Do I Know You? Managing Offline Interaction in Acquainted Stranger Relationships

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Abstract

Sociology has a long history of analyzing relationships between strangers in everyday life. The ubiquity of social media and mobile technologies, however, necessitates refined theories of how people relate to and interact with strangers in a social world where online and offline contexts are intertwined. This study examines public encounters between acquainted strangers, a type of connection fostered through social media wherein people are both digital acquaintances and offline strangers. Drawing on ethnographic data of queer men who use mobile dating and hookup apps, I find that queer men experience these encounters as routine yet problematic, which past theories of stranger relationships cannot fully explain. I argue that offline interactions with acquainted strangers amplify interactional uncertainties around identification (e.g. “I know them, but do they know me?”) and recognition (e.g. “What are the moral demands of our relationship?”). Managing these uncertainties is socially significant as the decision to regard or ignore an acquainted stranger marks not only interpersonal acceptance/rejection but also broader forms of belonging and exclusion. These findings underscore how mobile technologies are fundamentally transforming what it means to be a “stranger.”

Keywords Sexuality · Social media · Urban ethnography · Context collapse · Grindr

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Introduction

I don’t very often find myself in queer spaces, but I do very often see people in my neighborhood who I’ve interacted with to some degree on Grindr or Tinder or Hinge on the streets and in coffee shops… I think it’s generally accepted that it’s an awkward moment.
(Ryan, 25, gay)

I’ve used a bunch of apps to find sex. I’ve also used Instagram and Twitter for that same purpose… Sometimes I’m relieved [when a guy from a mobile app ignores me in public], and I’m like, ‘Oh good, they did it first.’ This happens so much that it feels like one of us is going to do it. Which one’s going to do it first? And that’s kind of ridiculous… There’s not a single night that I’ve gone out in the last, I don’t know, five years where this hasn’t happened. Maybe we should have a word for it or recognize it as a fairly normal behavior at this point.
(Andrew, 31, gay)

In common usage, a stranger is a person we do not know. In sociology, the stranger has a vibrant history as a concept that both extends and complicates this definition. In modern cities, characterized by a shift from Gemeinschaft (close, homogenous ties) to Gesellschaft (distant, heterogenous ties) (Tönnies 2011 [1887]), relations between strangers are a patterned characteristic of urban living (e.g., Durkheim 2014 [1893]; Goffman 1963; Lofland 1973; Simmel 1950; Wirth 1938). This broad sociological tradition of “interaction spaces and urban relationships” (Lofland 2003) examines how people manage the anonymity of urban life. A key theme is that stranger relationships often blur the lines between stranger and acquaintance. People may be acquaintances or even personally known to one another but also cultural strangers (Simmel 1950). Strangers can also be categorically known to one another through making inferences about their age, race, gender, or class (Lofland 1973). Cultural and categorical forms of knowing strangers “made [city life] possible” by making stranger encounters interactionally predictable (Lofland 1973, 22). Furthermore, strangers who are not total strangers play an important role in rendering urban spaces less anonymous (e.g., Lofland 1973, 1998; Milgram 1977).

In the digital age, however, mobile technologies produce hybridized social spaces, which encompass how “online interactions are deeply intertwined with offline places and relationships” and vice versa (Blackwell et al. 2015, 1117). New media and cultural geographic research show how hybridization complicates sociological assumptions of urban anonymity and the relationships people generate with strangers (Humphreys and Liao 2013; Koch and Miles 2020; Licoppe 2016; Licoppe and Inada 2012; Miles 2021; Schwartz 2013; Sutko and de Souza e Silva 2011). Social media creates stranger relationships that fundamentally differ from analog strangers, one of which Baldor (2022) defines as acquainted strangers, or “digitally mediated social tie[s] that individuals foster through social media use” (5). Acquainted strangers are acquaintances—to varying degrees—in digital space, yet strangers in physical space.
As the above quotes from queer men\(^1\) suggest, users of mobile dating and hookup apps routinely experience chance encounters with geographically proximate users with whom they have interacted online, even if they did not intend to meet. These encounters occur in nightlife and beyond: in their apartment buildings and neighborhoods, on public transit, at work, and in school. In this article, I examine why queer men’s acquainted stranger encounters are frequent yet marked by uncertainty. Ryan and Andrew describe navigating these encounters as “awkward” and “ridiculous” despite regularly running into digital acquaintances in-person. Analog theories of stranger relationships cannot fully explain this tension between routine and unpredictability. As Lofland (1973) notes: “It is only when strangers appear routinely among a people unarmed with routine handling procedures that we can begin to meaningfully talk about ‘difficulties’” (182). Why do queer men seem to lack “routine handling procedures” when encountering acquainted strangers in public, despite it being so frequent?

To address this question, I draw on both new media scholarship and sociological theories of face-to-face interaction. I theorize in-person encounters between digital strangers as moments of context collapse (boyd 2010), which encompass “how people, information, and norms from one context seep into the bounds of another” (Davis and Jurgenson 2014, 477). While the concept is widely used in social media research, context collapse is also a fruitful framework to analyze digitally mediated in-person interactions. I argue that acquainted strangers running into one another in everyday life is a form of what Davis and Jurgenson (2014) refer to as context collisions where “different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other” (480).

