

## Grindr-ing the Self: Young Filipino Gay Men's Exploration of Sexual Identity Through a Geo-Social Networking Application

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The study investigated how young Filipino gay men use emergent technologies to explore their sexual identity. Incorporating research techniques from Sikolohiyang Pilipino, participants were asked to share their experiences of using Grindr, a geo-social networking application, and how it contributed to the way they understood and conceptualized what it meant to be a young Filipino gay man. Using frequency coding, the analysis revealed various themes based on data collected from 30 participants who did not use Grindr solely for its advertised purpose of finding partners for friendship and dating, or for its popular purpose of seeking sexual encounters. Results show that young Filipino gay men use the application to probe into personal issues relevant to their sexual identity. Themes include the desire to share one's stories as a young gay man, to connect with whom they perceive to share similar experiences with, and to learn how to be gay. The implications of how emergent technologies such as geo-social networking applications can be understood as a space for exploring sexual identity are also discussed.

*Keywords:* Grindr, geo-social networking application, young Filipino gay men, sexual identity, LGBT

As people become more conscious of their sexual feelings, beginning in adolescence as part of the typical process of human development, they devote more time and resources into investigating these novel impulses. The trajectory of this process of exploration is

influenced by a constellation of psychosocial influences, including social institutions, and cultural norms and practices (Westheimer & Lopater, 2005). For people of heterosexual leanings – those with an “enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions” towards the opposite sex (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008, p. 1) – avenues for exploring sexual identity are readily available because their sexual orientation is recognized as normal or legitimate. Heterosexual youth are thus able to “explore and practice relational and, sometimes, even sexual skills” in any setting (Picavet & Reinders, 2004, p. 2). However, gender and sexual minorities are not afforded the same opportunities; they are often alienated in this regard because their experiences of attraction and desire, that is, what constitutes their sexual identities, may not be entirely accepted. This overarching culture of stigmatization results in various challenges including the lack of role models, the dilemma of recognizing one’s experience of sexuality as not readily endorsed by society, and limited access to information about gender and sexuality because such knowledge “is largely non-existent elsewhere” (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010, p. 169).

For sexual and gender minorities such as gay men, access to increasingly sophisticated communication technologies has afforded opportunities that traditional avenues have not, particularly in matters of sexuality (Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011; Woodland, 2000). These opportunities can take on distinctly political hues such as in building communities “to find belonging and establish connections to advance particular social and political causes” (Soriano, 2014, p. 92). They can also be personal in nature, as in the freedom to articulate one’s sexual identity or “to present the kind of identity or self-image they feel they cannot present in other spaces” (Stern, 2008, p. 105) as well as the opportunity to create networks of companionship among other gender and sexual minorities. From the existing literature, “it was clear that the Internet played a variety of roles in facilitating aspects of sexual identity development” (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009, p. 310) including self-awareness of one’s sexual identity and greater knowledge of their respective communities. On many different levels, “the advent of the Internet has revolutionized the ability to explore sexuality and gender identity” (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 169).

The potential of these new technologies for carving out spaces for gender and sexual minorities in Asia is especially pronounced, and it has been said that “the recent emergence of gay and lesbian communities in Asia and its diaspora is intimately linked to the development of information technology in the region” (Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003, p. 1). This continuing emergence occurs within a backdrop heteronormative values and practices that pervade conservative Asian communities (Ojanen, 2014), necessitating the use of emergent technologies as a means of overcoming the barriers of traditional spaces. In the Philippines, for example, these emergent technologies – mobile communication tools in particular – was said to be “revolutionizing the social and economic lives of many Filipinos, including gendered and sexual aspects of their lives” (Dalisay, Quizon, & Landicho, 2014, p. 33). However, how these emergent technologies have influenced the way gender and sexual minorities explore their sexual identities remains understudied in the Philippine context. In neighboring contexts in the Southeast Asian region where these have been studied (Boellstorff, 2003; Offord, 2003), these technologies proved particularly valuable, for instance, “as a way to escape from the moral policing and to express their sexuality” (Boonmongkon et al., 2013, p. 1172).

The study seeks to address this gap on the subject of sexual identity and to contribute to a more inclusive articulation of how “gender and sexuality are made and experienced in particular locales” in the Southeast Asian context (Johnson, Jackson, & Herdt, 2000). Following previous inquiries on the use of technology-mediated spaces by gay men in the navigation and construction of sexual identity (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001; Shaw, 2002), this study focused on Grindr, a popular geo-social networking application, and how young Filipino gay men use such applications to make sense of their sexual identities.

### **Grindr’s Interface**

Grindr was released in the United States in March 2009 and has become one of the most popular geo-social networking applications available. Catering primarily to gay and bisexual men but also used by other men who have do not necessarily identify as either, Grindr’s

user base has grown exponentially, with the company's own estimates at seven million men in more than 192 countries (Grindr LLC, 2014a). Putting these numbers into perspective, Grindr's website writes in proud parentheses, "that number is only going up".

