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THE DIGITAL BATHHOUSE ? AN ESSAY ON THE POSSIBLE DISRUPTIVE INFLUENCE OF GAY APPS ON HOMOSEXUAL VENUES

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ABSTRACT

The aim is to examine the possible disruptive influence of gay apps on homosexual venues. Based on the work of Licoppe et al. (2015), the main argument indicates that location-aware technologies such as gay apps combined the immediate availability and the disembedding of spatial contexts afforded by social networks to privatize sexual encounters with strangers and redefine the urban experiences of gay men. Instead of being initiated and taking place in uncertain public places, the sexual encounters – which operate within a sexual script of the fast sexual consumption of objectified others – can be organized and occur indoors, separately from other domains of sociality. At the same time, users can use gay apps for having potential encounters during their daily activities, and the whole city appears as a potential hunting ground, which turns traditional gay venues such as bars, clubs and saunas into limited places for gay sexual encounters. Many gay bars, clubs and saunas close their doors not only because of economic, political or legal problems, but, with the dissemination of gay apps, they also started to lose their political role as specific subversive spaces where gay men might express their identity and desires.

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INTRODUCTION

Gay apps based on geolocation have had an impressive growth over the 2010s and generated virtual spaces in which affective and sexual relations among men created new ways of interaction. The physical spaces have been gradually left in the background of casual social interaction, and the "cartography of desire" in the city – such as gay saunas, bars and cruising sites – has been changed by these apps, which allow private and public spaces such as airports, bus stations, offices and gyms to become new places for hook-ups (Castelló et al., 2018). As Davis et al. (2016) argue, hook-up apps have been linked with the erosion of gay public places as the basis for identity politics and social action. Many countries have lost gay bars, clubs and bathhouses since the mid-2000s. In the United Kingdom, for example, London has lost more than half of its gay bars and clubs, falling from 125 to 53 in just over a decade. Besides the rising commercial rents and the 2007's smoking ban, gay venues face the additional pressure of apps such as Grindr and Scruff, which have gradually eliminated the need to meet first in bars, pubs or bathhouses. Although these apps are a solution for meeting in repressive countries or areas

where there are no gay-specific venues (Davis et al., 2016), they may be a problem in other places (Greenhalgh, 2017). Ireland has had gay saunas since at least the 1980s, where huge numbers of gay and bisexual men of all ages still go to have sex. However, most are older men who are strict on privacy and closeted. Many do not know how to use apps, and most do not fit the young athletic stereotypes that prevail in gay apps. Places that offer similar opportunity to saunas for a lower price, such as adult cinemas and shops, seem to be better options in times of economic crises (Kelleher, 2017). In the United States, many saunas have provided gay men a place to relax and form new relationships. Many gay men have also been allowed to engage in some wish fulfillment, often of the kinky variety: sex has been a near-guarantee for those who desired it. Many of these businesses have made efforts to ensure that sexual activities were safe, making condoms available and promoting safe-sex campaigns. However, the sense of community – rarely experienced on social media – has been gradually lost in the age of apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Hornet, and gay bathhouses – as well as many gay bars and clubs – have not withstood the test of time (Giambrone, 2017). In 2015, U.S. health officials released data showing a dramatic

spike in cases of syphilis, gonorrhoea, and HIV in the previous year because of certain high-risk behaviors, including using apps to arrange casual and often anonymous sexual encounters. Health experts increasingly view apps and sites such as Grindr as enablers of high-risk sex, helping people meet and hook up more efficiently than ever before. Although these apps could not be stigmatized for being associated with sexually transmitted diseases, many specialists say major networks do as little as possible regarding the issue (Belluz, 2017). Many gay men still say they feel safer when they find sexual partners using the apps instead of looking for them in saunas, bars or clubs. The aim of the essay is to examine the possible disruptive influence of gay apps on homosexual venues. Based on the work of Licoppe et al. (2015), the main argument indicates that location-aware technologies such as gay apps combined the immediate availability and the disembedding of spatial contexts afforded by social networks to privatize sexual encounters with strangers and redefine the urban experiences of gay men. Instead of being initiated and taking place in uncertain public places, the sexual encounters – which operate within a sexual script of the fast sexual consumption of objectified others – can be organized and occur indoors, separately from other domains of sociality. At the same time, users can use gay apps for having potential encounters during their daily activities, and the whole city appears as a potential hunting ground, which turns traditional gay venues such as bars, clubs and saunas into limited places for gay sexual encounters. Many gay bars, clubs and saunas close their doors not only because of economic, political or legal problems, but, with the dissemination of gay apps, they also started to lose their political role as specific subversive spaces where gay men might express their identity and desires.