Digital interactions produce an array of uncertainties in moments of face-to-face context collisions as queer men contend with multiple audiences and contexts simultaneously. Drawing on Goffman’s (1963) theories of public interaction, I examine interactional uncertainties in two interrelated processes as individuals initiate interaction: (1) cognitive recognition, or “the process through which we socially or personally identify the other” and, in turn, (2) social recognition, or “the process of openly welcoming or at least accepting the initiation of [social interaction]” (112–113). Cognitive recognition between acquainted strangers is marked by relational uncertainty (e.g. “I know them, but do they know me?”), which affects social recognition (e.g. “I do not know how to interact with this person because I do not know what our relationship is”). Furthermore, I find that queer men variably frame digital interaction as necessitating offline social recognition (e.g. do mobile apps place in-person moral demands upon us?). The queer men app users I observed and interviewed either did not know or could not agree on how to interact with acquainted strangers offline. These uncertainties produced uncomfortable—and at times frustrating—encounters that shaped how queer men perceived and experienced queer community.

By paying close attention to how digital technologies shape people’s relationships and in-person interactions using the case of queer men and mobile hookup apps, I show how people must grapple with “the philosophical quagmire of questions about

\(^1\) For the sake of brevity, I use “queer men” as an umbrella term to encompass a range of sexual and gender identities among informants. I discuss interviewees’ demographics in “Data and Methods.”
what it means to ‘truly know’ another” (Lofland 1973, 184) that interactionists have long sidestepped when analyzing analog stranger interactions through everyday collisions between digital and in-person situations. These thorny questions are at the forefront of people’s minds as they navigate encounters at the nexus of the digital and the analog. The concept of acquainted strangers, then, not only builds on classic sociological statements of how people manage anonymity and diversity in everyday life but also illuminates how our digitally mediated social contexts are reshaping what a “stranger” fundamentally is.

**From Analog to Digital Stranger Relationships**

This article contributes to urban sociological research on everyday interaction in the digital age as well as interdisciplinary research on queer digital cultures, which I discuss in turn. Analog stranger relationships are marked by clear norms and obligations for interaction, which allow people to live in “a world of strangers” (Lofland 1973). For example, Milgram’s (1977) field research of train commuters who become “familiar strangers” shows how clear norms and obligations allow for a “real relationship, in which both parties have agreed to mutually ignore each other” (53) to foster between urban denizens.

In addition, quotidian stranger encounters are predicated on the certainty that neither actor personally knows the other. In familiar stranger relationships, for example, both parties recognize the other through repeated exposure, but they do not possess additional kinds of personal information about each other (Milgram 1977). This is not necessarily the case between digitally mediated acquainted strangers as digital interaction can produce several types of uncertainty that people must negotiate. Communication scholars delineate three forms of interpersonal uncertainty that are salient in acquainted stranger encounters: (1) self uncertainty (e.g. do I know this person?), (2) partner uncertainty (e.g. does this person know me?), and (3) relationship uncertainty (e.g. are we strangers, acquaintances, or friends?) (e.g. Knobloch and Solomon 1999). Similarly, new media scholar Licoppe (2016) identifies issues around real-life identification of digital acquaintances in public (e.g. is that the person I think it is?) as a factor that complicates encounters with other location-aware app users, whether they be from hookup, gaming, or other kinds of social media apps.

Just as there are different types of analog stranger relationships, mobile technologies produce different kinds of digitally mediated strangers. New media research in this vein tends to focus on location-aware mobile applications, which encompasses but is not exclusive to hookup and dating apps. For example, Schwartz (2013) analyzes how users on social media applications such as Foursquare foster “networked familiar strangers” who are familiar strangers both on and off an app in that they see each other but do not directly interact. In contrast, Licoppe (2016) defines “pseudonymous strangers” as “[app] users with whom one may never have interacted or talked about before” but about whom some information is known through the app (108). This article specifically elaborates upon Baldor’s (2020) concept of acquainted strangers, which emphasizes how people can become digital acquaintances through directly messaging and sharing personal information on mobile apps and yet remain
strangers in-person. When we run into acquainted strangers in-person, which can be a regular occurrence for users of GPS-enabled mobile apps where users connect with nearby others, the digital relationship does not neatly translate into offline acquaintance. Rather, people may choose to treat acquainted strangers as either strangers or acquaintances in-person. Baldor draws on this concept to illuminate how gay club-goers tend to avoid acquainted strangers in person due to issues of “context collapse” (boyd 2010), which cause feelings of stress, embarrassment, and rejection. This paper further elaborates why mobile app users experience acquainted stranger encounters as interactionally problematic.