The application advertises itself as "uncomplicated and meant to help you meet guys while you're on the go" (Grindr LLC, 2014b). It distinguishes itself from similar platforms which it described as those "that make you sit in front of a faraway computer filling out complex, detailed profiles." It markets itself as an application conducive for digital interactions "on-the-go" – one that facilitates uncomplicated and purposively straightforward communication between with a premium on proximity, directness, and immediacy. Grindr's founder Joel Simkhai articulated that he "wanted something that would allow us to find out who else is gay" (Hall, 2013) – to find out quickly and do things quickly.

Unlike similar platforms, Grindr's interface provides limited space for biographical descriptions. Each profile presents a single display photo, a short Headline of 100 characters maximum, and an About section of 150 characters maximum. Identifying physical characteristics are limited to height, weight, ethnicity, and body type, but an additional "Grindr Tribe" section offers labels such as "bear," "trans," and "poz" to supplement the profile with specific erotic niches to construct more specific impressions. It also allows users to show what they are "Looking For:" Chat, Date, Friends, and, most prominently, Right Now. A "Filter" option allows users to calibrate the interface to show profiles who match a certain criteria. And although Grindr is not the only application of its kind available – other competitors include Scruff, targeting users of a hypermasculine erotic niche, and Bender, which allows video calls and text translation – it remains the most recognizable both in the popular imagination and the academic literature.

As a geo-social networking application, the list of users shown on-screen – 100 users total for the free version and an additional 200 users with paid subscriptions – is organized according to the user's geographical location (see Figure 1). Upon choosing a user, the selected profile's display photo is enlarged and will display that user's distance based on their GPS coordinates. In the free version, which was used



Figure 1. The Grindr Interface as seen on the Android iOS version.

in this study, the furthest distance between users at any time reached 3 miles, the nearest reaching 250 feet. Only one-on-one messaging between users is permitted and offers the option of sending photos and user's GPS coordinates.

This process of finding quickly and doing quickly is sustained by Grindr's interface, which is distinct from older mediums because of its combination of user visibility based on users' online presence and the geographic proximity between them (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014). And although the technology could arguably be considered revolutionary in the sense that it has the power to "redistribute and redefine the boundaries of 'gay space'" (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014, p. 3), it has also proven problematic. Beyond its advertised function for meeting men "while you're on the go" – a promotion that is "deliberately vague" (Crooks, 2013) – past research reported how Grindr has been used chiefly for seeking out instantaneous sexual gratification (Mowlabocus, 2010). Although Grindr does not explicitly market itself as a tool for instantaneous sexual gratification, "the platform is the most commonly reported mechanism for sexual partnering" (Landovitz et al., 2013). Much of the literature on Grindr has understandably followed this logic, focusing on the way it facilitated risky sexual behavior (Beymer et al., 2014; Wei, Lim, Gaudamuz, & Koe, 2013). Echoing this trend in interpretation, Gallegos (2013) bluntly described most communication on Grindr as an "automated game that requires a user to find the best way in which to warrant a reaction from another user, often reducing users to fetishized automatons."

That being said, the existing literature is now demonstrating that the spaces afforded by these applications are "fundamentally altering the ways gay men organize their social and sexual lives" (Jones, 2005, p. 71) and that its geo-social capacities "are participating in the emergence of new sexual practices, new attachments and new distributions of intimacy" (Rice, 2015, p. 498). Considering also that Grindr can be and has been appropriated by users to meet needs beyond immediate sexual gratification (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), the argument can be made that Grindr, because of its unique technological features, impacts how gay men explore sexual identity in ways significantly different from other platforms – and arguing further, that it is possible to imagine Grindr as "a new space for dreaming, community, connection,

and desire that cannot or no longer exists in physical places” (Henry, 2014).

### **The Current Study**

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in Filipino LGBT Psychology by describing young Filipino gay men’s experiences of how they explore and conceptualize their sexual identities within a technology-mediated space, specifically a geo-social networking application. As an exploratory study, it seeks to prompt new questions about how young Filipino gay men make sense of sexual identity using emergent technologies – not only as a tool but as a space in which one is able to “claim and impute social [and sexual] identities” (Jones, 2005, p. 71). It also seeks to contribute to the investigation of the intersections between emergent technologies and sexual identity, which remains understudied in the local literature.

Specifically, the study attempted to answer three broad questions. First, are young Filipino gay men using Grindr for purposes beyond finding partners for dating or sexual encounters? And if so, what were their motives and intentions? Second, what issues do young Filipino gay men encounter when using Grindr in this manner? And third, what are the implications to understanding how young Filipino gay men explore their sexual identities?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Thirty self-identified young gay men ages 17 to 25 years old ( $M = 20.06$ ) participated in the study. To be eligible, the participant must be a Filipino citizen who was raised in the Philippines and who has not lived for a significant period of time in another country, must be currently residing within Metro Manila, must self-identify as gay, and must be a user of Grindr. Participants were recruited within the application itself ( $n = 23$ ) and through referrals by other participants ( $n = 7$ ). The profile of the study’s sample consists of college students ( $n = 30$ ) and young professionals of various occupations ( $n = 11$ ) residing

within the Quezon City. Participants reported varying degrees of time using the application, ranging from 1 to 5 months.

