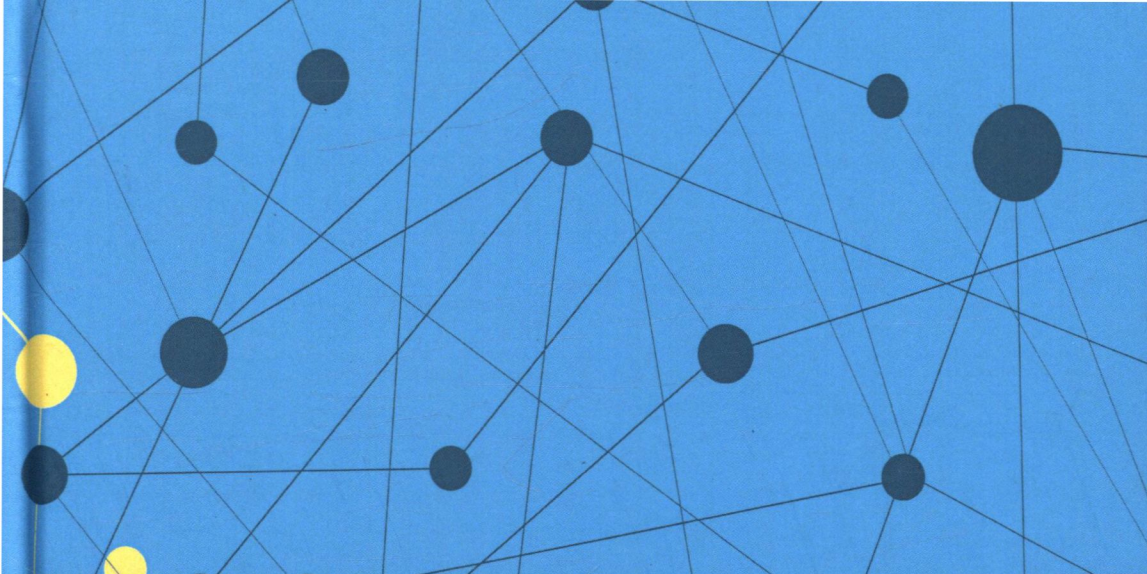




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GAY MEN, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATORY RELUCTANCE

Elija Cassidy



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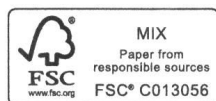
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Gay Men, Identity and Social Media

“Cassidy has answered the call a number of us have been making for a solid empirical study of social media habits in the LGBTQ communities. The specific social media venues may change with time but what his work has to teach us about identity formation and performance, the formation of social capital, and the building of social networks will influence our agendas and thinking for years to come.”

—Bruce E. Drushel, *Miami University, USA*

“An elegant book that makes significant contributions to our understandings of gay male internet use, but more generally to how social media, place, and subcultures come together to shape identity.”

—Nancy Baym, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA*

“This work offers important and compelling insights into how gay men utilize social networking sites. Given that the online experiences of sexual minorities are woefully understudied, Eliza Cassidy’s study is a welcome work indeed.”

—John Edward Campbell, *Temple University, USA*

This book explores how the social and technical integration of mainstream social media into gay men’s digital cultures since the mid-2000s has played out in the lives of young gay men, looking at how these convergences have influenced more recent iterations of gay men’s digital culture. Focusing on platforms such as Gaydar, Facebook, Grindr and Instagram, Cassidy highlights the ways that identity and privacy management issues experienced in this context have helped to generate a culture of participatory reluctance within gay men’s digital environments.

Eliza Cassidy is a Lecturer in Journalism, Media and Communication at Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

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Sara Schoonmaker
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Elija Cassidy

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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
-----------------------------------	-----

1	Gay Men's Digital Culture and Participatory Reluctance: An Introduction	1
2	From the Hankie Code to the Hanky App: Historical Change, Technological Development and Shifting GLBT Identities	23
3	Gaydar Cultures: The Only 'Good' Gay in the Village?	40
4	Facebook and Its Role in Gaydar Cultures	69
5	Consequences of Convergence – Privacy and Safety Concerns	97
6	Participatory Reluctance Post-Gaydar	136

<i>Bibliography</i>	161
---------------------	-----

<i>Appendix</i>	187
-----------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	189
--------------	-----

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

3.1	Basic layout of a Gaydar profile	45
3.2	A Gaydar cover image from 2012	49
4.1	Facebook profile template 'Basic Information' and 'Interested In' subsections	72
5.1	'Tell your life story': Facebook cover page at launch of Timeline	116