While mobile hookup apps’ location-aware design features allow for theoretical generalizability to other location-aware social media and its users, this study’s empirical focus on queer men’s experiences also draws on and contributes to research on how queer people connect in the digital age. A key theme is that queer users of mobile hookup apps are ambivalent about their experiences on these platforms that are normatively used for immediate, impersonal sexual encounters. Generating sexual or social ties on the apps is an uncertain process (Corriero and Tong 2016; Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz 2018). Despite “dominant cultural beliefs that virtual intimacies are failed intimacies” (McGlotten 2013, 7), queer cultures and communities are inextricably hybridized and queer people rely on mobile apps for a variety of purposes (Mowlabocus 2016; Renninger 2019). Studies focus on how users’ management of sexual stigmas can limit the apps’ potential benefits, such as new social connections or the emergence of public queer sex cultures (Ahlm 2017; McGlotten 2013). When research on queer mobile apps focus on in-person situations, they tend to focus on planned sexual encounters and how “digital cruising” (Mowlabocus 2016) practices privatize queer sex by “turning [the home] into a place to meet strangers” (Licoppe et al. 2016, 2542). This context sets the stage for this study’s emphasis on unintentional, non-sexual encounters with other app users in public. Focusing on these everyday situations is important for better understanding mobile hookup app users’ digital behaviors as well as queer people’s ambivalences toward apps that are ubiquitous in queer communities.

**Data and Methods**

This paper’s findings developed inductively from a larger in-person urban ethnography on the interactional bases of sexual community (Baldor 2019, 2022). My data and methods both align with traditional ethnography as well as extend these methods for the digital age by capturing the hybridized nature of in-person social life through in-person observations and interviewing. I draw on approximately 400 hours of participant observation in gay nightlife spaces in and beyond Philadelphia’s Gayborhood neighborhood, and 34 in-depth interviews with queer men and countless informal interviews during fieldwork.

I rely on in-person observations and narrative accounts of queer men’s digital experiences, rather than follow participants and observe them on hookup apps, for several methodological reasons. First, these apps’ interfaces make conducting virtual observations difficult. An ethnographer can set up a profile on Grindr, for instance,
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and see a dynamic grid of profiles in their immediate area (and thus be seen by others). However, they cannot observe interactions happening between other users; the “action” (Goffman 1967) occurs privately through direct messaging. This limits an ethnographer’s insights to how users interact with them. Second, given the project’s focus on face-to-face interaction in urban gay spaces, my research protocol was not oriented towards obtaining intimate digital data and recruitment did not hinge on whether participants would be willing to discuss their digital lives. Rather, these topics came up organically in interviews.

I conducted fieldwork in 2015 and intermittently from 2018 to 2021. I joined queer men in their nighttime rituals, frequenting every gay bar in the Gayborhood (around ten bars at any given time) as well as queer events throughout the city. I joined club-goers as they made their nightly rounds, oftentimes starting at pre-games in private apartments and ending at late-night dining spots popular among revelers after the clubs closed. I primarily interviewed club-goers with whom I socialized while out. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I also used snowball methods to interview six additional club-goers through fieldwork contacts. In total, all interviewees sexually identify as either gay or queer; 75% of interviewees identify as gay men, while 25% identify as nonbinary, transgender, or genderqueer. In terms of race/ethnicity, 62% of interviewees identify as non-Hispanic white. All names of club-goers in the text are pseudonyms.

I did not initially consider how I could leverage the popularity of mobile dating and hookup apps among queer men in my fieldwork, especially as I observed few bar patrons using hookup apps while out. However, I found through informal conversations in the bars and in-person interviews that club-goers’ digital performances, interactions, and relationships collided with their in-person experiences in the bars. From these insights, I adapted the interview protocol to include more questions around app use and participants’ experiences running into other app users in gay and non-gay public spaces. In particular, the prompt “Describe a recent time you encountered someone from the apps in-person” proved to be generative, as queer men had often seen a digital acquaintance very recently and could recount—and wanted to recount—the situation as it unfolded both in-person and on the apps. Furthermore, interview data illuminated the pervasiveness of acquainted stranger encounters in men’s everyday lives beyond nightlife or the Gayborhood. As a gay person in my early to mid-twenties, I had personal experience navigating mobile dating apps and the acquainted strangers these platforms generate. While I do not directly draw on or analyze my experience, my biography helped to inform data collection and analysis (cf. Blackwell et al. 2015, 1124).

Findings: Social Uncertainties in Collapsed Interaction

Queer men’s acquainted stranger encounters are frequent yet marked by uncertainty. In an illustrative example, Stavros (28, gay) described an encounter that he experienced just hours before our interview wherein he discovered that he shared a mutual friend with someone he was talking to on Grindr:
I go into [a coffee shop] and my friend stayed outside. And then when I got outside, he was talking with someone that I’ve been talking to on Grindr. And that person pretended that he had no idea who I was. So I reintroduced myself. And, uh, you know, now we like started talking in real life. And then I got his Instagram, so I don’t know if he’s gonna hit me up on Instagram, we’ll see. Maybe he didn’t even remember that we were talking on Grindr.

