with

that user. In other words, the 'connect point' is used as a defensive mechanism, to ward off those

who do not fit the user's requirements. The same phenomenon occurs on Wapa. Wapa User A's

profile description does not display any information about the user. Instead, the user's main

identificatory traits are who they do and do not want to engage with. Their profile description

reads: "Feminine? Smart? Educated? Good looking? If you think you match these standards hit

that button. PS: Not into boyish, threesomes, hookups" (Fig. 8)
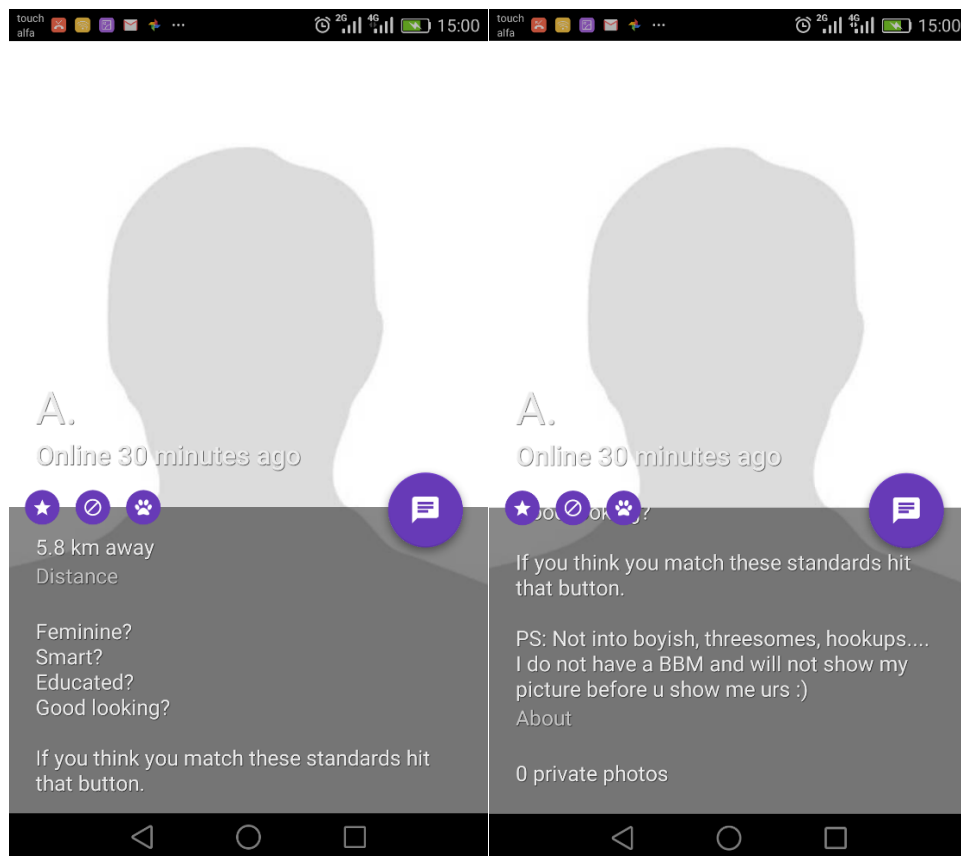
Fig. 8. Wapa User A

Wapa Users B, C, and D (Fig. 9) all specify that they are "not into boyish", or not into non-

feminine women, while Users B and C specify that they are not looking for threesomes or

couples (usually with another man and woman). These users, and many others like them, list

minimal information about themselves, unlike the users on Grindr, who usually list their

reservations alongside a myriad of information about their sexual preferences, sexual health,

"tribe", among other identificatory factors. On Wapa, the tendency is to identify oneself more

harshly along the lines of what one wants and does not want, with little or no personal

