

## “Mr Right Now”

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**“Mr Right Now”: Temporality of Relationship Formation on Gay Mobile Dating Apps**

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## **Abstract**

Mobile dating apps with geolocation function have gained popularity for fostering social, romantic, and sexual connections between nearby strangers. Through in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with 74 users of gay mobile dating apps (Grindr and Jack'd) in Hong Kong, this study illustrates how the sociological concept of time can shed light on users' experience of relationship formation through these apps. Specifically, the accelerated tempo of interactions facilitated by perpetual connectivity, mutual proximity awareness, and instant messaging was seen to entail instantaneous and ephemeral relationships. The interface design, which foregrounds profile photos and backgrounds textual self-descriptions, was perceived to structure the sequence of browsing and screening in favor of physical appearance and users seeking casual hook-ups. The findings suggest that the temporality of browsing and exchange on apps is incongruous with the temporal norms prescribing formation of friendship and long-term romance. Such incongruity affects the perceived quality and satisfaction of app use, frustrating users who seek more durable relationships.

*Keywords:* mobile apps, online dating, gay men, time, social media, Grindr, Jack'd

## **Mr Right Now: Temporality of Relationship Formation on Gay Mobile Dating Apps**

Social networking apps on smartphones have gained widespread popularity in recent years for relationship initiation, formation and maintenance. In Hong Kong, smartphone networking apps are a popular means for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to meet one another (Chong, Zhang, Mak, & Pang, 2015). Among these are geolocative mobile dating apps which harness the affordances of mobile phones in general, and leverage the function of global positioning system (GPS) more commonly found on smartphones to foster social, romantic, and sexual connections between proximate strangers.

In this study, we focus on Hong Kong young gay/bisexual men's use of two popular gay mobile dating apps—Grindr and Jack'd. Although some of their functions differ, their interfaces share important similarities that give rise to similar browsing and interactional experiences. On both apps, users are represented by a single profile picture on the main screen. These profile pictures together form a grid of thumbnails on the main screen. Users scroll down to browse this grid before tapping into a specific user's thumbnail to read his detailed profile or initiate a conversation with him. Moreover, on the main screen of both apps, the profile pictures are arranged by proximity. This design feature is enabled by the GPS function of smartphones. When a user opens the app, what appear first on the main screen are thumbnail photos of users closest to his physical location. As we will demonstrate, these design features common to Grindr and Jack'd influence the norms and satisfaction of app use.

Our study aims to contribute to the research on gay mobile dating apps by highlighting users' experiences of seeking durable relationships. Existing research on the use of gay mobile dating apps has largely focused on the management of self-presentation (Crooks, 2013; Miller, 2015; Roth, 2014), norms of interaction (Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016; Tziallas, 2015), the

hybridization of physical and virtual spaces (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Roth, 2014), and the facilitation of new mode of sexual sociality (Race, 2015). Some of these studies acknowledge the significance of time in the experience of app use. For example, when discussing the interactional norms on Grindr, Licoppe and colleagues (2016) find that the ability to identify proximate strangers facilitated by the app's geolocation function fuels the immediacy of sexual encounters. While some of these studies have mentioned the temporality of casual hook-ups as shaped by mobile dating apps, little attention has been paid to the temporal patterns of the formation of durable relationships on these apps. By focusing on the specific affordances of Grindr and Jack'd, this study investigates the interactions and browsing experience on these platforms through the lens of time to understand relationship formation on mobile dating apps.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Time and Technology**

Time has been examined in relation to information and communication technologies (ICT) at different scales. One branch of literature posits that the proliferation of ICT, in conjunction with the new mode of capital accumulation in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, has ushered in a new temporality. Castells (2000) diagnoses that, in what he terms the network society, information technologies have eroded the established order of time across a range of institutions and social domains. Flexible work schedule, future-oriented financial market, instant access to information, real-time reportage of events are examples in the network society that subvert linear, chronological time. The breakdown of sequence and the collapsing of past, present, and future, result in what he calls "timeless time," a culture where eternity and ephemerality coexist.

