The case of Grindr and gay men’s embodiment and body image through new media

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ABSTRACT

Grindr is a geo-social based dating application (app) that allows men who have sex with men (MSM) to connect with each other based on sexual preferences and appearance. The popularization of Grindr over the last decade and its major influence on the MSM community has brought about new queries into its usage, body image, and masculine (dis)embodiment, particularly due to its userbase being heavily appearance-focused. MSM in general are an understudied demographic in the body image literature. MSM have reported greater negative body image than their heterosexual counterparts pertaining to masculine identity, physical appearance, and sexualized self-presentation. To investigate the relationship between Grindr, body image, and MSM’s (dis)embodiment, a qualitative case study design was utilized. Nine MSM who had used Grindr took part in a semi-structured interview. Two data-driven themes were identified from the reflexive thematic analysis process; ‘No fats, no femmes, no Asians’ which explored the issues of social performativity and body image experiences on Grindr; and ‘Grindr doesn’t allow for... people to really express themselves’ which explored the experiences of using cyberspace dating and its effects on body image and self-presentation. Participants unanimously identified that their experiences on Grindr were catalysts for maladaptive behaviors, including excessive exercise, self-objectification, and disembodiment pertaining to their genuine self-identity. Body image was described as both a relationship one has with their body and as the ascription of others’ opinions of one’s body. The disembodiment expressed was related to notions of performative masculinity to gain attention rather than being true to one’s self. Additionally, it was identified that for appearance-focused MSM, there remains issues of understanding what (positive) body image actually is. Participants described the complex relationships between sexual performativity, short-term satisfaction, and the necessity of others’
opinions for understanding their (positive) body image. Ultimately, Grindr was identified to be a negative cyberspace which facilitates curated ideal-self presentation that focuses on self-objectification for the pleasure of other MSM as a way of being perceived as desirable.

Key Words: Body image, Embodiment, Grindr, MSM, Self-presentation
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CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Body Image

Body image is a multidimensional construct, encompassing self-perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors pertaining to bodily appearance and function (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Cash (2012) has described body image using a cognitive-behavioral model that outlines a person’s relationship with their body. In this model body image is separated into two main domains, perceptual and attitudinal. Perceptual aspects of body image outline one’s beliefs about what their body looks like (i.e., an individual’s subjective perceptions of their body, particularly size and shape, versus the objective reality). Attitudinal aspects of body image are slightly more complex. Within this framework, attitudes relate to cognitions (thoughts), affect (feelings), and behaviors (related to the previous aspects) pertaining to their body. These attitudinal aspects of body image can encompass evaluations and investment regarding one’s body. Evaluations refer to the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the body, whereas investment refers to the importance of appearance ideals in relation to self-evaluation (e.g., self-esteem) which may be reflected in such beliefs as drives for thinness, muscularity, and/or leanness, or behaviors such as diet and exercise. Body image research has predominantly been conducted with adolescent and young adult, White, able-bodied, heterosexual women using quantitative measures. However, with research focusing on the effects of various biopsychosocial influences on body image, researchers have begun to investigate other demographics, such as various ages, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities (e.g., Cash & Smolak, 2011; Grogan, 2017).

As illustrated by Cash (2011, 2012), the multidimensionality of body image reflects environmental influences, the media, cultural values, and interpersonal relationships, as well as
one’s biological and psychological predispositions. The body plays a major role in how people articulate meaning through cultural categorization, physical adornments (tattoos, piercings), sexuality, and gender expression (Crawford, 2006; Vasilovsky & Gurevich, 2017). These variables all have extrinsic and intrinsic sociocultural rewards. Turner (2002) emphasized how the body creates social meaning, coining the phrase “somatic society.” They describe this phenomenon as a way for the body to non-verbally communicate social class, health status, ideals, norms, and body constructs.

Negative body image. A majority of the body image literature has examined negative body image (Tylka, 2011). Negative body image includes negative perceptions and attitudes about one’s body. In their review of the literature, Cash and Smolak (2011) and Grogan (2017) have identified studies correlating negative body image to body disturbance, objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), social comparisons (Festinger, 1954), self-ideal discrepancies, and internalization of unrealistic sociocultural ideals leading to poor mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, lowered self and body esteem). Negative body image may also be reflected in body evaluations such as body dissatisfaction, investment in appearance ideals such as the drive for muscularity and leanness in men or the drive for thinness in women, and social physique anxiety. Negative body image can be influenced by various factors, including media pressures, family and peers, in addition to comorbidities like acne, obesity, and incurable diseases (De Jesus et al., 2015).

Positive body image. By contrast, positive body image is a unique, holistic construct, distinct from negative body image. It refers to a love and respect for the body, where one appreciates their own unique beauty and capabilities even if they do not match sociocultural ideals (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). An individual with positive body image feels
comfortable in their body, has a mind-body connection, and uses self-protective behaviors that critique problematic external influences, such as photo-shopped imagery. Individuals with positive body image may be more aware of their body experiences and positive body image may help them positively cope with challenges (Menzel & Levine, 2011).

Positive body image is shaped by numerous interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) outlined these features in their holistic body image model. They outlined three processes of positive body image: reciprocity (interplay of various sociocultural sources), filtering (the acceptance or rejection of information from these sources), and fluidity (adaptability and flexibility of one’s attitudes and perceptions) as processes of positive body image. Additionally, sociocultural factors and one’s level of acceptance of these factors influences body image. In this same study on positive body image on young adult women, Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) reported that a portion of their sample identified unconditional love and acceptance from others and spirituality to be factors in developing, maintaining, and reciprocating body positive attitudes towards themselves and others.

**Embodiment: A Working Definition**

In conjunction with the growing research on positive body image, research has begun to conceptualize the importance of embodiment in relation to one’s experiences within their body. Although embodiment is broadly conceptual and varies between disciplines, body image researchers describe it as having a strong connection with one’s body, the belief that the body deserves positive experiences and feelings, and that one is aligned with his/her body (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Tylka, 2011, 2015). Embodiment refers to a mind-body experience reflective of one’s culture, society, and personal values. It is a cyclical experience where one’s body experiences a phenomenon, which then is regulated by their mind, and then is projected back
outwards to the world around them (Csordas, 1990). The body is a medium by which culture can be enacted and appraised, where the self is an object of perception and a subject of normative practices (Csordas, 1990). Thus, the body is situated as both a sensational and sentinel, precept subject, interacting with, and reflecting on, other subject-objects within a sociocultural context (Csordas, 1990, Piran, 2016, Menzel & Levine, 2011). Embodiment underscores the importance of trusting the body to be comfortable, deserving of respect, and a self-awareness that is reflected in positive and in-tune bodily behaviors (Tylka 2011, 2015). Research suggests embodying experiences leading to embodiment are ameliorative measures to not only reduce negative body image, but to also promote positive body image rather than just having one tolerate their body (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). For example, Mahlo and Tiggemann (2016) investigated body appreciation, embodiment and self-objectification in 124 Iyengar yoga, 69 Bikram yoga, and 127 non-yoga practicing females aged 22-75, 18-66, and 17-57 respectively. It was found that those who participated in yoga reported higher scores on measures of body appreciation, embodiment, and lower scores on self-objectification.

Just as body image requires a holistic understanding of numerous biopsychosocial factors, there is a need to conceptualize embodiment in a more holistic manner as well. A recent model proposed by Piran (2016) has emphasized the importance of a construct called disembodiment using her developmental model of embodiment. This model is rooted in a grounded theory approach that outlines five unique aspects of positive embodiment, and more uniquely introduces the concept of negative embodiment. It is the first known model rooted in empirical evidence from the life-histories of girls and women. Piran (2016) proposes that these constructs of embodiment are the bridging gap between positive and negative body image; embodied and disembodied experiences are reflective of people’s perceptions and attitudes about
their bodies. These dimensions are: (1) the experiences of engaging with the body as either comfortable or problematic; (2) agency and functionality versus restricted agency and restraint; (3) experiences and expression of desire versus disrupted connection to desire; (4) attuned self-care versus disrupted attunement, neglect and self-care; and (5) inhabiting the body as a subjective site versus as an objective site. Piran (2016) also rationalizes the needed for a middle ground between positive or negative embodiment. An individual may not feel strongly on either aspect of embodiment (i.e., positive or negative) as it may be dependent on situations, environments, others, and the self. These five dimensions are situated in, and can reflect, various aspects of both negative and positive body image simultaneously.

**Body Image in Men: A General Understanding**

A large subset of the body image literature has described the nuances of men’s body image (Grogan, 2017; Cash & Smolak, 2011; Grogan & Richards, 2002). As Bordo (2013) describes it, body image concerns and maladaptive eating and exercise behaviors are not solely for the middle-class White girl, but a growing phenomenon in minority groups, including varied sexual orientations and genders. Unlike studies with women that focus on the thin ideal, a clear majority of the work with men has focused on the muscular and lean ideal (Grogan, 2017). Sociocultural pressures and interpersonal relationships underscore the importance of physiological aspects of men’s bodies that emphasize their masculinity, power, and social competence. Reflecting this social construction of the ideal, the masculine body ideal emphasizes a body characterized by a broad chest and back, defined shoulders, defined abdominals, low body fat, and taller height (Cibralic & Conti, 2018; Griffiths, Murray, Krug, & McLean, 2018; Grogan & Richards, 2002; McCreary, 2011; Pope, Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000).
The interplay of these masculine characteristics is designed to perpetuate the idea that bodies are visual tools for social success, and less so functional and unique beings. As a result of this phenomenon, men often report a drive for muscularity and drive for leanness (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Grogan, 2017). The drive for muscularity emphasizes a need to expand one’s hypertrophic levels to unrealistic and difficult to obtain and maintain levels. Similarly, the drive for leanness emphasizes a need to sculpt a muscular body’s definition by drastically reducing one’s body fat percentage to achieve a “ripped” appearance. These two drives are interconnected because if someone only has muscularity without leanness, they may still be perceived as fat. Also, if one is just lean, then they may be regarded as skinny. Failing to meet either factor can increase the discrepancy between one’s perceived body and the male appearance ideal. Similarly, researchers have shown the importance of height in affecting a man’s body image (Griffiths, Murray, Medeiros, & Blashill, 2017). Those who are shorter or taller than the height ideal (185 cm via Griffiths et al., 2017) may feel that they are less attractive because of it. Additional contributors to men’s body image experiences include hairlessness, youth/ageism, and penis size (Cibralic & Conti, 2018; McCreary, Hildebrandt, Heinberg, Broughs, & Thompson, 2007; Murray, Nagata, Griffiths, Calzo, Brown, Mitchison et al., 2017). By achieving these ideals, men are assumed to attain social capital, which reflects sport and social competence, status, ascribed masculinity, and sexual desirability (Cibralic & Conti, 2018; McCreary, 2011; Schneider, Rollitz, Voracek, & Hennig-Fast, 2016).

**Negative body image in men.** A recent study conducted by Fallon, Harris, and Johnson (2014) looked at the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in US adults. They investigated the overall estimated rates of body dissatisfaction among US men and women \( n = 1893 \), to examine body dissatisfaction in different subgroups and compare the results with those
previously published. It was reported male body dissatisfaction rates ranged from 9% - 28.4% overall, which was identified to be comparable to previous research 1973 to 1997, suggesting that body dissatisfaction may have remained relatively stable over time (e.g., Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding (2014) reported 8%-61% in their meta-analysis). Although there are limitations to these studies, they offer insight for future research on men’s body image, particularly their body dissatisfaction. For example, researchers should come closer to a more universal understanding of how to interpret men’s body dissatisfaction due to the variation in measures or items used, as well as researchers’ differing operational cut-offs of dissatisfaction. More intuitive measures or methodologies would be necessary for capturing men’s body dissatisfaction, because they may be less likely to experience body dissatisfaction or are at least less likely to report it in similar ways to women due to sociocultural assumptions about masculinity. Although dissatisfaction rates for men may be lower than women (9-28.4% versus 13.4%-31.8% respectively), it does not necessarily mean they are satisfied with their bodies. Like women, men may experience a ‘normative discontent’ with their bodies, which describes the normalization of negative body image in everyday society due to individuals not meeting societal appearance ideals (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984).

The adverse psychological and behavioral outcomes of negative body image are abundant in male populations. Although men are more likely to report a drive for an unattainable muscular physique than women, like women, men still fear fat and perpetuate negative stereotypes of fat bodies between each other (Brown & Graham, 2008; Galli, Petrie, Reel, Greenleaf, & Carter, 2015; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Thompson & Cafri, 2007). For example, a study conducted by Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, and Joiner (2011) investigated the relationship between body dissatisfaction and body fat in 204 males. Body dissatisfaction related to body fat specifically
was predictive of maladaptive eating behavior in homosexual and heterosexual men. Matera, Nerini, and Stefanile (2018) also identified body fat-related dissatisfaction to be one of the variables related to interest in cosmetic surgery in 204 Italian men. The investment in the lean and muscular appearance ideals may be associated with a plethora of dysfunctional perceptions and attitudes in men. Some negative cognitive outcomes include perfectionism, low self-esteem, perceived low self-competence, and body dissatisfaction (Bardone-Cone, Cass, & Ford, 2008; Nowell & Ricciardelli, 2008; Olivardia, Pope Jr, Borowiecki III, & Cohane 2004; Ricciardelli & McCade, 2001). Dysfunctional behaviors related to negative body image in men include excessive exercise, strict dieting, negative body talk, and increased risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abuse; Devrim, Biligic, & Hongu, 2018; Murray et al., 2017; Lamarche, Gammage, & Ozimok, 2018; Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007; Thompson & Cafri, 2007).