information about oneself, beyond what Wapa asks for: age, height, and weight.
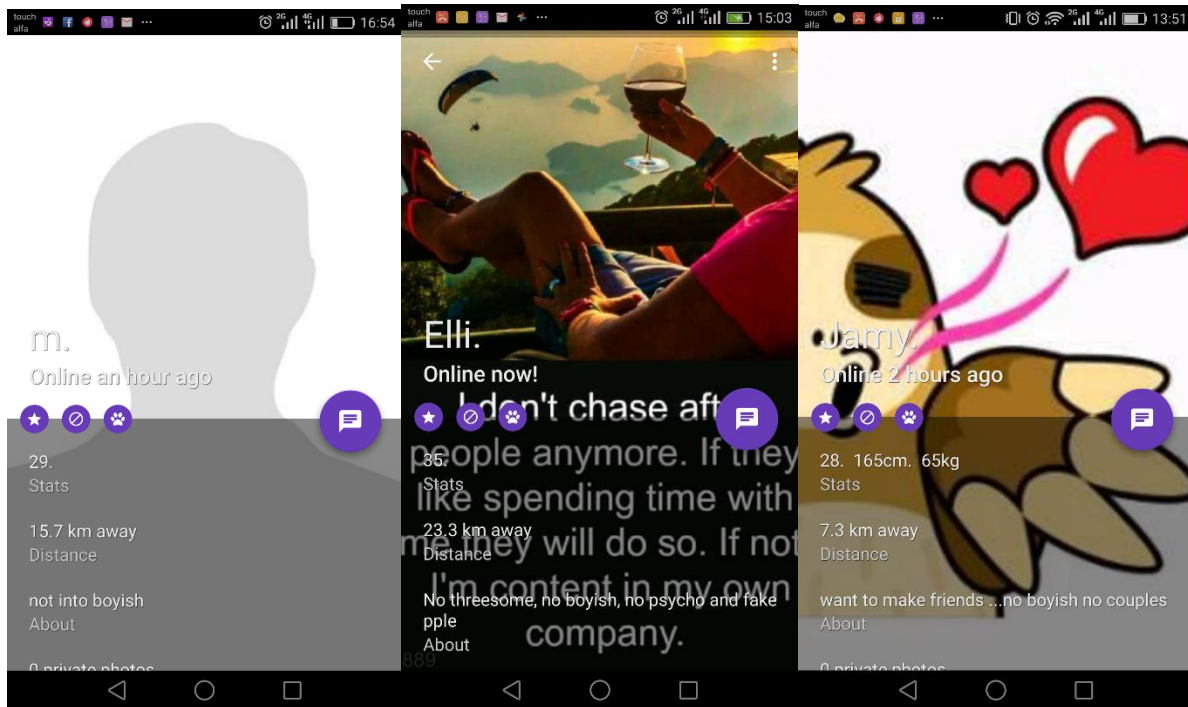

Fig. 9. Wapa Users B, C, D

The implications of these profile description and identifying markers for identity

construction and community formation are noteworthy. Constructing one's identity on these

apps, based on some of these profiles, often becomes synonymous with identifying one's sexual

or physical preferences. Considering that these are hookup apps, this should not be surprising.

However, as seen especially in the case of Wapa, often these preferences become the sole

identifying factors these users choose to input about themselves, alongside basic information

asked for by the app. If we return to our initial understanding of these user profiles as 'connect

points', then what we are seeing at many of the initial connect points is a form of gatekeeping.

These users use this identificatory space to determine who should and should not attempt to

engage.

Beyond the filtering present in profile descriptions, other identity markers include the information one chooses to post on the app. As noted in previous sections, Grindr has an extensive array of categorizations that one can choose to fill in, from physical markers (height, age) to sexual preferences and "tribe" (gay subculture). On the other hand, Wapa only asks for one's age, weight, and height, alongside a profile descriptor. Not all profiles I surveyed had height or weight listed, but most of them had their age listed (and many also specified their age preference in the description). These are other identificatory factors, this time afforded by the app developers themselves to categorize their users accordingly. Listing more of these identificatory factors on Grindr makes it easier for the app to filter one out from another user's search. In other words, the more information one shares, the more likely they are to be filtered out of another user's grid. The only exception to this is having a profile picture; since Grindr has an option to filter out users with no pictures, that means that if one chooses not to share a picture on the app, then they are more likely to be filtered out of other user's grids. However, one may not necessarily choose to display a personal photo; many on Grindr either opt to share stock photos or clip art instead of a picture of their bodies or face. On Wapa, since filtering is not an option enabled by the app, setting one's boundaries, likes, and dislikes in their profile description is the only option to reduce instances of engagement with potentially undesirable people, since users have no means to filter those who potentially do not appeal to them out of their grid.

The ability to cut other users out of one's grid, or pool of potential interlocuters, based on highly specific identificatory markers, is one that leads to fragmentation within the app itself. The fragmentation occurs not only between different users of the app but even with users themselves; users are only exposed to a highly exclusive and specific pool of people, based on app filtering and their own profile description, meant to dissuade those who do not fit the

"requirements" from talking to them. Constructing one's own profile requires a fragmentation of oneself into parts; age, height, weight, "tribe", "looking for", sexual health status – before meeting the person beyond these categorization, users simply see the profile and the identity markers scaffolded by the app itself. This environment denotes what community has become in the neoliberal era; a quest to find one or multiple interlocutors for highly specific purposes, whether sexual gratification or otherwise. The process requires an alienation of people not only from each other but also from their own personhood, which is reduced into categories and data. Identity in this context becomes nothing more than a list of items that regulate whether one is part of another user's grid or not.