Similarly, Hassan argues that the spread of ICT has brought about a shift in the experience of time that challenges the uniformity and linearity of clock-time. He calls this new

temporality “network time,” which is characterized by acceleration (2003), as well as “connected asynchronicity” (2007, p. 51) resulting from the time lag between the sending and receiving of a message and co-existence of different bandwidths. This new organization of time is double-edged: its fragmentary and asynchronous nature potentially enables us to create our own experience of time that is less impersonal than the abstract, homogeneous clock-time (2007); yet, the speed of information access creates information overload, entailing short attention span and quick, superficial understanding of issues (2008).

While theorists like Castells and Hassan have drawn a schematic contour of the general change of time induced by ICT, other scholars have nuanced our understanding of the relationship between temporality and ICT by investigating the practice of ICT use in everyday contexts. Exemplars of this line of research include how mobile phones reconfigure the boundary between work time and family time (Green, 2002; Wajcman, 2014); how computer use is integrated into the everyday rhythm through filling the time lag between planned activities (Rattenbury, Nafus, & Anderson, 2008); and the everyday tasks of constant interactions with mobile phone itself and with the interface of messaging applications (Burchell, 2015).

Rather than making grandiose claims that ICT erode or shatter established norms of time, these studies have shown that the temporal experience of ICT use is affected by the social expectations of technology use and, importantly, the pre-existing norms in the specific context where technology is used. As Green (2002, p. 281) observes in her analysis of the use of mobile phone, “the practical construction of mobile time in everyday life remains firmly connected to well-established time-based social practices.” Therefore, to fully understand the temporality of geolocative mobile dating apps, we have to examine not only the sense of time facilitated by the specific affordances of apps themselves, but also the “well-established time-based social

practices” of relationship development in order to understand how “social norms [...] *evolve* as devices are integrated into daily life” (Wajcman, 2014, p. 31).

### **Time and Relationships**

The sociological concept of social time is a pertinent framework for understanding the social norms underlying the formation of durable relationships. Social time encompasses the periodicity, tempo, duration, sequence, and timing shaping the subjective experience of social interactions (Lauer, 1981). These dimensions of social time not only organize but also prescribe the “proper” and “normal” process of social interactions. In other words, social time can be seen as a set of socio-temporal patterns producing expectations in social interactions, the violation of which produces cognitive disturbance (Zerubavel, 1981). For example, Fine (1996) uses the various dimensions of social time to analyze the organization of workflow in a restaurant, showing that cooks feel frustrated when established boundaries of time, such as the routine of time off, are violated.

Romantic relationships are also organized and prescribed by the dimensions of social time. In particular, the tempo and sequence with which we interact with someone not only reflect the significance of our relationship with that person but also affect its perceived quality. Tempo refers to “the frequency of activities in some unit of social time” (Lauer, 1981, p. 31), which conveys the perceived rapidity of time and experience as well as the intensity of an event. Sequence orders the proper occurrence of a series of actions, which signals a “value hierarchy,” as in “work before play” (Lauer, 1981, p. 35). In the course of courtship, “there are generally agreed-upon norms regarding which stage in the courtship ritual ought to precede or follow others” (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 4). Sequence and tempo govern the various stages—such as from initial physical contact to more intimate sexual activity—wherein the “steps and countersteps



have a coercive order” so that “[s]kipping steps or reversing their order” will impart the impression of moving too fast (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 159). As such, the symbolic meanings and values of social time govern relationship development.

In this study, we seek to examine the socio-temporal meanings that underlie the use of gay mobile dating apps. We argue that these socio-temporal meanings are not solely determined by technology but are related to the social norms and expectations that emerge and evolve with technology use. More specifically, we aim to demonstrate how the design features of gay mobile dating apps may give rise to specific tempo and sequence of browsing and interactions during the formation of relationships between users. These temporal patterns deviate from the normative tempo and sequence prescribing formation of friendship and romantic relationships internalized by our participants. The violation of these normative temporal expectations affects the perceived quality and satisfaction of app use.

Following in the footsteps of extant literature, our analysis takes into account of both the temporal experience of users interacting with their physical devices (Burchell, 2015; Green, 2002) and the temporality facilitated by the interface of the software applications (Harper, Whitworth, & Page, 2012; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014). Both dimensions of time influence participants’ perception of the use of mobile dating apps. Using the framework of social time, these aspects of mobile dating apps use will be discussed in relation to pre-existing temporal norms of romance and friendship formation.