The gay apps: According to Jaque (2017), gay apps such as Grindr – a geosocial networking and online dating app released in 2009 to increase hook-up opportunities for gay users – radically contributed to render gay interaction and associability into a space for life style development. Although in some countries the app became the arena of numerous forms of subversion and gradually succeeded in coordinating online interaction, real estate, fashion, urban transformation and interior design, it also worked as a means to de-queer gayness, commodify sex and transform bodies into vehicles of market acceleration. The gay apps create a type of online archiurbanism, a form of environmental design that articulates scales of proximity and the large scales of digital data. The photographs mainly show sexualized versions of users, with carefully selected outfits in a combination of porn, fashion, and interior design. The conversation between users tends to be simultaneously casual and intimate and creates a space of visually driven pre-agreed normativity. The apps replace online chat rooms with an overlapped urban network that prioritizes multiple, selective and technologically manageable proximity and promotes simultaneous techno-human settings. This archiurbanism – which evolved from the long running traditions of queer urban lacunas where normativity was challenged and cruising strangers became possible – has reinvented the offline domain with a customizable infrastructure where digital self-construction replaces the need for specific physical buildings (Jaque, 2017). Gay apps such as Grindr and Scruff rely on proximity awareness – a cue for sexual availability – and allow the “privatization” of sexual practices, which can be managed by users and happen at their home or during their daily activities. This turns the city into a hunting ground for new

urban wayfarers (Licoppe et al., 2015). When gay men use these apps, they can experience something about their bodies and sexualities that they cannot do in many other spaces where they circulate (Zago, 2016). The social dynamics that involves the search for partners and the experiences of sexuality through digital media such as gay apps include the intense technological integration, the conversion of the online profile into a sexual commodity – the commodification of the self in the sexual market – and the displacement of the expression of homosexual desire to a space protected by supposed anonymity. The search for male partners occurs mainly in digital media, not in bars, nightclubs, neighborhoods or parties (Miskolci, 2015; Pelúcio, 2015). The concept of “pornotopy” (Preciado, 2010) makes it possible to allude to the different conditions of circulation in the urban space and its implications for sexual identity policies after the emergence of the internet. As suggested by Miskolci (2015), the internet has made online sociability possible in an anonymous and relatively safe way, especially for people who feared social retaliation to get away from loneliness, and allowed their modulated contact with possible partners and friends. When Zago (2016) proposes the understanding of gay apps as “pornotopies”, he argues that they can be seen as spaces that juxtapose other incompatible urban spaces and evolve as places where an individual enters in the expectation of being someone different and images and descriptions of users’ bodies are instruments for sociability. Sibilia (2005) points out that the uses of social networking sites and apps renew the inside-outside and public-private dichotomies. According to Zago (2016), the vulnerability to violence – which is potentially present, for many gay men, in spaces of the institutionalized circuit of gay sociability such as saunas, parks, public restrooms, porn cinemas and erotic video stores – also discourages circulation in these places. The constitution of urban spaces inhabited mainly by gay men played a fundamental role in the political organization of movements to affirm sexual identities, but these spaces have been gradually replaced, by many of these men, with the use of new technologies, such as gay apps. However, analyses of the subjective maps of gay apps’ users show that the idea that the virtual spaces known to be inhabited by gay men would be havens against homophobia is a fiction, because, in these spaces, many symbolic forms of violence continue to be reproduced not only against men considered “effeminate”, but also the prejudice based on origin, race, ethnicity and income. As Gosine (2007) argues, apps may also deepen the commodification of gay men’s bodies and stimulate raced and gendered ideals of male beauty, which exclude people that do not fit into these models and strengthen forms of self-oppression.