C. Tinder/HER

The process of alienation from one's own personhood – and from other users of these apps is replicated on Tinder and Her, but in slightly different ways. This is primarily due to the difference in structures of these apps. While Grindr and Wapa utilize a grid platform, where different users are thumbnails that are mostly organized by their distance from a user's phone, Tinder and HER organize the pool of potential interlocuters randomly, and one-by-one (Fig. 10). Both Tinder and HER use external means of verifying one's data to avoid fake accounts; the primary method is Facebook, though Tinder recently began allowing one to create a profile using
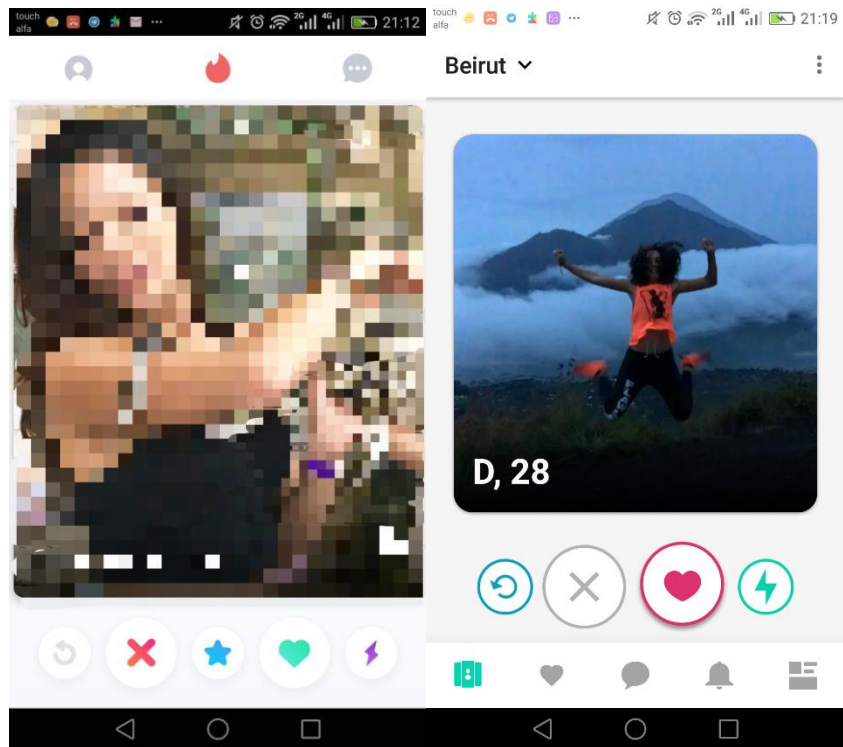
Fig. 10. Tinder and HER's home pages

their phone number instead of Facebook. The use of Facebook to verify one's existence as a

'real' person is reflected in what type of data is shared on these apps. Tinder's scaffolding of user

profiles is minimal. Tinder users are given two options for gender: man or woman. Users can

input their profile description, job title, company, and school. Unlike Grindr and Wapa, physical

descriptors and other factors that may be relevant in a sexual encounter are not requested, other

than gender (which is limited to man/woman). This does not mean that users are not allowed to

share descriptors that may be relevant in a romantic or sexual setting, but rather that the user

cannot be 'filtered out' of the pool of potential interlocuters based on these identificatory factors.

Indeed, the only three filters that exist on Tinder are for distance, age, and gender. Profile filters

on HER are minimal as well; one can filter other profiles out based on age and distance (Fig. 11).

Notably, profiles on HER do not have a profile description box, making the app an exception out

of the four apps. Many users who want to have a profile description make a note on their phones

and post a screenshot of that note in their picture library. HER is not as minimalist as Tinder in

profile information: the app requests one's name, age, height, sexuality, gender, and relationship

status. While one can choose not to share their sexuality or gender, the "relationship status" box

cannot be left empty. Further, as on Tinder, one's age is taken off their Facebook profile, making

it more difficult to input a fake age. Both apps allow users to curate a picture library consisting

of more than one image, and on Tinder one can take those images right off their Facebook

profiles. On top of this, Tinder allows users to connect to their Instagram accounts, meaning that

one's Instagram posts can also be displayed on their profile if they so choose.