As face-to-face moments of context collision, these encounters tend to engender impression management as people contend with multiple audiences and contexts simultaneously (Baldor 2022). In this situation, Stavros and his acquainted stranger were accountable to one another in a new context as well as to their mutual friend who knew them separately.

Within this collapsed context, Stavros’s experience highlights several interactional problems that render acquainted stranger encounters difficult to manage. As an initial interaction between two people in public, Stavros confronted two dilemmas around cognitive and social recognition (cf. Goffman 1963). First, Stavros grappled with whether the acquainted stranger purposefully or “innocent[ly]” did not remember him. In encounters where acquainted strangers do not acknowledge that they know one another from the apps, it is not clear whether this is an impression management strategy or a genuine “not knowing.” While Stavros recognized and could place the acquainted stranger within his digital sociality, he first asserted that the acquainted stranger “pretended that he had no idea” who Stavros was, and then second-guessed himself to acknowledge that “maybe he didn’t even remember” their digital interactions because they followed each other on Instagram, which seemed to suggest that this person was interested in fostering a connection.

Second, Stavros grappled with whether he was afforded appropriate social recognition in the encounter. An important aspect of social relationships is the moral underpinnings that bind them. As Goffman (1963) theorizes, different urban relationships convey different interactional norms and expectations. Queer men often framed these encounters as emotionally negative experiences when they felt acquainted strangers purposefully slighted them. When I asked Stravros how he felt when it was apparent that this person was not going to acknowledge him, he responded:

I absolutely hate every single moment of it. Every time this happens, I feel like an idiot. I feel like I’m not important. I’m suspicious. I’m like, this is not innocent; it’s not like you didn’t recognize me!

Here, Stavros returned to his initial interpretation of the encounter that this person did recognize him and chose to pretend he didn’t. However, there remains tension regarding cognitive recognition at the onset of the encounter. He felt like an “idiot” in this moment, which seems to stem from having unreciprocated knowledge or recognition of this person. This put him in the position to introduce himself since he did remember their digital interactions. At the same time, he felt “not important,” which could stem from either this person genuinely not remembering him from the apps (e.g. “not important enough to remember”) or this person remembering Stavros and choosing not to obey normative rules around regarding acquaintances.
In the following sections, I analyze interactional uncertainties around (1) cognitive recognition and (2) social recognition that queer men contended with in collapsed interaction. As illuminated in this section, these uncertainties are not independent. I separate them by the processual unfolding of interaction for clarity.

**Cognitive Recognition Uncertainty**

For an acquainted stranger encounter to be experienced as such, at least one person needs to cognitively recognize the other from the apps. I identified three forms of recognition uncertainty in my fieldwork, which help to explain why acquainted stranger encounters are often not openly acknowledged (cf. Baldor 2022). First, queer men questioned their own recognition of a person (e.g. “is that person from Grindr?”). Second, queer men recognized someone, but they did not know whether the recognition was reciprocated. Third, queer men questioned what it means to “know” an acquainted stranger at all. As Goffman (1963) notes, cognitive recognition involves “linking the sight of [an individual] with a framework of information concerning [them]” (113). In these instances, queer men struggled to reconcile the gap between knowing intimate details—learned directly through digital interaction or indirectly through social rituals of gossip or photo sharing—about someone online and not knowing them offline.

Regarding the first two forms of uncertainty, a lack of recognition is not always strategic. This compounds the unpredictability of the encounter. Mike (late 20s, gay) expressed that in public “there’s definitely still that sense of do we say hi or not?” which he attributed to “a disconnect” related to recognition that occurs from translating digital contexts into in-person encounters:

I have a strong memory. I could tell you pretty much everything we’ve talked about [from the apps], but sometimes there’s a bit of a disconnect between how people look in photos versus in real life, and that’s not an uglyer or prettier kind of thing, but… there’s always a hesitancy on my part of like, is that that person?

Mike’s account here is particularly striking because he dismissed a prominent aspect of context collapse as a threat to oneself—someone being “uglier or prettier” in person than how they present online—for a more foundational interactional concern: is that the person he thinks it is?

While queer men often described encounters where they recognized the other and were not sure the other recognized them, such as Stavros’s example above, they also recounted uncomfortable instances where they did not recognize the other. Under-scoring how acquainted stranger encounters could occur across contexts, Nate (28, gay), a healthcare professional, described treating a gay patient at his workplace who may or may not have recognized him from an app: “[Eventually] he gets out, and then after the fact…” Nate nervously laughed and cupped his head in his hands before regaining composure, continuing, “He messages me on Scruff! And then I see the old conversations and was like, ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe I talked to this guy for like two weeks every day each morning and I didn’t remember at all.” I asked if he thought this guy had recognized him, and Nate could not say for certain since he did
not continue the interaction: “He just said, ‘Hey’ and I didn’t respond… Looking back through the messages, he was into weird stuff, and that’s why I stopped messaging him before.” In this instance, Nate’s professional and personal identities collided in a way that he did not realize until the other person messaged him on the apps afterwards. Because he was not interested in continuing the digital relationship with this person, the ambiguity of whether there was mutual recognition was never resolved.