Positive body in men. Positive body image outcomes are an understudied aspect of men’s body image. In the negative body image literature, men report overall less body dissatisfaction and negative outcomes than women, but that does not necessarily mean they have positive body image. However, several studies have begun to contextualize how positive body image appears in adolescent boys and adult men. Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) investigated positive body image among 15 male and 15 female Swedish adolescents. It was reported a positive body image was reflected in an overall sense of body protection and appreciation among their sample. From their interviews, they found that both adolescent girls and boys rationalized and accepted their imperfections as part of who they were, used exercise in health-positive and enjoyable ways, rejected negative body talk, and reported that the interpersonal and social messages they received were less body-ideal focused, which helped emphasize the importance of non-appearance-based aspects of themselves. Similarly, in a sample of 15 women and 16 men aged 26-27, Gattario and
Frisén (2019) investigated the progression or development of positive body image from adolescence to young adulthood. They reported that past the age of 18, most of their sample had better relationships with their bodies. Using a mixed-methods design, they identified that their sample had high scores of body appreciation. The participants stated that their transition from negative body image to positive body image was a result of several factors such as removing themselves from negative peer influences, finding social spaces that were accepting and cultivating of their life’s purpose, healthy interpersonal relationships, and agency. Participants also actively tried to improve their body image by rejecting or filtering out negative information and attributing negative costs to trying to pursue the ideal. Men in the study reported using media-images in a motivational way, and that body change was an aspect of their overall self-improvement, while remaining critical of the media. The themes in this study are in line with the present literature on positive body image and embodiment that look at body attunement, self-care, mentoring others to like their body, and filtering media information (e.g., Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

A study conducted by Gillen (2015) investigated the relationship between positive body image (body appreciation) and mental and physical health outcomes including depression, self-esteem, dieting behaviors, drive for muscularity, and intentions for using sun protection in a mixed gender sample of 284 individuals aged 18-59. She reported participants with higher body appreciation scores reported fewer depressed symptoms, higher self-esteem, fewer maladaptive eating behaviors, and lower drives for muscularity (although they were higher in men than women). Lower BMI was also associated with higher body appreciation scores. Women in the cohort were more likely to protect their skin if they had higher positive body image than men were.
Conceptualizing Gay Men’s Body Image

Historically, gay men’s body image has been explored in a comparative framework against heterosexual men, heterosexual women, and homosexual women (Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Tiggemann, Martin, & Kirkbride, 2008; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2011). Recently, a systematic review and meta-analysis investigating body image disturbance (BID) and sexual orientation conducted by Dehlenburg, Gleaves, Hutchinson, and Coro (2020) reported that gay men continue to report greater BID than their heterosexual counterparts, while still potentially having greater body satisfaction than heterosexual and/or lesbian women. They allude to the importance of gender being potentially more significant than sexual orientation in identifying BID in general populations. However, for gay men, many factors were proposed as potential factors in influencing their BID and body (dis)satisfaction, including pressure from other men, minority stress (Meyer, 1995), and involvement in the gay community (Kousari-Rad & McLaren, 2013) which will be discussed in further detail. This approach (i.e., comparing gay men to other groups of gay or heterosexual men and women), however, remains limiting as it does not fully encapsulate the varied gay body types, nor understand the life-histories of gay men, resulting in dated assumptions and generalizations about gay men’s (or MSM’s) body image. These assumptions have resulted in a call to better understand gay men’s body image, and to identify whether body image issues are more pronounced in this population or simply more announced (Dehlenburg et al., 2020; Duncan, 2008; Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

In general, previous research has shown gay men have greater body image issues comparatively to heterosexual men. Cognitive outcomes of poorer body image in gay men include negative evaluations including body dissatisfaction, height dissatisfaction, penis size
concerns, and lowered self-esteem (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2011; Peplau, Frederick, Yee, Maisel, Lever, & Ghavami, 2009). Behavioral outcomes of negative body image in gay men include the use of steroids, unprotected or more casual sex, body objectification, and excess shopping to improve body appearance (Goedel, Krebs, Greene, & Duncan, 2017; Griffiths et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2007). Variables such as greater adiposity and race may worsen these issues (Bhambhani, Flynn, Kellum, & Wilson, 2019; Boisvert & Harrell, 2009; Brown & Graham, 2008; Grogan, Conner, & Smithson, 2006; Miller, 2015a, Peplau et al, 2009; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Specifically, men of color who are MSM may be more body image inflexible, meaning that they strongly align with the muscular ideal via attitudes and behaviors, possibly due to the presence of sexual racism within the MSM community, which commodifies whiteness (Bhambhani et al., 2019). In sum, gay men may be more vulnerable than their heterosexual counterparts to experiencing poor body image.

There are several reasons why gay men may report more negative body image outcomes. First, the ideal male body may be more central to gay men’s body image because the mainstream gay community is a more appearance ideal focused group than mainstream heterosexual culture (Dehlenburg et al., 2020; Duncan, 2008; Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). For example, gay men may experience greater opportunities to be exposed to the appearance ideals by participating in gay spaces as most gay media uses these images as attractions or performative pieces (e.g., online communities, drag shows with backup dancers, gogo boys; Adams & Berry, 2013; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006). The impact of these messages and images reiterates the assumption that in order for gay men to succeed in enacting their ‘gay identity’ they must look, act, and be perceived in a certain way
that reflects the gay body ideal (Levesque & Vichesky, 2005; Miller, 2018; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2011; Robinson, 2016). Although there are spaces for other kinds of bodies to exist (e.g., gay bear sub-groups), mainstream gay culture typically emphasizes the muscular ideal during cultural events like Pride (Duncan, 2008; Filialt & Drummond, 2009; Miller, 2015b; Moskowitz, Turrubiates, Lozano, & Hajek, 2013).

Although the presence of the muscular ideal in gay spaces is widespread, there remains some difficulty when identifying a single specific ideal for the gay community, as numerous subcultures within the community all have ideals relative to themselves. Focusing on these more “in-group” definitions of the ideal is superior to the incomprehensive overview the present research provides, as it allows gay men to be the voices of their community. The most commonly identified ideals are the muscular and lean ideal (similar to the mainstream muscular ideal), twinks (young, slender, and hairless), or bears (larger men who are hairier or may be older) and then derivatives of these three main categories (Bhambhani et al., 2019; Brennan, Asakura, George, Newman, Giwa, Hart, et al., 2013; Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Moskowitz et al., 2013). It is also imperative to understand that racialized bodies remain underrepresented in gay body ideals, and that whiteness plays an implicit part in the categorization of what or who is ideal in mainstream gay media and culture (Bhambhani et al., 2019). Overall, research fails to recognize that gay bodies are multifaceted and must be contextualized within the implicit power relationships, intersecting ideologies, and expectations placed onto them (Morrison & McCutcheon, 2011; Grogan, 2017). These include the proliferation of the commodified gay male body and biopsychosocial barriers limiting equitable access to social and cultural capital on gay men (Duncan, 2008; Levesque & Vichesky, 2005).
Viewing the body as a malleable object for the sort of ‘external validation’ that gay men may seek out can be looked at through the lens of objectification theory. First proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) to understand poor mental health in women, objectification theory posits that an individual internalizes an external perspective of their body. Self-objectification may occur through daily interactions or through the media, where one’s body becomes central to their self-concept. Objectification theory has also been contextualized within the gay population as the ‘gay male gaze’ (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2018; Martins et al., 2007; Miller, 2015a; Morrison et al., 2004). Within male samples, men who have sex with men (MSM) have reported greater state and trait self-objectification than heterosexual samples. The relationship between trait self-objectification and lower body dissatisfaction and higher drive for thinness specifically has been shown to be mediated by body shame in MSM (Brewster, Sandil, Brewster, Parent, Chan, Yucel, et al., 2017; Martins et al, 2007). Through this gaze, gay men’s bodies become objects by which Western heteronormative notions of masculinity are rewarded to them if they meet an exclusionary (e.g., difficult to achieve, masculine-muscular) body ideal.

There may be additional reasons as to why gay men self-objectify to achieve the masculine-muscular ideal. For example, the ideal body is both a biological and sociocultural commodity in the visually-focused gay community (Duncan, 2008; Morrison et al., 2004). It has been theorized to enact a ‘protested masculinity’ to repress HIV and/or AIDS stereotyping (Drummond, 2010). It has also been looked at as a site for sexual fetishization and enacted status via heteronormative self-presentation (Brown & Graham, 2008; Duncan, 2008, 2010a; Galli & Reel, 2009; Goedel et al., 2017; Grogan et al. 2006; Miller, 2018; Peplau et al., 2009; Robinson, 2016; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). The masculine-muscular ideal may thus be looked at as a form of visible privilege that circumvents biopsychosocial barriers limiting access to capital
against most gay men (Bardone-Cone et al., 2008; Crawford, 2006; Robinson, 2016; Vasilovsky & Gurevich 2017).

**Minority stress model.** The LGBTQ+ community has been able to cultivate a social space for themselves that has enabled progress towards better inclusivity and acceptance. However, LGBTQ+ individuals like gay men still face chronic environmental and social stresses due to their identities. Meyer (1995) first conceptualized a model of minority stress which posits that because of their queer identity, gay men face discrimination from heteronormative spaces and stigma for being LGBTQ+ as well as internalize homonegativity to compensate for their identity. The minority stress model may offer insight into how gay men’s body image concerns relate to their bodily and masculine-gender ideals (Badenes-Ribera, Fabirs, & Longobardi, 2018; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Morrison & McCutcheon via Cash 2011). Environmental and social stressors may occur from youth, where gay men are socialized through trauma, worry of outing, or isolation for being gay (Drummond, 2010). The stressors may be reflected in how gay men perceive heterosexual male dominated spaces like sports and recreation. For example, while straight men may be socialized to be active for competition, enjoyment, and normative masculinity (even though this does not promote positive body image as discussed previously), gay men may often participate in physical activity due to body image concerns such as weight and shape control to a greater extent than heterosexual men (Brown & Graham, 2008; Galli & Reel, 2009; Grogan et al., 2006; Peplau et al., 2009; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Thus, by being socialized by these stressors, gay men may begin to negatively self-evaluate their masculinity and muscularity due to the expectation of others’ negative evaluations (Brown & Graham, 2008) which has been hypothesized to increase internal distress due to greater self-ideal
discrepancy, drive for muscularity, and body surveillance (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2018; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005).

However, the relationship between minority stress and body image has been under investigated. Limited research has generally reported a correlation between minority stresses and negative body image outcomes. For example, Brewster et al. (2017) investigated the effects of homonegativity on body image in 326 cisgender minority men. It was reported that internalized homonegativity was associated with body dissatisfaction, interest in using steroids, drive for muscularity, and body surveillance. Thus, for gay men the muscular ideal’s utility is a measure of self-protection from socio-environmental stressors that may be damaging (i.e., Chaney, 2008; Goedel et al., 2016; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Levesque & Vichesky, 2005; Morrison et al., 2004; Robinson, 2016).

**Embodiment in Gay Men**

Little to no work has been done on gay men’s embodiment within the framework of body image. I have previously discussed how embodiment is defined within the body image literature and will be primarily using that definition to begin exploring its contexts within gay men’s body image experiences. However, to offer some context into gay men’s embodiment I will briefly review the limited literature in the social sciences. When constructing gay men’s embodiment, we may explore the sociological definitions of embodiment relative to their identities via embodied masculinity through the lifespan. These constructs can be contextualized as reflexive-embodiment. Reflexive embodiment is a process where social discourses are internalized and reflected on the body through behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions (Connell 2000, 2002 as cited by Duncan, 2010a; Vasilovsky & Gurevich, 2017). In the framework I have established (e.g., masculine ideals and minority stress model) we may articulate reflexive embodiment for gay
men to be a “negative” process of de-queering, reducing bodily agency, and promoting disembodiment. Or reflexive embodiment could be a “positive” process, allowing gay men to traverse heteronormative society through their masculine identity. Thus, some gay men may reject overt queerness to gain social status, femininity for the masculine ideal to gain respect, and nuanced gender expression for rigid traditionalism that averts homonegative stereotyping away from them (Duncan, 2010b; Padva, 2002). In studying the self, sexual identity, masculinity, and visibility, Duncan (2010b) reported that the reflexive embodiment practices of gay men were related to body ideals through body hierarchies within the gay community, as the appearance ideal is a form of bio-sociocultural capital. He conceptualizes gay identity embodiment to be a way for gay men to reject the stereotyped and essentialized bodies they are being categorized as and is a method for empowerment. In sum, gay male embodiment is extremely complex, intersecting numerous social factors, and goes beyond the scope of the present study. Although I will be using (dis)embodiment within the study, it will present itself through a lens of body image, as I have described previously. However, outlining this framework underscores the limited knowledge within body image literature regarding gay men’s embodiment in a way that other disciplines have been able to. Thus, one of the aims of the present study explicitly is to further develop the embodiment literature by interpreting the experiences of gay men.

**Media’s Effects on Body Image**

*Traditional mass media and body image.* Sociocultural pressures on people’s body image have often been transmitted by mass media. Traditional mass media may be defined as any visual or auditory medium including magazines, music, video games, TV, or advertising that is consumed by the public. The media informs individuals about pleasure, sexuality, personal identity, moral citizenship, appearance ideals, diet and food, body management, race, and power
Meta-analyses on the effects of mass media on the body image of women and men have found relationships between its consumption and increases in body image concerns. Specifically, the content individuals are exposed to and how they use media has been reported to be detrimental for body image, which I will further detail in later sections (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Generally, viewing media appearance ideals for both women and men have been implicated in promoting negative body image outcomes, including greater body dissatisfaction and a drive for the ideal (e.g., thin, muscular, or lean), poor psychological outcomes, and maladaptive relationships with diet and exercise (Barlett, Voewls, & Saucier, 2008; De Jesus et al., 2015; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008).

There remain limitations in the literature regarding the underlying relationships between body image and traditional media. It is difficult to understand whether media’s effects proliferate negative outcomes, or one’s predispositions may direct them towards media, or both. Causal and longitudinal work remains very limited, especially for male populations (De Jesus et al., 2015).

In summary, the media has generally been implicated as a contributor of negative body image issues.

The internet, social media and body image. Internet media is posited to differ from traditional media due to the way in which the content is produced and viewed. Unlike traditional mainstream media (i.e., television, print magazines, movies), which historically was produced by major corporations, almost anyone can actively engage in internet media as both producers and consumers. One major platform for understanding how the internet works with body image is through social media. Social media may be defined as applications or websites that allow users to post, communicate, like and share information, pictures, or videos with one another. Body image research in social media has often focused on Facebook as it has 2.2 billion users, making it the
most popular platform in the world (Fardouly & Varanian, 2015; Lua, 2019; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Instagram, Pinterest, and other platforms have also gained massive popularity in the last decade, particularly among young adults (aged around 18-29; Tiggemann, Hayden, Brown, & Veldhuis, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019). Similar to the majority of the body image literature, body image and social media research has overwhelmingly focused on cis-gender, young, white women.

Research has generally found associations between amount of usage and the type of usage of social media and negative body image outcomes (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Chou & Edge, 2012; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). More specifically, research has shown greater time spent engaging in image-focused activities like photoshopping, having body-focused conversations, or comparing one’s body to online images to have negative consequences to body image. These consequences include body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and greater thoughts to exercise and diet due to body concerns, in female samples specifically (Bell, Cassarly, & Dunbar, 2018; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Chou & Edge, 2012; Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2018; Tamplin, McLean, & Paxton, 2018; Trekels, Ward, & Eggermont, 2018).

Little work on the relationship between social media and body image has been done on men, particularly gay men. What has been identified is disparate from both the social media literature on women, and the traditional media literature on men. For example, unlike women, for men viewing fitspiration images (an amalgamation of fitness and inspiration) or other idealized social media images has not had a direct effect on their body satisfaction, appearance-based exercise motivation, or appearance investment unlike women in previous studies (Casale,
Gemelli, Calosi, Giangrasso, & Fioravanti, 2019; Fatt, Fardouly & Rapee, 2019). However, an indirect relationship was identified via greater internalization of the muscular ideal and greater appearance comparisons. These findings are dissimilar to previous literature on the effects of traditional media on men’s negative body image (Barlett et al., 2008). These findings may be the result of body image being less salient in men’s lives or the use of these images being different for men than for women (e.g., function and information-focused versus aesthetic or idealized).

**Dating Applications and Body Image**

A newer avenue of inquiry of the effects of social media on body image is dating and hookup social media apps, such as Tinder and Grindr. Dating and hookup apps may be defined as phone or computer apps that allow individuals to find long or short-term partners (i.e., relationships and hookups). As online dating becomes more common, more people are turning to them to find partners. Unique to them, dating and hookup apps blend the social aspect of sites like Facebook with emotional and physical intimacy. They also promote the idea of quick, emotionally unattached sexual encounters.