Fig. 11. Tinder and HER's filters
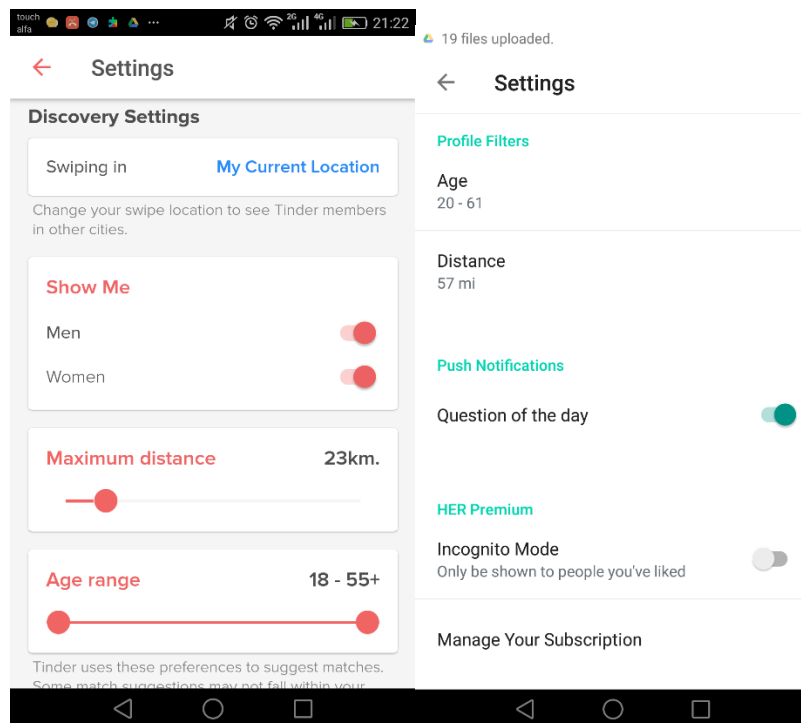
Most notably, these apps do not show users their pool of potential interlocuters, like Grindr

or Wapa. Instead, one is forced to decide on the spot; even quitting the app at that moment could

force users to lose the profile shown. As stated in chapter II, these apps are privy to information

about one's behavior on Facebook, meaning that the app's algorithm can show users others'

profiles based on their Facebook likes, dislikes, browsing history, and so forth. What is particularly troubling about this data sharing on Tinder is that the algorithm also uses that history to show users advertisements. In my use of the app for this project, I encountered several advertisements between profiles (Fig. 11).
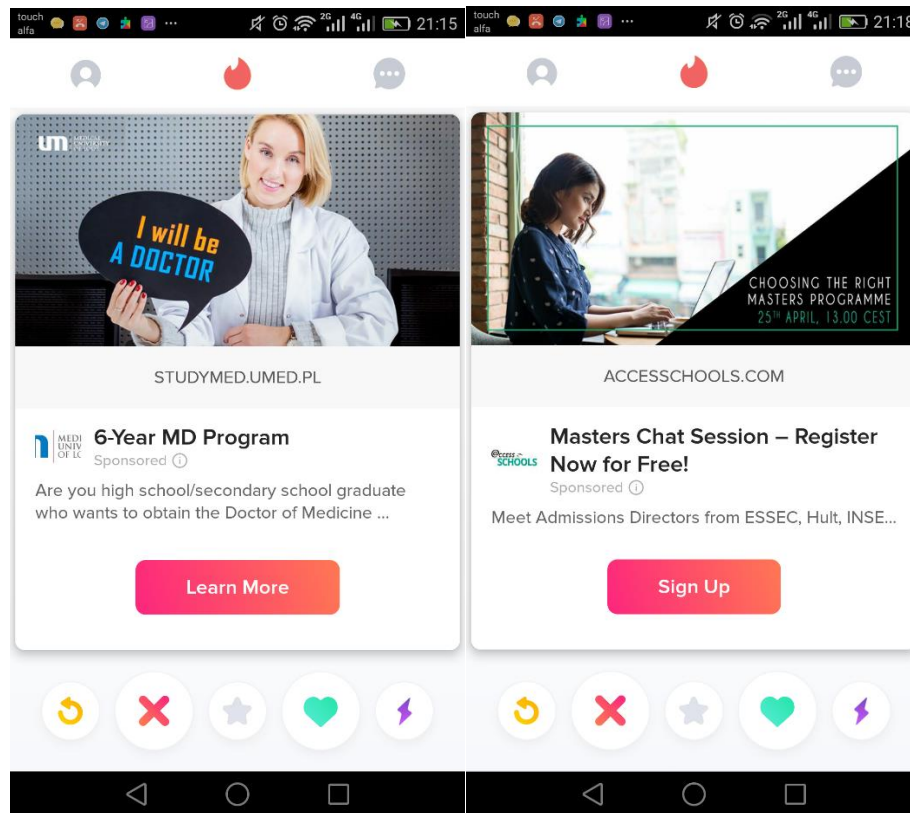
Fig. 12. Advertisements on Tinder

Instead of the banner and video advertisements that exist on Grindr and Wapa, advertisements on Tinder are designed to flow with the experience of using the app. The logic is to create advertisements that are not intrusive or disruptive, and that blend in with the experience of the app. In other words, while one is swiping through their pool of potential friends or romantic/sexual partners, they are also receiving advertisements that they can swipe left or right on. These advertisements are troubling because they are displayed on the app through a partnership with Facebook. In 2017, Tinder announced that it would partner with Facebook's

"Audience Network", meaning that advertisers on Facebook could opt to place their advertisements on Tinder as well. Fuchs notes that users cannot opt out of targeted advertising on Facebook. What this means is that users who agree to Facebook's Terms and Conditions are ultimately agreeing to the sale of "their self-descriptions, uploaded data and transaction data"[68] to advertising clients. When Tinder opts to partner with Facebook's "Audience Network", they are extending Facebook's ability to place targeted advertisements on their platform. As Jillian D'Onfro notes in *Business Insider*, this means that the kind of advertisements one sees on Facebook "follow [users] around the web"[69].