In addition to asymmetry around mutual recognition, mobile app users expressed that they sometimes knew too much about people who they did not know offline. For instance, one crisp fall evening I was sitting outside at a gay bar and people watching with James and Alex when a guy whom James had briefly interacted with on Tinder walked by. James took a sip of his drink while the guy passed, evading eye contact. We began to talk about why these encounters are “awkward:”

Author: Do you say hi?
Alex (early 30s, trans/nonbinary): No, I’m awkward about it and I’m like, privately whispering to my friends, “I recognize that person oh my god, blah blah blah.”
Author: Why is it awkward?
Alex: You don’t actually know that person?
James (mid 20s, gay): Sometimes you know too much about them for not having met them personally, and you know from people gossiping that what they’re presenting online is not actually a real thing.
Alex: And if you say hi to someone, then you have to explain to your friends how the fuck you know that person.

These moments can be “awkward” because queer men learn a lot about other app users, whether through direct digital interaction or through gossip, and yet have not met or engaged in meaningful interaction in-person.

Furthermore, queer men routinely engaged in social rituals around their app use, which created indirect acquainted stranger relationships. These rituals ranged from gossiping about other users to sharing intimate photos and private conversations from the apps with friends. In some ways, this is a digitally mediated update to 1970s urban gay men’s sociability around “disco, drugs, dish [gossip], and dick” (Levine 1998, 70). Levine (1998) and other queer ethnographers show how rituals such as gossip or “spilling tea” demarcate boundaries of belonging within and between queer communities (e.g. Johnson 2012). For Andrew, socializing with friends around the apps is “one of [his] favorite activities:”

We’re coming down from the evening, sitting on the couch, and people just open up Grindr, and then everybody looks over their shoulder and is like, “Oh, what about that guy?” As a friend group we behave like cheerleaders for our one friend who’s trying to get it in that night, or who needs it the most that night, and that’s a fun aspect of it, you know?
Through using hookup apps socially rather than individually, queer men gained knowledge of other app users by looking over their friends’ shoulders rather than directly interacting with them.

In practice, gossip rituals brought established friends together through information sharing, but they did so by further distancing themselves from acquainted strangers. For example, one night, Steven (28, gay) and I were waiting in a long line for the upstairs dancefloor at a gay bar. I overheard two white guys in front of us gossiping about some of the men they see around the bar. “See that guy on the stairs?” one said to his friend. “I’ve talked to him on Grindr and he says he’s a top, but he’s totally a bottom.” “Which one?” his friend asked. “In the white shirt.” I tried to catch Steven’s eye to see if he is also overhearing this, but his focus was elsewhere. Later, as we walked out of the bar, I mentioned this conversation and Steven said he saw him too and he knew whom I was talking about. Steven opened Grindr on his phone; the orange glow from the app loading briefly illuminated his face in the dark. He quickly pulled up the profile of the guy in the white shirt; he used to hook up with him and his ex-boyfriend last year. “He is, in fact, a top.” In full gossip mode, he shared that one of the guys who was standing in front of us in line has trouble getting erections. Steven “tapped” his profile, which sent the guy a fire emoji from Steven’s Grindr account. “I would hook up with him again,” he shrugged. It is particularly striking, and characteristic, that none of the bar patrons interacted outside their friend groups—at least face-to-face.

In addition, a common social ritual that produced indirect acquainted stranger relationships involved people sharing other app users’ “nudes” with friends. For example, Jorge (26, gay) expressed that it was “really embarrassing” when friends would show him nude photos of guys who he later served at his job as a barista. James’s words echo here: “Sometimes you know too much about [a person] for not having met them personally.” While app users did not feel that they knew someone in these contexts, they did know a lot about them.

This uncertainty is made more complex because the meaning of sharing nude photos varies in queer communities. Of course, sharing someone’s information and photos with friends raises important concerns about privacy and consent for scholars and laymen alike, and especially for queer social media users (Corriero and Tong 2016; Kennedy and Moss 2015; Renninger 2015). Some patrons expressed in interviews that they no longer send others’ nude photos in group chats for this reason. At the same time, some people were aware that sharing private information about themselves on the apps meant it might be shared with a broader audience than they intended. Furthermore, the practice of sharing others’ nude photos could also be a form of identity work as people assert a positive queer identity. This was particularly apparent when Alex, a trans/nonbinary club-goer, discussed the divergent meanings of nude photos in the gay versus straight world. For them, seeing and sharing “dick pics” made them feel part of a gay world as “someone who is slowly crossing the gender divide:”

As a woman, I don’t want a dick pic. On straight-ish apps, if you send me a dick pic you’re fucking done, canceled, get the fuck out of here, inappropriate, and it’s rape culture in that setting… I think that’s why it’s fun because in gay
world it’s not seen as gross because of a power dynamic. It’s coming from a place of, “Hey, I’m interested [in you], this is me, do you want this too? Let’s swap pictures.” … I mean I just want to see dicks, I think they’re fun to look at or interesting… I feel like it’s entering into this taboo thing that I was raised as a woman to not want… I want to be part of some piece of gay culture that I felt like I couldn’t access before.