### Procedure

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, integrating the concept of *pakikipagkuwentuhan* from *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* into the qualitative procedure. To recruit participants, a Grindr profile was created to facilitate the development of interaction and familiarity with other users in order to position the researcher as *hindi-ibang-tao*, conceptualized as positioning oneself as an active and reflexive part of the group and recognizing a shared identity as a means of building rapport (Orteza, 1997).

By necessity, all visible users were engaged through direct messaging, initiated either by the researcher or the other person. When available, messages were adjusted based on cues gathered from users' profiles (e.g., photo depicting user cradling a dog, "For decent convos" in user's Headline) to maximize opportunities for conversation (e.g., "Anong breed niya?", "What do you wanna talk about?"). Introducing the study to potential participants, if users asked a question related to work or occupation (e.g., "gawa mo ngayon?", "what do you do?"), the researcher would respond but would not directly ask them to participate (e.g., "nagsusulat lang," "I'm writing a paper haha," "Oo, research work :)"); instead, the conversation would be allowed to develop further before the subject would be raised again (e.g., "Would you be interested?", "Naghahanap pa ako ng participant, baka interesado ka, haha"). One hundred thirty users declined to participate citing disinterest or lack of time (e.g., "Medyo busy ako eh", "Didn't come to Grindr for that"). Of the remaining 39 who agreed to participate, sessions with nine participants were discontinued due to ethical concerns.

*Pakikipagkuwentuhan*, understood as a free and informal process of exchanging ideas and beliefs, which allows for a liberated range of speaking with the goal of producing something of worth or value (Orteza, 1997), was used. *Pakikipagkuwentuhan* was employed to better navigate the intimate nature of the application, where casual conversation served as a more effective means of building rapport



and facilitating more personal responses by giving participants “more freedom to explore their thoughts, feelings, and reactions” and potentially “revealing innermost thoughts, frames of reference, emotional reactions, and cultural assumptions that may or may not be accessible through other methods” (Woike, 2007, p. 293). When requested by the participant, the *kuwentuhan* session was conducted in other comfortable locations (e.g., a coffee shop) agreed upon by both parties. For those referred by other participants in the study, the *kuwentuhan* session was scheduled at their convenience.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure participants’ rights, identifying details were removed and consent to record sessions and use the data for the study were obtained. After completing the data analysis, validation with participants who were available (10 of 30) was carried out to obtain feedback and ascertain whether the analysis truthfully framed participants’ experiences. With users who began to express sexual interest through various verbal and behavioral cues during *pakikipagkuwentuhan* sessions, the boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship were reiterated. Sessions were discontinued when participants continued to engage with the researcher in a sexual manner.

### **Analysis**

Responses were recorded and categorized using frequency coding, described as a process of “developing criteria for meaningful units of the response and recording the number of these units in the data” (Woike, 2007, p. 297). *Kuwentuhan* sessions within Grindr were copied and *kuwentuhan* sessions conducted outside Grindr were recorded and transcribed. Similar statements were then grouped together and reviewed to determine their frequency. Applying a grounded approach in constructing the criteria for analysis, salient themes were generated based primarily on participants’ responses. This is in keeping with the goal of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* to “generate its own set of hypotheses, theories and body of knowledge” (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino,

2000), refraining from imposing theoretical frameworks to allow data to emerge naturally. Infrequent but remarkable responses were also considered to offer additional points of analysis.

## RESULTS

### Impressions of Grindr

Participants viewed Grindr primarily as a dating application; specifically, participants understood that they were a part of the target market but whose advertised functions did not encompass their concerns. They also understood the popular beliefs about the application, as one participant summarized, "*Kung nasa Grindr ka, malibugin ka. Everything else follows.*" [If you're on Grindr, you're horny. Everything else follows.]. However, participants' impressions of Grindr oscillated between two ideas: Grindr as "fast and secure" and Grindr as "mutual."

**Fast and secure.** Grindr is notable for its minimalist interface and participants view this as an opportunity for "fast" and straightforward communication. As one participant said, "*wala masyadong hassle kasi i-message mo lang siya at ayun na*" [there's not much hassle because you just message him and that's that]. In terms of being "secure," participants claimed that the limitations of the interface offers a surprising amount of flexibility for clandestine interaction, allowing them to hide identifying information but still reveal enough about themselves to supply some level of authenticity. One participant explains this process, relating to the way which he balances his disposition to exercise caution and his desire to be genuine simultaneously:

Grindr doesn't give you much to go with, *at siyempre gusto mo rin na itago yung identity mo kasi baka may makaalam*. But at the same time *gusto mo rin maging honest and to be yourself, so medyo complicated*. Gets? *Ako*, personally, it's something that I think also plays a part. *Yung tipong, kasi you're gay, it becomes natural na maging cautious at maging careful with how you do things. Yun yung unang realization siguro: being gay is complicated*. [Grindr doesn't give you much to go with, and of

course you also want to hide your identity because people might find out. But at the same time you want to be honest and to be yourself, so it's complicated. Get it? Personally, it's something that I think also plays a part. Like, because you're gay, it becomes natural to be cautious and careful with how you do things. That's the first realization: being gay is complicated.]