## **Method**

The data presented here are part of a project investigating the impact of social media on the sexual socialization of young gay/bisexual men in Hong Kong. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Hong Kong Baptist University. Between February and

May 2014, 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews and eight focus-group discussions (each group comprised five to six participants) were conducted with a total of 74 gay mobile apps users aged 18 to 26. In this paper, we focus on the most popular apps used by our participants, namely Grindr and Jack'd. Since participants often drew comparison with other media platforms such as gay online forums or dating websites when discussing mobile dating apps, we will discuss the temporality of these other platforms wherever relevant to highlight the temporal patterns of interactions specific to mobile dating apps.

Quotes from participants presented in this paper were translated from Cantonese into English. Some slangs among Hong Kong gay men and formulaic expressions used in mobile dating apps were uttered in English by the participants; we have retained such English phrases in the quotes. Participants' names were anonymized during transcription. Pseudonyms were given to participants quoted in this paper. Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), which proceeded from labelling similar elements (open coding), to exploring relationships among the open codes (axial coding), and identifying the most significant and encompassing concepts (theoretical coding). Both authors were involved in coding and analyzing the data. Consistent with an interpretivist qualitative methodology, an intercoder reliability test was not conducted in this study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Instead, the trustworthiness and credibility of our data analysis were evaluated by searching for and reconciling participants' accounts that do not support or appear to contradict patterns or explanations which are emerging from data analysis (negative case analysis) and cycling some of the interpretations back through participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their own experiences (member validation).

## **Findings**

Tempo and sequence stand out as the most salient dimensions of social time shaping participants' use of mobile dating apps vis-à-vis other social networking channels, their interactions with other app users, as well as browsing and screening processes when using apps.

### **Tempo**

Tempo is a major dimension of users' experience. Participants attribute the pace of relationship development via gay mobile dating apps to the rate of making connections and interacting with other users. Specifically, the constant use of smartphone, the mobility of the device, and the design of the dating apps enable more frequent and efficient connections between users, generating feelings of accelerated relationship formation through these apps.

**Accelerated tempo of interactions with perpetual connectivity.** The fast tempo of interactions on mobile apps was evaluated by some participants as an advantage. For example, explaining why he now rarely used the gay forum TT1069 (aka TT) for meeting guys, Johnny singled out the efficiency of the messaging system of mobile dating apps:

Because apps are more convenient. For example, now people on average check their Whatsapp messages every hour. So if you are free...if you receive a notification of message, you will tap into the app and read the message. It's more convenient than going online through the Internet for no other reason than to log in [to a forum]. After logging in, you have to scroll down the page slowly to read, read, and read. So I won't do that.

The notification system of mobile dating apps alerts users to new messages whenever they are received, even when users are not using the apps. This feature dovetails with the general culture of perpetual connectivity in which people are constantly drawn back to their digital devices.

While checking messages on a forum is a purposeful act involving typing a username and password, viewing messages on mobile dating apps is just another tap on the touchscreen, a

gesture embedded in the seamless flow of constant smartphone use. Both of these “conveniences” accelerate the response rate to messages. Likewise, the following participants discussed the increase in the tempo of exchange between users:

Nowadays everyone, regardless of age and class, always has a phone in their hands. So the speed of knowing a guy has increased exponentially. You don't have to be at home to check your email or inbox in order to reply to messages. You can receive messages and know if someone is looking you up immediately, or you can just open the app to view everyone.

Convenience is of utmost importance. (Anson)

You have to log in to it. You have to switch on a computer, log in to the forum or MSN to chat with other guys. It wasn't popular to use SMS or text messaging. But now it's different.

The phone is with you everywhere. You can [chat] when you go out, or even when you are sitting on a toilet. So now it's more convenient. It's more user-friendly. (Ronald)

Whereas in the past, they were only able to connect with other gay men when they were at home, they are now enabled by the mobility of the device to exchange messages everywhere and to respond to messages immediately. In this way, perpetual connectivity increases the frequency of interactions, thus accelerating the speed of contact as a first step of relationship formation.