While some queer men interpreted seeing nude photos as gaining an extraordinary amount of information about someone they did not know, Alex seemed to interpret seeing nude photos as much more ordinary in a queer male context and detached from the person’s identity (e.g. “I just want to see dicks, I think they’re fun to look at”). Both orientations towards nude photos seem to suggest problems for cognitive recognition in-person.

This section contributes to literature on hybridized queer socializing (e.g., Johnson 2012; Levine 1998) and raises interesting implications for classic sociological theories of interaction in the digital era. For example, Erving Goffman stressed throughout his work that people strategically try to glean as much information from others as they can while trying to suppress unfavorable information about themselves in everyday interactions. My informants’ experiences, however, suggest that possessing too much information about others creates an interactional burden. Queer men not only engage in impression management to protect themselves in acquainted stranger encounters, but they also must engage in information management wherein they have to conceal the amount of knowledge they have about the other. This additional interpersonal task inhibits some men from acknowledging these people altogether. As my informants detailed, this can result in negative emotions or social stress (Baldor 2022).

Social Recognition Uncertainty

In contrast to cultural norms around navigating analog stranger relationships, a key theme that emerged in my fieldwork is the lack of consensus among queer men around whether digital interactions carry moral obligations to acknowledge the digital in-person. Some queer men felt that there is no obligation to regard digital relationships offline, while others, especially when ignored by an acquainted stranger in public, expressed that there is some obligatory acknowledgement. Consequently, people cannot reliably predict how these types of situations, whether they occur in gay bars or elsewhere, might play out. For example, even when men tried to enact a social rule for themselves to at least wave to acquainted strangers on the street, not having that acknowledgment reciprocated could feel embarrassing or aggravating. One patron relayed: “I say ‘Hi’ and sometimes they don’t respond. It’s really awkward. They give me a cold stare and then I’m just a crazy person talking to myself.”

Queer men seemed to agree that broader contextual factors affected whether they would acknowledge a digital relationship offline situationally. For example, if they were interested in establishing an offline relationship of some kind they would acknowledge, or if the other person seemed preoccupied in a friend group, they would not. However, the broader frames around Grindr and community help organize these situational contextual factors.

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I argue that this lack of consensus stems from conflicting definitions of the digital situation: are apps separate from, or a digital extension of, in-person gay community? Does the app place moral demands upon the individual? While people who framed the app through a community lens felt more pressure to acknowledge acquainted strangers offline, others framed the app through an individualistic lens and felt less obligation to acknowledge others offline.

Some users frame apps as distinct from their offline worlds, even those that are location aware like Grindr. For example, Pi (30, trans/nonbinary) likened their approach to saying hi to acquainted strangers only when they feel like it (rather than feeling a social obligation to do so) as “similar to my approach that you don’t have to say hi to everyone.” They suggest that social contexts are distinct from public spaces like the sidewalk:

There are a lot of times where there are people from the apps whom I pass on the street, and some people [I give] a smile and wave. Some people there’s no eye contact whatsoever, which is always kind of weird. But I also feel that, too—sometimes you don’t [want to acknowledge them], it’s kind of like social exhaustion. I’m hooking up with so many people. I’m not looking to add people [from the apps] into my life, into the social rolodex that I have… I don’t want to stop and have a conversation with this person, I’m just trying to get coffee or get to the gym.

Pi framed the apps and the street as separate in part to manage “social exhaustion,” which evokes Milgram’s (1977) argument that familiar strangers do not interact to manage social overload. Milgram stated that “we permit a person to impinge on us perceptually, but close off any further interaction” (53). It is a management strategy to separate the apps from other contexts.

Similarly, Steven underscored how gay public spaces are fraught with social overload due to apps and socializing in gay social networks by expressing that “there’s all this knowing.” To combat “knowing,” Steven tried to reassert that he does not actually know most of these “strangers” he encounters, especially those from the apps: “I used to feel really shitty [when I saw someone on Grindr in the bars] because I was like, ‘Oh but you know me.’ I don’t really know them. They don’t really know me… They’re different worlds, at least in my head. I separate them.”

In contrast to framing the apps as independent from other contexts, other users framed apps as interdependent with their local milieu. For instance, some men expressed that once you acknowledge a digital interaction offline, the normative rules of socializing with acquaintances are activated. For example, one night, Chris and I attended a queer warehouse party located several miles from the Gayborhood. On the dancefloor, he recognized a guy from Tinder, who danced near us with his friends. Chris was not interested in interacting with him and purposefully avoided showing recognition:

I saw him [on the dancefloor] and I was unclear if he had seen me. And my feeling right then was, “I don’t really want to engage with this person…” So I was like, “Okay, not gonna deal with that.” But then I realized that he was looking
at his friends, who were standing right next to me. There was nobody between
him and I. And my feeling was, “This is interesting. I know this person from the
apps and I’m aware of their existence. Are they aware of mine?” I didn’t have
the answer to that, but I certainly did not feel like I needed to say hi to him. But
I did feel like there was a [tacit understanding that] if you both acknowledge
that you are who you are, through eye contact or body language or a wave or a
nod… then I would have felt like I needed to say hi. And as a result, I tried to
avoid eye contact at all costs.

