Locating the "Scruff Guy":
Theorizing Body and Space in Gay Geosocial Media

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This article offers a critical examination of the smartphone application Scruff, a gay geosocial networking service targeted primarily at bears that boasts a user base of more than five million individuals in more than 180 countries. Using a case study of gay geosocial networking, the article argues for a theoretical reworking of the relationships among embodiment, space, and digital media. Geosocial services such as Scruff, by virtue of their emphasis on bodies and locations that can be accessed offline, complicate notions that online interactions are displaced, disembodied, and ethereal. By layering a virtual, but still spatialized network of users atop existing physical locations, Scruff straddles the online–offline divide and indicates how bodies, places, and identities are discursively constructed through the interplay of virtual and physical experience.

Keywords: gay men, social media, mobile media, geosocial, embodiment, location, identity

Introduction

Nestled in the heart of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, long regarded as a bastion of gay urban culture in the United States, is a coffee shop known to locals as Bearbucks, in recognition of its relatively high proportion of burly, hairy customers who identify as bears. One man, sitting at a table, takes out his phone and opens an application called Scruff, a geosocial network targeted primarily at bears (and their admirers) that leverages smartphones and global positioning technology to connect a user base of more than five million individuals in more than 180 countries. A new window appears on the screen: "Johnny just woof'd at you." Upon tapping the message, he is presented with a picture of Johnny (a bearded, muscle-bound man in a black shirt), his age (29), height (6 feet), weight (188 pounds), ethnicity (white), and distance (33 miles). "Hey man," reads the message. "Nice scruff."

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Scruff's developers, New York–based Perry Street Software, have marketed their app as a key expansion in the future of gay sociability: Using technology to meet men, both local and remote, bound together under the ambiguous banner of being "Scruff guys." The man in Bearbucks could just as easily be in another city—or, for that matter, another country—and still be a part of the imagined Scruff community. But what does it mean to be a "Scruff guy"? How do Scruff's developers differentially enable and constrain the behaviors of the service's more than five million active users? More generally, how is mobile software such as Scruff enrolled in the process of constructing the new social and spatial configurations of gay life?

Each Scruff user has a wide array of contextually and temporally variable motivations and desired outcomes for using the service: Some seek face-to-face sexual encounters; some are looking for friendship or professional networking; and yet others use the service as a source of visual and interactive fantasy (see Crooks, 2013; Gudelunas, 2012b; Raj, 2011; Woo, 2013). These goals, in turn, influence how users present their bodies, desires, and identities within the specific context of the Scruff app. This article examines the work of Scruff in this process of self-presentation and user interaction by highlighting how the interface, technologies, and marketing of the app both explicitly and implicitly construct certain idealized user types and interactions (see Schäfer, 2011; van Dijck, 2013). Users express a diverse range of bodies and identities through the Scruff app; but they do so in a manner constrained by the social and technical structures of a mass-marketed and popularly distributed piece of software.

Further, this article positions Scruff within a broader theoretical reworking of ideas of space and geography in mobile social networking. As a mobile service, accessed on devices that are often equipped with always-on cellular Internet connections, Scruff offers its users immediate and nearly omnipresent access to a gay social network. Scruff layers this network atop existing physical spaces, providing users with access to gay sociability without necessarily requiring their presence in publicly visible or demarcated gay geographic spaces. I argue that geosocial services like Scruff require a theoretical reevaluation of traditional ideas of location and community as they pertain to identities, bodies, and sexualities.

Theoretical Paradigms in Cybersexuality Research

Developing a theoretical framework for assessing services such as Scruff should begin with some discussion of the history of cybersexuality in academic literature. The position expanded in this article argues that Scruff enables the formation of embodied, localized communities in online spaces, a theoretical position at one extreme of a diverse set of theories regarding how to conceive of bodies and identities in digital spaces. By mapping the progression of these theories, from utopian conceptions of the possibilities for inventing a digital self to concerns over the consequences of different modes of online self-expression, this section outlines a theoretical middle ground: a version of online embodiment that recognizes the necessary relationship between the digital and the physical self, while privileging neither.

A key entry point into the historiography of cybersexuality is Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (Dibbell, 1994). The facts of Dibbell's article are well-established. Within the universe of an online roleplaying community known as LambdaMOO, a character by the name of Mr. Bungle used a piece of software mimicking a voodoo doll to force other players to commit sexual acts in-game against their

will. The actions were immediately understood by members of the LambdaMOO community to constitute rape; players couldn't react to the actions taken against them or stop the process. But the RL (real-life) dimensions of the events are complex: The tension at the heart of *A Rape in Cyberspace* is the dissonance that, despite the obvious psychological gravity of the situation for members of the LambdaMOO community, "no rape at all as any RL court of law has yet defined it" took place (Dibbell, 1994, p. 473). What does *rape* mean when its mediated context is presumed to be fundamentally characterized by abstraction and ephemerality?

Dibbell's central insight is the rejection of this presumed disembodiment. In LambdaMOO, as in other social spaces,

> Amid flurries of even the most cursorily described caresses, sighs, and penetrations, the glands do engage, and often as throbbingly as they would in a real-life assignation— sometimes even more so, given the combined power of anonymity and textual suggestiveness to unshackle deep-seated fantasies. (1994, p. 476)

This stands in stark contrast to traditional images of computer users as seated at a keyboard, disengaged from the lives unfolding on the screen. Bodies are either nonexistent in these online spaces or are fantastical simulations of their offline counterparts. They exist, in Juniper Wiley's terms, as "a parallel universe" (Wiley, 1995, p. 161). Computer-mediated communication "brackets the physical presence of the participants, either by omitting or by simulating corporeal immediacy" (Heim, 2001, p. 74).