Gay men are one of the most common users of online dating and hookup apps as they have been reported to be one of the earliest adopters to utilize the internet to communicate, share information, and find like-peers for intimacy (Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Grov et al., 2014 as cited by Breslow et al., 2019). Over the last decade, research has suggested an increase in internet dating and usage frequency by MSM. For example, Smith (2015) reported that, out of the 27% of young Americans who use dating apps, 70% of them were MSM under the age of 35. This corroborates previous rates reported earlier in the decade by Rosser, Wilkerson, Smolenski, Oakes, Konstan, Horvath, et al. (2011; cited by Miller, 2015b) of 85% of MSM men using online dating. The most common way individuals are gaining access to each other are through geo-
social apps (which use GPS to identify other individuals using the app within physical
proximity). For example, Badal, Stryker, DeLuca, and Purcell (2018) reported in their study
using online surveys with 3105 MSM respondents, around half of their sample had used some
kind of dating app or website, with 60% having used Grindr either in the past or at the time of
the study. Additionally, they reported their younger cohort (aged 18-24) were the most frequent
users of apps. Geo-social apps offer gay men the ability to create social support and sexual
networks with like-individuals and are easily accessible mobile applications that are freely
downloaded from any smartphone application store. Like other social media, these apps promote
an opportunity to create virtual spaces where one feels safer than offline spaces to explore their
identity with others while also giving them anonymity. This agency offered to individuals may
allow a more real or ideal self to be presented online with less worry over gay bashing or in-
person rejection, and greater relationship or sexual success. They also allow some gay men to
become more comfortable with their same-sex attraction (Chan, 2017; Miller, 2015a; Moskowitz
et al., 2013).

*Dating media and body image: similar but distinct from social media.* While MSM dating apps
offer a positive space for MSM, research is beginning to explore the possible outcomes of their
usage for gay men’s body image (Miller, 2015a; Roth, 2014). There is limited body image
literature explicitly looking at the possible negative outcomes of dating app usage, so I will be
relying on a study that used a heterosexual sample and several others using MSM samples.

In heterosexual samples, dating apps have been correlated to negative body image
outcomes. Strubel and Petrie (2017) examined Tinder regarding its use and interaction with
gender, and its relationship with body image concerns, internalization, and self-esteem in a
mixed sample of male and female users (n =100) and non-users (n =1047). It was reported that
users generally had lower body satisfaction, higher social comparison tendencies, greater internalization of media ideals, higher body surveillance, and greater body shame. A unique finding of this study was that male users reported lower esteem than all other participant samples. Thus, dating applications may promote negative body image because their model is to offer individuals an abundance of options with few consequences for rejecting others based on their looks irrespective of one’s character or purpose for using the app. Alternatively, men with more negative body image may be more attracted to these apps because they align with their image-centered beliefs.

In MSM populations, dating app usage has been related to poorer body image and psychological outcomes. A recent study conducted by Breslow et al. (2019) tested a model of online objectification to investigate the relationship between dating app usage frequency, number of apps used, online objectification, and body image outcomes including internalization, body surveillance, body satisfaction, and self-esteem using their proposed model in 230 app-using MSM aged 18-68 from the US. The model proposed the number of apps used and frequency of usage would have a positive relationship with online self-objectification (sexualization or objectified self-presentation), which in turn would have a positive relationship with body surveillance and internalization of the ideal (internalization also having a direct effect on body surveillance). Further, the model proposed body surveillance would have a negative relationship with body satisfaction and self-esteem, and body satisfaction would have a direct positive relation with self-esteem. They reported limited support for their online objectification model. The number of apps used was a stronger indicator of the pathway in the model over frequency of usage. This paper is the only study which reports the number of apps having a greater effect on body image. Comparatively, previous literature has reported increased usage frequency using
social media apps to be harmful to users, as I have described previously. Although they reported only weak support for the model, they still present important findings in relation to how the investment in dating apps, whether through time spent on the apps or number of apps being used, is associated with poorer body image outcomes. This may be due to a constant stream of comparison opportunities which may result in poorer body image outcomes (Griffiths et al., 2018).

Grindr and body image outcomes in MSM. The most popular dating app for MSM is Grindr. Grindr, the first formal dating application, was established in 2009 for gay men to find long- and short-term relationships with other men (Chan, 2017). Grindr is described as the largest geo-social networking application for gay, bisexual, and queer men to explore the lifestyle (see Methods for in-depth description; Grindr website). It averages 2.8 million users a day, with average in-app times of 54 minutes (Berslow et al., 2019). This geo-social app uses GPS to identify nearby users, as well as offers filters to find partners with similar interests or attractions. Users are able to upload images of themselves and then describe in great detail using the in-app features, their bodies, demographics, interests, and sexual subgroups (Anderson et al., 2018).

Although Grindr is statistically the most popular of the dating apps for gay men, there are a plethora of other apps that are specialized for specific subcultures of the gay community, such as Scruff and Growlr. These applications appear to be gaining more traction as Grindr is beginning to lose favor in the community. A recent study from the Center for Human Technology (2019) ran a survey with 200,000 iPhone users and found that Grindr had the unhappiest user-base out of all other applications, beating out major social media platforms like Facebook, Weibo, Instagram, Snapchat, and even Tinder. It is imperative to understand why so many MSM on Grindr may feel unhappy after using it, and body image may be an avenue to study this.
To investigate how the effects of body image issues and Grindr use affected sexual wellbeing and body image outcomes, Goedel et al. (2017) examined how weight perception, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification affected sexual behaviors with a sample of 92 MSM recruited from Grindr, with a mean age of 31.73 years and average BMI of 25.79. They investigated how the evaluation (self or other) of masculine or non-masculine male bodies plays a role in self-efficacy and condom use during sexual encounters. It was reported that those who identified as gay and perceived themselves to be overweight reported higher body dissatisfaction than their bisexual counterparts or those who perceived themselves to be underweight, average weight, or obese. Additionally, muscular and height-related dissatisfaction were both related to self-objectification. Those who perceived themselves to be overweight also reported greater sexual sensation seeking. Two-thirds of the sample reported partaking in insertive anal sex and 56.5% reported partaking in receptive anal sex with at least one partner in the last six months. Around 40.2% of this overall sample also participated in unprotected anal sex in the same timeframe. The number of partners for either protected or unprotected sex was also related to sexual sensation seeking scores. These findings corroborate Badal et al.’s (2018) findings that a majority of their MSM sample had mainly casual sex partners within the last year. The researchers hypothesized that those who feel that others may evaluate them more poorly for their bodies due to their own perceived or actual body concerns may be inclined to participate in greater problematic sexual behaviors. This is especially concerning when rates of STIs and the risk of transmitting HIV are higher in this population (Centers for Disease Control, 2018).

To investigate objectification, self-presentation, and mating orientation on Grindr, Anderson et al. (2018) looked at (a) rates of self and other objectification (the objectification of other people’s bodies) between Grindr users ($n = 103$) versus non-users ($n = 66$) in 169
Australian MSM, (b) sexual modes of self-presentation and mating orientation using a content analysis of 1400 Grindr profiles, and (c) the relationship between self and other objectification, visual objectification, sexual disclosure, and risk-taking behaviors on Grindr with 300 MSM who used Grindr at the time of the study. They reported that use of Grindr was not related to self-objectification but was significantly related to the objectification of other men. Similarly, they found that Grindr users were significantly more likely to objectify other men than MSM who did not use the app. Self-objectification and other-objectification were also found to be significantly positively related to each other. This may suggest that, although Grindr itself is not directly related to self-objectification, those who tend to objectify others may be more likely to objectify themselves as well. They also reported that MSM who used Grindr for finding sexual partners were three times more likely than those using it for other purposes to post sexualized images of themselves. This relationship also predicted higher body focus scores (i.e., users’ faces were less likely to be present in the images if users were on the app for finding sexual partners). Self-objectification was also related to finding partners under the influence, less HIV disclosure, but greater disclosure about their sexuality. Similarly, other-objectification was related to greater use of the app for sex, increased chances of findings partners under the influence of drugs, and less frequent discussion of HIV status with their partner. They also reported that closeted men were less likely to post images of their faces on the app, had more body-focused images, and less frequent unprotected sex that out users.

When discussing the dating app environment, it is important to consider the ways in which MSM are presenting their bodies online, including semiotics. For example, Robinson (2016) found that gay men may pursue sexual or romantic partners based solely on how they describe their body through lifestyle habits (e.g., athletic) or quantifications (e.g., penis size,
height, body fat percent). Robinson (2016) termed this the ‘quantifiable-body.’ Quantifying the body permits men opportunities to reject others if they are short, too skinny or fat, or even of a certain racial group. Moreover, due to scant personal interactions needed prior to hooking up, exclusionary or discriminatory behavior may be more prominent (Miller, 2015b). As described previously, research has associated un-ideal bodies with increased risks of unprotected sex and sexual dysfunction in gay populations due to negative body image in those using these applications (e.g., Goedel et al., 2017). These examples illustrate the possible negative body image outcomes related to what takes place on these applications and emphasizes a need to understand the processes better.

Recently, Filice, Raffoul, Meyer, and Neiterman (2019) investigated how the use of Grindr related to several body image outcomes, such as body satisfaction and weight control, and how MSMs’ previous experiences, values, and positionalities affected the relationship between Grindr use and body image outcomes in a group of 13 MSM in an exploratory study. The research team used semi-structured interviews to facilitate discussion regarding Grindr use, MSM’s experiences on Grindr, and body image experiences. They identified several themes across the 13 interviews, including weight stigma, sexual objectification, social comparisons, and protective factors and coping strategies.

Generally, participants identified that the Grindr conversations overemphasized or centered around bodies, which affected their ability to access other men for sexual or romantic purposes, specifically stating that certain in-app and in-person sexual positions (receptive or penetrative) had to look a certain way to engage in sexual or romantic behaviors. A majority of participants felt that the explicit appearance stigma and discrimination present in both conversation and profiles on Grindr (e.g., weight and height) decreased their access to engage in
in-app or in-person activities, sexually objectified them (or others) via a focus on bodies or
dehumanized them, and promoted appearance comparisons (e.g., with photoshopped images).
The participants outlined the critical importance the muscular appearance ideal played in
allowing individuals to have primarily positive experiences when using Grindr, including
deliberately showing off their body to stimulate sexual interactions with others in the MSM
userbase. Furthermore, participants felt that Grindr itself promoted objectification and/or body
stigma by prompting individuals to self-select into body-focused, appearance subgroups (e.g.,
bear, twink, clean-cut). To some participants, the inability for them and others to identify as “fat”
prompted them to feel that Grindr and its user base proliferate negative stereotyping of un-ideal
bodies, promoting body image issues in the population.

A minority of their participants reported that having greater coping mechanisms (e.g.,
higher self-esteem, higher satisfaction, resilience, and interpersonal support) helped with
protecting them from the effects of Grindr. The researchers identified that there needs to be
greater diversity in the types of individuals interviewed, including those with more positive
outcomes when using Grindr (e.g., not just antagonistic to body image), as well as individuals
with varied identities (e.g., transgender).

In sum, the present literature has begun to implicate dating apps, like Grindr, for being
problematic spaces for body image outcomes. This is especially true regarding MSM
objectifying their and others’ bodies, internalizing and perpetuating male appearance ideals,
making social comparisons, and partaking in maladaptive sexual behaviors, which may result in
poorer sexual health, poorer global mental health, and worse body image outcomes.
CHAPTER 2: RATIONALE, PURPOSE, AND PROPOSITIONS

Within the body image literature, MSM are a critically understudied population. Researchers often described MSM’s body image as being similar to heterosexual women’s body image, such as their tendencies to self-objectify, participate in physical activity due to body image concerns, and place an overall greater importance on societal appearance ideals than heterosexual men (Brown & Graham, 2008; Dehlenburg et al., 2020; Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Goedel, Krebs, Greene, & Duncan, 2016; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006). MSM’s body image is shaped by the centrality of appearance ideals within their distinct and visually-focused community (Duncan, 2008; Morrison et al., 2004). Although researchers have begun to explore this community and its members, they have been unable to identify and contextualize the varied experiences of different kinds of MSM bodies. The implications for better understanding MSM’s body image within a more holistic context include the possibility of more intuitive methods to understand MSM’s body image, understanding the variation of MSM identities’ body images (e.g., bears) rather than categorizing them into one uniform group, and unpacking the biopsychosocial barriers pertaining to queer identities and the extensive impact they have on body image (Bhambhani et al, 2019; Miller, 2015b, 2018; Moskowitz et al., 2013). To investigate the above limitations, the present study utilized exploratory qualitative methodologies to best capture the body image experiences of varied gay men existing in dissimilar bodies.

The body image literature describes embodiment as a strong connection with one’s body, the belief that it deserves positive experiences, and being aligned with one’s body; disembodiment is the opposite (Menzel & Levine, 2011; Piran, 2016; Tylka, 2011, 2015).
Similar to the limitations in the overall body image literature pertaining to MSM experiences, researchers as of yet have not developed a framework for understanding embodiment in MSM. What is understood about embodiment in MSM is almost exclusively present in the social science literature as reflexive embodiment. Reflexive embodiment is the process where MSM individuals may either align themselves with traditional masculine roles to circumvent stigma or reinforce their queer identity to challenge stigma (Duncan, 2010b; Padva, 2002). Although the social science framework allows us to understand embodiment in MSM, the body image literature’s definition of embodiment is discrepant from this and requires further exploration within the specific population. The present study will be addressing MSM embodiment by exploring gender and sexuality-based embodied identities and how they relate to MSM body image.

The body image literature focusing on media has shifted to investigate the effects of social media on body image (e.g., Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Although the literature is limited, it has begun to establish the negative consequences of utilizing social media in appearance-centered activities, such as photoshopping images and comparing one’s body to idealized social media images, on individuals’ body image (Chou & Edge, 2012; Cohen et al., 2017). However, understanding the consequences of using social media on men’s body image is almost non-existent. What has been reported thus far has shown the possible development of negative body image outcomes, including greater internalization of the muscular ideal and more upwards appearance comparisons, leading to poorer body satisfaction (Casale et al., 2019; Fatt et al., 2019).

An even newer and less understood subset of social media is dating apps. Dating apps may be critical sites for the development and reinforcement of negative body image concerns
Dating apps may possibly be more deleterious to body image because they mix the social aspects of social media, such as liking, commenting and sharing appearance-based medias, with sexual identity, a very personal aspect of identity that intersects body image. The importance of understanding the effects of dating apps cannot be overstated; as the number of individuals utilizing these apps for long-term relationships and short-term sexual encounters increases (Smith, 2015), greater opportunities for the development of negative body image outcomes arise. For example, a small body of literature has begun to show correlations between the use of dating apps like Tinder with decreased body satisfaction, more comparison tendencies, more self-objectification, and increased body shame in heterosexual samples (Strubel & Petrie, 2017).

Dating applications play a greater role in the intimate relationships of MSM than heterosexual populations. The MSM community was the first group to establish online dating chat rooms and mobile geo-social apps for dating due to the scarcity of available avenues for finding other MSM in real-world, public spaces (Grov et al., 2014 as cited by Breslow et al., 2019). As a result, a vast number of MSM under the age of 35 have used dating applications for relationships and hookups (Smith, 2015). For MSM, dating applications are a way of not only finding romantic partners, but exploring their community and identity (Chan, 2017).