Tables

3.1	'Keywords' options presented during Gaydar profile construction	50
5.1	Privacy settings available on Gaydar	100
5.2	Categories of privacy settings available on Facebook	114

1 Gay Men's Digital Culture and Participatory Reluctance

An Introduction

On the name and shame website, Douchebags of Grindr,¹ a steady stream of screen-captured profiles representing the worst of gay men's social dating application Grindr have been appearing daily since 2011 – with added commentary from the site owner for entertainment value. From day to day and year to year, there is almost infinite repetition of the same profile types submitted, with usernames and profile text boxes exclaiming, “don't be gay”, “not interested”, “no olds, asians, fats or fems”, “99.9% of you are disgusting”, “don't message me”, “too good for this app”, “this app suksz” and “30+ fossils will be blocked”. Beyond the intrinsic ageism, racism, femmephobia, hypocrisy, arrogance and general ‘douchebaggery’ constantly highlighted here, a clear overarching picture also emerges of the deep-seated antipathy many Grindr users feel towards the application and its core audience.

On the spin-off site, Poking Fun at Grindr,² which in addition to Grindr also covers similar applications such as Jack'd, Hornet, Hunters BBS “and all the rest”, a mirror image of the attitudes on display at Douchebags of Grindr can be found in streams of screen-captured user conversations posted to the site, albeit sans comedic commentary. While the racism, ageism and other forms of discrimination and antagonism seen on these sites were part of gay male communities well before the arrival of social dating and hook-up applications (see Ayers, 2000), the recent success of Douchebags of Grindr and Poking Fun at Grindr demonstrates the extent to which ill will towards social applications designed for gay male audiences, and their users, has now become central to the culture of such spaces.

Where does this culture of hostility come from? Why would so many people employ social media profiles to condemn the very same services – and their user bases – that they themselves are members of? Is this an issue of internalised homophobia? Simply a case of social media (or dating app) fatigue? How do these patterns of use play into broader incarnations of gay men's digital culture beyond niche services, like Grindr? And why should any of this matter to more than just app designers trying to leverage gay male markets?

2 *Gay Men's Digital Culture*

I first began thinking about these kinds of questions and the nature of gay men's digital cultures back in 2007. During a night out with some friends in March of that year at a small gay club in Brisbane, Australia, the man who would later become my partner approached me while I was alone at the bar. New to the city and recognising me only from a profile on a social networking site (SNS) specifically for gay men, he said simply, "Excuse me, are you Brista?" As this was before the rise of geolocator mobile phone applications, like Grindr, somewhat surprised and amused that a stranger with whom I had had no previous interaction would not only recognise me from an online profile, but also approach me to say so, I laughed – both at the novelty of the situation and in confirmation of the question – and we began chatting. Hence, with a simple reference to a profile name ('Brista')³ I had maintained on three separate gay-oriented networking sites since the beginning of my adult life, 'Tobulus' had begun the conversation that would lead to our relationship and, eventually, his proposal.

In this way, and numerous others, social networking sites for gay men have been a central element in both my most pivotal life events and the more banal experiences of my everyday existence. Equal parts consciously and subconsciously, I have used them, among other things, to test the waters of the gay world and my own identity within it; to assist with navigating various physical spaces and real-world events across Australia designed to cater for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community; as an information repository and source of social capital and as a tool for simply bonding with my peers. While numerous GLBT-oriented movies, popular television programmes, newspapers and magazines attest that I am certainly not alone in this regard – that these sites are simply part of the cultural milieu of being gay in the 21st century⁴ – it was only through that moment at the bar, at age 22, that I first began to fully understand this point. Or, at least, the extent to which it was true. It encouraged me to really think about and try to make sense of gay men's digital culture and to consider how my own personal experiences with it compared to those of other men my age. Being recognised from an online profile also ensured I would become more self-reflexive in my use of the three gay-specific social networking sites I was then signed up to, by making me much more conscious of the intense relationship that exists between gay men's digital culture and other spheres of gay male life.

The event that would really translate the curiosity this moment piqued into the desire to conduct formal research concerning gay men's digital culture, however, would come almost six months later, as 2007 was drawing to a close. In the interim, the range of technologies and services designed to facilitate social networking was expanding almost daily, and the ways that people engaged in this practice were rapidly changing. At the forefront of this change were mainstream social networking

sites, namely, Facebook. Though it was launched in 2004 and has since become one of the most visited websites on the internet and a cultural icon at the centre of books (Kirkpatrick, 2010), documentaries (Weitzner, 2010) and Hollywood feature films (Fincher, 2010), it was the 12 months between the beginning of 2007 and 2008 that saw Facebook, in particular, and mainstream social networking sites, more generally, firmly establish themselves in Australia's public consciousness, as large numbers of internet users flocked to the service and its (then) competitor MySpace (Moses, 2008). In fact, with journalists and other social commentators scrambling to make sense of the rapidity and extensiveness of the public's uptake of SNSs, between January 2007 and January 2008, there were well over 2000 articles in Australian newspapers on Facebook alone.