Similar positions about the operation of identities online have been put forth, canonically, by Donna Haraway (1991), N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Howard Rheingold (2000), and Sherry Turkle (1995). As Rheingold puts it, computer-mediated communication inherently traffics in "new identities, false identities, multiple identities, [and] exploratory identities" (2000, p. 152), none of which need necessarily be connected in theoretically substantial ways to a user's offline body or persona. And, as Kate O'Riordan (2007) recognizes, there exist significant theoretical linkages between these classic perspectives on exploratory identities and queer theoretic positions about the possibilities of individual expression. Queer theory and cybercultural studies share a common affinity for utopian identity construction, potentially wholly divorced from bodies in the "real world."

Dibbell argues explicitly against this once-widely held view of cyberculture that privileges a disembodied utopia of virtual identity construction. LambdaMOO users do not merely perform their characters as independent identities; rather, they are intimately connected to them, and experience significant real-world consequences as a result of in-game actions. The broader theoretical claim—that RL bodies should not be imagined as independent of their digital manifestations—has emerged as a dominant trope in academic studies of cyberculture.

Integrating physical bodies into theories of online identity brought about a new set of theoretical problematics: namely, questions of passing and "realness" in self-presentation in digital spaces. Turkle's liberated vision of donning different identities as a way to perceive the world through the eyes of another becomes, as Lisa Nakamura puts it, a pernicious form of identity tourism.

> Tourism is a particularly apt metaphor to describe the activity of racial identity appropriation, or "passing" in cyberspace. The activity of "surfing" . . . the Internet not only reinforces the idea that cyberspace is not only a place where travel and mobility are featured attractions, but also figures it as a form of travel which is inherently recreational, exotic, and exciting, like surfing. (2001, p. 229)

Nakamura insists that the freedom to superficially adopt the identity of another is not the same thing as understanding the experience of living that identity. The ease of identity tourism online should not be mistaken for an accurate reflection of the lived experience of that identity.

The underlying assumption of research focused on passing and authenticity is that an offline ur-self exists, and that the other, specific selves populating online spaces are refractions of that original image. The alternative to this online/offline identity binary—and the theoretical paradigm within which this study is positioned—takes online identity as a site for the discursive interplay of physical and digital manifestations of selfhood as part of a broader process of community and identity formation. Writing about gay male sexuality in Internet Relay Chat (IRC), John Edward Campbell (2004) notes that studying human interaction online should be understood as an exploration not just of online communities, but also of the actual presence of bodies in cyberspace: "What we refer to as 'the body' is at once a physical form and a discursive configuration apprehending the physical, and it is this discursive configuration that accompanies individuals into these virtual environments and shapes online interaction" (2004, p. 6).

Crucially, these patterns of representation are influenced by the types of communities in which they take place. In Campbell's study, he found that the participants in the #gaymuscle chatroom (a community based around an interest in the muscular gay body) emphasized certain parts of their bodies, such as the circumference of their muscles and their percentage of body fat, in accordance with the chatroom's specific norms. The body is never absent from these interactions; instead, it is differently mediated depending on context. For Campbell, individual chatrooms were that context.

The technical medium likewise constitutes an important interactive context. The patterns of self-presentation that Campbell observed are not coincidental to the fact that his study takes place on IRC. While Campbell devotes some attention to the history of the relay chat protocol and the interfaces of modern IRC clients, his focus is resolutely on the interactions IRC enables, rather than on the technologies of IRC itself. Campbell's interests are in the human aspects of the IRC community, rather than the technological ones. By omission, Campbell naturalizes the mechanics of IRC. But, as Wendy Chun (2006) recognizes, the fact that digital interfaces may seem intuitive or natural should not obscure their coercive potential. The engineered limitations of particular technologies can be as coercive as human norms of conduct—and, as Alexander Galloway (2004) notes, those limitations are themselves the product of specific, normatively informed design choices. IRC is both the product of the technological limits of its time and particular choices on the part of the protocol's developers. The forms of the communities Campbell studies are products of those choices, whether or not users recognize them as such.

For example, one of the chief affordances of the IRC protocol is anonymity. The chatrooms Campbell studied are spaces where users have the opportunity to explore different subcultural

communities without necessarily embracing those communities offline. The multiplicity not only of identity categories, but also available social contexts on the Internet allows for a flexibility of individual expression that, Campbell suggests, is often foreclosed by mainstream discourses of sexuality. The anonymity of the text-based IRC protocol gives users the ability to present a more specifically constructed version of themselves, better suited to the complex interplay of motivations, interests, and bodies brought together under the banner of "gay identity."

Particular technologies also bring with them particular sets of constraints. Especially striking in early studies of computer-mediated communication is the issue of bandwidth: the amount of data that can be exchanged in an interaction with a service. Relay chat was built for the slow and high-latency Internet connections of its time: Users exchange relatively small amounts of data while connected to IRC. This has important consequences for user experience. As Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1995) notes, compressing higher-bandwidth embodied interactions into lower-bandwidth forms (for example, translating the embodied experience of sexuality into phone sex or online chats) creates significant potential for loss or distortion. Newer technologies have taken advantage of the availability of higher-bandwidth Internet connections to enable more audibly or visibly robust forms of online interaction, presumably coming closer to reflecting the extremely high-bandwidth sensory interactions that take place face-to-face (see Mowlabocus, 2010a, 2010b; Shaw, 1997; Waskul, 2002).