**Accelerated tempo of interactions with mutual proximity awareness.** The tempo of relationship formation is affected not only by the general features of mobile communication, but also by mobile dating apps' specific affordance of location-based service. Gay men nearby who are also using the apps are made visible on one's smartphone screen. The ability to identify gay men in proximity was seen to favor the instantaneous arrangement of a meet-up:

I think because users on Grindr and Jack'd are within short distance, everything happens very quickly. You chat with someone for a bit, and then meet up, and then have sex. But if

you meet someone you like on Fridae [an online dating website] or online, you may be far from that person. So you chat for a while, and then switch to Whatsapp, and then talk on the phone, but you still have not met up. Since the process is longer, there are more opportunities to get to know each other. (Ming)

This account is an exemplar of how user experience is temporally organized around the actual and perceived tempo of interactions associated with each communication platform. In contrast to online dating sites, proximity awareness between users on mobile dating apps highlights the opportunity for meeting up “here and now,” which imbues a sense of urgency for some users, hastening the tempo between exchange on an online platform and a face-to-face encounter. However, as Ming and several other participants suggest, the quick pace of interaction catalyzed by the potential for a rapid meet-up is depersonalizing and geared toward sexual gratification.

**Symbolic meanings of tempo.** Indeed, for some participants, the accelerated interactions between users enabled by mobile dating apps privilege casual sex and impede the cultivation of friendship or romance. Consequently, users with different motives gravitate towards different platforms for their specific tempos of interactions:

The downside of TT is its slowness. I think that this actually allows users to have a deeper understanding of each other. If a guy is looking for “fun,” he won’t go to TT to send private messages to another user and wait for a day for a reply, to wait, and wait, for it. Only those who are genuine about meeting friends will go to this platform to have a slow conversation. Although the conversation lasting a day on other platforms may take a week on TT, this actually allows people to learn more about each other. The good thing about Jack’d is its speed, but its downside is that it can easily become a platform for “fun” and instant relationships. (Vincent)

The affordances of different platforms facilitate different temporal patterns of interactions, which in turn satisfy different gratifications: Online forums are for friendships, whereas apps are for “fun” (a common parlance expressed in English for casual hook-ups among Hong Kong gay men). Moreover, Vincent’s account shows that temporal patterns are rich with meanings and values. The gradual pace of relationship progression implies sincerity, whereas the fast pace of interactions suggests impersonality. Similarly, as Wayne discussed:

It’s obvious that guys who use apps are looking for sex, even if they don’t admit it [...] If you can find someone so easily, you may also casually dump the relationship, no matter whether it’s friendship or romance. So I feel that on a forum...you have to go through a series of steps to know someone on a forum, so the friendship will last longer...I mean it’s the difference between a hard-won relationship and getting something too easily. So I have a stronger dislike for apps.

In this account, the tempos of communication on different platforms register the different temporal norms governing different social relationships.

Participants further elaborated on how the fast tempo of relationship formation on apps deviates from the temporal norms prescribing friendship and romance, resulting in their ephemerality and loss of intimacy:

Since everyone is different, no matter how well you get along with someone, there must be something you don’t like about him. With a secondary school friend, you won’t act like you have never met this person just because you don’t like something minor about him. It’s very hard to do that or you just won’t do that. But with someone you met through a few taps online, if you don’t have feelings for him anymore, you will just leave him in the way you would un-friend someone on Facebook, acting like you have never met this person before.

This is just my speculation. So I think it's very easy to lose a relationship, it's more likely that that would happen. (Wayne)

When you meet someone at a bar, perhaps you'll chat a little... [but] even when both parties run out of things to say [if] you are genuinely keen [to get to know each other], you can play a game of dice or have a drink, so you have many other things you can do and you have more time to develop. You'll have more opportunities to get to know a person. But when you're on an app, people start by asking whether you're studying or working, what you study, etc. In these exchanges, there isn't much depth in the communication. So I think the foundation is not quite sufficient... so it's harder to get to know a person. (Ming)

While the affordances of apps enable the efficient formation of relationship, the limited efforts invested in its establishment were seen to entail weak, impersonal relationships that are as easy to dispose as they are formed.

### **Sequence**

Sequence is another dimension of social time shaping the experience of app use. The concept of sequence as an ordered process and a reflection of values is pertinent for understanding the browsing experience and conversational dynamics on mobile dating apps. Participants' accounts suggest that the design features of apps structure the sequence of browsing in a way that emphasizes the physical appearances of users. This sequence contributes to the perception that communication on apps is geared towards sexual motivation, and relationships initiated on apps are ephemeral.