It was during this time, in June 2007, that my own profile on Facebook was first established. I set it up utilising a headshot of myself from an existing account I maintained on Gaydar, a web-based social networking site designed specifically for gay men. It was the same photo from which my partner had first recognised me as 'Brista' in the bar months earlier. I reused the image because I had signed up to Facebook on the recommendation of a friend who not only spoke enthusiastically about the functionalities of the site, but also labelled it 'a new version of Gaydar'.

Designed specifically for same-sex-attracted men, Gaydar has members registered in almost 150 countries around the world. As one of the first and largest social networking sites of its kind, Gaydar was at the very centre of gay men's digital culture from the moment it was launched in London in 1999, until the arrival of geolocative mobile phone applications, like Grindr, a decade later. Although no longer owned by its original developers at QSoft Consulting, the site – which is still in operation today – offers two levels of membership (free and fee paying) and incorporates functions for profile creation, personal network displays, messaging, chat rooms, photo and video upload, participation in online group activities (e.g., competitions), mobile accessibility and much more.

Despite some of these core technological similarities, time, of course, would prove that Facebook was in fact not the same as Gaydar, as my friend had suggested, or, for that matter, any other gay-oriented networking site we had ever seen. However, from the moment it began gaining widespread popularity in Australia, Facebook became part of a culture that I, and many of my gay peers, had previously associated only with networking sites specifically for the gay male community. Fast-forward six months from March 2007, when I had first met my partner, for instance, and another 'Brista'/'Tobulus'-style scenario was playing out before me – only this time it was Facebook, rather than Gaydar, that facilitated the exchange.

On a night of celebrations for a friend's birthday, the group of people I was out with were standing together near the dance floor of the

4 *Gay Men's Digital Culture*

same Brisbane club where I had met 'Tobulus' earlier in the year. Midway through our conversation, we were approached by a fellow patron, who, without so much as a nod hello, handed a business card to his chosen target amongst the group (let's call him 'Sam'), then said, 'Find me on Facebook', and promptly walked away. 'Sam' and the business-card-wielding stranger (let's call him 'Matt') went on to meet via Facebook a few days later and, eventually, to have an eight-month-long relationship. This event came on the back of a number of weeks immediately following my signing up to the site in which friend requests from gay men unknown to me from all across Australia (and beyond) had flooded my inbox, where 'pokes' from brands that would typically advertise on Gaydar and other gay male SNSs began to rival those from people I knew, and where faces I recognised from local gay venues and events were frequently popping up in my 'people you might know' column – all despite my sexuality not being specified on the profile anywhere. Hence, both for me and a number of others who witnessed 'Matt' and 'Sam's' initial meeting by the dance floor that night, it was an experience that cemented mainstream social networking sites into parts of our lives we thought, however naively, that they would not touch, and in ways we had not expected. In the space of just six months, we had seen a shift from 'Excuse me, are you Brista?' to 'Find me on Facebook'. For some of the group present that night, who had had similar experiences with 'pokes' and unsolicited friend requests from gay men around the world appearing in their recently opened Facebook accounts, it was living proof, as my friend had excitedly put it when encouraging me to sign up, that 'Facebook is the new Gaydar'.

With the benefit of hindsight, of course, it is now clear that what we had witnessed that night, in September 2007, was not the arrival of a new niche SNS specifically for gay men. Any user of Facebook can attest to the fact that its remit is far too broad for the service to be classified as a networking tool for one particular community. What we had actually experienced, both on that night itself, and in the weeks prior with the array of friend requests sent our way from gay men around the globe, was simply evidence of a growing convergence between mainstream social networking services and gay men's digital culture. This convergence could also be seen at that time in the rapidly expanding number of Facebook pages being run by GLBT-oriented venues, community groups and organisations, and in the simultaneous decision of smaller-scale social networking platforms for gay men, like UK-based service, Jake, to shift all networking functionalities from their own site over to Facebook. While larger services, such as Gaydar, continued to operate independently, by 2008, Gaydar too had established its own Facebook page, and Gaydar users were beginning to include links to Facebook accounts in their Gaydar profiles.