The most prolific dating app for MSM is the geo-social app Grindr. Grindr has millions of annual followers (27 million + active users worldwide via dating app ratings) and is readily used for communication, dating, relationships, and hookups (Grindr, 2019). Although it is the leading MSM app for dating, it also has the most unhappy user-base out of all dating and social media apps (Center for Human Technology, 2019). Grindr presents a unique site for exploring sexual identity, but due to its sex and image-focused nature, many feel that the environment
increases negative body image experiences and public health concerns, including greater self and other objectification as well as participation in unprotected casual sex (Anderson et al., 2018; Goedel et al., 2017; Miller, 2015b; Robinson, 2016). For example, MSM dating app frequency and quantity of apps used have been partially related to increased self and other objectification, internalization of the appearance ideal, and lowered body satisfaction and self-esteem (Breslow et al., 2019). Furthermore, individuals who do not meet appearance ideals or have negative body image are more likely to partake in casual and unprotected sex and use these apps while under the influence of drugs and alcohol (Anderson et al., 2018; Goedel et al., 2017). The use of these applications while having negative body image is explicitly dangerous, as the risk behaviours and outcomes associated to them may increase the chances of transmitting disease (Centers for Disease Control, 2018) and reinforcing negative body image, therefore making the current limited knowledge a public health issue. By understanding how MSM use Grindr, how they feel about using it, and understanding how this use may relate to their relationship with their body, this study will underscore the necessary future directions clinicians and other researchers should take to ameliorate further harm on MSM’s health.

Recently, Filice et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between Grindr and MSM’s body image through an exploratory study focusing on MSMs’ previous experiences, Grindr use, and self-presentation. They reported that Grindr promoted negative body image through its use via objectifying conversations and behaviors, particularly pertaining to weight, body type, and height stigma that influenced the barriers MSM felt regarding sex, acceptance, and positive experiences on Grindr. To protect themselves from negative outcomes, individuals felt they needed to have strong coping strategies (e.g., high self-esteem, and resilience) to protect themselves. This study rationalizes the need for further exploration of Grindr use in MSM
qualitatively. More specifically, the present study seeks to expand and further develop a framework from understanding MSMs’ body image in relation to Grindr use, hookups, embodied experiences of masculinity, and their embodiment in relation to their body image.

**Purpose**

To explore the above stated limitations of the present body image literature, my research questions were as follows:

1. How did young adult MSM (aged 18-29) conceptualize their body image, gay appearance ideal(s), and their embodied identity using the dating app Grindr for relationships and hookups?
   a. What were the explicit and implicit implications for achieving or not achieving the gay male body ideal on Grindr for MSM?
   b. How did this conceptualization affect how they self-present and participate in activities on and off Grindr?
2. How, if at all, did using Grindr for relationships and dating affect MSM’s embodied experiences and how was this related to their overall body image experience?
3. Were the interactions between Grindr and MSMs’ body image primarily antagonistic?

**Propositions**

Due to the qualitative nature of the present study, no hypotheses were proposed, however due to being primed by previous literature I began this investigation with several propositions:
(1) MSM with greater overall dating app use (whether Grindr only or in conjunction with other apps) may describe worse body image experiences.

(2) Individuals who do not meet appearance ideals may describe worse overall body image outcomes related to Grindr use and may describe more problematic behaviors or relationships pertaining to Grindr use.

(3) Individuals who describe negative body image prior to Grindr use may show signs of increased negative body image due to Grindr.

(4) Individuals using Grindr will overall identify that Grindr is a problematic space for body image but will validate its use due to their limited options.

(5) Individuals who attempt to use Grindr mainly for relationships will have worse overall Grindr experiences compared to those who primarily use it for sex.

(6) Individuals who have more positive sexual experiences on Grindr may describe the benefits of Grindr more than the negatives.

(7) Grindr will primarily be described as a hookup app despite the company’s marketing advertising it as something more.

(8) The participation in hookup culture will be implicated for worsened body image experiences, worsened meaningful relationships, or one’s self-perceptions.

(9) Grindr overall will be implicated in proliferating exclusionary appearance ideals within the community.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Research Design

To explore the research questions proposed for this inquiry, I utilized a case study approach. A case study is defined as an in-depth exploration and analysis of a real-world contemporary phenomenon bounded temporally, spatially, contextually, or definitively (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2003). The case study design utilizes various qualitative methodologies to capture the complex and unique perspectives of a phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Case studies are rooted in numerous disciplinary traditions, and may be used to explain ideas, as well as update current theories or challenge them (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Within this research design, I used a framework that was both intrinsic and exploratory. Baxter and Jack (2008) describe an intrinsic framework as one that seeks to investigate a phenomenon that is relevant or important in the researcher’s life-history while exploratory frameworks seek to develop a better understanding of a phenomenon that is understudied. Hence, I opted to further develop the current theoretical dearth pertaining to men’s body image and social media, and more explicitly that of MSM’s body image and the use of Grindr. Additionally, because of my epistemological underpinnings, this research was interpretive in design as opposed to solely qualitative. This interpretive framework fit well within the case study design, as they are both highly flexible, holistic and comparative (Baskarada, 2014; Yin, 2003). The case study model allowed me to critically analyze raw data while allowing me to also illustrate my findings in an evocative and digestible way (Patton 2015a).

Case studies set explicit boundaries around the scope of research. As previously stated, these boundaries are created by space and time, time and activity, definition, and context.
Thomas (2011) proposed a new and concrete framework to assist researchers in identifying these boundaries for social constructionists, described as the object and subject dichotomy. For the sake of simplicity, the object will be described as the ‘thing to be explained,’ and the subject will be the ‘thing that will offer an explanation.’ Within the context of this research, the object was defined as MSM’s body image and social media, and the subject(s) were the bodily experiences of MSM on Grindr. The stated subject was a class of phenomenon that provides an opportunity to illuminate the object of study and bounds the analytical framework, thematic analysis (Thomas, 2011). This format allowed the study to remain holistic, allowed for comparisons of varied experiences, and had a clear context as to how the phenomenon occurred (Patton, 2015a).

This case study was single-unit in design encapsulated by Grindr (Yin, 2003). A singular case study design was advantageous as not only was the overarching research inquiry exploratory, but it also sought to capture the phenomenon in-depth. The singular, holistic case of Grindr was used to encompass a range of bodily experiences of MSM in both private and public settings through their experiences. Thomas (2011) asserts that researchers should continuously refer to this overall unit of analysis and the purpose of the study to remain focused. Thus, I had formulated a design to describe the multidirectional and ever-branching relationship illustrated in the object/subject dichotomy, as well as expanded the theoretical framework surrounding MSM’s body image and embodied experience (Baskarada, 2014).

Within this bounded phenomenon, multiple methodologies were used to explicate further the relationship between Grindr and MSM’s body image and embodiment. These methodologies were utilized to confer sensitive, private information in a way that can be interwoven together through a process of hermeneutic writing for the case report. These methods were semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and open-ended questionnaires (See Participants and Sampling
section). By having used this methodological framework, I sought to present a genuine and sincere account of the phenomenon in a holistic and exploratory manner (Diaz Andrade, 2009). While following this in-depth and focused application, I remained flexible to new unexplored discourses that arose during the data collection process and to find alternative understandings of the raw data itself (Patton, 2015b).

**Unit of Analysis: Grindr**

The unit of analysis is what defines and establishes the design framework of the case study protocol (Baskarada, 2014; Yin, 2003). Although the literature does not clearly delineate how to construct a formal unit of analysis, Thomas (2011) expands Yin’s original pros of conceptualizing the unit of analysis through his typological framework. This includes local knowledge, a critical case, or an outlier case on the object/subject dichotomy; I chose local knowledge as my typographic framework. Local knowledge is described as having previous experiences, emic perspectives (defined as in-group knowledge), and academic knowledge that informed me where to best look for key informants, what analytical or theoretical choices to make, what barriers may have presented themselves, and how best to address them (Thomas, 2011). As described previously, within this single overarching unit, the experiences of individuals were explored as the focus of the inquiry. Patton (2015c) suggests that researchers identify who or what the case report will be disseminated through. I proposed that the body image experiences of participants on Grindr and their use of Grindr would lead the development and dissemination of my results. The app provided a sociocultural context that mediated the experiences that were central to this inquiry (Patton, 2015a). By having a singular unit of analysis that was broad but tangibly encapsulated, it allowed me to better utilize multiple streams of evidence to form salient themes that may be applicable to other like-cases (Thomas, 2011).
The purpose for choosing Grindr as the singular unit of analysis, as opposed to participation experiences, was to identify how the usage, Internet hookup culture, gay cyber-space, and experiences within Grindr affected the overall body image experiences of MSM.

*Defining Grindr.* Referring to the above, I had conceptualized the sex-seeking and dating app Grindr as my single-case unit of analysis. When looking at Grindr’s broader social media and website they described themselves as the largest geo-social networking app for gay, bisexual, and queer men to explore the lifestyle (Grindr, 2019). The app launched in 2009 solely as a social network but expanded to cover original content and community events. They have millions of registered followers across numerous countries, cementing their influence in gay culture (Dating Site Reviews, 2019; Grindr, 2019). Their social medias included a diverse representation of the full LGBTQ+ community, safe-sex awareness, happy couples, drag performers, major LGBTQ+ online-influencers, and pop-cultural icons. At face value, the social networking site managed to refrain from reproducing the one-on-one interactions that were often found on the app that may have been sexually explicit. By contrast, ongoing studies focusing on Grindr have been portraying the app as a sex-seeking (hookup) and dating app for MSM to find anonymous others to interact with (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2018; Goedel et al., 2016, 2017; Landovitz et al., 2012; Winetrobe et al., 2014). Having this context was important to identify the discrepancy between the greater inclusivity seen on their media and the more exclusionary behaviors presented on the app.

**Participants and Sampling**

*The participants.* Previous research has been vague regarding how to define gay male/MSM participants (Filiault & Drummond, 2010). In their meta-analysis, Filiault and
Drummond (2010) recognize that along with the dearth of literature on the current topic, there is some contention as to what language, what parameters, and what context to define gay men under. For this case study, gay, homosexual, or bisexual identities were defined as a self-identified sexual, behavioral, sociocultural, political, or romantic characteristic of an individual that identifies as male or male presenting. As I had used previously, the acronym MSM was the umbrella term to encompass these varied identifiers. I used this in my literature review and continued to use this general definition as a more relevant label was never elucidated.

To be a participant in this study, the MSM must have met the following inclusion criteria which included (a) self-identified as under the definition described above; and (b) have used or were actively using Grindr; (c) a minimum of two months or more’s worth of experience on Grindr and this should have taken place within a six-month timeframe from when the study was conducted; (d) between the ages of 18-29. For example, individuals who had both successful and failed attempts at relationships or sexual encounters were included in the study. These interactions were the major focus of how Grindr may affect MSM’s body image and self-concept (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Goedel et al., 2017). There were no exclusions pertaining to socio-economic status, race, religion, or level of investment in the LGBTQ+ community. This inclusivity had been suggested by previous literature as it had often been difficult to find empirical data on non-White, middle class, or university attending participants (Filiault & Drummond, 2010). These varied backgrounds increased the rigor of this social constructionist interpretive research, as it sought out heterogeneity to strengthen the propositions and study (Filiault & Drummond, 2010; Patton, 2015a). Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 3-1.
Table 3-1

Participant self-reported demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic descriptors</th>
<th>Participant Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ranged from 19-29 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height</td>
<td>Ranged from 5’5” to 6’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>Ranged from 123-195lbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/ Ethnic demographics</td>
<td>Asian 2/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White 6/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latinx 1/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupations</td>
<td>Student 7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time or full-time position 4/9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sampling strategy and sample size. In their meta-analysis, Filiault and Drummond (2010) found that qualitative body image studies done with MSM included larger participant pools (20-35) than typical qualitative studies that include 6-12 participants to capture greater variance, depth, and complexity. Additionally, Baskarada (2014) suggested roughly 12-15 participants and/or cases to be the ideal participant pool for case study protocols when reviewing the current paradigm at the time. Although a vast participant pool would have been ideal, for pragmatic reasons this case study included nine participants. Patton (2015a) recommends these smaller numbers of participants for higher quality analysis and interpretation. Participants were recruited utilizing posters posted around Brock University’s campus, my personal social media, and in-person referrals. These measures followed the sampling strategies listed below.

To recruit this sample, I relied on several purposeful sampling strategies. Purposeful sampling seeks out information-rich cases that have insights and a rich understanding of the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2015b). This study was rooted in social constructionism, and therefore dictated a heterogeneous purposeful sampling strategy that intended to capture the greatest variance whilst fixating on group characteristics. When sampling for exploratory
qualitative case studies, Patton (2015a) and Filiault and Drummond (2010) recommend maximum variance purposeful case sampling as well as snowball sampling. Maximum variance or heterogeneous sampling in qualitative work has two purposes: (a) to document the diversity present in the population; (b) to identify the shared patterns across this diversity (Patton, 2015b). Snowball sampling utilizes word of mouth to gain participants, which allowed me to begin with a small participant pool. This also was an essential tool due to the vulnerability of the participant population. Vulnerable populations may be more difficult to access unless the researcher has developed rapport via gatekeepers or community leaders prior to beginning the research. As I do not have this level of rapport, snowball sampling was justified. Due to the specific age range (e.g., 18-29) that was recruited, homogeneous purposeful sampling was utilized to minimize possible progressive changes in body image presented with broader age demographics (Patton, 2015b). Also, I proposed a measure of intensity purposeful sampling to ensure that the participants spoke on salient and relevant topics that they had strongly felt. Patton (2015b) describes intensity samples as information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon (body image related experiences on Grindr) in an intense but not extreme way. The purpose of using intensity sampling was to be able to make comparisons rooted in varied experiences. For example, some participants manifested intensely negative experiences, while others intensely positive ones.

**Epistemological Framework and The Researcher**

Epistemology is concerned with understanding the nature and extent of knowledge (Truncellito, n.d.). Knowledge, and by extension the conception of truth, to me, was framed through a lens of social constructionism. Social constructionism focuses on how tacit meaning and knowledge is conceived through social interactions, actions, norms, environment, sociocultural factors and politics, and how knowledge is a subjective phenomenon directly
correlated to one’s experiences of these influences (Diaz Andrade, 2009; Patton, 2015c). The role of social constructionism was present in all aspects of this study, including its exploratory nature, the sampling strategy, and its interpretive analysis (Thomas, 2011). As a social constructionist researcher, I made my biases clear; throughout the interpretation of the literature and raw data, I recorded my own beliefs and reactions to the various outcomes. Although body image research is typically rooted in a post-positivist underpinning, I felt there was a call for people with lived experiences with the phenomenon to formally share their knowledge along with other informants to better influence the scientific community. Particularly regarding body image research with MSM, my emic perspective as opposed to most researchers’ etic perspective on the matter was instrumental in identifying nuances within the LGBTQ+ culture and body image (Patton, 2015).

To have proposed this kind of research I had to have had some prior experience regarding Grindr, body image, and embodiment. As stated in my unit of analysis, I was undertaking this study as I had local knowledge with an intrinsic investment in the phenomenon (Thomas, 2011). As I was a 24-year-old out MSM, I had been inundated with messages about what my body should have looked like since my early teens. I had also used Grindr off and on since the age of 18 and had inherent biases towards it. From my own experiences and conversations with friends I was aware of how the app positively or negatively changed the way someone felt about, behaved upon, or conceptualized his body. I had been intuitive of the fact that my success or failures to form short- or long-term relationships with other men may have been related to how my body was presented and perceived. These experiences and conversations drove me to formally explore the empirical nature of the phenomenon for other MSM. In general, researchers have made it abundantly clear that MSM do experience worse body image than heterosexual men
(e.g., Dehlenburg et al., 2020). For example, I had found that fat and feminine gay men were seen as rejects from the community unless they were represented as a fetish or campy (Goedel, 2008; Moskowitz et al, 2013; Padva, 2002). From my own experiences as a fat and feminine teen, the only way I managed to circumvent my trauma was to be humorous through self-deprecation to carve out a space for myself in my community.