**Sequence of browsing.** Because of the large number of people on online platforms, users tend to screen for potential partners based on certain criteria. The interface design of mobile

dating apps typically orchestrates the sequence of browsing in a way that directs a user's gaze to profile pictures. For some participants, this sequence of browsing facilitates efficient screening:

When you open Jack'd, you will see a bunch of photos for you to choose from. It seems that there are many, many choices. You can spend an entire day to view them. But if you go on TT, you won't read every post. There isn't a list of members with photos for you to quickly browse through. But on Jack'd...it's easier, at least you can check out the photos without having to tap into it, or you can bookmark who you want to check out next time. (Andrew)

People in Hong Kong want to make the most out of the least amount of time. With apps, you don't have to sit in front of a computer, and you don't need to write a long passage or read through a long passage to decide if you want to know someone, as you would have to when you were 15 or 16 years old [apps were not available then]. Now, based on another user's photos, you can decide if you want to know him. (Jeff)

What immediately appears on the main screen when a user opens the app is a grid showing thumbnails of users' profile pictures, as opposed to a list of headings of the posts on a forum. An app user has to tap on a thumbnail on the main screen in order to access that user's self-description displayed on another screen. This design feature that foregrounds visual representation allows users to make quick judgments when selecting potential partners, saving users from the drudgery of reading long passages of text as one would have to on a forum.

While some participants favored the expeditious screening process facilitated by this sequence, others lamented that such a sequence of browsing inhibits users from establishing a quality connection:

When you open Jack'd, you will first see a lot of photos and get distracted. You won't tap on those that don't look good. Maybe you don't intend this, but when you see those who



look good, you will tap on them. But on TT, there are many posts. Every post has a heading mentioning the subject of the post. If you want to check out cute guys, you can do that with a simple tap on Jack'd. But on TT, you have headings. You may not want to check out cute guys right from the beginning. After reading the headings, you feel that you want to befriend the poster. You will click on those headings that interest you. Therefore, it seems that the people met through TT have more substance. (Lawrence)

The sequence of browsing shaped by the interface design favors screening by physical attractiveness instead of shared interests. While screening by topic of interest is more likely to connect users sharing common interests, for this participant, filtering by profile photos on apps was construed as a “distraction” from seeing the person behind his surface representation. Relationships initiated based on looks were perceived by many participants as inevitably superficial.

The sequence of browsing on apps shapes the perception that app use is for sex-seeking. For example, Matthew suggested that screening by physical appearance, which he viewed as inevitable on mobile dating apps, favors casual sex:

The goal of using apps is after all for “fun.” Think about it, you only tap on those photos who look cute. You won't tap on those who don't look good. If you are looking for a long-term relationship, it can't be that another guy's looks would matter so much, if it's long-term.

In this account, casual sex and long-term relationship are governed by opposing sets of values. Apps are conducive to sex-seeking in that the interface design skews the browsing and screening sequence in a way that promotes looks over mind and heart, registering a hierarchy of values incompatible with that governing long-term relationships. Some participants also explained that

for those looking for casual sex, photos are what matter during their screening process, so much so that they ignored other users' textual self-descriptions and asked about information readily available in other users' profiles. Notably, this participant's reiteration of the "long-term" duration of romance implies that those relationships initiated based on looks are ephemeral.

**Sequence of messaging.** The concept of sequence also helps us understand the conversational dynamics between app users. Unlike the sequential order of online chat rooms which entails turn-by-turn negotiation of information and photo exchange after initial interactions (Jones, 2005), app users frown upon such ambiguity and demand to know upfront what the other party looks like. The imperative "no picture, no chat," which is written in English and commonly found in the free-text description section of profiles, specifies the proper order of message exchange between users: a conversation initiator should readily display a photo showing his appearance on his profile or send one over to the other user before starting a chat. Indeed, many participants have noted that showing a self-picture is a rule of engagement on apps. Sometimes, the acronym of this demand—"NPNC"—is used as a profile name. Since a Grindr user's profile name is overlaid on his thumbnail in the main screen, which is the first screen coming into view after a user has opened the app, a user with "NPNC" as his profile name takes advantage of the browsing sequence of the app to signal upfront to other users that a photo is a prerequisite for making connection with him. The widespread understanding of and insistence on this obligatory sequence of exchange, as well as the fact that the formulaic expression of this imperative has become a shared language, attest to the importance of looks in the initiation of relationships on apps.