**Mutual.** One participant said, "In Grindr, the feeling is almost mutual." To the participants, the assumption was that users shared traits and characteristics – founded on the general assumption that they are also gay men – and that they also shared experiences to some degree including experiences of stigma (e.g., "That's why they use faceless pics, right? *Dahil takot silang makita?*"), sentiment (e.g., "*Siguro pareho yung feeling namin* about the shit that goes on these days"), and desire (e.g., "We're all hoping for a good man to come around"). Because of this perceived sense of mutuality, the belief that users can carve out a safe space for themselves arose. Another participant shared his thoughts on how this relates to his sexual identity, connecting it to a concept of "community":

*Dahil pareho kaming gay, mas madali siyang kausap* in a way. More often than not, *meron kaming parehong pinagdaanan kaya mas may* understanding. If you think about it, *parang nagiging part ng pagiging gay ang* community and camaraderie. Obviously *hindi* totally *sa* Grindr, but in general. [Because we're both gay, it's easier to talk to him in a way. More often than not, we both went through similar experiences so there's more understanding. If you think about it, community and camaraderie has become part of being gay. Obviously not totally in Grindr, but in general.]

### Motivations for Grindr

Participants' narratives revealed four general themes which clarified their motivation for using Grindr: to network with other gay men, to talk about their experiences *as* and *with* gay men, to ask questions about being gay, and to experience dating.

**Networking.** Even though the use of Grindr for networking is obvious, it is worth noting participants' reasons for using it as opposed to other arguably less stigmatized alternatives. Although participants

said that they are able to satisfy this need to connect through other social media platforms like Facebook, these platforms did not necessarily offer the kind of answers they seek in relation to their sexual identity. One participant explained, "*Medyo magulo rin kasi yung news feed eh. Hindi naka-focus sa mga kailangan ko* most of the time. As if *hindi na nga magulo ang paging bakla, di ba?*" [The news feed is kind of messy. It isn't focused on what I need most of the time. As if being gay isn't messy enough, right?]

Going further than not being able to provide certain answers, some participants explained that these other platforms were not conducive to the answers they were probing for – answers that were more intimate in nature that they could respond to physically and emotionally. For the participants, Grindr constituted more than a networking device because it provided them a space that significantly narrowed the scope of possible interactions down to a select few with whom they perceived to share a sense of mutuality – to “have conversations I can't have anywhere else,” as one participant put it. Another participant explained this idea relating it to an experience of “intimacy” that emerges from the awareness that one is connecting with others in a more intimate and personal way – that is, as a gay man:

Info and stuff is great, but it doesn't really speak to me the way I wish it would. *Yung tipong, hindi ko talaga feel kasi kahit maganda ang picture or message. May parang distance pa rin kasi, gets? Pero sa Grindr, you feel there's something dirty, something raw. May pagka-intimate rin, may ibang klaseng connection. Ewan ko kung may sense, but that's how it feels for me and others I met here. Walang ganito sa Facebook.* [Info and stuff is great, but it doesn't really speak to me the way I wish it would. Like, I don't really feel it even if the picture or message is nice. There's still something like distance, you get it? But in Grindr, you feel there's something dirty, something raw. There's something intimate also, there's a different kind of connection. I don't know if there's sense, but that's how it feels for me and others I met here. There's nothing like this on Facebook.]

**Sharing stories.** Critical to participants' motivations is the desire to talk about their own stories. Returning to the idea of self-

disclosure and of common ground between users by virtue of perceived commonalities, participants agreed that these factors allowed them to willfully share personal and sensitive information about their experiences as gay men. One participant also explained how the application acted as “*harang*” or a kind of barrier between himself and the other person, which makes any possible ill-treatment less potent:

*Kahit sabihin natin na maraming gago sa Grindr, sa experience ko there’s less risk of the things that make me scared about talking tungkol sa paging bakla sa ibang lugar. Iba yung rejection sa Grindr sa labas kasi parang may harang dahil mobile lang. Hindi kasing sakit if they make fun of you, ignore you, or kung minaltrato ka. [Even if there are many nasty people on Grindr, in my experience there’s less risk of the things that make me scared about talking about being gay in other places. The rejection in Grindr is different from outside because it’s like there’s a barrier because it’s just mobile. It’s not as painful if they make fun of you, ignore you, or mistreat you.]*

The stories participants reported sharing with other users on Grindr varied in scope and subject matter. While one participant talked about his experiences being bullied (e.g., “*Nung high school, tinutukso ako dahil crush ko yung isang kaklase namin*” [In high school, I was picked on because I had a crush on one of our classmates.]), another participant talked about his frustrations with a closeted boyfriend (“*Lahat ng kilos tago, sobrang paranoid.*” [Every move is hidden, so paranoid.]). A range of stories frequently mentioned by participants are summarized in Table 1, grouped into four contexts: concerns about family, school, faith, and sex and romance. Though varied, the stories were united by an overarching theme of struggle as gay men, with specific emphasis on the tension in their relationships with others and the dilemma of effectively navigating these relationships while at the same time maintaining some sense of authenticity as gay men. Notably, participants spoke more often and with greater detail about concerns related to sex and romance and home and the family. As one participant explained, “*Mas malapit sa puso kasi sobrang personal*” [It’s closer to heart because it’s so personal.],