Tinder advertisements are more deeply connected to one's online behavior than advertisements on the other apps featured in this project. Tinder's intimate relationship with Facebook leads to the exposure of its users to advertising clients who use Facebook to market brands. While this should be obvious considering that, until recently, one needed a Facebook account to use Tinder, these terms are not explicitly articulated in the app's Terms of Service. Like most of the documents users are meant to peruse before signing up to use a social networking app, Tinder's privacy policy is opaque, lengthy, and packed with jargon that most users do not read. This means that users agree to entangle their Facebook and Tinder experiences without necessarily understanding that this means advertisements that are displayed on Facebook, that are chosen based on one's prior online behavior and personal data, can and do follow them to Tinder. This means that advertisements displayed on one's Tinder account, if that Tinder account is connected to their Facebook account, are displayed there based on information given both to Facebook and to Tinder.

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[68] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 166.
[69] Jillian D'Onfro, "How an 'oddball' team created one of Facebook's biggest threats to Google", *Business insider*, Feb 28 2016. Accessed Apr 23 2018 http://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-facebook-audience-network-

This has implications for the pool of profiles that are shown to users. As Judith Duportail notes in her expose of Tinder's data aggregation:

> Tinder is often compared to a bar full of singles, but it's more like a bar full of single people chosen for me while studying my behaviour, reading my diary and with new people constantly selected based on my live reactions.[70]

It is crucial to understand the implications of targeted advertising and other forms of profiteering if we are to understand how identities are constructed and displayed, and whether communities are formed on Tinder and Her. In the case of Tinder, it is abundantly clear that the sheer connection between one's Facebook and Tinder account makes users self-regulate and self-censor what they choose to display on their Tinder profiles, in a way that they potentially would not on apps like Grindr or Wapa. Further, data that is not part of one's profile description is collected from one's Facebook profile, meaning that one's job title or the university they are attending are displayed on their Tinder accounts simply because they are shared on Facebook. This means that, unlike Grindr and Wapa, most Tinder profiles do not have any explicit sexual, or even romantic preferences listed. While users on Grindr and Wapa are explicit about what they want and do not want ("no boyish" "vers bottoms stay away"), Tinder profiles mirror Facebook or even LinkedIn[71] profiles. This leads to a sanitized self-presentation. For example, some profiles I surveyed consisted solely of information about the users' jobs and educational backgrounds. These profiles displayed no personal information about the user, and especially not the kind of information one would see on Grindr and Wapa.

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[70] Duportail, "I asked Tinder for my data. It sent me 800 pages of my deepest, darkest secrets", *The Guardian*, Sept 26 2017. Accessed Apr 23 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/26/tinder-personal-data-dating-app-messages-hacked-sold
[71] A social network for job seeking individuals and businesses.