In this situation, Chris wrestled with cognitive recognition yet leveraged its inher-
ent ambiguity in these situations to avoid interaction. While perhaps giving a cold
shoulder to the other person, Chris obeyed normative codes around what to do when
confronted with an acquaintance, which suggested that he saw his digital interactions
as intertwined with in-person commitments (Goffman 1963).

This interconnection was particularly illuminated when men framed the app con-
textually based on where they were, which shaped how they interacted with people
online and how they regarded acquainted strangers offline. For example, Stavros
reported that he used to view Grindr, which he used exclusively to find sex, as an
app separate from his social life until he moved to a gay neighborhood: “Before I
moved, I was very much into the understanding that you don’t have to acknowledge
people that you talk to on Grindr. You don’t have to say hi if you walk by them—who
cares?” Living where many gay people live and socialize, he found that his digital
interactions were inextricable from his offline interactions, which changed how he
framed and used the app:

I can’t [ignore people] anymore. Say you ignore someone, and then you go to
a party, and they’re there and are like, your friend’s best friend. Then you leave
the party, and they go, “Well, let me tell you a story about that shitty person.”…
And I want to take it a step further and say, a lot of times, if I’m not interested
in someone on Grindr, I just ignore them. I just don’t answer the messages. And
then they’re your friend’s bestie. I learned to just answer and be nice. It’s a lot
of work. It makes me be on Grindr less, that’s for sure.

Stavros found that living and socializing in a physical gay community rendered an
app that he used for casual sex a digital space that more closely approximated face-to-
face contexts where interactions have “a distinctive moral character” whereby people
“expect that others will value and treat [them] in an appropriate way” (Goffman 1959,
13). He suggested this was a negative shift (“It’s a lot of work”) and reported that he
now only used Grindr late at night when “drunk or desperate.”

Others similarly felt that managing acquainted stranger relationships was “higher
stakes” when encounters occurred in their daily rounds. While Stavros’s sense of
accountability on and off Grindr increased when he moved to the Gayborhood,
Andrew shifted his approach depending upon where he was:

If I’m on a work trip and I am on Grindr… it doesn’t really matter if I ignore
them [in public]. But if I don’t acknowledge somebody’s existence [in my
neighborhood], or I don’t acknowledge that I have encountered this person on the apps, I might be putting myself in danger of doing something stupid or coming off as mean or dismissive to someone who may very well enter into my life by any other means... one of the weird things about living in large cities is like, if this person shows up on your grid, you probably have friends in common.

Even though apps like Grindr might seem to privatize cruising rituals (cf. Ahlm 2017), Andrew underscored how users are not as anonymous as they appear, even in big cities.

These two cultural frames for understanding apps and their moral demands conflict, which can generate tension when acquainted strangers are not operating from the same interaction code. In an illustrative example of how these frames create friction, Andrew shared a “consistently frustrating” experience of using Grindr through a neighborly lens to interact with someone in his building who did not seem to share his perspective. First, Andrew shows how issues around “being seen” (cf. Blackwell et al. 2015) can complicate in-person relations:

I [first] encountered him in the elevator. I said, “Hi how’s it going,” and he did not respond to me, he did not look at me, he did not make eye contact with me… And then I noticed that he was also showing up on my [Grindr] grid. I don’t know how long this has been going on; I don’t know when he moved into the building versus when he showed up on the grid. He may have recognized me from the grid and been like, “I don’t want to talk to this person because they’re another fag in the building and I don’t want to encounter them” or “I’m afraid of having any type of relationship that goes beyond neighborly with my neighbor.”

Andrew questioned whether his neighbor had seen him on Grindr before Andrew saw him, which could have explained why the neighbor snubbed him in-person. Regardless, Andrew, framing the app as a community tool, messaged him on the app as part of his “neighboring” practice (Kusenbach 2006) because he was dog-sitting and knew his neighbor also had a dog:

I messaged him on Grindr [about a doggy playdate]. No response, and I get it; in his bio he makes it very clear that he’s looking for something that is not me, and that’s fine. But... this is somebody who is a neighbor and I don’t have another way of reaching out to this person. I don’t know what apartment he lives in, I don’t know his name, and he won’t say hi to me. But I did feel like this is somebody who ostensibly would be part of my neighborhood community because he lives in the same building, he’s gay, and he, in this case, has a dog and he goes out and spends time on the roof just like I do. And all of those things, to me, combined to make somebody who maybe you would interact with outside of the apps...