The temporal norm of messaging on apps prescribing that the exchange of photos precedes conversation was seen by participants to hamper the development of quality

relationships. As Patrick observed, this common expectation constrains the development of friendship:

I think the mode of communication on apps is too direct. On TT, after you have created a post to meet friends, you will exchange private messages with someone, and keep chatting and chatting and chatting until you guys meet up in person. But on apps, let's say Jack'd, the first line you get is "Do you have photos?" You get stuck at that point and will not go deeper to learn more about each other. But on TT, the exchange is based on chats. Because you don't know what the other guy looks like, you will keep chatting and chatting, and friendship will grow gradually.

The sequence of exchange, once again, registers a value hierarchy that prioritizes physical attractiveness and devalues the exploration of mind and character. The request of photos at the outset conveys the impression of superficial connections. On the contrary, connections on forum are maintained and strengthened by extended correspondence, which was seen as the basis of friendship. This account shows the temporal norms of friendship: it cannot be developed out of quick judgments based on looks, but has to be cultivated through verbal communication unfolding over time.

Besides asking for photos, another commonly posed question in the sequence of message exchange among app users is "what are you looking for?" This question serves to "triage" other users according to their relational intention so as to decide whether to proceed with the next order of engagement, which could be anything from ignoring or blocking the user, having a regular conversation, exchanging contact numbers, to meeting up face-to-face:

Adam: Before meeting face-to-face, many "members" [local slang for "gay"], especially those in Hong Kong would ask me "what are you looking for"? Ahh... so I could only

reply with a standard answer: looking for friends, love, or if you want, just for fun. Well, most of those I met up with... (Laughs)... the majority are just for fun but there are a few who only want to be friends.

Interviewer: When you said that many people ask “what are you looking for”, you sounded a little frustrated, especially with members from Hong Kong. Is that so?

Adam: Yeah. Because...among those members I know from Hong Kong, almost 90% of them would ask that question. Come on man, this question... It doesn't matter that I respond with a standard answer because it's really not important. But the problem is when it's asked almost all the time, won't you feel frustrated?

As a British Chinese residing in Hong Kong, Adam shares his frustration with the repetitive use of this question by Hong Kong gay app users, suggesting that it is a prevalent local practice rather than something inherent with online dating. His account further indicates that users who posed the question were mostly looking for casual sex. The following example illustrates a typical exchange between users seeking to hookup:

For sex, the procedure normally is: “Hi, hey” followed by a greeting, then I'll type “what are you looking for”, “nice to meet you” and so on...which I won't elaborate. After “what are you looking for” followed by “anything if match”, then I'll say “Fun?”, then he will say “okay”, then we'll start to discuss time and location. It's really quick, really straightforward until a suitable match is found then we'll sort out the details and if both parties are agreeable then it's a go. After which we'll leave contact [information], as a backup [to messaging via the app] or [for] follow-up action, then we'll try to meet up face-to-face. Yeah that's it, normally that's the way. (Billy)

Clarifying each other's relational intentions at the beginning of a conversation allows both parties who are looking for sexual gratification to dispense with irrelevant or unnecessary conversational steps by jumping straight to the point. As an expedient conversational device, it is geared toward maximizing the number of connections by minimizing the initial interaction time with individual users. While posing this question is not exclusive to those seeking casual sex, the two accounts demonstrate that it tends to beget instrumental and formulaic exchanges out of expediency or frustration, which precludes relational development.

**Sequence as a norm prescribing relationships.** Participants' accounts around the clarification of relational intentions demonstrate that the concept of sequence is integral to online dating not only because it underlies the process of browsing and messaging, but also because the development of durable relationships is predicated on temporal norms as a series of steps. William, for example, articulated a temporalized courtship norm. Based on his friends' and his own experiences, he attributed the ephemerality of romantic relationships to app users' nonconformity to normative sequence of courtship:

At first, I believed that one should approach love carefully. That is to say, if you want to develop a relationship, you have to do it step by step, and be sure about it. But after using apps, the whole matter becomes instantaneous. After hanging out a few times, the guy may ask you to become his boyfriend. Or some guys clearly state in their profiles "look for ltr" [long-term relationship] and "look for boyfriend." The first thing they say is "Do you want to develop a relationship with me?" Whoa, the whole matter is very instantaneous, and the result is that the relationship may not last. For example...yeah...because you do not start from friendship, but instead you guys become attached in two or three weeks. The

foundation of the relationship is not solid. So actually the result of instantaneity is that the relationship is very unstable.