The emergence of newer technologies augments this process, further reducing the need for compression. Mobile devices with high-speed Internet connections are an especially important development. Higher-bandwidth exchanges become what Jason Farman (2012) calls "sensory-inscribed": the body as a feeling entity is always bound into mediated processes of communication. Bringing the theoretical narrative of virtuality and embodiment full-circle, Farman argues that, phenomenologically speaking, "full, embodied presence is always being deferred" (2012, p. 30)—that even those interactions we imagine to be highest-bandwidth, such as a face-to-face conversation, always involve a series of textual, visual, and embodied significations that defer "direct" engagement. When people interact online, they do so by trafficking in symbolic currencies particular to the networked spaces they inhabit—as would individuals speaking face-to-face in a bar. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognize, as Farman does, that mobile technologies intervene in these processes in a significant way by establishing the centrality of bodies-in-physical-space as an anchor for virtual interactions. Particularly as computer-mediated interactions move out of the traditional sites of electronic connectivity—the desktop-bound experience of IRC, for example—and into the street, cybercultural theory has been forced to reckon with the presence of the body in digital interaction.

Method

This article draws on an ethnographically informed critical reading of the Scruff software and its paratexts. This relies on two central empirical approaches. First, this study draws on participant observation conducted over a period of two years in six major metropolitan areas in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. This ethnographic examination of the Scruff service offers an account of how Scruff is deployed by a wide range of users across a range of national, cultural, and temporal contexts. In this article, I offer a close reading of the Scruff application features that emerged as the most significant

in structuring these interactions. Where the Scruff application changed over time through incremental software updates, these evolutions are identified and integrated into an analysis that reflects changing developer understandings of how Scruff ought to operate. Further, this study examines media paratexts about Scruff, such as blog posts, magazine articles, and marketing materials. These two sources of data— ethnographic and textual—are evaluated hermeneutically (see Boland, 2002; Burnett, Whetstone, & Jaeger, 2013; Cole & Avison, 2007), bringing together software and paratext to outline the internal logic of the Scruff service.

Gay Bar 3.0

Scruff is part of a broad (and still growing) set of smartphone applications that I term gay-targeted geosocial networking services. These services leverage the global positioning (GPS) capabilities of smartphones as well as information disclosed by individual users (such as photos, age, height, weight, and brief textual descriptions) to create a virtual community of men. This study takes Scruff as an instantiation of how social networking operates within the parameters of an interest-centric community: namely, an application targeted to gay men who identify as bears. In this section, I consider the basic elements of interactivity through Scruff—browsing profiles and communicating with other users—and outline the relationship between digital user experience and the embodied dimensions of gay sociability.

On opening Scruff, users are presented with a grid of 16 square photographs of other users (see Figure 1). The entry point into the Scruff community is a scrollable selection of randomly chosen Scruff users. Each photo is accompanied by a brief textual headline and a colored dot indicating whether the user is online. Users who have been offline for longer than 24 hours are omitted entirely from the grid view. Along the top bar of the application, just below the Scruff logo, are four buttons that give users access to other, filtered grids of photos. Tapping the word Nearby brings up a new grid of 16 photos of men geographically closest to the user's own phone. In the top left corner is the user's own photo and headline. At the bottom of each screen of photos is a textual reminder that the user's own location is being recorded and transmitted to the Scruff service: "Accuracy: 300 feet," reflecting the precision of the GPS location. The nearby view also gives users the ability to search for other locations by name: a user in New York could filter his grid to show users in San Francisco, London, or Tokyo.

Tapping on a photo brings up a more detailed view of that user's profile. A profile may contain as much or as little information as a user chooses to disclose, but the visual and interactive focal point of the profile is the user's photo, which occupies almost the entirety of the device's screen. Next to the photo are four buttons: one to initiate a one-on-one conversation with the user, another to "woof" at the user (a function whose intended use is never explicitly defined in the application but in practice is an interpretively permissive way to express interest or attraction), a third to mark the user as a favorite (which adds him to a separate grid of favorite users), and finally, a fourth to share a preselected album of other photos with the user (which, in practice, is often a way to share erotic photographs that the Scruff terms of service do not permit to be publicly displayed).[2] Beneath the photo, the bulk of a user's profile is displayed. The first piece of information provided is the geographical distance from the user's phone
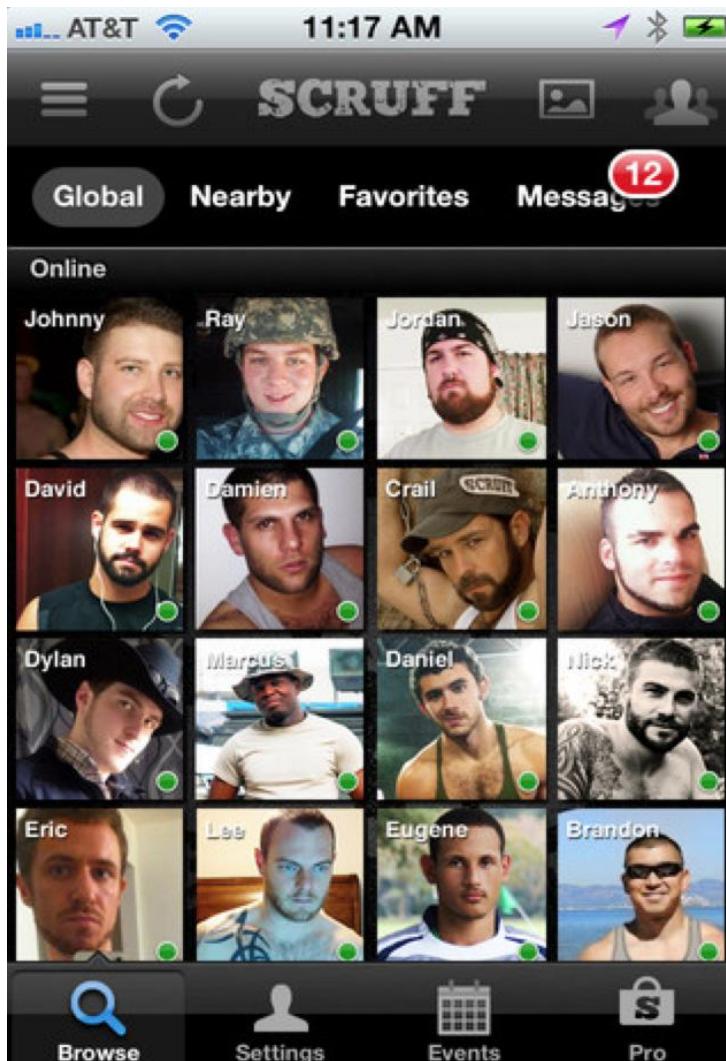
Figure 1. Screenshot of the Scruff interface and global grid. Used in marketing materials, iTunes Store, Oct. 2012. © *Perry Street Software.*