The possible disruptive influence of gay apps on LGBT venues: In the 1980s, the use of the streets by gay men was impacted by the AIDS epidemic. Due to the multiple speeches that blamed gay men for the disease and classified them as a “risk group”, casual and quite frequent encounters in sociable urban spaces became gradually scarce. The street, once seen as a space for experimenting with gay sexualities, was increasingly associated with danger. Instead of prioritizing the streets as spaces for conquests, many men started to resort to private spaces such as bars and nightclubs as places of sociability. The computer-mediated communication – which took place at work, in universities, in schools and at home – seemed to offer more secure and institutionalized spaces, seen by many gay men as points of protection. This does not mean

that the frequency and use of traditional gay venues by these men has immediately disappeared. However, the uses of gay sociability spaces have been significantly transformed in recent decades. As heirs to a previous history of marginalization and stigmatization, gay sites and apps have gradually become the main spaces that many men have come to use to meet other men. Thus, it was possible to be online in apps such as Grindr or Scruff and stay indoors to meet other men (Trindade, 2004; Zago, 2016). This kind of search was possible because of the dissemination of commercial internet in the mid-1990s, first with the use of chat rooms and then platforms that evolved into the apps for mobile devices, in which the possibility for the preselection of partners remains the main attraction (Miskolci, 2016). The increased opportunities for mutual proximity offered by smartphone-mediated location awareness plays a crucial role as a resource for the initiation of encounters, and users experience contexts as “hybrid ecologies”, in which they combine mobility and sociality in a constant re-articulation of onscreen and “real life” perceptions and actions (Licoppe *et al.*, 2015).

In heteronormative contexts, finding potential partners has been difficult for gay men, because many of their practices were conceived as deviant and even illegal. In some cities, well established gay communities could develop or “colonize” specific places for hooking up with potential partners, such as bars, saunas, beaches, parks or public toilets. These spaces became potential meeting points for men who wanted to have sex with other men, where they developed specific interactional expertise for manipulating the conventions of ordinary conversation to recognize one another’s mutual interest. The gaze, the embodied conduct and, to a lesser extent, the talk were key resources to convey a shared sense of emergent intimate encounters. With mobile-based dating systems such as gay apps, gay men have a resource to hook up with strangers, which, in their perception, can minimize the risks involved in the gay “colonization of public places” (Licoppe *et al.*, 2015). According to Bell & Valentine (1995), the creation of specific urban spaces for sociability among gay men – such as bars, clubs and saunas – served to explain the power relationship with the idea that all public space is “sexually neutral”. In that supposedly “neutral space”, the heterosexual norm operated and the circulation and occupation by people were free, as long as their behaviors consistent with a certain sexuality considered “normal”. However, with the uses of the internet, the almost causal relationship between attending certain spaces and coming out as gay is dissociated. It is possible for a man to access apps such as Grindr or Scruff without necessarily having to come out as gay. If bars, clubs, saunas and cruising spots used to be what produced gay scenes, it is now the self-construction of subjects – through online editing and circulation – that defines gayness. Cruising spots and dark rooms around the world have seen their aging constituencies reduced in the last years, as younger generations have preferred digital spaces to cruise and negotiate sex. In the light of the growing normalization of gay lifestyles in many Western countries, historical sites of queer empowerment have lost their role in accommodating the marginal experiences and have become spaces of aspirational real estate investment. The one-to-one relationship that the gay apps’ interface prioritizes and the progressive replacement of venues with apartments in former gay neighborhoods shows that gayness is less a victim and more an actor in the making of a normative culture (Jaque, 2017). It is also possible to say that men who grew up at the time of the invention of the antiretroviral cocktail and the

dissemination of internet have developed different kinds of homosexuality compared to previous generations. New images of homosexuality are in part connected to digital media that generated more individualized experiences. Older men see the decline of the culture of gay bars and cruising, which was more open to sexual experimentation and more characterized by uncertainty and chance, based on the scarcity of partners that tended to make attractive contact with people of a different class, age or race. Differently from the old cruising, gay apps provide the opportunity to preselect partners in an “economy of abundance” that induces the choice of the ones considered to be the most “handsome” or “interesting”, even for fortuitous sexual encounters (Miskolci, 2016).