While this is not universally the case on Tinder, it is notable that out of all the apps surveyed, Tinder is the only one which contained profiles with exclusively career-oriented content. Notably, while HER also uses Facebook to verify new user accounts, one is free to input a different name, age, and so forth. Further, HER does not ask for one's career or company background; instead, when constructing a profile one can select their sexuality, gender, and relationship status. While users do not have to disclose their sexuality or gender, they are forced to disclose their relationship status; I was not allowed to remove my relationship status for the purpose of this project, but I was allowed to remove my sexuality and gender.
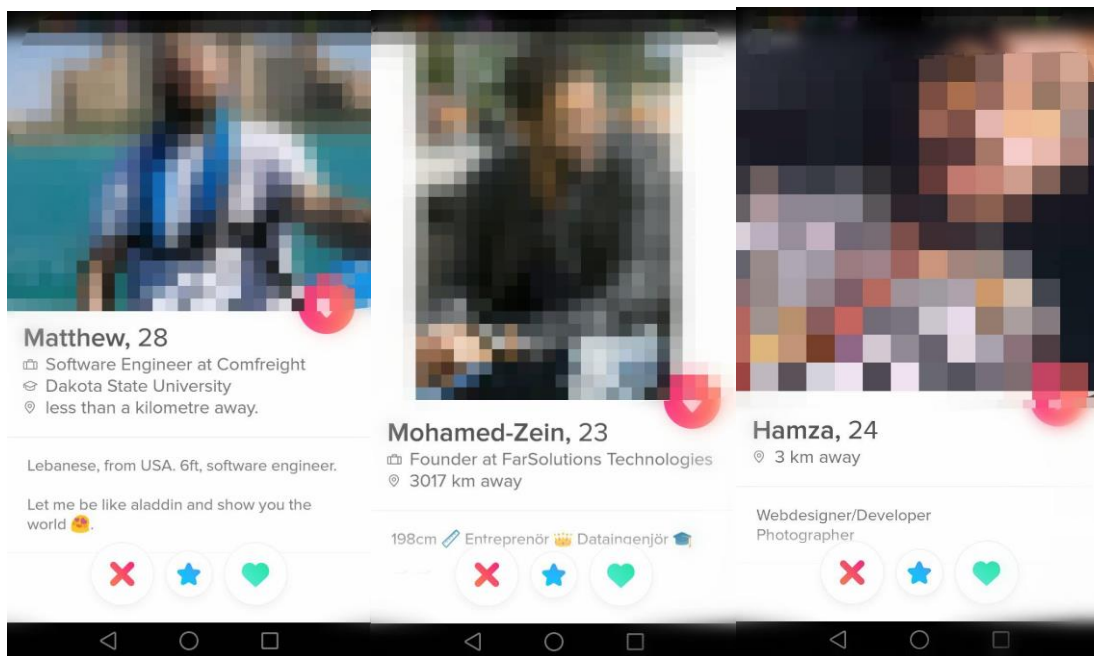
Fig. 13. Examples of Tinder profiles containing career information

The options for these three categories are extensive. For sexuality, one can select from a wide array of options, including: lesbian, queer, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, fluid, pansexual, flexisexual, polysexual, asexual, TBD, questioning, "-" (none), straight, demisexual, heteroflexible, and homoflexible. Under gender, the following options exist: female, trans female, non-binary, boi, agender, androgynous, bigender, cis female, FTM, gender fluid,

intersex, MTF, other, "-" (none), pangender, trans person, transgender, two-spirit, hijra, kathoey, mak nyah, muxe, waria, mahu, and questioning. Relationship status options include: single, coupled, married, divorced, dating, open, complicated, widow, and polyamorous. This is another major difference between HER and Tinder. Tinder only allows users to identify as male or female. Instead of asking for sexual orientation, Tinder asks users whether they would like to filter out men, women, or see everyone. On the other hand, HER has no filters based on sexuality or gender, and also provides a wide array of choices for their users to choose from.

Based on a post by the HER Team, the gender options update, which came in 2016, came following feedback from users who were not satisfied with the inability to post gender identity on profiles. The post states that

> When we first started HER we were creating an app with a very specific set of users and a very specific problem in mind – helping lesbian and bisexual women find a date (…) we realized how much bigger, broader and more diverse the community that HER should be for, was (…) we've been hearing more and more from our community how important [establishing a space to define and share gender identity] can be to you. So we finally got ourselves together and added gender identity as an option to add to your profile[72]

Much like Grindr's 2017 update, which made customizable gender identity and pronoun fields available to users[73], the HER update came after criticisms from "the community" about a lack of inclusivity. With the update, HER even gave users the option to submit their own gender identity and sexuality labels for review.

The attempt to create a techno-social space that is inclusive of all identities and experiences is an impressive feat. However, the fragmentation of personhood that is seen on

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[72] HER Team, "Our latest update is all about Gender. Are you ready to express yours?" *WeAreHER*, May 24 2016. Accessed Apr 23 2018 https://weareher.com/our-latest-update-is-all-about-gender-are-you-ready-to-define-yours
[73] Wong, "Grindr Unveils New Options for Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Useres", *Huffington Post*. Accessed Apr 23 2018 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/grindr-transgender-dating-options_us_5a136f53e4b0aa32975d688f

Grindr (and Wapa to an extent, but more predominantly on Grindr), is paralleled on HER. Identity construction becomes a matter of selecting one's gender identity, relationship status, and sexuality from a drop-down menu. Constructing one's identity becomes a matter of filling in one's job details and educational background (in the case of Tinder) or selecting different identificatory factors from several drop-down menus spanning more than ten choices (in the case of HER). The case is especially exacerbated on HER, which has no profile description box. While on Tinder users are allowed to input text into the profile description, job title, company, and school boxes, HER users can only input their names into a text box. Profile building on HER is a process of selecting options from a drop-down menu, meaning that the app developers, despite their efforts to be inclusive, control people's individual narratives. HER's developers determine the sorts of identifications that exist on the app, and even though users are given the options to send in their own for review and potential approval, that still means that the app developers are in full control of the language people can use to identify themselves in the techno-social space.