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[2] The types of content permitted for public display on Scruff are heavily restricted. Scruff's profile guidelines (http://www.scruff.com/en/guidelines/), for example, prohibit the display of any nudity in profile photos, as well as the inclusion of certain types of information in profile text (such as phone numbers or references to illegal drugs). Many (but not all) of these guidelines are intended to ensure compliance with requirements set out by smartphone platform stewards such as Apple and Google, who restrict the types of content that can be included in applications distributed through the Apple App Store or Google Play.

to the person he is viewing; location, on Scruff, is key. Beyond that, users have full control over what (if any) information they provide. Many elect to provide their age, height, weight, and relationship status (all of which are condensed into a single line of the profile), and Scruff gives users the ability to complete a more elaborate, textual profile, responding to prompts like "What I do" or "What I'm looking for."

One-to-one communication in the form of private chats constitutes the majority of interactions between users. While users can initiate as many conversations with as many users as they want, Scruff limits the length of a conversation that can be accessed without paying for the Scruff "Pro" version. In the free version of the application, Scruff conversations are limited to the most recent 25 exchanges between users; older conversations are archived on Scruff servers, but are rendered inaccessible unless users purchase the $12.99 monthly "Pro" subscription. Scruff keeps users and their interactions firmly rooted in the present, with an eye toward brief, rapid communication, rather than deep, textual relationships.

Scruff's central interactive feature is browsing grids of user profiles, both nearby and remote. Users can load up to 100 nearby profiles in a continuous scrolling list of the profiles closest to a user's last known location. Importantly, even as one-to-one interactions are a central part of how many users engage with Scruff, browsing in the app does not necessitate any kind of textual exchange: Users are free to look, without any commitment to engage with other users on any other level. The analogy to cruising is readily apparent. But unlike in a gay bar or a cruising area where bodies are present and physical identity is challenging to conceal, users are permitted to browse Scruff without uploading pictures to their own profiles. Scruff's developers authorize looking, without in turn requiring one to be looked at.

It's worth recognizing that many users do choose to upload photos of themselves to their profiles (although ascertaining any kind of absolute frequency is impossible, as "lurkers" without photos are not displayed in the application's grids). Scruff's interface privileges the types of self-disclosure that enable passive or glancing encounters between users; Scruff is designed to be browsed. And, for the users who appear in the application's grids, the positioning of self in a grid of other users creates an important sense of mutuality—of reciprocal being-looked-at-ness. This two-sided observation (of looking and, in turn, being looked at) binds the app users together in a shared negotiation of self-disclosure. The interactive nature of observation comes to resemble what Chris Chesher (2004), writing about the experience of video gaming, terms "glaze": an immersive, interactive, and cognitively sticky manner of looking.

The fact that this browsing takes place at users' fingertips is likewise significant. This textual description of Scruff necessarily excludes the essential sensuousness of geosocial mobile applications. Services like Scruff are, at their core, visually, haptically, and interactively embodied experiences. While smartphone-bound geosocial applications were not the first gay-targeted online networks, apps like Scruff and Grindr have risen to a previously unattained level of popularity that suggests a particular affinity between mobile phone interfaces and sensual browsing. The first generation of browser-bound services such as Manhunt, Adam4Adam, and Gaydar created an interactive divide between a user and the profiles he browsed: Selecting a profile photo with a cursor is different from touching that photo with one's finger. The accessibility of touch interfaces—what users and marketing materials alike characterize as the ease of using and relating to these applications—is a core phenomenological component of geosocial media. While touch interfaces are by no means unique to smartphones, a number of researchers have stressed that the

relationship between touch and mobility can have dramatic consequences for how users engage with digital media (see Lee, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Verhoeff, 2009). Through touch, users directly incorporate their bodies into the experience of using electronic media. Emphasizing touch interfaces brings to the forefront both meanings of the word "digital": first, of the digits of binary code and the technical infrastructure of these apps; and second, but perhaps more important, of the digits of the hand and of the intimately, essentially human quality of these interfaces.