Another participant expounded on the unifying concept that these stories shared, linking it to a general idea of “struggle” – and a sobering

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Stories Shared on Grindr

Context	Topic	Sample Responses
Concerns about Family F1	Relationship with parents, siblings, and other relatives	"I try not to strain my relationship with them by not talking about things about being gay."
	F2 Dealing with pressures to compensate for their sexuality	"I feel like I have to do more for them because I'm gay and they're having a hard time dealing with it."
	F3 Balancing between hiding their sexuality and being "genuine"	"I want to be more genuine, but it's hard because I need to be secretive about other parts of me."
	F4 Dealing with family life after coming out as a gay man	"It took time to adjust and I still feel alienated and uncomfortable sometimes, but I feel lighter."
Concerns about School S1	Pressure to conform and please friends and peers	"Sometimes I pretend to act tough or macho just so people don't ask questions about me liking guys."
	S2 Limited opportunities to learn and discuss about being gay	"My problems aren't covered by any of our classes or the things the guidance counselors do."
	S3 Risk of bullying, harassment, and being taken advantage of	"I live with this fear that someone will find out I'm gay and will try to blackmail me."
	S4 Microaggressions from within the school community	"I sometimes here people using the words 'gay', 'bakla' and 'bading' in really nasty ways."
Concerns about Faith F1	Understanding sexual behavior through the lens of faith	"Sometimes I think God meant for me to learn the power of love in a different way, because being gay is so hard."

(Table 1 continued)

Context	Topic	Sample Responses
F2	Questioning sexuality because of religious beliefs	"Everyone says that what I feel is not normal and immoral. Sometimes I start to believe it."
F3	Making one's sexuality and religious beliefs compatible	"The church talks, but is it really God talking? Maybe there's space somewhere for my own needs."
F4	Criticizing and struggling with religion because of sexuality	"They don't know how much they hurt us. It's scary and frustrating all at once."
<b>Concerns about Sex and Romance</b>		
SR1	Issues and dilemmas with practicing safe sex	"It's obvious that we should all use condoms, but sometimes it feels less intimate when you do."
SR2	Self-image and feelings of attractiveness	"TV's and ads all show these really hot guys, and I don't look anything like them."
SR3	Desires, fantasies and fetishes	"Sometimes I wonder what it's like to have more than one guy with me on the same bed."
SR4	Styles and strategies within a gay romantic relationship	"Being a gay man, there's this problem I have about balancing being macho and being affectionate."
SR5	Dealing with romantic feelings as a gay man	"You're lucky if you can find someone who can really relate to you. Everyone else seems so clueless."
SR6	Dilemmas in connecting with someone you're attracted to	"Because of all the outside pressure, it's hard to be honest to a guy you like or to tell if he likes you back."

reminder that because these are their stories as gay men, there are not many other spaces in which these conversations can flourish:

*Ma-notice mo talaga kung makinig ka sa kanila.* The things they want to talk about are very personal *at* close to heart; *minsan malungkot, minsan masaya, pero laging* close to heart. And interesting *nga kasi halos lahat* there's that concept *na may pinagdaanan, na may struggle. Medyo weird nga na dito sa Grindr pinapag-usapan yung mga ito,* but then again where else will they talk about it? *Hindi pwede sa school, sa bahay, sa pamilya, ayun.* [You'll really notice if you listen to them. The things they want to talk about are very personal and close to heart; sometimes sad, sometimes happy, but always close to heart. And it's interesting because mostly there's that concept of going through something, of there being a struggle. It is kind of weird that these things are discussed in Grindr, but then again where else will they talk about it? Can't in school, in the home, in the family.]

**Questions about sexual identity.** Central to participants' use of Grindr was asking questions related to their sexual identity. But until a degree of rapport between them and other users was established, inquiries were not made directly in fear of awkwardness. One participant explains this rapport-building process, admitting that not all users were on Grindr simply to talk:

That's a hard first step: opening up. *Naiintindihan mo rin kasi na iba yung mga tao sa Grindr at alam mo na hindi sila naghahanap ng kausap lang. Kaya maraming bagay na you consider: yung pic, yung nakasulat sa profile, yung vibe. Ayaw mo rin kasing masaktan kung sabihan kang 'gago' o 'laki ng problema mo'. Hindi rin kasi ganun karami yung maayos na kausap dito, pero you make do with what you have.* [That's a hard first step: opening up. You understand also that the people in Grindr are different and you know that they're not just looking for someone to talk to. So there are many things you consider: the pic, what's written on the profile, the vibe. You don't want to get hurt too when you're told 'stupid' or 'you have a huge problem.' There aren't many decent people to talk to, but you make do with what you have.]