Self-presentation rhetoric and conversational dynamics on apps impart the impression that users do not conform to the normative sequence of romance development, which orders that friendship should precede love. Notably, the sense of instantaneity is generated not just by the short duration taken to form a romantic relationship, but also by the disruption of the normative sequence. Skipping the stage of friendship suggests a rush to love. This deviation from the temporal norm was seen to result in short-lived relationships owing to a lack of effort at laying the groundwork.

The sequential order in which we attend to different people is seldom random or coincidental but adheres to a normative prescription and holds social meanings. Given that time is widely considered in modern societies to be precious, the willingness to devote time to a particular person or sequential progression of relationship conveys seriousness and sincerity:

If someone types “anything if match” then he must be a very casual person since it doesn’t matter to him if it’s sex, friendship, etc. Actually I feel that this message implies looking for sex. That’s my interpretation [...] Normally if you really wish to develop [a serious relationship] with someone, you wouldn’t be so quick to talk about sex. Maybe I’m too traditional in my mindset. I would imagine that you’ll want to slowly get to know someone first rather than... because if you feel it is something long term then there’s no rush to get physical with him or to have sex. That’s why I feel “anything if match” is too casual or too straightforward — people will think that your real intention is sex. (Billy)

As this account demonstrates, temporal segregation in terms of “before” and “after” signifies priority and those who do not respect such sequential norms of long-term relationship development are deemed morally “casual” and undesirable relational partners.

### **Discussion**

Gay men inhibit the thin market for potential partners in that the cost of identifying multiple potential partners who satisfy their minimum criteria may be so large as to form a barrier to relationship formation (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). As demonstrated in this study, mobile dating apps represent one of the latest instances of technology-mediated social intermediary that reduces such costs by reshaping the temporal patterns of connecting with potential partners, though not without downsides. In contrast to web platforms traditionally accessed from home computers, mobile dating apps are designed for smaller screens and shorter durations of access which demand greater user visibility in terms of revealing photos and pertinent information upfront. Unlike gay web-groups that pre-arrange meetups in specific locations such as public toilets (Mowlabocus, 2010), location-based dating apps transform one’s immediate surroundings into virtual meeting places on the fly. However, the visibility of a user on a location-based dating service typically lasts only momentarily when the user happens to be at the particular locale. As one participant explained, the fact that users appear only when they are logged on nearby imbues the immediacy of making a connection with someone of interest before he disappears from the screen. Notably, the duration of approaching someone and receiving a response on an app is not necessarily faster than that of a face-to-face encounter at a gay sauna or bar. Communications on apps tend to be more temporally fragile (cf. Mowlabocus, 2010) than face-to-face encounters owing to greater opportunities for situational interruptions and unpredictable responses of nearby strangers who could potentially reciprocate but more commonly ignore or even block the user.

Moreover, as participants often alluded to, app users typically divide their attention not only between interactions on the app and other tasks on hand but also between parallel conversations within the app. Nevertheless, mobile dating apps represent an efficient way to access a wider pool of potential partners in close proximity and to make quick judgments about their suitability through screening and filtering. For some participants in this study, the convenience and efficiency in screening for potential partners create a sense of accelerated relationship formation, which was perceived as contributing to more ephemeral relationships because, in the words of one participant, “relationships form so quickly that you won’t cherish them.”

Our findings have also shown that conversational dynamics and the norms of self-presentation on apps produce a sense of expediency—convenient and practical but improper. Many participants in this study noted that initial chats between users often revolve around a set of brusque, formulaic, and task-oriented questions. Some participants were so fed up with this standard line of questioning that they used the copy and paste function to send stock answers in reply. Participants observed that this kind of mechanical exchange, while apt for the efficient handling of multiple conversations, lacks the depth that would pave the way for the development of meaningful relationships. Moreover, what is commonly known as a user’s “stats”—age, height, weight—serve as an expedient screening tool. The expectation to fill in this set of numbers on profile, and the perfunctory enquiry about another user’s “stats” illustrate that physical attributes figure prominently in the screening process on apps. However, some participants were frustrated with being evaluated by and reduced to a set of standardized numerical data. Such interactional and screening norms underlying the practices established on apps for handling information abundance inadvertently produce depersonalizing experiences of use. They reflect and promote the values of expediency by maximizing the number of



connections (and thus the choice of potential partners) by minimizing the initial interaction time with individual users. On the other hand, the willingness to follow a slower tempo or adhere to the traditional sequential order of relationship development which begins with friendship rather than sex or “anything that match” and not rushing through a conversation or chatting up many guys at the same time are considered by some users to be the normative temporality prescribing the formation of long-term relationships.