The application interfaces of Scruff and Grindr are a significant—and distinctive—iteration of how human interactions are rendered through online media. The haptic nature of the smartphone interface—the fact that scrolling through the grids of Scruff profile images requires the user to touch images of the bodies and faces of other people—eliminates some of the impetus to theoretically separate object and action online. Geosocial networking services are distinctive in that they bridge the gap between tactile and electronic by making contact with bodies an inherent part of the interface's operation. Unlike browser-bound online dating services, geosocial networking applications put bodies at their users' fingertips.

Seeking Johnny Scruff

Bear identity is more than just a change of window dressing on the basic gay geosocial networking concept famously introduced by Grindr. While Grindr's approach favors inclusivity, the image of being a "Scruff guy" (touted prominently in the app's marketing materials) creates tacit barriers to entry into Scruff. Virtually anyone with a smartphone can download Scruff; but not anyone would. In the context of designing and using a social network, what does being a "Scruff guy" mean?
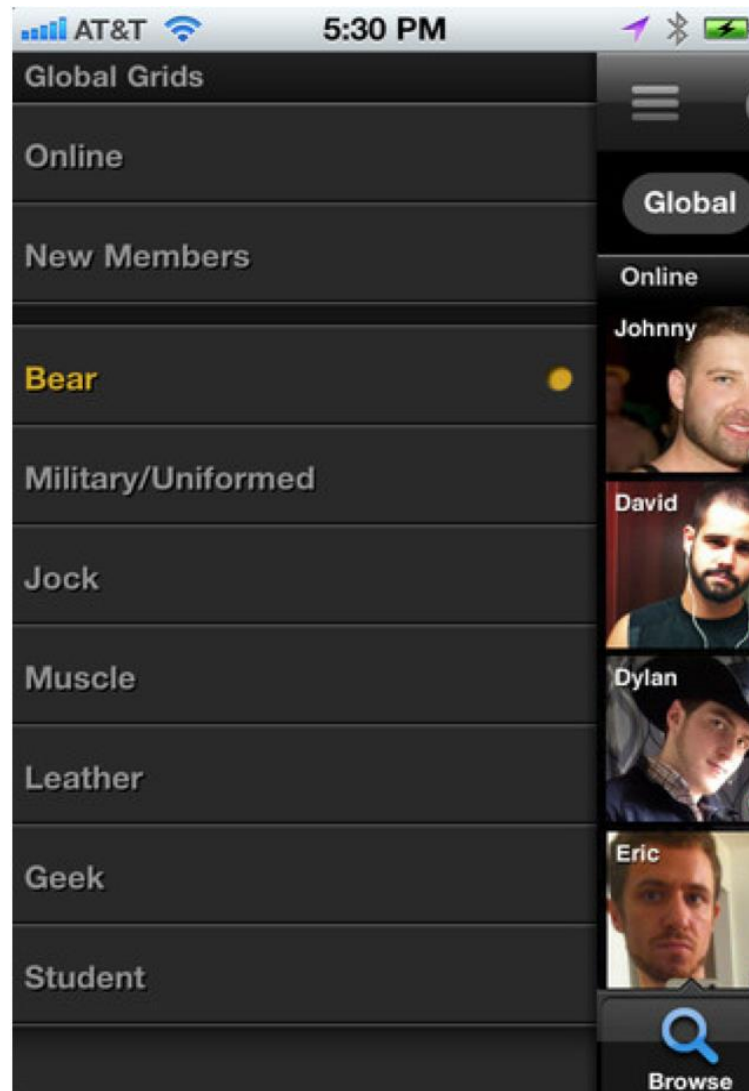
A more fundamental question (and one that has largely been sidestepped by Scruff's developers) is: What does it mean to be a "bear" (as differentiated from being merely bearish)? Is bear identity reducible to the sum of its physical parts—height, weight, clothing choices, the presence of a beard, and so on? If so, is someone who doesn't meet those requirements necessarily excluded from identifying as a bear or participating in bear communities? Even as there exists some sense of what physical attributes may be considered bear-like, the wide array of men who deploy the term bear to describe themselves or their interests undermines the stability of the term.

This hesitation to commit to a definition is not accidental. Ambivalent definitions of self and community are at the historical heart of bear culture. Les Wright begins *The Bear Book* with a reflection on the ill-defined boundaries of bear-dom: "The underlying theoretical starting point is the notion of 'a bear': as a Saussurian or Barthian empty signifier. Each self-identifying bear over the last ten years, has filled in his own definition and meaning" (1997, p. 2).

Herein, "bear" is presented as a null set: an identity waiting to be filled in by each individual as he adopts it. Wright devotes both *The Bear Book* and its sequel, *The Bear Book II* (2001), to the task of problematizing bear identity as a cultural construct. Particularly as notions of bear-dom have emerged into mainstream popular culture, the openness of the term has evolved into a multiplicity of potential identifications (including new terms like cub and otter), alongside a more careful policing of the boundaries around each term.

Scruff engages with these historical and popular constructions of bear-dom only obliquely, although questions of authentication persist on the app. Scruff offers its users a new and seemingly permissive label: the "Scruff guy." Scruff makes no explicit attempt to positively define the concept of a "Scruff guy," instead deferring the meaning of the term by deploying other empty signifiers of identity. As the app's developers note on the service's Facebook page: "What is a scruff guy? Scruff guys are many things: servicemen, firefighters, students, gamers, and designers just to name a few. Some scruff guys are bears, some scruff guys are jocks, some scruff guys are just guys."