Masculine and muscular men, however, experience a very different perspective in gay virtual space and real life. They are inundated with virtual interactions ranging from dating requests to explicit content. However, as a caveat of this, these same idealized men are also seen as promiscuous, un-monogamous fantasies for some men (Miller, 2015b; Miller, 2018). I believed there was a possibility that these experiences may have been shared by other men, as truth and knowledge are created through a shared understanding of discourse. As a result of this positionality, my biases were evident in the implicit direction I expected this research to go, as described in my propositions. Although I sought to capture heterogeneous experiences, I had felt that there would be greater intrinsic investment in the effects of Grindr on body image from those who had negative experiences within the community to speak out about these issues.

Filiault and Drummond (2010) corroborate this assumption by stating that there may be overrepresentation of certain kinds of participants who are more outspoken, and that this may affect research. With that being stated, as a qualitative researcher I did my best to remove these hurdles from this study. I systematically reflected on everything that occurred before, during, and after fieldwork and analysis to position myself and the data apart from each other. I also reflected on how participants understood their world, what caused these perceptions, and the result; the participants were fundamentally the core of this study and I attempted to fully understand them
in this regard. This was done to better rationalize how I sought out new information, analyzed data, and disseminated it as a social constructionist.

**Procedures**

Ethics clearance was obtained prior to any research taking place (see Appendix A). Interested participants contacted me, and I emailed them an electronic copy of the informed consent form, which included and explained the study’s purpose and inclusion criteria. These documents were distributed prior to participation to give participants time to read over what would occur during the study, so they could have asked me questions or raise concerns ahead of time. If they agreed to participate, a time was set up at a location they were most comfortable with for the private interviews.

*Interviews.* Nine one-on-one semi-structured interviews (eight in-person, one Skype) were used to capture participant experiences using Grindr and allowed the participants to direct the investigation to unexplored avenues unique to the phenomenon (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). This empirical data was designed to fill in gaps in qualitative and quantitative research pertaining to body image (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016; Patton, 2015a). Semi-structured interviews use pre-formulated key questions that have been created by conducting a comprehensive literature review (Gill et al., 2008). I had designed these questions to be generally open-ended, neutral, sensitive, under a frame of empathetic neutrality, yet with a focus on theory and the purpose of the study (Gill et al., 2008; See appendix B). Patton (2015) describes semi-structured interview questions as opportunities to allow participants to discuss their feelings, opinions, experiences, knowledge and senses pertaining to the topic. Feeling-based questions pertained to the emotionally-driven positive or negative experiences regarding their bodies, sex, or masculinity. Opinion questions looked at the pros and cons of various topics such
as the use of nudes, hookup culture, or Grindr as a utility for gaining access to other MSM.

Knowledge questions asked participants about information that they may have known regarding topics such as Grindr’s options for self-presentation, body image knowledge, and ideals in the gay community. Sensory questions related to the five senses they may have experienced on the app or off-app interactions related to Grindr. Finally, experience questions pertained to the positive and negative experiences participants may have had on Grindr relating to their bodies and identities. Most of the questions were related to experiences, feelings, and opinions as those were particularly salient for addressing the major themes of the study. The use of probes ensured that I would capture as much data as possible. Several probes including silence, echoing, verbal agreement, baiting, asking in-depth questions, and asking the participant to discuss a certain topic in more detail were used along more specific follow-up questions (Whiting, 2008). My job as the investigator was to be an attentive listener who reflected on what was being said and applied previous research knowledge to gain as much information as possible (Gill et al., 2008).

Prior to beginning data collection using the interview guide, piloting was utilized to ensure the coherence and validity of the questions. This was done on three levels: internal testing, expert assessment, and field testing (Kallio et al., 2016). Internal testing related to refining the questions with fellow collaborators, including my supervisor and committee. Expert assessment utilized knowledgeable academics outside of the research team, including other graduate students. Finally, field testing brought in relevant community members (MSM within the Niagara or GTA regions) to measure the real-world applicability of the questions. Field testing using a pilot interview was not only done to ensure that the questions were valid in a real-world setting, but additionally, because the pilot interview offered information-rich data, it was used in the study with the approval of the participant. This was necessary due to the difficulties
of recruiting other MSM for the study. These steps were designed to ensure that the guide ran sensibly and asked broad but relevant questions that followed qualitative inquiry guidelines (Kallio et al., 2016).

Conducting the interviews took place after the best iteration of the guide was produced and occurred in several steps. Recruited participants had the option to be interviewed in a private research lab at Brock University, the Brock-Niagara Centre for Health & Wellbeing, or over Skype if there were geographical barriers between the participant and myself. If necessary, participants also had the option of choosing a location that they felt most comfortable discussing sensitive information, such as their home (Gill et al., 2008). Although as a novice researcher, I would have preferred all my interviews to be conducted in-person, participants had the option to participate using Skype if they were outside of the Niagara region. Skype is a synchronous teleconferencing application that can be used both on a computer or cellphone. Although Skype alludes to a digital space, and therefore is not as organic, the Skype interview remained synchronous utilizing both real-time audio and video resources (Janghorban, Roudsari, Taghipour, 2014). Skype interviews pose several limitations regarding the participant-controlled setting via limiting my spatial understanding and interpretation of their self-presentation (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Sullivan, 2012, via Janghorban et al., 2014). Additionally, Skype presented technological limitations in regards to internet quality which affected the clarity of the calls, uncontrolled background noises or lighting (e.g., construction in another apartment), or the lack of intimacy between the participant and myself. This, at times, may have caused poorer quality data to be collected due to the disconnect we felt over the call (Janghorban et al., 2014).

Additionally, unlike in-person interviews where the researcher is in charge of managing the quality of the interview, for Skype interviews, the participant had to be trusted to ensure that
they had the most appropriate and up-to-date version of the application and understood of how to use it to ensure the interview ran smoothly (Seitz, 2016). This at times made it difficult to transcribe effectively when feedback (e.g., environmental feedback, audio, or responses) caused difficulty in understanding the audio over the conference call (Hamilton, 2014). However, I would argue that due to the context of the digital-focused research, the participants using Skype were comfortable enough to share information and be authentic due to their ongoing use of Grindr and information-sharing on the app (Hamilton, 2014 for skype comfort). Other researchers have also shown that effective communication, including speaking clearly and with intention, slowing down conversation, and repeating inaudible sections are effective tools for ensuring the interview runs more smoothly (Seitz, 2016). Generally, when defining the pros and cons of using Skype as a tool to gain access to distant participants who wished to join the study, it was mainly seen as a positive for accommodating the participant wishes as well as my own research needs for one-on-one synchronous interviewing.

Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were informed of their rights, the purpose of the study, what to expect from the interviews, the format of the interviews, approximate length of their participation (~60 minutes), and my method of recording the interviews (done via password locked device). They were told they could ask for clarification, could decline answering questions if they felt uncomfortable, and/or had the option of speaking off topic without being recorded (Whiting, 2008). Additionally, they were told I would debrief them to determine if the process was clear, and to ask if the participant needed any assistance for his emotional or mental state while answering questions that he may have. Once participants were made aware of the interview process, I read a copy of the informed consent form with them and asked them to sign it, either in person or asynchronously via email. The interview began by
easing participants in with ice-breaker questions which allowed them to become more comfortable with the material and understand what was expected of them (Gill et al., 2008). When more difficult situations arose, I took a neutrally empathetic stance. Patton (2015) describes empathetic neutrality as a way for qualitative researchers to be understanding of informant’s experiences without having to agree or disagree with them by being communicative, understanding, and not judgmental. Additionally, throughout the interviews I wrote down any observations, feelings, or thoughts I had about what was happening (Whiting, 2008). This was done to ensure that any important discussions could be investigated further.

Upon the completion of the private interviews, participants were asked to fill out an open-ended questionnaire to confer demographic information which roughly took 15 minutes to complete. Participants who were interviewed over Skype were asked to fill out the demographic information after the completion of the interview and send it via email along with their consent form. Any email containing this information was promptly deleted/destroyed after the documents were downloaded and encrypted. Demographic information pertained to biological profiles, ethnicity, race, Grindr usage frequency, and app profile information.

Each interview was completed with verbatim transcription that followed a standard of rigor established for the entire study (See trustworthiness section; Whiting, 2008). The transcription process happened as immediately after an interview as possible, so that prior interviews could have informed new questions to be asked of future participants. However, to ensure inductive patterning was captured, I waited until two or three interviews were completed prior to beginning verbatim transcription, as the further stages in analysis would require me to develop codes and patterns across the data set. In addition, participants received a summary sheet of their transcription and the discussion within two weeks of their interview. They were asked if
they would like to add any new information to their interview data or to clarify any of the interpretations; this would have taken them roughly 15 minutes of their time. While I had hoped that all the participants would reply to these follow-up emails, four of the nine participants did not have the time, forgot, or did not have anything to add to their information as they felt I had captured our interview accurately. This concluded the procedure for each one-on-one, private interview.

**Data Analysis**

As a novice qualitative researcher, I investigated various analytical methods to best develop a case report. Qualitative analysis seeks to analyze the life-stories of individuals and is utilized as both a descriptive and interpretive tool (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). It is often experiential and exploratory, contextualized through meaning-making and mediated through social phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) propose reflexive thematic analysis as a fundamental tool for qualitative researchers to utilize as it is flexible and shaped by a variety of epistemological frameworks, positionalities, and is suited for complex sociological frameworks like social constructionism. The working definition of reflexive thematic analysis is that it is an analytical method which identifies, interprets, and reports patterns or themes by utilizing other methodologies, such as interviews, while identifying the critical necessity to reflect upon one’s positionality and purpose. This process is critically informed by the researcher’s understanding of their theoretical framework, philosophical assumptions, values, and analytical purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis permitted me to disseminate findings easily, analyze a large set of data in a tangible way, and offered insights to unexplored phenomenon from within data (Braun and Clarke, 2012, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).
Reflexive thematic analysis can reflect on reality through a lens of essentialism or unpacking and interpreting latent meanings through a constructionist lens (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To best understand the purpose of this inquiry, I captured both semantic and latent discussion, and therefore sought to analyze my data through a more centered contextual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This not only described experiences and meanings for participants but explored in-depth interpretation that reflected the intersectionality of various social discourses. The summative goal of this study’s utilization of thematic analysis was to understand the sociocultural ideologies or narratives that impart themselves onto MSM’s conceptualization of their bodies and identities. Reflecting this goal, my analytical process first began inductively by allowing the raw data to inform candidate codes, initial patterns, and themes. This was essential, as the research topic had a limited amount of previous literature to inform the themes prior to this inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Once a level of thematization is achieved, a deductive or theory-driven approach was utilized to confirm or de-confirm certain research questions. This deductive process allowed me to build upon previous research assumptions and make salient contexts more known to establish future theory development (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis helped me go beyond basic description to abstract and interpret both semantic and latent themes across a data set to form a rich context for the exploration of MSM’s bodily experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Thematic Analysis of Interviews**

*Transcription and candidate coding.* Liamputtong (2009) describes analysis as a process that blends the collection of data and its analysis together (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019). The initial steps of coding and thematization of data began at the transcription of audio files. I listened through the audio files in full and reflected on my thoughts and feelings while writing some
surface-level ideas about the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) regard the verbatim/orthographic transcription process as a way of first familiarizing yourself with the data. This step continues with the reading and rereading of the data corpus to question it (e.g., How did the participants make sense of this? What worldview is illuminated?) and form ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Liamputtong, 2009). This step emphasized a need for an abundance of candidate labels prior to patterning because higher level abstraction and interpretation had not occurred. The goal here was to identify what may have formed my data set, and what information to pursue further.

Step two involved developing initial codes in a systematized fashion. This allowed me to begin identifying what the data was and was not (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Patton (2015a) describes this as the process of finding a signal within the data noise; a signal illuminates patterns and meanings, while noise is background that contextualizes the signal. For example, in focus groups the interactions between the participants may be considered the contextualizing noise. A code’s purpose is multifaceted; I used them to name extracts, define data chunks (grouped together data extracts), and answer the who’s, what’s, why’s, how’s, and when’s of experiences or discourses (Liamputtong, 2009; Patton, 2015c). Codes represent a summative language-based attribute for the systematic organization of data chunks (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2019). The codes allowed me to begin thinking about semantic and latent variations in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Each of these initial codes was coded systematically and one at a time. The codes for this step either used the participants’ voices (i.e., in vivo coding) or my own codes via concepts, process, and/or ideas that I identified. Although Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012, 2019) works reflect a concrete foundation upon which to build codes, they do recommend the exploration of other, more epistemologically focused modes of coding, thematizing, and knowledge translation that suit specific purposes. For example, Miles et al.
(2019) describe a coding strategy that I effectively integrated to meet my coding goals. They describe first cycle coding similarly to Braun and Clarke (2012) but explicate upwards of 25 varied approaches to coding transcripts. Some key examples of coding proposed by Miles et al. (2019) that were used in this study included: in vivo coding which directly quotes the participants’ language; process coding which related to the dynamics of time and sequence (this was particularly important for understanding the ‘time’ and ‘space’ aspects of Grindr’s use); concept coding, which looked at the broader sociocultural contexts at play in participants’ experiences, including ‘identity,’ ‘homonegativity,’ and ‘culture’; and emotion coding, which looked at one’s value systems, evaluations of experiences, and interpretations of a topic. At the end of this step, I had several documents for separate codes with data extracts and personal notes, a single document for the entire data corpus, and a miscellaneous pile. These were all used to rationalize the structure of themes when overlapping and contradictions arose (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Prior to moving onto the later steps, I revisited my initial codes to look for patterns or clusters. If I were able to identify strong patterned relationships, these codes would be clustered or renamed to fit into tentative groups to streamline thematization and refinement in later steps.

**Building themes.** The third step began the development of initial or candidate themes. This step began to look at the data in a broader context by merging codes and patterns into larger themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke 2006; 2012). The main purpose of these themes was to bring together disparate experiences in a meaningful way to answer research questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Although thematic analysis does not seek to explicate on idiosyncratic experiences, themes did not have to encompass a majority or all the participants’ experiences to be relevant to the inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To assist me in organizing this process I used a theme map that branches out into sub-themes that form explicit boundaries from each other.
(Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Each of these themes had short descriptors to delineate its purpose. Additionally, I looked for alternate ways to thematize data chunks, so as to remain as inductive and data driven as possible prior to deduction in later steps (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This was done by interpreting data chunks through different contextual lenses (e.g., the ongoing use of Grindr for hookups versus a single use for hookups). By the end of this phase I had a sense of purpose for the themes as to how they reflect the participants’ experiences, my research questions, and the broader literary context.

The next phase was to refine candidate themes. In this phase I checked for internal homogeneity of themes, collapsed themes together, reworked some, and completely removed others. This was also the phase where I sought out deviant cases to disconfirm my themes to ensure they had credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Patton, 2015c). The goal of this phase was to have explicit heterogeneity between themes that form meaningful relationships within and between themselves all while telling a coherent story (Patton, 2015). Both homogeneity and heterogeneity were meant to be systematic but not forced. The themes directly reflected the raw data in a meaningful and credible way (Patton, 2015a). This process was presented in my thematic map that was then reviewed to ensure that it was reflective of my research questions and epistemological framework (this was similar to step three for codes; Liamputton, 2009). The next phase began once I had a thematic map and when I was unlikely to make major changes to the themes.