Before the gay apps, the initiation and achievement of sexual encounters among gay men had been typically confined to specific public places, where they constituted deviant, subversive and often illegal conducts in some countries, such as cruising gay bars and saunas. These encounters involved mobility to get to these places and some degree of risk, since some of these places were also accessible to potentially hostile groups. The first personal ads in the press and web-based dating services have provided alternatives for managing such encounters from a distance and allowed them to occur in more private places (Licoppe *et al.*, 2015). The gay apps have disrupted the way men have sex with other men, because meeting new partners became much easier with them, especially in places where there were no gay bars, clubs or saunas (Belluz, 2017). However, in areas where these places exist, the apps are not the only factor which is responsible for many queer and gay spaces closing their doors in Western countries. In big cities such as London, many gay places such as bars, clubs and saunas are mixing with heterosexual places in new constructions, which shows that the assimilation of gay spaces is killing LGBT liberation. The homoconservatism – that shows that gay people are decades away from safety in public space – creates obstacles to the progress of the queer movement (Rasmussen, 2016). Although gay venues may be closing also because of greater acceptance of homosexuality in public spaces some countries, the gold rush on property and the continuing swell of gentrification have a huge role to play in destroying gay independent businesses. These places were seen by many gay men as spaces for socialization and sex, but their closure seems to be another step towards the “sanitization of the nations” and a step closer to an old fashioned and conservative way of thinking about sexuality. The struggle for sexual liberation in places where gay men could meet, escape the day’s monotony and its regularity and be socially free seems to be replaced by the satisfaction, by many gay men, to become part of the establishment (Rasmussen, 2016). The “cleansing” of the search for partners offered by the digital media – which made homosexual sociabilities increasingly migrate to the online relationship spaces – turns the public space into a more controlled and propitious place to hegemonic heterosexual sociabilities (Miskolci, 2016). The use of gay apps combines spatial experiences with communication technologies, which produces infiltrations between different physical and informational spaces through digital communication networks. The apps allow users to choose images and words to characterize their bodies in the construction of their online profiles and show themselves to others, in addition to using the internet as a means of communication in the exchange of messages. In these apps, the expectation of “hunting” sexual and affective partners online is common, which constitutes them as spaces of dispute of bodies

and sexualities. These practices constitute a sociability that can be the product of a certain kind of fear or insecurity that prevent some of these men from frequenting spaces known as traditional to search for male partners. Such apps allocate the desire for other men in a space and time that do not interfere in their lives within heteronormative premises, to assume, in the virtual environment, identities different from the ones these men assume in other physical spaces (Maffesoli, 2005; Miskolci, 2015). It can be argued that mobility and location awareness brought into a digital dating service could promote an orientation towards immediacy and spatial proximity, which are necessary for social encounters with strangers (Licoppe *et al.*, 2015). However, gay apps may also contribute to eliminate the sense of spontaneity and collectivity of the physical space and the present experience. Apps such as Grindr may annihilate this kind of spontaneity and the sense of collective spaces, as well as stimulate institutionalised racism and body shaming in a more explicit form. In this sense, they show how the gay population continues to be fractured, and the lack of physical spaces to collectively convene sees less cohesion (Rasmussen, 2016). The apps may spatialize sexual sociality in ways unlike the ones found in bars and saunas and give rise to temporally and spatially-fluid and digitally-mediated socialities among gay men. This leads to the debate over the relevance of gay community, since sexual hook-ups may be now be situated in the fabric of daily life, not necessarily in typically gay venues, such as gay bars, clubs or saunas (Davis *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusion

The particular map of physical geography for gay men defines places where friends, lovers, potential sexual partners and allies can be found thanks to the constitution of spaces that allows and stimulates their circulation according to the potential encounters and also the need to protect against violence (Eribon, 2008). The definition of this map is linked to homosexual experiences, which tell a long history of discrimination and marginalization that required different spaces within cities to be marked and appropriated according to criteria related to the search for protection against violence, defined by the possibilities of group life (Zago, 2016). In the light of this, gay men could have preserved gay bars, clubs and saunas as subversive spaces where they might express their identity and desires (Giambrone, 2017). Nevertheless, the hook-ups facilitated by the gay apps are inserted in a new “economy of desire”, which tend to create filters and selections that “sanitize” looking for sex and evoke in more impressionable minds the fear and panic related to cruising (Miskolci, 2016). As many gay men increasingly opt for apps, new exclusion mechanisms are defined, which, far from constituting the apps as refuges against discrimination, end up making them fighting surfaces among those who would be characterized by the gay identity. One should not assume that the use of gay apps necessarily guarantees or increases the safety of users against the risk of violence. On the contrary, the ultra-connected sociability itself can bring new marks of symbolic violence and point out the conditions for exercising exclusionary practices (Zago, 2016). The apps did not turn the internet into a digital bathhouse, but reproduced mechanisms of exclusion and emptied the subversive potential of physical spaces where gay men used to define their sexual relations with other men.

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