What do the terms designer and student mean, as a sexual identity category, any more than the terms jock and firefighter? When asked directly about whether he could offer a profile of the typical Scruff user, Scruff's cofounder Johnny Skandros (or, as he goes by publicly, Johnny Scruff) offered only, "It's an attitude" (O'Bryan, 2012). This perspective parallels notions of "homomasculinity" that structured many early discourses around bear culture

Figure 2. Screenshot of Scruff "communities" filters. Used in marketing materials, iTunes Store, Oct. 2012. © *Perry Street Software.*

(see Suresha, 2009, p. 81), even as it avoids fixing any particular meaning to the term. The explicit message that emerges across Scruff's marketing materials is that defining these terms any more precisely than as sexual stereotypes is a task best left to the imaginations of individual users.

Issues of self-presentation and labeling emerge throughout the process of creating and managing a profile on Scruff. In 2012 Perry Street Software released a new version of Scruff, 3.0, that introduced the ability to use qualitative categories (called communities) like "bear," "jock," "leather," and "student" alongside existing numerical and photographic representations of a user's body (see Figure 2). The update also introduced the option to explicitly disclose one's level of body hair, with options ranging from "smooth" to "very hairy."[3] Users are in no way obligated to place themselves in one or more (up to five) of the app's seven predefined categories, just as they aren't required to disclose their level of hirsuteness, age, height, or weight. Nevertheless, as with photos, Scruff creates subtle but significant incentives to disclose as much information as possible: Users who do not label themselves are automatically excluded from grids that filter users on the basis of those labels. Opting out of categorization means reducing one's chances of being browsed and, therefore, one's level of integration into the Scruff service.

These hybrid bodies—composed of words, numbers, and (often) images—constitute a symbolic re-presentation of the physical body in digital contexts. But even in relatively permissive contexts like IRC chatrooms or applications like Scruff, technological design choices about how users disclose information about themselves can often force reductive self-presentations that bear little in common with the complexities of raced, gendered, or embodied experiences of self. As software tries to create order among the enormous set of possible identity presentations by giving users a series of clear choices (e.g., ranking one's body hair on a scale of "smooth" to "very hairy"), the outcome is not always empowering. As Lisa Nakamura puts it,

> This interface feature enforces a menu-driven sense of personal identity that works by progressively narrowing the choices of subject positions available to the user, an outcome that seems to fly in the face of claims that the Internet allows for a more fluid, free, unbounded sense of identity than had been available in other media—or, indeed, in the world—before. (2002, p. 104)

These menu-driven identities stand in stark contrast to the "unclickable, hyphenated, hybrid, 'messy'" forms of identity that are essential in reflecting embodied experience (Nakamura, 2002, p. 120). Users may feel more comfortable approaching interfaces with fewer choices—it's easier to select the "bear" community on Scruff than to write a paragraph about the relationship between one's body and chosen identity—but significant detail is lost in the process.

Mobile interfaces further restrict the amount of space available to convey user information. Scruff represents the product of a number of significant design choices to reduce users' ability to express their identities in ways not easily defined by a series of toggles or a scrolling list of communities. Some of these choices are the result of technological necessity, a reincarnation of the classic bandwidth problem; but others, such as the choice of specific community labels, reflect normative judgments about how bodies— and, specifically, bodies potentially marked as nonnormative by virtue of their bearishness—ought to be expressed online.

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[3] A further expansion of this feature, introduced in 2013, allows users to translate these quantitative and categorical disclosures into metrics about the types of users they interact with.

Inherent in this process of self-expression are several forms of authentication. Questions of authenticity are neither new to social networking services nor to gay subcultures, but Scruff complicates each in important ways. First, by stressing physical encounters (or the possibility of physical encounters) between users, geosocial services such as Scruff diminish users' incentives to construct deceptive or exploratory presentations of self. Many studies of social media—and especially of services targeted at forming romantic or sexual relationships—have focused on the veracity of photos and profile text in self-presentation (see Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). In these studies, photos operate as what Mowlabocus (2010b) calls a "passport" into the world of online relationships: meaningful participation requires some form of visual authentication of self. But with geosocial networking, where the physical distance between users is often measured in feet, not miles, the "problems" of authenticity are reframed by the likelihood of a face-to-face encounter. Dense urban spaces tear down what McKenna and Bargh (1998) describe as the boundaries of "concealable identity" online. Photos on Scruff may be false or retouched, but the likelihood of physical encounters reduces incentives to be deceptive.

Second, the user targeting that distinguishes Scruff from competing services such as Grindr also creates a type of passive authentication: of individuals against a hypothetical ideal "Scruff guy." The maintenance of "Scruff guy" as a category suggests that a prospective app user has to pause and contemplate whether he belongs on the Scruff application (as opposed to on Grindr or another competing service). The fact that Scruff's developers set aside many of the usual labels of bear culture and create a new set of terms (such as Scruff guy, jock, student, or designer) should not be mistaken for an absence of discourses of authenticity. Both the application itself and the marketing and press materials surrounding it advance a particular image of what the "Scruff guy" looks and acts like. The first image presented to Scruff users while launching the application is a rotating selection of user photos and celebrities, selected by the Scruff staff and offered without explanation. Johnny Skandros, Scruff's cofounder, appears frequently in these photos, as well as in marketing materials for the application, lending credence to the possibility that the "Scruff guy" is modeled closely after the Johnny Scruff persona. And, in a 2014 episode of the Scruff-sponsored television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a group of 10 men clad only in underwear with the Scruff logo were displayed to the show's viewers, embodying subtle variations on the marketing ideal of the "Scruff guy."