Step five is where I explicitly defined and named the themes, designed to capture each theme’s essential purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was also done for sub-themes. The significance of a theme was defined through what it captured in the data set. Each theme had its own thorough analysis to ensure there was minimal overlap of data between and within
themes and that each told a story within itself through extracts, literature, and interpretation. The final goal before finishing the analysis process was to name and define the themes. The themes conclusively underscored the scope of the inquiry, offered meaningful data extracts for semantics, and interpretations for latent meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Finally, step six was the production of the case report. The case report involved hermeneutically interweaving vivid data extracts, my interpretations, and previous literature in an easily understood way (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Patton, 2015c). The report reflected an analysis process that went across the entire data set and that took place from the beginning to the end.

*Triangulation of data and theory.* Triangulation was an instrumental part in the rigor of this qualitative case study. As stated previously, case studies work with various source materials; they are holistic, comparative, contextual, and case sensitive. Triangulation finds relevance and consistency across multiple data sets and frameworks (Patton, 2015b). Patton (2015b) describes two types of triangulation that I used for this study: multiple streams of qualitative data and theory triangulation. For multiple streams of raw data, I went through the raw data of the interviews and open-ended questionnaires, themes I generated, literature, and journaling to offer a more concrete rationale to my final report (Braun & Clarke 2006; Patton, 2015). By identifying a theme’s significance, I was able to emphasize its necessity in my interpretations.

Regarding theoretical triangulation, Patton describes this as using different interpretive avenues to frame data. For my study, some relevant theoretical frameworks included social constructionism, body image theories (e.g., objectification theory via Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; social comparison theory via Festinger, 1954), minority stress theory (Meyer, 1996), and (dis)embodiment (Piran, 2016). Theoretical triangulation also allowed me to make deductive
findings to bound the case report to a specific context. This helped remove some forms of analytical biases, including building codes and themes based on preconceived notions or non-data driven assumptions about what the participants experienced on Grindr. These processes allowed me to check the authenticity of the inductive findings, as to whether they were applicable to the present body of literature, and if they allowed for future research to be developed (Patton, 2015a).

Remaining accountable. I utilized several measures of accountability throughout the analysis and triangulation process. These focused on reflexivity, transparency, and logic. Primarily, reflexivity took place throughout the entire methodological process, but was more evident in the analysis section. How data was interpreted, triangulated and then disseminated directly affected how people perceive my findings and the participants. I asked myself several questions regarding the credibility of my themes, such as, what aspect of a greater context may they reflect; what their implications are; what may have caused them; why I named them a particular way; and what story are they telling (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, by documenting this process, I was formally presenting my rationale or analytical changes (Patton, 2015b). Another measure of credibility through my analysis was to remain rooted in my epistemological framework and purpose. Social constructionism seeks to capture context and understand truth and knowledge. This includes illuminating experiences that are not shared by all and accounting for irregularities; bias against outliers should not exist in qualitative work. By remaining accountable, Patton (2015) states that “interpretive work will disabuse us of misconceptions in the real world, illuminate things that we did not know that we should, and ultimately confirm what we know is supported in both theory and real-world experiences” (Patton, 2015a).
**Trustworthiness and Rigor**

The trustworthiness and rigor of this study was based upon social constructionist and qualitative case study criterion. Due to these criteria being similar in their general description of trustworthiness and rigor, I chose to interweave them to create a more robust measure of trustworthiness. The two measures operated upon different aspects of my study; therefore, they were able to ensure rigor pertaining to my worldview, my philosophical assumptions/biases, my positionality, and my methodological choices. The social constructionist criterion regulated the overarching worldview, discourses and assumptions I personally carried into the study. The case study criterion reinforced this by also ensuring the methodological design of the case study was valid. As case studies may operate under less reliable means than more established qualitative methodologies (Yin, 2003), it was essential for myself as an investigator to thoroughly reinforce the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Case studies are said to have a difficult time being validated due to a lack of tangible procedural methodology to increase rigor and validate findings (Yin, 2003). However, a growing body of literature written by qualitative social constructionist researchers is better informing novice researchers on how to conduct interpretive case study designs. Yin (2003) initially proposed construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability as the measures for trustworthy and sound case study design. Diaz Andrade (2009) adopts this framework, but as a social constructionist adapts it in a way that is rooted in theory building for interpretive researchers. I went through construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability utilizing the framework by Diaz Andrade (2009) and proposed how they would be facilitated through a social constructionist/interpretive lens if they were applicable to the exploratory/instrumental nature of the study. Patton (2015) also outlines a criterion for quality
and credibility for novice social constructionists to follow to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in our work.

Construct validity is described as facilitating correct methodological measures for the case study (Diaz Andrade, 2009; Yin, 2003). This was done by synthesizing multiple sources of qualitative data, including interview recordings and verbatim transcripts, observational data from interviews, and literature (Patton, 2015a). By utilizing these diverse streams of data, I was able to capture the heterogeneous informant subjectivities more holistically via the triangulation and extrapolation of data to create credible, transferable findings that deepened our understanding of the phenomenon. This was utilized to develop case-based theory and a data-chain to show the logical process of my theme and pattern building (Díaz Andrade, 2009).

Internal validity is rooted in explanatory case studies seeking to identify causal relationships within data (Yin, 2003). Due to the nature of this study, internal validity was not explicitly addressed through case study methods but was utilized through interpretive lenses. This was done through pattern building from raw data, identifying rival explanations, logical coding, identifying the importance of the results within my theoretical framework, and member checking at multiple points via emailed interview summaries asking for feedback (Yin, 2003; Patton, 2015a).

External validity is described as the capacity for the generated theory to be generalizable to a wider population. Due to the nature of this study and my framework, I utilized what Diaz Andrade (2009) calls analytical generalization. Analytical generalization is generalizability that is applicable to like-cases of the bounded phenomenon; within the time, space, and contextual framework utilized in this study and other studies like it, the theory proposed should be generalizable via transferability. Like transferability, this is conducted by the academic audience
and other researchers resonating with the work and then applying/exploring it elsewhere through a lens of social constructionism (Patton, 2015).

Reliability is the ability for other researchers to reproduce similar findings from this study if they follow my case study protocol. Although this is rooted heavily in a post-positivist framework, I utilized a database to house all my general notes, analysis, and interpretations, so that my methodological process, if followed within the bounded context of this study, would be able to be reproduced with similar results (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Additionally, because I kept extensive reflexive journaling, the entire methodological process, including my thoughts and feelings regarding my decisions were held accountable to ensure that participants and other researchers could corroborate my credibility via dependable operationalization (Díaz Andrade, 2009; Patton, 2015c; Yin, 2003).

By following the rigor models described above through my analysis, I attempted to propose a case for substantive significance. Like statistical significance, substantive significance illustrates the importance of empirical evidence in a study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Due to the sensitivity of the topics that were discussed and the possible vulnerability of participants, I took several precautionary measures for their safety and my own. Qualitative research works with few participants; as a result, there are issues of protecting mainly participant anonymity and confidentiality. To protect the anonymity of participants during data analysis and dissemination of findings, each were given a code name during the interviews. These names and their real names were located on separate documents that were password locked. Neither their likeness (personal profiles) nor in-app conversations were made public either. For
confidentiality, the content of interviews (audio recordings, transcription, observations) was kept on locked devices. At no point until completion of thematization were any extracts made public to anyone besides myself and my supervisor.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of this study are being presented as a cohesive chapter to ensure that the hermeneutic nature of qualitative analysis and interpretation are upheld. The presentation of the results follow a streamlined format, where key excerpts from interviews will be presented, analyzed via my personal interpretations, and then discussed along with the present literature to construct a sound answer to this study’s fundamental research questions. Based on the interviews and open-ended questionnaire that were provided to the participants, two major themes were identified: No fats, no femmes, no Asians, and Grindr doesn’t allow for... people to really express themselves, along with key subthemes that delineate the varying complexities of the participants’ experiences. Presented in Figure 4-1 are the themes along with their relevant subthemes.
'No fats, no femmes, no Asians'

: ‘I think it’s more natural for us to seek out outside validation’

Grindr doesn’t allow for... people to really express themselves

The ideal

The ideal and space

Subcultures and body tribes*

The physical ideal

The social ideal: Masculinity

What does space mean in our context

Grindr’s interface and novelty attractions

"Pressure" and the nature of app-based investment

Presentation of the self and/or the ideal self on Grindr

Verifiability

Body exclusions

The novelty of hook-up culture and body image

Lowered investment with time

Body image and self and/or ideal presentation
‘No fats, no femmes, no Asians’: The Normalization of Discrimination, Eurocentric Ideal Appearances, and Masculine Social Performativity as the Mediators of Body Image Experiences on Grindr

As a social constructivist researcher who is very much aware of the issues of reproducing marginalizing hate speech, the in vivo quote that was used to name this theme is used to bring critical attention to the normalization of this language within the MSM community and its dating platforms. While inherently body shaming, misogynistic/anti-femme, and outright racist, its controversial nature to readers that are socially aware should raise questions as to why this type of language is so normalized and common within the MSM experience on Grindr. This language has become a defining feature of a subset of the MSM population. While both researchers and MSM who do not believe in this language are appalled by their exposure to it, so long as it exists and is experienced so readily, I felt that it was incumbent on me to not only highlight the shared experiences of discrimination that the participants and myself have felt on Grindr, but to make no allusions to the clear and intentional prejudices that some MSM problematically tote on their social platforms. It is also important to note that while Grindr continues to portray itself as a space that is all-inclusive in its outreach and community platforming, they appear to be repeat offenders in their lack of userbase protection against outright discrimination. That is why this theme name was critical to maintain, regardless of its potentially inflammatory status.

Discussions of body image often address appearance ideals, the cultural significance they have, and what they mean for a given population. As with most forms of appearance ideals in varied populations, this study’s cohort exemplified the lingering and often overt significance the appearance ideal played in their day-to-day interactions on Grindr, as well as their daily lives as MSM. Consistent with Tran, Kaplan, and Austin et al. (2020), the media consumed by the participants of this study, including Grindr, other social media, and traditional media, promoted
the manifestation of objectifying, and often homonegative and discriminatory perceptions and attitudes regarding oneself and others. This is similar to findings in a study conducted among Brazilian Grindr users by Saraiza, Santos, and Pereira (2020), who reported on the experiences of normalizing discriminatory and homonegative language via ‘beauty semantics’ (i.e., the language used for the appearance ideal versus those who are unideal) by MSM who use Grindr for hook-ups. The media’s importance, particularly the importance of Grindr, may have greatly affected my participants’ ideologies due to their heavy consumption/ investment in its use over other medias, including both traditional and contemporary social media (as per my sampling guidelines; Miller, Behn-Morawitz, 2020). The appearance ideal was split into the physical and social ideals which intersected on numerous topics, some of which were expected, like the role of masculinity and muscularity in MSMs’ sexual expression and attraction, to more abstract phenomena like space/location variations, and queer subgroups/sub-cultures.

**The physical ideal.** The participants were very clear in what they understood the MSM appearance ideal to be in both the contexts of Grindr and the greater LGBTQ+ community. From their Grindr experiences and development as MSM, the depiction of the appearance ideal was generally an MSM who was White (or white-passing), conventionally masculine, muscular/toned/slim, ripped (visible muscle structures), on the younger side (below 30), hairy in only the right places, a jock or straight acting individual (straight-passing), and who was a top (the penetrative partner). These depictions of the MSM appearance ideal corroborate the contemporary literature regarding MSM’s body image (i.e., expressions of body image consistent with definitions in the literature, e.g., body dissatisfaction) and self-image (i.e., idiosyncratic conceptual understandings of one’s body, body image, and identity). Similar to men in the present study, studies conducted by Saraiza et al. (2019) and Tran et al. (2020) also identified
that their respective participants understood the importance of ideal representation. Participants often adhered to the appearance ideal by aligning themselves with fitness-related health behaviors that permitted the self-presentation of the muscular and masculine appearance ideal.

In describing the appearance ideal for Grindr users, the need for understanding what is un-ideal is presented; however, what can be considered physically un-ideal begins to shift into a more social categorization, where personal characteristics and sociobiological identities are critiqued in comparison to the ideal described above. Although MSM are a sexual minority, the presence of prejudicial stereotyping antics remains a commonplace discourse amongst users. Conner (2019) argues that these discriminatory behaviors may be conveniently promoted on Grindr as a facet of exemplifying a user’s heteronormative performances, i.e., the decoupling of MSM sex from MSM identities through the rejection of perceiving all bodies as equal. Conferring the rejection of the un-ideal, the expression ‘no fats, no femmes, no Asians’ is something many Grindr users have unfortunately witnessed when looking at what it means to be attractive on Grindr (see Miller & Behn-Morawitz, 2016; Saraiza et al., 2019) for studies particularly looking at femmephobia). For example, Samuel stated,

> Despite being a white man myself, uh...whiteness is also a huge factor into it... because like...the amount of like ‘no fats, no femmes, no Asians’ shit I see on there is like, pretty disgusting, or like light skinned people of colour are often seen as the exotic or more desirable I guess, like personally that’s not my views, but it’s how I’ve seen some gay men interact with...people of those identities, I guess. And in regards to racism, like I don’t face that, but I’ve seen...people like...put things like no fats, no femmes, no Asians, no blacks, like in their profile, ya...I think it is often at the expenses of them being
fetishized, I don’t think it’s always them truly being allowed in the ‘space’, to be honest with you, it’s more of just like, they’re serving a sexual purpose to a lot of people.

As Samuel stated, those who do not fit the ideal have to find a niche to be able to achieve some form of success on the app. However, the sexual or cultural niches that they are finding may be present due to the sexual or fetish-based fixation of these bodies over the freedom these bodies have to move freely within the social-sexual space that is Grindr (Conner, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted by Meanhey, Bruce, Hidalgo, and Bauvermister (2020) among 172 participants (relevant sample demographics: 87.8% gay, 47.7% minorities, 27.9% overweight) identified that at least 63% of MSM who used online forms of media to find partners had been discriminated against for one or more of the following: ethnic/racial/ancestral background, and physical appearance (e.g., height, weight). These app-based discriminations, even outside the context of Grindr, were related to lowered self-esteem and greater depression, with appearance-based discrimination being more prevalent amongst visible minorities. Hence, to be White and muscular/toned is a way to not only circumvent outward discrimination, but to also access whatever circle you wish to join on Grindr. This will be discussed in-depth later.