Questions frequently asked by participants are summarized in



Table 2, which were also grouped according to overarching themes: questions related to sex, specifically regarding sexual performance and desires; questions about identity, specifically regarding managing one's expressions and behaviors as a gay man; questions about relationships with the wider community, specifically regarding tensions with others because of their sexual identity; and questions about health and wellness, specifically regarding HIV and risky sexual behaviors.

The act of asking is itself critical to the process of exploration, and is just as integral to the way they conceptualize their sexual identity as the answers received. One participant summarized this, calling this practice of questioning an “obstacle course”:

*Yung pagtatanong hindi lang simpleng pagtatanong eh... It becomes part of you: kung paano magtanong, kung paano makarating sa sagot, moving through the cracks. Yung Grindr ganun diba? Puro cracks na kailangan sumiksik. Parang obstacle course eh, yung pag-iintindi sa sarili bilang bakla. [Asking is not just simply asking. ... It becomes part of you: how to ask, how to get to the answer, moving through the cracks. Grindr is like that, right? Full of cracks that you need to squeeze into. It's like an obstacle course, understanding yourself as gay.]*

**Dating.** A theme that consistently emerged was the desire to experience dating. Participants' nuanced responses on this theme suggested a differentiation between dating in itself, dating other men who did not identify as gay, and dating other gay men, citing their own experiences and those of their friends to support this differentiation. One participant explained: “*Ako kasi, I dated girls before, kaya iba na ang aking ideas tungkol sa dating dahil sa experience na yun. Iba na ang expectations mo. Example: hindi kailangan tago if you date a girl. Matindi na difference yun.*” [Me, I've dated girls before, so now my ideas about dating are different because of that experience. Your expectations are different now. For example, you don't need to hide if you date a girl. That's a major difference.] Another participant added, “*Siguro colored yung tingin ko kasi I've dated guys, but they weren't gay. Yung isa, curious lang raw pero may girlfriend. Yung isa naman, hindi sigurado. Those experiences change the way you see yourself.*” [Maybe my perspective is colored because I've dated guys, but they weren't [openly or self-identified as] gay. One was just curious but had

Table 2. Summary of Participants' Questions

Context	Topic	Sample Questions
<b>Sexual Practices</b>		
S1	Performing oral and anal sex	<p>"What's the right way to put it in my mouth?"</p> <p>"Is this really what gay men are into?"</p>
S2	Kissing and practicing foreplay	<p>"How do I kiss without making it dry?"</p> <p>"Is there a kind of kiss that gay men do?"</p>
S3	Mutual masturbation and non-penetrative sexual stimulation	<p>"How much pressure do you apply with your hands?"</p> <p>"What parts of the body should I focus on?"</p>
S4	Practicing and negotiating for safe and satisfying sex	<p>"How do I keep it from getting too rough?"</p> <p>"What do I do if a guy I like won't use a condom?"</p>
<b>Identity and Expression</b>		
P1	Calibrating expressions of sexuality in daily life	<p>"Should I lower the pitch of my voice?"</p> <p>"Should I still wear tight clothing?"</p>
P2	Dealing with one's feelings of desirability and self-image	<p>"Do I have to look like Piolo for guys to like me?"</p> <p>"If I'm not handsome, what can I do to be attractive?"</p>
P3	Dealing with one's identity as an individual	<p>"How do I stand out as unique with all that's going on?"</p> <p>"Should I conform to what people think of gay men?"</p>
P4	Dealing with one's emotions and desires	<p>"How do I take my mind off my troubles?"</p> <p>"Does drinking actually help make people feel better?"</p>
P5	Dealing with challenges specific to gay men's issues	<p>"How do I talk about being gay in discussions?"</p> <p>"How do I respond to people who say nasty things?"</p>

(Table 2 continued)

Context	Topic	Sample Questions
Community Relations		
SR1	Navigating experiences with family and relatives	“When is the right time to come out to my sisters?” “Should I wait until I’m by myself before coming out?”
SR2	Navigating experiences with friends and colleagues	“Which friends do I share my feelings with?” “Would coming out affect my relationships with them?”
SR3	Navigating experiences with one’s religion and spirituality	“Do I have to give up being Christian to be gay?” “Can I be gay and faithful at the same time?”
SR4	Navigating experiences in public places and institutions	“Will the police listen to me if I file a complaint?” “How do I confront a professor who is bigoted?”
SR5	Navigating experiences related to political and social issues	“Can I draw from my experiences of unfairness?” “How do I contribute to the community as a gay man?”
Health		
H1	HIV/AIDS and Sexually-Transmitted Diseases (STDs)	“How do I talk about HIV/AIDS with a date?” “Where do I go to get myself tested?”
H2	General health and wellbeing for gay men	“Why are rates of smoking higher among gay men?” “Who do I consult about anxiety or depression?”
H3	Challenges in consulting medical professionals	“Should I lie about being gay if I donate blood?” “What do I do if they ask me if I have sex with guys?”

a girlfriend. Another wasn't sure. Those experiences change the way you see yourself.]