Whoever the true "Scruff guy" is, the suggestion that certain types of bodies and identities are more Scruff-ish than others creates barriers to entry for potential users. These barriers are the result of design choices: Scruff emerged in reaction to the one-size-fits-all approach to gay geosocial networking of services like Grindr by targeting a (generally) older, larger-bodied, more hirsute, or more masculine demographic. And, in turn, Scruff has been succeeded by newer services like Growlr and Mister, each of which targets a yet-more-specific market segment. Even as anyone may download these applications, their developers suggest that not every body belongs on every service.

These considerations are not new to gay subcultures or unique to digital media, and bear culture has a particularly pronounced relationship to the management of bodies and social belonging. Bear identification originally emerged as a form of resistance to the "body fascism" of American gay culture in the mid-20th century (Hennen, 2005, p. 27). In the case of bearishness, this was encapsulated in the

feeling that "You can't be gay. You're too old, hairy, and fat" (Suresha, 2009, p. 82). But the patterns of exclusion have become increasingly granular. The perceived imprecision of "bear" as a label has created new categories such as "otter" and "wolf" to more precisely indicate the position of particular bodies along a hypothetical bear spectrum. From the tongue-in-cheek "Natural Bears Classification System," which classifies bear bodies based on properties like the length and bushiness of one's beard (from B0 to B9), height, weight, and body hair (Donahue & Stoner, 1997), to the online Gay Cliques Census, which aggregated more than 15,000 survey responses to compute a mean body type for various gay subcultures (Hafertepen, n.d.), there remains little room for exploration or play in the construction of these identities. On the basis of the Gay Cliques Census data, the average bear is 36 years old, is 5 feet and 10 inches tall, weighs 239 pounds, has a 39-inch waist, and is "extremely hairy." Whether these metrics cohere with any individual experiences of bear identification, the quantification of subcultural identity creates credentials against which individuals can (and frequently do) assess themselves—and on which meaningful participation on services like Scruff is predicated.

The combination of positivistic approaches to the body and an increasing emphasis on authenticity creates a particular problem for the identities and bodies that apps such as Scruff were originally designed to embrace. We can begin to reconcile these theoretical tensions—between the historical openness of the bear category on one hand and the tightly constrained establishment of identity categories online on the other—by turning to Lionel Trilling's discussion of sincere self-presentation. Proper sincerity, Trilling writes, requires that "we play the role of being ourselves" (Trilling, 1971, p. 11)— that who we say we are, as a question of social construction and interpersonal engagement, is judged against what we are, as a question of embodiment. As John Jackson puts it,

> Authenticity attempts to domesticate sincerity, rein it in, control its excesses. It demands hard, fast, and absolute sure-footedness, whereas . . . sincerity wallows in unfalsifiability, ephemerality, partiality, and social vulnerability. Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting "liveness" of everyday . . . performance that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind. Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent. (2005, pp. 17–18)

The search for the certainty of "correct" identity results in holding one's sincere performance of self to some supposedly objective standards of authenticity. We seek in notions of authenticity some way to disentangle the essential problem of sincerity: individuals assuming identities that may or may not be "real" and which, accordingly, threaten the very structure of the groups they identify with. Decades of contestation have complicated notions of what being a bear "really" means. Sincerity enables ambiguity in identity construction; authenticity is its corrective.

The bear movement, online and offline, is both brought together and held apart by these two concepts. The semiotic openness of bear identity speaks to a form of sexual sincerity that looks beyond bodies and toward a common search for community. But the fact that bear identity originated in a feeling of difference and separation from mainstream gay culture *precisely because of* its embodied characteristics implies at least some relationship to ideas of bodily authenticity. The act of creating a profile on a social networking service such as Scruff asks users to reflect on their sincere performance of

self as grounded in their authentic body "stats" as well as the socially negotiated meaning of categories such as "Scruff guy."

Bear GPS: Geolocation and Spatial Heterogeneity

Scruff has a complex relationship with geography. On one hand, the application is a geosocial networking service where user interaction is predicated on geographic proximity and the possibility of local encounters. In tandem, the app maintains an international focus, giving people the ability to search for other Scruff users in remote locations and stressing the possibility of finding men "around the world." The fact that Scruff allows users to seek out connections that extend beyond the hyperlocal is more than a peripheral feature of the application; it represents an important shift in how applications such as Scruff fit into the new digital geography of the gay community.

One of the key shifts brought about by digital media—and particularly by geosocial media—is the displacement of the traditional primacy of particular locations as loci of community. Lev Manovich (2006) engages with this issue in his discussion of augmented space. For Manovich, physical spaces may be overlaid with dynamic data (for instance, the grids of geosocial networking services), creating hybrid, heterogeneous physical and digital spaces in which neither the physical nor the digital has necessary primacy over the other. Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith (2012) likewise offer an important account of this process of physical and digital hybridization. Their central insight is that embedding digital social interactions into physical space diminishes the importance of the online/offline binary.

While many social networks dis-place users and interactions, geosocial services maintain a firm connection between user presence and physical geography. This focus on physical space structures, but does not necessarily constrain, user behavior. Users may browse locally, showing only men in their geographic vicinity but they can just as easily browse users on the other side of the world. While Scruff constantly reminds the user of how far he is from the owner of a given profile, this distance is never presented as an obstacle to either browsing or communicating. Geographic distance, like height, weight, and age, is one property of a user's profile, among many others.