*The social ideal: Masculinity.* Elliot: *...but the thing is, those two things, like masculinity and heterosexuality, some kind of people use it interchangeably as the same word, or as the same term, as the same characteristic that they’re looking for in the app.*

As the above quote alludes to, masculinity is a social ideal that is highly sought after on Grindr due to its connections with notions of heteronormativity, muscularity, or being a ‘traditional’ man. As Saraiza et al. (2019) describe, users of Grindr may often hold extremely homonegative beliefs (e.g., calling femme men faggots) as a way of detailing their preferences for finding ‘men’. Often these attitudes may be perceived as allowing the users to strongly align
with masculinity (via Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Masculinity was the definitive backbone of what personified the MSM ideal in my study as well, both physically and socially. Many of the participants understood where masculine discourse was fostered in their lives, whether through early childhood socialization (i.e., what boys can do versus what girls can do), to everyday interactions. For one participant, Grindr was an extension of the rigidity that was learnt/taught from a young age as a MSM,

_**Cassidy:** Uhm, okay so…in the community, I felt…the notion of…masculinity has…I mean it’s at a younger age it took, a little bit…it took a little bit more…to feel comfortable, I find. Uhm, and it pushed me…outside of where I felt comfortable, uhm…at a younger age I definitely felt, well I couldn’t express anything else but masculinity, especially in the gay community, because…when I came out…I felt like if you were even barely teetering on that spectrum of…anything else but masculinity, you were essentially just thrown to the other side (femme) and told to just stay there. So at a younger age, it took a lot more, because I was so focused on being perceived a certain way, that I didn’t want to show anything else, but that then when it came to Grindr, and I will say this, I was on Grindr when I was not supposed to be on Grindr, a lot of gay men my age were on Grindr when they weren’t supposed to be *laughs* and that’s bad to say…but I think Grindr then…amplifies that idea ‘well you have to be masculine, and if you’re not, then you’re in this group of outcasts’ uhm…so I feel especially Grindr at a younger age, it pushed me…to think pretty…eat, think- to be a certain way when that wasn’t me…

It appeared that a common thread for several participants was the difficulty in challenging queer stereotyping once they were identified as MSM. The social discourses ascribed to MSM by their given environment appear to be deleterious (Conner, 2019). As with Cassidy, it forces them
to put a heteronormative mask on their true selves while traversing society, and by extension their time on Grindr. This mask, while first being protective against stressors, ultimately appears to be damaging. As earlier described via the minority stress model first proposed by Meyer (1995), the circumvention of homonegative stigma comes with the caveat of increased identity stressors that may increase one’s fixation with attaining a more muscular physique and surveilling the body to appear more masculine (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2018). However, this appeared to be a calculated risk for several of my participants as MSM face the challenge of not feeling enough for Grindr’s standard of what it means to be a man, not feeling enough for other MSM for what it means to be attractive, and to themselves, not enough to be proud of who they are.

Elliot, who identified as a more masculine jock on Grindr, described the strive for masculinity as a challenge,

Okay uhm, it...I would say, depending on how serious you’re taking the app, sometimes it can affect those lives, these lives, like pretty heavily, like they’re trying to fit into that standard, that masc, that muscularity and masculinity sort of trait then...they’re gonna do what it takes...to kind of, to reach that point...uhm... and...I guess it could be consuming, cuz if...let’s say if you’re far off from that then...uhm, and you’re doing everything you can, you could be just totally focused on that and... block everything else out, but hopefully no ones that fixated on it...

For Samuel, who identified less with rigid notions of masculinity, he described the pervasive, parasitic nature masculinity had even in intimate connections on and off Grindr, particularly regarding sexually codified language and appearances,
When you’re looking for sex on Grindr, like, I know how to act like when I wanna be a top, but I know how to act when I wanna be a bottom. So I would say, it’s not like as pleased when you’re a bottom because you’re supposed...well not supposed to be, there’s no rules about that, dom bottoms exist, but like...I’d say you’re expected to be submissive and femme in that way, whereas if you’re a top, bottoms are expecting you to play your part in playing the dom role, uhm, and...Being strong, and like...aggressive, is very much enforced in being that, and I’d say like...the way by which like...uhm, manliness is desired, like if you’re this big, muscle, masculine, hunk, you’re seen as the top, you’re seen as who...everyone would want to have sex with...

This confers the reoccuring narrative presented in previous studies showing that masculinity in itself is important not only for its gender-affirming characteristic, but for the sake of aligning an MSM with notions of success, power, dominance, strength, and competence (De Jesus et al., 2015; Miller, 2018; Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2007). In reference to the notion of sexual positions described by Samuel, indulging in femmephobia when communicating sexual position and preference legitimizes the antithetical belief some MSM have, which depicts a MSM as being heteronormative/straight acting/a real man, during discussions of or partaking in a very un-heteronormative act, such as same-sex intercourse (Saraiza et al., 2019).

Similarly, other participants, like Billie, described the challenges faced due to masculinity even in the context of discussing MSM sexuality among other MSM,

_They’ll ask you whether you’re like gay or bi(sexual), and I answer honestly that I’m gay, and they get turned off by that, because that’s like oh I’m bi, I prefer other bi guys, and even that is...I don’t want to say that I’m discriminated against, but it’s a weird_
assumption that, men who identify as bisexual are what? More masculine, more discreet, than those who identify than those who are gay? Like I could be as butch as fucking all hell, and he would never know, because he just assumes that I’m going to be, I dunno, rainbow bright?

Masculinity, in these experiences, plays a role in how people codify bodies regarding sexuality itself. Samuel described the challenges of not aligning rigidly with traditional masculinity even as a bisexual man which caused other MSM on Grindr to disregard his identity and relegate him into a submissive/passive ‘bottom’. Brennan et al. (2013) also identified during focus groups and interviews among racialized and socially oppressed MSM that individuals who were perceived to be less masculine (i.e., in their study, Asians) were inherently perceived to be the receptive or bottom partner and not given the opportunity to be the penetrative or top partner (see Cascalheira & Smith, 2019 for similar findings for Grindr-based partner appraisals). He, like many others, experiences the exclusion of the un-ideal. For another participant, the challenge of being attracted to masculine appearances and performativity while not feeling ‘enough’ to pursue a connection was an inhibition.

Bryce: I’d say that, if someone didn’t feel like they were masculine enough, they...probably would go for...they wouldn’t try to talk to the people that are the most attractive like if you...don’t think you are masculine enough, you might not talk to a masculine person, even if you think like...that is the man of your dreams or whatever, but I think also in the other sense, I think the...non—like, I think masculinity plays into anyone, like your- like if you’re more attracted to masculinity, you’re not going to talk to people who aren’t masculine, so it really just puts up barriers like left and right, it’s not good.
The excerpt outlined above corroborates Robinson’s (2016) study looking at accessibility to other MSM based on body-appearance on the dating app and website Adam4Adam.com, which functions similarly to Grindr. In its likeness, Bryce found that he, like other MSM, identified that they would have limited access to more attractive individuals because their appearance or presentation did not meet the covert, nuanced standard of appearance and social ideals that are required for an MSM to connect with their preferred sexual partners.

*The ideal and space.*

What does space mean in our context? The concept of social space goes beyond the simple scope of the current study. Space, in more social than physical terms, may relate to the access and exclusivity/inclusivity of identities or bodies within a given cultural and geo-social environment. The narratives described below are focused on conversations about how spaces change the focus on aspects of the appearance ideal. However, for MSM, it also can mean the permission to exist in one’s own body with the presence of social, cultural, political, and environmental pressures that not only hinder their success on Grindr, but their quality of life in general.

*Elliot: Well with my experience...every location has its kind of...uh...what they look for...it could be a different city or just a whole different area. Sometimes I see people looking for one specific body type, and another area looking for something else. But it does limit them (the users?) just because, there is a specific body type looked for...or that would be ideal people for most of the people who use the app...*

Although the study was conducted in one location (St. Catharines in the Niagara region), the demographic makeup from the participants was fairly diverse in terms of location of origin.
As participants came from various parts of Niagara, Ontario and the world, space became a medium by which information about the ideal was reproduced and contextualized. The social and appearance ideal intermixed with sets of norms in specific regions that produced the relative experiences of the participants. These components (i.e., location, norms, ideals, space allowance) were intermingled in several ways: 1. big spaces (e.g., Toronto) versus smaller spaces (e.g., St. Catharines) 2. foreign countries versus Ontario and/or Canada (the foreign participants having little experience outside Niagara), and 3. progressive versus conservative spaces, which intermixed with the first two archetypes of ideal-forming spaces.

The more MSM populated regions were often described as more rigid about their preferred ideal(s). In my exchanges with several participants, Toronto came up as a strong comparison point to how physical and sociocultural spaces intersected with Grindr activity and MSM ideals.

For Stephen, who lives in Toronto, he alluded to the ‘stricter’ discourses pertaining to Grindr-based appearance evaluations. This was identified to be directly related to the increased population of MSM, creating an environment where people are objectified and dismissed more readily,

Stephen: Ya, areas where people are... more sparse, like they’re not as close together, uhm, there’s more...leniency in terms of who you meet up with etc., where now where I live...like I scroll to the bottom of the screen and you’re still within a Km away, so uhm, in that sense...you’re a lot more- I think people are more picky, because they have more people within a closer distance to choose from.
Interviewer: Do you think it makes it easier for people I guess to—not be rude to each other, just kind of toss people off?

Stephen: Yes, push them away, block them or whatever...uhm definitely, uhm, and even that used to be like, their bio used to be like ‘blocking my way to a more attractive app’ because if they block anyone they don’t feel that physical attraction to...Uhm, so in that sense, they’re just tossing people aside like they’re nothing.

Similarly, Billie described experiences where his interactions within bigger spaces were markedly more ideal-focused, rigid, and possibly problematic, stating,

In terms of small town versus here, even like somewhere like...here is different from when I’m in Toronto...the more times I’ve encountered it here or even at home, has in terms of like “are you masc’ or like “ masc for masc” and all that stuff, happens in Toronto, and I think because there’s so many people, ya like there’s blank profiles and discrete people, but there’s so many people period in that area, that people are less afraid of...you know discretion of like showing their face and whatever, it’s like a needle in a hay stack, and if someone has a face picture, they aren’t afraid to ask like “are you more masculine or are you bi” like...it’s the amount of people in the area is more like a shield, than a blank profile is to them... just because of the geography, you know what I mean? Like every time that I’ve been there, and I’ve been on Grindr, there’s been more messages about masculinity or specifications or criteria than somewhere like my house, which has like, the same people in the radius all the time... and that’s almost never occurred which is wild. So that’s that.

Additionally, Cassidy noted similarly,
I feel like down here...and it’s definitely apparent - especially GTA and extended a little bit more extensive GTA area, and I consider Burlington, Hamilton, especially stretching out towards St. Catherine’s and Niagara, uhm...there’s definitely this perceived notion of they can find whatever they want and they don’t want anything else but that. So, it’s definitely a bit more closed minded, where back home it’s a little bit more open, a little bit more airy.

Within the three given spacial contexts above, the overall perception appeared to be that bigger spaces allowed for more rigid, possibly (body-based) discriminatory behavior. As these three participants stated, the geographical location coupled with the larger population allows for individuals to be more brash and upfront with anyone that does not fit their standards. These findings corroborate a study conducted by Szymanski, Mikorski, and Duhn (2019), who investigated appearance focus, involvement in the LGBTQ+ community, porn use, gender role conflict, and restrictive affection’s effects on MSM’s objectification of other men. Regarding community and space, the researchers identified that those more readily involved in the LGBTQ+ community (where one is largely present, like Toronto) may be more likely to objectify other MSM if they were also appearance-focused and had more restrictive affection towards other MSM. Additionally, a study conducted by Kousari-Rad and McLean (2013) investigated a moderation and mediation model between LGBTQ+ community-perceived belonging, body image dissatisfaction, and self-esteem among 90 Australian MSM. They reported that the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and self-esteem was moderated by average to high perceived levels of belonging to the community, and that body dissatisfaction partially mediated the relationship between community belonging and self-esteem. Interestingly, these studies, along with my own, present a discussion as to whether surface level perceived
acceptance and visibility amongst the LGBTQ+ community, specifically for MSM, plays a volatile role for within-group social norms regarding body politics. Specifically, these findings may allude to the fact that not only are spacial contexts important, but how they are used (i.e., no strings attached/un-intimate hook-ups via restrictive affection) may play a critical role in the greater cultural fixation with the appearance ideal.

Bigger cities, however, were not universally identified to be more problematic regarding Grindr, body image, or the LGBTQ+ community for all participants. For Toronto specifically, as with other metropolitan cities, one participant identified that the proliferation and presence of the LGBTQ+ community, irrespective of problematic peoples, allows for individuals to be whoever or however they chose. Samuel said,

*I would say like comparison within that is like, gays in Toronto don’t really care as much, not to say that there aren’t disgusting human beings there, but they’re just much more rare, whereas in Toronto, I find that people are much nicer and more accepting for different kinds of bodies and interests, like...habitual and sexual, to be honest with you, uhm, whereas...Here there’s obviously not that openness, it’s very like, closed-minded I’d say.*

This also includes more openness for race for another participant,

*Lincoln: They (friends or people he spoke to on Grindr) are from Toronto, and they told me that... being a Latino is a plus (in Toronto), but here (St. Catharine’s/Niagara) no, sometimes I feel like...why...that they (the users in Niagara) are... they think that I’m a strange person or weird person...You know?*
The stated factors related to space and the ideal, particularly in regards to community and access, add to the present body image literature as there remains some contention as to whether involvement in the community/a gay-space is actually a tangible factor in the body image of MSM. Regarding inclusivity, while there are more options and platforms to feel welcomed and represented, bigger spaces also resulted in greater in-group competition, particularly if a similar ideal MSM is being sought, as the general ideal depicts in this study.

The important message to identify here is that the ideal itself changed from place to place, and its level of importance factored in aspects of profile options, geographical population, and local culture. Whether there was a greater fixation on masculinity, body types, racial preferences, or certain subgroups and sub-cultures, the concept of what is ideal flows with the local perceptions of the given community.

Sub-culture and body tribes.

Prior to beginning the discussion on sub-culture and body tribes, I thought it would be important to explicitly discuss the inappropriate usage of the word ‘tribe’ regarding sexual body subgroupings in the MSM community. Cultural appropriation by non-native peoples of native culture and language (e.g., terms/expressions like ‘stomping grounds’, we had a ‘Pow wow’) is prolific in contemporary pop-culture. The MSM community, led by the examples of apps like Grindr, have further normalized this issue. Although the lexicon pertaining to body subgroups is referred to as a ‘tribe’ on Grindr’s interface and is commonly used in the MSM community, the usage of the term throughout the document will be replaced with the more appropriate term of body subgroup. The term body subgroup not only emphasizes the appearance-focused nature of Grindr’s initial intentions with the term ‘tribe’, but also better contextualizes why participants had ongoing issues regarding the rigidity of the term ‘tribe’. Anecdotally, it appears that the term
tribe was co-opted as a way of emphasizing micro-cultural differences between subgroups (e.g., how the jock ‘tribe’ practices fitness-related behaviors and the bear ‘tribe’ emphasize the importance of larger bodies, body hair, and beards). However, please also note that in direct quotes or when referencing material directly from the interview guide, the term ‘tribe’ will be retained.

A discussion of subcultures regarding body subgroups (i.e., jocks, otters, and bears) was not strongly identified within the participants’ experiences. However, sub-cultures and body subgroups within the context of Grindr and the research questions remain important. Grindr’s body subgroups or sub-culture categorizations establish a criteria or language by which users are able to hyper-exaggerate their identities for their base of attraction (Conner, 2019). Regarding their importance then, when asked about the body subgroups, the participants believed they were limiting on occasion while also being welcomed to allow for easier filtering of options. Many of the participants felt that they could not adhere to the body subgroups culture on Grindr. The non-adherence to subgroups cultures was described to be due to the assumption that these body subgroups held specific body and cultural norms that may have been too ‘self-defining’, meaning they did not want to be limited to such labels. The access to body subgroup identifiers via body type and self-presentations were described as regulated by the opinions and perceptions of others. Whether or not one wanted or perceived themselves to be aligned with certain categorizations was irrelevant if other users on the app did not believe them. There was the presence of underlying masculine-aligning categories that were the main body subgroups presented to me throughout the interviews. Overall, the cohort identified that Grindr’s body subgroups and the MSM culture of sub-categorization of bodies into rigid groups was very limiting and exclusionary,
Cassidy: Uhm...I mean if I have to say one, I’d say more jock...tribe, uh I mean, very big in athletics, very big in...kinda everyday fitness, so...I mean if I have to align with one, I would say that. But I feel like, sometimes I can’t align with any group, just because, I feel...I feel like sometimes these...standards of what fits in a specific group, I feel like some days I’m like oh ya...totally, and there’s other days, I’m like I don’t feel like I’m there * puts arm up in air for measure*.