Although participants did not use Grindr specifically for the purpose of dating, they admitted that the idea often preoccupied them and its influence was considered to be significant to the way they understood their sexual identity. The importance of dating other self-identified gay men and what it represented, according to the participants, could be summarized into four themes: curiosity ("I want to know what actually goes on"), erotic desire ("I want to feel what people say they feel when they're with someone else"), certainty ("I want to make sure I really am gay"), and validation of one's identity ("*Gagawin ko kasi may karapatang akong maging masaya*" [I will do it because I have the right to be happy]).

Noting that most questions emphasized the importance of one's relationships with others, a participant attempted to bring these questions together into an overarching theme of one's desire to be part of a "living community," explaining that this sense of being part of a larger body of individuals who share these uniquely nuanced experiences as gay men is integral to one's overall understanding of their sexual identity, at least in the Philippines:

*Siguro ganito sa Philippines. Parang napakaimportante yung dating sa pagbuo ang idea ng sexuality. Baka dahil sa collectivist culture natin. There's this premium on relationships, kahit hindi specifically romantic, at isang part na yun ng sexuality. May social aspect ang pagmamahal at pagnanasa, kung baga. No gay man is an island, di ba? Tama siguro yung sinabi ng kaibigan ko through text nung isang araw: being gay is also about being a living part of the community. [Maybe this is how it is in the Philippines. Dating seems very important in making whole the idea of sexuality. Maybe because of our collectivist culture. There's this premium on relationships, even not specifically romantic, and it's part of sexuality. Love and lust have a social aspect. No gay man is an island, right? Maybe what my friend said through text the other day was right: being gay is also about being a living part of the community.]*

## DISCUSSION

This study attempted to describe the experiences of young Filipino gay men as they explore and conceptualize their sexual identity using emergent technologies, taking into consideration the Philippines' unique sociocultural context. Through *pakikipagkuwentuhan*, participants discussed how they explored and made sense of their sexual identity using Grindr, a popular geo-social networking application. Their narratives reveal a number of similarities with the narratives generated by previous research that demonstrated how technology-mediated spaces were being used by gender and sexual minorities to achieve a sense of community and intimacy with their fellows (Clarke et al., 2010; Harper et al., 2009; Stern, 2008). The narratives and the results of previous research support the assertion that "the internet and the mobile world are likely to play seminal roles in you gay men's identity and the identity development process" (Parsons & Grov, 2013, p. 21), although what role these emergent technologies are playing exactly remains an important point of contention.

Two factors appeared to mediate how participants approached Grindr: the impressions and expectations that they formed of the application and its users (i.e., perceived similarities and desires conducive for rapport) and the need for a specific kind of experience (i.e., that which they are able to respond to more intimately). Their responses suggested that part of conceptualizing sexual identity, much like their conceptualization of Grindr as quick and immediate, is built on a foundation of need: the accumulation of their experiences as young Filipino gay men nurtured in them a sense of urgency that prompted them to seek out a means of addressing the myriad issues and dilemmas they had come to recognize as critical to their sexual identity. This need is driven in part by pressures to seek out alternative avenues to do so as traditional avenues have proven insufficient in accommodating their unique challenges, or were hostile to them entirely. Even before logging in, participants' exploration began with the discovery that their particular sexual identity as young Filipino gay men involves anticipating certain challenges, including self-disclosure, building rapport with other gay men, and sharing stories in the hopes of validating one's experiences. It is this propensity for caution and calculation when navigating this space and disclosing parts of one's self to others, which served as both a guide to using the application

and as an integral component to their understanding of their sexual identity as a whole.

The concept of sharing one's experiences also played an important role in the way participants explored their sexual identity, and that using Grindr offered them two general insights. The first insight is that it is necessary, and urgently so, to strike some balance between concealment and disclosure of what they believe constitutes sexual identity (i.e., tone of voice, gestures and gait, and other overt expressions) because of external pressures (i.e., stigmatization, absence of institutional support, etc.) and internalized dilemmas (i.e., uncertainty of one's place in society because of sexual identity), which would allow them to both maintain a sense of control over the challenges they face as young gay men while at the same time feel that they are being true to themselves. The second insight is that a sense of togetherness and of being a part of a community was integral to achieving this balance. The data suggests that a geo-social networking application, specifically one such as Grindr, has become a legitimate space for interactions of a nature that overlap with and far exceeded its marketed function to "chat and meet guys." More than being a legitimate space, participants' responses suggest that they viewed Grindr as a unique source of knowledge that engages them in a more personal and intimate way.

Participants' reports of how they used Grindr revealed four overarching motives: the desire to engage with other gay men, the desire to talk about their experiences as gay men, the desire to learn more about themselves as gay men, and the desire to experience dating other men. The first involves establishing relationships that function on different levels, allowing them to explore different areas of sexual identity (i.e., issues of self-image, concerns about attractiveness and sexual desirability, navigating faith, coming out to the family, etc.). The second involves sharing one's stories and sharing in the stories of others as gay men as a means of validating and coming to terms with one's experiences. The third involves learning about one's self and the community as a whole in relation to being a gay man (i.e., questions about safe sex practices, political and social issues, etc.). The fourth involves being able to engage more intimately with other men – drawing distinctions between dating men who self-identified

as gay and men who were not openly or did not identify as gay, among others – in order to validating one’s sexual identity. These motives were justified by the assumption that users shared similar experiences – and by extension, similar dilemmas – and that whatever risks were associated with its use were acceptable because alternatives were not readily available.