These issues reemerge in distinctively queer ways in the interplay between gay identity and physical space. Geography has consistently played an important role in the formation and operation of gay identity. Studies of urban gay populations (see Chauncey, 1995; Houlbrook, 2005; Kaiser, 1997; Levine, 1992; Taylor, Kaminski, & Dugan, 2002) frequently underscore the relationship between distinctively gay spaces (like neighborhoods) and the consolidation of particular gay identities. Omnipresent risk—the possibility of being unexpectedly outed or the chance of being caught in the act of cruising—emphasizes the importance of demarcating spaces that are identifiably (and therefore, perhaps, more safely) gay. The publicness of offline gay social networks requires a corresponding level of ownership over special locations, such as bars, cruising areas, or even entire neighborhoods. The aggregation of identities in public is even more overt in the context of bear culture, where physical meetings known as bear runs play a consistent role in the enactment of bear identity and community (see Hennen, 2005). Bear identity is intimately connected to the establishment (even temporarily, at annual events) of visibly, identifiably gay and bear spaces.

Digital media complicates this process of spatial construction. Concerns over whether spaces are hetero- or homosexual (see Bell, Binnie, Cream, & Valentine, 1994; Oswin, 2008)—and, consequently, whether those spaces can be "reterritorialized" as queer—neglects the possibility of heterogeneous spaces in which queerness can coexist, omnipresently, with heterosexuality. Heterogeneity in this sense is not the same as assimilation. Queerness does not need to be subsumed by heterosexuality for the two to occupy the same physical space when queer communities can exist, invisibly but to their participants, on mobile phone screens.

Spatial heterogeneity is a fundamental trait of Scruff—and of gay geosocial networking generally. Browsing Scruff can take place on a smartphone at practically any time, in practically any place. While this constant accessibility is characteristic of most mobile media, it has particular consequences in the context of gay-targeted services such as Scruff. Coding spaces as "gay" or "straight" becomes less important when an application's grids of nearby profiles can be overlaid atop any space where a user has a cellular data connection. Any space, in practice, becomes a potential site for gay sociability when that sociability is enacted through a mobile application. This commingling of hetero- and homosexual sociability, facilitated by the simultaneous and ubiquitous presence of physical and electronic spaces for interaction, reduces the need to insist on homosexuality as defined by visible, spatial difference. The visibility of gay identity has historically depended on the physical spaces individuals choose to be in. Scruff users, by contrast, can be as visibly gay as they want without needing to engage with the queerness (or not) of their physical surroundings.

This heterogeneity has important consequences for how we conceptualize the relationship between space and interactivity in geosocial media. Many studies have drawn a direct connection between using services such as Scruff and Grindr and offline cruising:

> The act of cruising has moved online and to mobile phones, but the effect is the same: Gay men can still hail one another within anonymous crowds in order to both solidify their real and imagined social networks as well as find partners for practical, sexual pleasures. (Gudelunas, 2012a, p. 14)

A reliance on cruising as a metaphor for geosocial networking reduces the complexities of these services to a simple recreation of analog forms of interaction. This is not the case. The users of geosocial networking services are not altogether anonymous. Rather, users are highly conscientious about how they construct their profiles and the digital representations of their bodies. And, in turn, these profiles allow users to engage in sophisticated practices of search and filtering that far exceed the possibilities of a fleeting visual encounter in traditional offline cruising. The grid interfaces of Scruff and Grindr offer unique abilities to organize and efficiently navigate the "crowd" of other users. By deploying menu-driven identity attributes, Scruff imposes order on user profiles in a way that makes it easier to seek out particular traits in other users. Users also have the option of banishing certain faces from view entirely with filters based on traits expressed quantitatively or categorically in a profile. While the spatial divides between different gay spaces constitute their own type of filtering mechanism (for example, the distinction between a gay bar catering specifically to bears versus a general-purpose gay bar), Scruff makes this process both highly granular and automatic. Search and algorithmic filtering supplant the traditional spatial ordering of

cruising by translating physical encounters between bodies in space into ordered and digitally manipulable datasets.

Conclusions

Gay geosocial media is moving out of the margins and into the popular spotlight. Since its launch in 2009, Grindr has consistently garnered attention in the mainstream press: *The New York Times* included Grindr in a 2011 roundup of smartphone dating applications, noting that the app has "earned a racy reputation" due to the relative paucity of information each user profile contains (Wortham, 2011). *Vanity Fair* referred to Grindr as "the world's biggest, scariest gay bar" (Kapp, 2011). And in one of the earliest mainstream stories about the app, published in *The Guardian* in 2010, the author stated, unequivocally, that Grindr "is reconfiguring the landscape of human relationships" (Vernon, 2010)—a lofty achievement for any smartphone application.

As services like Grindr and Scruff become increasingly pervasive—as the glow of smartphone screens becomes a phenomenological mainstay of gay bars—we're left with the problem of theorizing the new electronic face of gay sociability in the 21st century. The fundamental issues raised by these applications—of identity construction and community formation—are challenging to address. Do geosocial networking applications replace sites of local sociability such as bars and clubs or do they operate in tandem with them, supplementing physical spaces with electronic ones? What is the work of the body in online social networks, particularly when those networks are embedded in physical space? Are bodies present in geosocial media or are they hypertextually referenced? What are the consequences of these services for individual privacy? Who sets the rules by which they operate? These questions require a basic reconsideration of how we theorize bodies, spaces, and communities online. This study argues for a fundamental hybridization of online and offline bodies and identities through geosocial media: Users are at once constructed as data and physically engaged in social and sexual interactions. Physical locations are transformed into data points that position users in space, giving people access to social connections that are local, global, or anywhere in between. And, crucially, these interactions have the potential to take place at any time, in any place where a mobile Internet connection is available. The impact of these developments on both online and offline gay sociability is still emerging, but this article offers a needed first step toward describing the heterogeneous practices of embodiment and geography that correspond with these technological and social changes.

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