Today, of course, this convergence continues apace. Go to YouTube and type in 'Grindr'. Search Instagram for the hashtag #instagay. Or head over to Tumblr and find the scores of accounts dedicated to gay Snapchatters. The results might not be safe for work, but they're unequivocal. Gay men's digital culture is now deeply converged with mainstream social media. While Facebook may not have become 'the new Gaydar', as my friend had exclaimed it would be in 2007, practices once confined to the realms of niche sites designed specifically for same-sex-attracted men are now very much part of mainstream social networking platforms used by the general population for posting food and travel snaps, workout shots and updates on the vast minutiae of everyday life. What these developments signal about the kinds of relationships that gay men have with SNSs, both niche and mainstream, and the roles that these services play in gay male culture more broadly have interested me since Facebook first emerged on Brisbane's gay scene in 2007. Hence, it is these issues of sociotechnical convergence within gay men's digital culture – and their associated drivers and repercussions – that are at the very centre of this book.

Set against the backdrop of the growing global push for recognition of marriage equality, and the increasing prominence of social media as premier settings for the very real developmental task of identity formation amongst the present generation of youth (James et al., 2008, p. 15), *Gay Men, Identity and Social Media: A Culture of Participatory Reluctance* is an account of how the sociotechnical integration of mainstream social media into gay men's digital cultures occurring since the mid-2000s has played out in the lives of young gay men who have experienced it and how these convergences have impacted upon more recent iterations of gay men's digital culture, helping to intensify the kind of paradoxical hostility seen on sites like Douchebags of Grindr, where users of niche SNSs designed for gay male audiences denigrate the very same sites and user communities that they themselves are members of. Providing detailed examination of Facebook's early integration into Gaydar cultures as it occurred in Brisbane, Australia, as well as discussion of recent developments across services such as Grindr, Instagram and Snapchat, it demonstrates how, through the emergence and subsequent enmeshment of mainstream social media into gay men's digital cultures, niche social networking services designed for gay male audiences have come to be experienced by users as comparatively difficult environments in which to manage identity, and thus, environments where large numbers of users would actually prefer not to be present at all. As such, I ultimately argue here that key shifts in gay men's digital culture both within and beyond community-specific social media over the past decade have increasingly been shaped in western environments by what might best be described as a culture of *participatory reluctance*.

What's Participatory Reluctance?

In the mid-2000s, social media technologies began impacting intensely upon the traditional operation of media industries by enabling publics to function as content co-creators, rather than just viewers and listeners (Flew, 2014, p. 87). As such, media scholars heralded the arrival of a new 'age of participation'. While the internet had already been written about as a highly communal and potentially democratising technology in the 1990s by likes of Rheingold (1993) and Turkle (1995), Henry Jenkins' (2006) *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide* was a tipping point of sorts in bringing issues of participation to the fore. Through this work, Jenkins (2006) popularised the term 'participatory culture', to describe the possibilities afforded by what were then known as Web 2.0 technologies for people to become contributors and producers – as well as users – of media content, or what Bruns (2008) refers to as 'produsers'. In the years since, scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds have sought to map and make sense of the implications of these possibilities for individuals, industries and society at large (see Benkler, 2006; Schäfer, 2011; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Attention has been placed on the possibilities for civic engagement and connection; creative expression and collaborative culture; and the democratisation of news, ideas and creativity and also upon challenges associated with the blurred lines between producers and users fostered by the rise of participatory culture – participation gaps and digital divides – and the increasing complexity of the ethical and legal issues around privacy and intellectual property, to name just a few.

Among these discussions, and amidst the arrival of mainstream social networking services like Facebook, Jenkins' (2006) notion of 'participatory culture' and Bruns' (2008) idea of 'produsage' have been extended upon to consider issues around 'explicit' and 'implicit' (Schäfer, 2011) participation in these contexts and the role of technology in co-shaping user interactions and content development. In *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, for example, Schäfer (2011) described how early discussions of participatory culture understood participation as a 'conscious practice of competent consumers', such as those who create content by engaging in online fan culture, cooperative software development or Wikipedia contribution (p. 52). Alongside this category of purposeful 'explicit' participation enabled by Web 2.0 technologies, however, Schäfer (2011) argued there is also a more subtle 'implicit' (p. 52) form of participation, where users contribute to applications, often unknowingly, simply through using them – for example, when uploading content to platforms like Flickr or watching and rating YouTube videos.

With interface design increasingly determining the forms of acceptable collaboration, connection and content contribution available to users