The narratives also revealed that a significant distinction was being made between Grindr as a medium for exploring sexual identity and Grindr as a distinct source of insight into that sexual identity, manifesting the need “to situate digital devices as active elements in the shaping of sexual practices” (Rice, 2015, p. 502). The present study suggests that the geo-social networking application was used by participants not only as a space in which to explore – as a tool with which to learn about and make sense of their sexual identity alongside others – but as a critical reference point that provided an alternative framework for interpreting their experiences as young Filipino gay men. For instance, the concept of their exploration of sexual identity as a kind of “obstacle course” was an insight gained from their own experience of application’s interface, and that this particular feature served as a useful analogy for participants to make sense of what it meant to be a gay man in the Philippine setting. In this respect, it can be said that geo-social networking applications such as Grindr were not simply “inert vessels or pathways” but were in fact “mediators ... that modify the practices and encounters they enable in quite specific, potentially impactful, ways” (Rice, 2015, p. 503). And in as much as Grindr as a geo-social networking application can be construed as a “public space” wherein individuals of a particular marginalized identity commune, what participants’ narratives revealed in this regard call for a more nuanced interpretation of this technology-mediated space “not simply as an arena for predetermined social behaviors but rather an active medium for the construction of objective and subjective identities” (Howard, 2000, p. 382).

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory study suggests the need for a more holistic view of how sexual identity is explored and conceptualized – bearing

in mind the influence of emergent technologies such as geo-social networking applications – and a particular sensitivity to gender and sexual minorities such as gay men who are faced with pressures unique to the Philippine setting. The narratives of participants revealed that they understood their sexual identity as working on multiple levels that needed to be addressed, emphasizing the importance of navigating their relationships with others, establishing some sense of community with those whom they perceive share similar experiences, and maintaining a sense of being true to one's sexual identity despite (or perhaps because of) the challenges of self-disclosure. The narratives also revealed the need to conceptualize these emergent technologies not merely as neutral tools but as active components from which people draw nuanced insights; that is, to see these emergent technologies in and of themselves, perhaps by virtue of the sociocultural climate in which this technology is framed, as integrated into their understanding of sexual identity.

Although the study's qualitative nature and relatively small sample size necessarily limits its generalizability, the data revealed a trend that show the potential of these emergent technologies to go over and beyond its original design and that certain users – whose mobility and visibility in traditional spaces are limited by stigmatization and the fear thereof – have adapted them to address their needs. Furthermore, the narratives revealed that for young Filipino gay men, these emergent technologies could play a critical role in addressing their unique concerns; the participants used Grindr as both an instrument and a critical point of reference with which to explore sexual identity. Although its limitations are readily acknowledged, the data is significant in that they provide a useful starting point in grasping this visibly complex phenomena of sexual identity, which the participants revealed in their narratives.

Although this study endeavored to provide insights into this understudied area in the local literature on the sexual identity of young Filipino gay men, there are significant limitations. Because participants reside in Metro Manila, it is debatable whether the narratives of those living outside of the National Capital Region parallel those living outside its regional borders, or whether young Filipino gay men in other regions face a different set of challenges altogether.



Also, although participant backgrounds are relatively diverse, they are all reasonably educated (i.e., most hold bachelor's degrees), so the participants' narratives cannot assume to speak on behalf of those with no access to formal education or whose mobility is limited due to socioeconomic status; it could be reasonably argued that such compounding factors could significantly impact the trajectory of one's exploration of sexual identity. And even when great care was taken to assure the authenticity of narrative data, "when respondents are doing their best to be forthright and insightful, their self-reports are subject to various sources of inaccuracy" (Paulhus and Vazire, 2009, p. 228).

The current study also attempts to generate an account of participants' experiences within this technology-mediated space to better understand young Filipino gay men's use of emergent technologies, specifically geo-social networking applications, and how its use influences their conceptualization of sexual identity. These narratives can offer those working with the local gay community a potentially useful reference to complement their analysis of their constituents' concerns. The data can also supplement the work of future studies on the sexual identity development and sexual identity management of young Filipino gay men, offering another area of inquiry which can be addressed. Future work can also fill in the gaps of the local literature on other technology-mediated spaces and its impact on sexual identity by looking into the content of other digital mediums used by young Filipino gay men such as blogs and other social networking platforms. One other possibility, specifically for geo-social networking applications such as Grindr, is a structural approach to the construction of users' profiles and how these calibrations reflect the way these users make sense of sexual identity. A quantitative approach to the study of Grindr users' motives would also be helpful. Also of interest would be how users confront and process experiences of discrimination and shaming within technology-mediated spaces, such as in terms of gender expression (i.e., "*effem*") or body type (i.e., "chubs"). Finally, in the spirit of inclusivity, future research can also look into how the use of emergent technologies by others in the LGBT spectrum (e.g., bisexual, lesbian, and transgender women) influences the trajectories of their own exploration of sexual identity and what similarities and differences can be drawn between them.

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