While Andrew framed, and attempted to interact with, his gay neighbor as a neighbor and not a potential sexual partner, their co-presence on a mobile app known
for producing digital ambiguities (cf. Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz 2018) muddled his intentions. Doubling down on his view that Grindr should not be an impediment to building contact with neighbors, he expressed:

Maybe I’m too much of an idealist about what a neighborhood should feel like but like… you’re living in the middle of a neighborhood that is made better by people knowing each other and hanging out with each other and meeting people in the building feels like a good thing to do. It’s annoying to me that this person wouldn’t do that.

It is a reasonable possibility that Andrew’s neighbor was trying to maintain boundaries of privacy by ignoring Andrew. If this was the case, both Andrew and his neighbor may have experienced one another as bad neighbors. Andrew’s experience unites the moral questions: What do we owe our neighbors, and what do we owe fellow mobile app users? The pairing of these two questions underscores how navigating acquainted stranger encounters are not confined to the public sphere. The stakes of whether to regard acquainted strangers not only mark interpersonal acceptance/rejection but community or identity-based belonging as well.

Discussion

The hybridization of everyday life is producing novel digitally mediated social relationships, which produces new interactional dilemmas around how to navigate and manage them in analog encounters. In contrast to the routine and generally predictable rituals of co-present strangers prior to the digital age, people now routinely encounter acquainted strangers in-person and experience these encounters as unpredictable despite their frequency. Incorporating both new media and sociological theory, I argue that acquainted stranger encounters are moments of context collision that complicate two interactional processes of initial interaction—cognitive and social recognition. I find that cognitive recognition between acquainted strangers is marked by several forms of relational uncertainty (e.g. “I know them but do they know me?”), which affects social recognition (e.g. “I do not know how to interact with this person because I do not know what our relationship is”). In some instances, queer men questioned what it means to “know” an acquainted stranger at all as they struggled to reconcile the gap between knowing intimate details—learned directly through digital interaction or indirectly through social rituals of gossip or photo sharing—about someone online and not knowing them offline. Furthermore, I find that queer men variably frame digital interaction as necessitating offline social recognition. Queer men I spoke to had varied perspectives on whether digital acquaintances are simply in-person strangers, and thus can be ignored as such, or whether they are more than strangers and thus must be acknowledged. This variation or lack of consensus produces uncertain situations, which I argue stems from conflicting definitions of the digital situation: are apps separate from, or a digital extension of, in-person community?
There may be other explanations for why these encounters are routine yet uncertain, such as app users managing stigma around promiscuity (cf. Ahlm 2017). However, stigma cannot fully explain these findings. First, most queer men I spoke to did not frame using hookup apps as shameful or embarrassing. Most were openly, visibly on the apps and resided in generally gay-friendly urban neighborhoods. Even men who used their face photos on the apps, and who connected their personal social media accounts such as Instagram to them, experienced uncertainty in the presence of acquainted strangers.

This study’s focus on queer mobile hookup app users colliding with one another in non-sexual, public encounters contributes to understandings of how the digital shapes—and complicates—queer belonging (e.g., McGlotten 2013; Mowlabocus 2016). As a theoretical case, these lessons can extend to other mobile dating and hookup app contexts and beyond. For example, Lundquist and Curington (2019, 24) find that college students who use dating apps manage acquainted stranger encounters on campus, including in class, at affinity group student meetings, and in their dorms. Given that regarding acquainted strangers mark not only interpersonal acceptance but also broader forms of belonging (e.g., belonging to a queer collective, neighborly community), acquainted stranger encounters may meaningfully shape college students’ experiences and wellbeing on campus.

Beyond dating and hookup apps, we generate acquainted stranger relationships as we interact with wider audiences than ever before through social media. We can also see conflicting views of mobile apps and how they relate to in-person commitments in other contexts, such as co-workers friending one another on Facebook (Frampton and Child 2013). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the extent to which we generate and sustain exclusively virtual social connections (Nguyen et al. 2021). The shift to remote work and school creates contexts where people have never interacted with others face-to-face whom they would have had close in-person contact otherwise. Clubs, meetings, and events of all kinds can now take place on digital platforms rather than in-person, even when participants are geographically proximate. When we run into these digital acquaintances in-person, we may wonder whether that is the person we think it is. We may also wonder whether we should say hi to them, or whether they would want us to say hi to them. From the other’s perspective, we may come off as cold or flippant if we ignore them, or intrusive if we regard them.

This paper underscores how all ethnographies are digital ethnographies in the digital age. I did not initially conceive of this project as a digital one. However, my attention to face-to-face interactions inductively led me to digital issues as queer men’s in-person interactions were inextricably linked to their digital selves, interactions, and relationships. Beyond the case of nightlife, consider the classroom. The digital age can both facilitate and impede learning. As an educator, my students bring theories and concepts from TikTok and Twitter into class with them, which produces engaging discussion. At the same time, I compete with social media for their attention. Studying my classroom without attending to my students’ digital lives would render that social reality woefully incomplete. The ubiquity of social media renders all institutional contexts hybridized, and this is ripe for further sociological inquiry.
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