Not having a profile description box means that users cannot state what they do and do not want in a potential interlocuter on their profile. Since the filters on HER are limited to age and distance filters, that means that users cannot limit their pool of options, neither through app options nor through statements made in their profile descriptions. However, this is part of the broader developer control over the content and data shared in the techno-social space. The developers do not want any 'extra' information that may be provided in a profile description. HER's archive of users is simply a collection of checked boxes, each labeled with a name. While HER does not host any advertisements on its platform, an exception within the four apps surveyed for this profile, the collection of personal data in such an automated and regulated

manner is ominous. HER claims to "connect the dots in the lesbian community"[74]. What they fail to mention is that the 'dots' are fashioned by the app developers, and not the users themselves.

In terms of community building, Tinder's developers have made no effort to develop a space where users can communicate with each other in group forums, or even where users can communicate with other users 'publicly'. The app is highly centered on a 'here and now' experience, where one is pressured into deciding, based on the other user's profile, whether to "discard" or like them. Fragmentation on Tinder is not solely a matter of identity markers but also a matter of fragmented time. The 'here and now' aspect of Tinder does not allow one to mull over other users' profiles, the way they could on Grindr or Wapa; instead, one is forced to limit their experience of that particular connect point to the moment in which the app's algorithm makes it available for consumption. Once that moment is gone, the user is at risk of never seeing that connect point again, thus losing the chance to connect with that individual. HER's developers, on the other hand, give users the luxury of mulling over profiles present in the 'Feed', which has a permanent backlog of posts one can scroll through at any time. Users can also review profiles they swiped left on, unlike Tinder which does not allow basic users to rewind old profiles. Thus, users do not necessarily have to decide at that moment. They are free to view their entire pool of options at leisure, provided the users in the pool do not delete their accounts. The HER app is the only one out of the four where developers make a concentrated effort to present users with a space for group discussions; indeed, the developers call the Feed a "communal area" in their community guidelines[75], which detail how one should behave in the space. Even with the development of "communal areas", however, we must keep in mind that the

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[74] "Community Guidelines", *WeAreHER*. Accessed Apr 23 2018 https://weareher.com/community-guidelines
[75] Ibid.

users accessing these communal areas of the techno-social space are only legible through options provided by the app developers themselves. While this is true to an extent for all four apps, Grindr, Wapa, and Tinder give users a small space to rebel against the regulation of how they present themselves on these apps. While there are regulations as to what one can share in the profile description, the point is that users are given a chance to document themselves on their own terms. On HER, this is not an option, though users find a way around it by posting a screenshot of their self-description as typed in the 'notes' app on their phones.

The hyper-regulation of identity markers and self-expression on HER seems to eclipse that of other apps. The community guidelines alone are specific about how one should present and behave on the app, especially in "communal areas". For example, users are asked to "keep trust and belief in [the] community" by being "true to [themselves]". Being true to yourself on HER means presenting "real identities and the absolute truth". The guidelines also ask that users "keep it clean" by asking users to "keep swear words and sex talk to a minimum (…) make the tone one you'd be happy to see when you show the app to your friends and family"[76]. Much like Tinder, there is a conception of sanitized identity expression and behavior that is promoted by the app developers. In the case of HER, the guidelines are explicit about establishing a relationship between these regulatory measures and the creation of a "safe and fun space for queer women around the world". Further, in a section entitled "Specifics", HER strictly prohibits users from soliciting threesomes, stating that "queer women have had a pretty tough time in the past being continually asked for threesomes in very unwanted circumstances. So HER is a threesome free space".

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[76] Ibid.

The anxiety around the app potentially being infiltrated by "creepy guys asking for threesomes"[77] indicates why identity construction and even the terms of community engagement are so strictly regulated on HER. This is not to say that the other apps are not highly regulated; rather that HER simply allows no room for self-expression, while the other three do. Wapa, the other app catered towards queer women, is not as strictly regulated, which is why the phenomenon of gay men looking for coverup marriages is predominant on that app. Further, the degree of blank profiles (no picture or identifying information) on Wapa is higher than on any of the other apps. There is no way to know whether the users behind these blank profiles are queer women, because it is relatively easy to create an account on Wapa. On the other hand, HER is the only app that allows profile creation solely through Facebook verification, which is more difficult than email or even phone number verification. Unless a male user aiming to infiltrate the space is willing to create a fake Facebook profile, which is also difficult due to Facebook's regulations, they will be unable to infiltrate the space.

D. Conclusion

These anxieties about creating and maintaining a "safe space" are not paralleled in apps that are not exclusive to queer women. While these apps are generally highly regulated, the need to regulate who exactly does and does not access and use the techno-social space is more urgent on apps catered towards queer women, because queer women are subject to patriarchal violence on two levels: because they are women, and because they are not heterosexual. In that quest to create and maintain a safe space, however, HER's app developers end up molding users of the app in every way. The developers even determine the language of identification and the behavior

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[77] "Why do you guys use Facebook?" Privacy, *HER* Support. Accessed Apr 23 2018 https://weareher.com/support-category/privacy?q=why-do-you-guys-use-facebook-2

one is expected to exhibit in the communal space, which also happens to be fashioned in a very specific way by the developers. HER's developers even regularly post in the Feed (i.e. the communal space) themselves, on a daily basis, to ensure that they are ever-present as users navigate and attempt to express themselves in the techno-social space.