Arguing for the significance of time in understanding relationship formation on apps, this study supports and strengthens previous literature on mobile dating apps. Licoppe and colleagues (2016, p. 2548) point out that conversational dynamics on Grindr constitute a genre of impersonal chat distinct from “the relationality of everyday conversation.” This type of conversation purposefully frames the interactions as gearing towards one-off, “no-strings-attached” encounters, preempting any lasting engagement. Our findings support their conclusion that interactional practices shaped by the design features of apps privilege sex-seeking. However, instead of contrasting interactions on apps with “everyday conversation,” we have approached this conclusion by juxtaposing the norms of interactions on apps with those on forums, foregrounding how the sense of acceleration (i.e. from a “slow” platform to a “fast” platform) facilitated by the affordances of apps is associated with casual sex and is thus seen to hinder the development of durable relationships. While Licoppe and colleagues mention that the patterns of exchange on gay mobile dating apps is geared towards efficient arrangement of a hook-up, we analyze these temporal patterns of exchange through the framework of social time in order to highlight how such patterns conflict with the temporal norms of prescribing durable relationships.

The deviation from the temporal norms governing durable relationships is a violation of internalized values and expectations, thus entailing social and psychological consequences. Prior research has highlighted users' frustrations stemming from the prioritization of sex in the use of gay mobile dating apps. In particular, Brubaker and colleagues (2016) show that some Grindr users delete the app owing to the failure to find their desired partners and other users' overwhelming focus on sex. Blackwell and colleagues (2015) suggest that the presence of users with different, sometimes conflicting, goals on the same platform can create confusions and frustrations. This study adds an additional contextual dimension to these earlier studies which were based on Euro-American experiences. Our findings indicate that participants tended to ascribe moralizing attributes to relational intentions of app use. A long-term romantic relationship was often described as the ideal or ultimate relational goal and several participants claimed to be holding out for Mr Right. While many participants did use apps for sexual gratification, some of these participants also expressed the desire for a long-term romantic relationship. Participants suggested that most users started out with "pure" intentions (seeking friendship or romance) but became distracted by the quick availability of hookups through apps or simply "grew up" as their experiences accrue. For those seeking more durable relationships, the tensions arising from the specific temporality of app use that privileges casual sex but which also maximizes the pool of potential partners versus the temporal norms prescribing friendship and long-term romantic relationships become a major source of frustration. Ultimately, these tensions resulted in users conforming to routine patterns of interactions, developing alternative modes of interactions on apps that decelerate relationship development, or (temporarily) deleting the apps.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the research on mobile dating apps by highlighting the temporality of users' experience and how socio-temporal norms shape processes and outcomes of usage.

Through the framework of social time, our findings have unpacked how affordances of mobile dating apps and attendant socio-material practices create the perception of accelerated relationships. We have also shown that the formation of romantic relationships involves temporal logics imbued with normative prescriptions. Notably, in the context of the formation of romance, some participants favored platforms that deferred satisfaction over those offering immediate gratification such as apps. The fast tempo of interaction on apps fostered by perpetual connectivity and a heightened sense of immediacy from mutual proximity awareness was seen as producing more ephemeral relationships. Meanwhile, the sequence of browsing and screening on apps which prioritizes physical attractiveness and expedient interactions was considered a barrier to meaningful relational development. This evaluation subverts the cultural imperative that "faster is better."

Continuing with this line of inquiry, future studies could examine other dimensions of social time. For instance, synchronicity may be useful for studying the messaging system on mobile dating apps. Moreover, researchers should investigate the temporality of other mobile dating apps like Tinder, whose affordances such as screening of partners by "swipe," may produce even more intensified sense of time in relationship formation (David & Cambre, 2016). Future studies could also nuance existing studies of the geolocation function of apps by intersecting space and time. For example, spatial concepts such as virtual co-presence and physical proximity could be explored together with temporal concepts such as simultaneity and synchronization.

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