In this context, identity construction and community building are highly regulated and highly fragmented; as noted, not only is the language of identification highly regulated but users are also provided with a finite number of identity markers that they can select from. Further, these are identity markers that the developers deem conducive to maintaining the safe space; any other personal information, such as personal preferences or favorite books or any other assortment of random information becomes irrelevant in this space. The construction of identities, both on HER and Tinder, denotes what identity construction and community engagement have become in the neoliberal era. Much like Grindr and Wapa, users access these apps both as a 'techno-social space' but also as a service, to satisfy a set of needs. What differs between these four apps are as follows: who developers imagine to be the primary users of these apps; how developers envision the app itself; and how users use the app. In the time I spent surveying these apps, it became clear to me that anxieties on apps generally branded as exclusively for queer women are more explicitly articulated by users or developers than apps like Tinder (no specific subcultural audience) and Grindr (marketed as LGBTQ, but mostly used by gay men). On Wapa, we saw a heightened sense of anxiety around other users soliciting coverup marriages or threesomes; these fears were articulated by users in their profile description. On HER, these fears are illustrated through the app's highly regulated profile options and community guidelines.

Returning to the original questions that fueled this project, we cannot necessarily say that the proliferation of these apps and others like them bring community formation to a halt, nor can we say that identity construction is 'reductive' compared to the past. These arguments are cynical, reductive, and reliant on a teleological view of technological development. Nor can we argue about any form of improvement; this type of techno-utopianism is likewise highly reductive and reliant on a teleological understanding of technological developments. Based on my study of the apps, their functionalities and affordances, and their users, I can only say that the way we think of our own identities and the way we think of community formation and engagement has shifted with the influx of technological developments. The way these apps function as well as the data users input about themselves on their profiles betray a highly fragmented understanding personhood, one that reduces identity to a set of 'markers' and 'factors'. Three of these apps foster a different sense of community, one that is reliant on one-on-one engagement rather than communal engagement. The only app where efforts are made to develop an actual "communal" space is highly regulated and built on an understandable sense of suspicion and paranoia.

Regardless of efforts to build a virtual world untouched by the dynamics of institutional and systemic injustices, like patriarchal violence or capitalist violence, these apps are ultimately articulated and shaped by these dynamics. Indeed, the virtual world is not separate from the physical world; the capitalist ambition present in app developers' extensive efforts to archive and exploit aggregated data to generate profits underpin every element of our world, from the virtual to the physical, which again are entangled in each other. This drive for profit generation, along with patriarchal and homophobic dynamics that are present on these four apps, as well as countless other virtual spaces, prove what many have already argued – it is dangerous to envision

the virtual world as a 'blank slate' utopia that is removed from reality. Identity construction and community formation are but a small part of the virtual and physical world. Yet the study of these phenomena across techno-social spaces illustrate that dynamics that are seen to be part of the physical world and not the virtual world are replicated across both spheres. Indeed, these are not two separate spheres; the virtual is physical and the physical is virtual, especially in the contemporary age where the 'physical world' becomes so immersed in online spaces that we cannot envision our daily lives without them.

The existence of gay men looking for coverup marriages by sect on one of these apps illustrates the kind of implications these apps can have on shifting modes of sociality, networking, and self-presentation in Beirut. These apps are marketed as global, but their entanglement in local modes of identity articulation cannot be overlooked. No one can definitively say that coverup marriages did not exist before these apps. This would not be true. However, these apps do facilitate new ways for individuals to seek out common interest partnerships that are not necessarily sexual or romantic in nature. The existence of profile descriptions that specify "place" or "no place" – i.e. whether the user has access to a location for the consummation of a sexual encounter – illustrates two crucial points that constantly come up in discourses about Beirut: first, the increasing encroachment of private enterprise on public space, and second, the rising price of real estate in Beirut, which makes it difficult for most people to find secluded places for sexual consummation. These apps, even with the dire implications of highly fragmented identity presentation, are used in ways that help gratify the needs and desires of Beirut's residents. How these apps are used by residents of Beirut to have their needs met is a promising direction for future studies of geolocative hookup apps in this part of the world to go in, and definitely one that this project could be expanded to include in the

future. It is crucial to study the impact of these apps on how desires are articulated and identities expressed because these apps and others like them have become fully immersive avenues that are becoming increasingly difficult to live without, both in Beirut and beyond.

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