On the more ‘positive’ uses of the body subgroup categorizations, one participant stated that it made it easier for him to find what he wanted in others to streamline his usage on the app. For example, because he identified as a jock and looked for others like himself, there was unspoken understanding that there would be more discretion about identity disclosure and keeping things behind closed doors rather than in public. As Elliot stated,

*I’ve learned just cuz I have more experience on the app, I’ve learned to stay away from the crowds that I wouldn’t categorized within...and it’s not-not something like, oh he’s kind of...He...He’s been denied from that crowd that he’s so much that he’s staying away. I just, I just kinda know that I don’t fit in with this crowd and I don’t fit in with this crowd. I just stick to what I know.*

Therefore, just as with the general appearance ideal, body subgroup specific appearance ideals were identified to be rigid but lucrative in their ability to drive the access to other MSM on the app, and success in general for those who were able to achieve that status. ‘I think it's more natural for us to seek out outside validation’: The experience of body image in the context of Grindr and MSM ideals

Body image was described as a multi-dimensional construct in the context of Grindr and MSM life-experiences. While this corroborates the contemporary literature when describing the dimensions of body image, participants did not understand the concept(s) of body image in a
similar manner as the scientific community does; this matter will be discussed throughout this section.

Depictions of body image were presented in several ways, typically focusing on appearance and one’s role within society and the ‘Grindr community’, as well as having interconnections with both the physical and emotional sensations of the body. In regards to the emotional sensations of the body, the participants may have been alluding to sensations of embodiment or a reflexive connection with their body. I would argue that, by understanding the emotional experience one’s body appears to traverse when engaging with one’s attitudes and perceptions of their bodies via Grindr, they are experiencing some form of embodiment, whether it is negative or positive, as Piran’s (2016) model of embodiment describes. Specifically in regards to Piran’s (2016) proposed dimensions of embodiment, the presence of dimension (1) the experiences of engaging with the body as either comfortable or problematic, (3) experiences and expression of desire versus disrupted connection to desire, (4) attuned self-care versus disrupted attunement, neglect and self-care, and (5) inhabiting the body as a subjective site versus an objective site, could be identified in the expressions of body image experiences of the participants. For example, there was a striking awareness of how powerful the opinions of the external viewer’s perspective were when defining body image for the participants; they had an understanding that body image, in the context of Grindr, is driven by both one’s own beliefs and values, as well as the beliefs and values ascribed onto them by others within their environment. Further, participants identified reflexively dysregulated behaviors (e.g., not contacting those they truly desired, restrictive eating, over-exercising, sleeping with whomever) that they engaged in while aware of their potential mental, emotional, and physical harms due to a sense of obligation to other users and the status quo on Grindr. This outcome corroborates a study conducted by
Ponce (2020) who investigated gay men’s self-perceptions based on Grindr use via tweets (on Twitter) about Grindr experiences. As with the participants of this study, my participants describe the self-awareness necessary to constantly evaluate their self-image to more strongly align with the Grindr environment, particularly in regards to what was expected of them by other MSM. This was expressed in discussions regarding the turbulent relationships the participants had with their bodies during the onset of their early to late teen years, compounded by their struggles with their MSM identities.

Stephen describes this ongoing dialogue between the inside/outside dichotomy/homeostasis that occurs between social pressures and inner bodily beliefs. He stated,

*I don’t think the decision is only yourself, I think that decision comes from, uhm...from yourself, and the other people that you may trust such as your peers, but also strangers, because they don’t know who you are, so they’re gonna give that candid feedback that you might not get from the people you know. (However) I think that one’s body image develops and changes over time, definitely depending on their lifestyle and what not… (regarding confidence with body image) Someone might think they are overweight or something because of a comment someone said, when in reality, it’s not necessarily true, but they’re now going to think that because they are not confident in the way they look.*

Within this context, several issues are presented regarding body image for MSM in this study. Primarily, the idea that the observer’s opinion is a powerful force in swaying people’s own perceptions of themselves is a clear mark of what was commonly identified within the group. Although there is an understanding of how body image evolves and is self-curated, this was expressed in a way that made it seem that one’s own dispositions were not enough to characterize one’s self-image (i.e., how participants interpreted and chose to describe their body
image). This may in part be due to the higher prevalence of self-objectification/surveillance in this study’s demographic, as MSM have been generally identified to report greater self-objectification than their heterosexual counterparts (e.g., Brewster et al., 2017; Enguíx & Gómez-Narváez, 2018). MSM who use Grindr are more prone to objectification of both themselves and others (Anderson et al., 2018; Breslow et al., 2019). For example, Billie also identified the importance of and preoccupation with getting external validation for this appearance. He speaks metaphorically when addressing the challenging reflexive dialogue that is occurring between one’s own self-confidence about their bodies and the (dis)approval of other Grindr users. He stated,

*I think it’s more natural for us to seek out outside validation, because I think validation backs up whatever thought we have. Like I love whatever…this movie, but if everyone I hear is saying ‘that was shit’, I will be like ‘oh’ and you feel discouraged, it’s the same thing with body image.*

This challenging battle between self and other narratives about what body image is for MSM using Grindr becomes common-place in the user-based experiences when communicating with one another. Billie continued,

*It’s weird when I send a picture to someone (who) is smaller than me, and they’re like ‘oh you’re huge’ and I’m like ‘oh I dunno about that’ and then you may send a picture to someone who is bigger than you and they’re like ‘oh…’ and they get turned off or whatever, like it’s very odd.*

Again, this describes the ongoing turbulence between the self and the other. In this example, Billie describes the all too common experience of the influx of varied incoming
information regarding one’s body. While some users addressed him in a positive manner, those he wanted approval from dismissed him, furthering his drive for attaining a better physique.

Equally so, Elliot further hashed out this ongoing pattern during my interview with him. The sense that one’s body needs to amount to something, needs the requisite approval from others to be successful on Grindr, drives many to have unstable relationships with their bodies. He stated,

*I feel like, when it comes to like, body image, sometimes...how you think you see yourself or how you think others see yourself, it might just not be enough, what I mean by that is...there are those specific body types that people look for, so sometimes- I wouldn’t say successfully, but to use the app, you’re gonna have to find a way to I guess, mesh with it.*

Here he is presenting an idea that was patterned within the experiences of numerous participants throughout the extent of the study; that the body is malleable, ever changeable, and necessitates a sense of being fixed to fit in. This specifically refers to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the gay male gaze (see Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2018; Martins et al., 2007; Miller, 2015a; Morrison et al., 2004. As it has been corroborated by the participants’ experiences, the internalization of an outsider perspective, in this case the other users of Grindr, is associated with sensations that may be connected to body shame and lowered esteem due to dissatisfaction related to an appearance-focused self-evaluation that they felt did not match other users’ ideals, as Billie detailed (Brewster et al., 2017; Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2018; Szymanski et al., 2019).

As Grindr is heavily driven by appearance, many participants described the initial challenges to their body image when reflecting on the ideal on Grindr. One participant even
outright stated that Grindr essentially gives you the information or the ‘rulebook’ to what your body should or should not be. Having the onslaught of sexualized, objectifying information and imagery presented on screen was described as making participants begin to doubt their own bodies, feel less secure with themselves, and have a sense of a lowered self-esteem. For example, two studies conducted by Austen, Greenaway, and Griffiths (2020) investigating weight discrimination, weight bias, and internalized weight bias in gay ($n = 842$), bisexual ($n = 480$), and heterosexual ($n = 408$) men, reported that overall, MSM, particularly gay men, continue to report high internalization of weight bias, and report greater weight discrimination than their heterosexual counterparts. Unfortunately, this study, along with the findings of my study, furthers the argument that MSM have ongoing challenges to their body image experiences. What has been further clarified in my study is that along with gay men, the bisexual men interviewed were equally, and in some cases, more concerned with their appearance, self-ideal discrepancies, and objectification.

Coupled with the above described negative feelings towards their bodies, many participants described the need to use and adhere to health-focused behaviors, like exercise, to not only decrease their personal self-ideal discrepancies, but to be better liked by other users.

*Stephen:* Uhm ya...Like I go to the gym more than I used to, cuz I’m like I can do this now, uhm...and...I know I need to work out certain things so then that...allows me to...make that shift and to go there and to do that...uhm, other behavioral changes is...I guess- ya uh...* long thinking* it just makes me sort of...I think a lot of...uhm, opinion generating, uhm...because you’re- or judgement I should say, I feel myself; I feel like I’m always judging myself based off of the other person, and what they look like, and it’s like
you’re comparing yourself to them, which isn’t the healthiest way to look at it because everyone’s body acts differently. I think in reality that’s what happens.

This was markedly described when the participants were exploring their earlier experiences on the app, in other words, their first exposures to the rigid body discourses on Grindr. It is essential to note that health-focused behaviors were a major focus when describing how the participants aimed to change themselves. These health-focused behaviors were almost exclusively linked to factors relating to the muscular/masculine appearance ideal, corroborating previous research in stating that the relationship to poorer body image outcomes in men, particularly those who often view images they consider inspiring (e.g., Fatt et al., 2019 investigating male fitspo; my study identifying that Grindr users find others’ images or bodies on and from the app ‘inspiring’). These appearance-related behaviors may be driven by the internalization of the ideal (as many of the participants describe striving for it and reflexively aligning to it) as well as comparing themselves to others, which occurred both consciously and subconsciously in the experiences described.

The normalization of the ideal described previously, especially within the context of an app with ‘real-people’, problematically, yet convincingly, makes appearance ideals seem attainable through adherence to these health-focused behaviors, regardless of genetics. The findings expressing the ‘realness’ of the highly appraised images of the ideals shown on the app further corroborate and expand on the current understanding that social media imagery, including those found on dating apps, do influence users’ understanding of what is real and what is attainable, especially if the individuals being compared to/evaluated are within a closer social proximity (friends or like-others), sexual competition (via attention grabbing), or a potential intimate partner (Casale et al., 2019; Filice et al., 2019; Strubel & Petrie, 2017). Thus, when
failing to attain the appearance ideal and be appraised as having it, the participants were made to feel that it was their own fault. As an extension and corroboration to the known research understanding of the media’s effects on body image, having the blame placed on those who cannot achieve an ideal appearance is once again reproduced. Additionally, the sense of failure for not achieving the appearance ideal may further reflect masculine reflexive embodiment and the misalignment between the idealized self, the real self, and the idealized other, as both idealized bodies become understood as achievable and normative. Therefore, one’s failure to obligate themselves to achieving this status may be understood as a flaw in their capacity to be a strong, healthy, young (heteronormative) man (Duncan, 2010b; 2010b). Even participants who were more closely aligned with the ideal were dissatisfied with their current appearance in some way and expected more from themselves. Thus, the vicious cycle of negative body image experiences proliferates.

As I alluded to previously, the body-focused attitudinal changes (i.e., behaviors, thoughts, and feelings) were almost directly correlated to the participants’ exposure to Grindr when they were young/underage. Take for example Cassidy, who began to be over encumbered by this pressure and felt consumed by it,

\textit{Cassidy:}...\textit{Uhm, so especially at a younger age, I felt a lot more pressure to keep up with these standards, at a younger age I was constantly shaving my chest, I was using hair removal creams, and constantly using these products to basically make myself...be perceived as this...twink ugh, uhm, and I think just...Grindr especially, I think * coughs* at a younger age influenced a lot more with how I perceived my body, especially I mean 18-19, barely turning 20, that time I felt...a lot less comfortable with my own body, and so I think that...gaining gratification and attention from others...through hook-ups}
helped me feel more normal about my body, or made me feel in general better about my body.

The focus on bodies reinforced the notion that Grindr users should actively engage in self-comparisons, whether it be upwards to someone they found ideal, attractive, or unattainable, or downwards, where they felt like they were better looking, more masculine, and more aligned with the ideal. Some participants described an almost obsessive compulsion to self-regulate and compare with others; however, this hyper-vigilance generally tires out or breaks down the mental health of users.

Cassidy: I mean in this case, unrealistic standards of Grindr, uhm...especially when dealing with Grindr, once again everyone is kind of looking for that perfect body, and if you don’t measure up, you’re going to start noticing, flaws...quote unquote...uhm...but there are only exasperated because, I find Grindr does that to some people, where if they don’t view- if they don’t have the perfect body, and I know this from myself because that’s how I used to think that way, if I didn’t have this perfect body, I’m not going to find anything, so that changes people’s idea of how they see themselves.

The self-comparisons were a way for participants to ultimately identify where they could class themselves and how successful they would be on the app. The notions of being ‘not enough’ regarding muscul arity, attractiveness, masculinity, and body subgroup-alignment were interwoven in these experiences from the exposure to the ideals. These captured, retrospective experiences align with the current research understanding of MSM’s body image ordeals when using dating apps like Grindr. In congruence with Griffiths et al. (2018) who identified the presence of easily accessible content for social comparisons, as well as expanding Filice et al.’s (2019) work regarding social comparisons, weight stigma, and sexual objectification, the current
study identifies that even within smaller cityscapes, such as St. Catharines, and with prolonged use, Grindr facilitates and exacerbates the promotion of self and other sexualization (see Anderson et al., 2018; Breslow et al., 2019). In regards to some of the queries and conclusions regarding the presented studies, it may be fair to assess the present study’s cohort as also partaking in self and other objectification via self and other evaluation/social-comparisons, quantifying their capacity for success via their appraised appearances on Grindr (see Filice et al., 2019; Robinson, 2016), and the orientation to identify their role on Grindr for success. However, it is also equally important to address the fact that while this study did attempt to address sexual behavior via Grindr usage, the participants were not often open and willing to discuss these matters. This may have been due to the fact that I as the interviewer was also a fellow user (although not during the time of the study) of the app, and they did not want to be stigmatized by me or potential readers for their sexual behaviors in relation to their body image and identity stressors.

Participants’ (mis)perceptions of Grindr-based positive body image. With these negative narratives being described by men, it may be difficult to see why MSM would actively attempt to traverse the Grindr landscape for the context of body image. However, as with most geo-social and social media apps like Grindr, there may be gratitudinal and confidence use purposes, that to users may feel like positive body image experiences. The participants described a range of these body experiences, ranging from reconfirmation/affirmation of self-image and identity, confidence boosting, normalizing or having disliked aspects of your body described in attractive ways, and being made to feel that one’s value is beyond just their appearance and sexuality.
In the case of affirmation of self-image and identity, Grindr creates an environment where there are opportunities for identity matching, as was described previously. When successful, the affirmation of identity (e.g., as a jock, or the comfort of being MSM) may inhibit some of the more negative thoughts users have about themselves. In the case of several participants, Grindr became a space for building a stronger self-understanding, where they were more connected with themselves due to their interactions with other people.

Stephen: Uhm...it could be healthy and unhealthy (using Grindr for body comparisons), I think in both ways because it can hurt someone’s self-esteem but at the same time make it stronger, I think it just depends on who you are, and, who you aspire to be, and umh, but definitely where you are in your current mental state, cuz if you know someone who is not confident with themselves, seeing that image can really make them umh, be like ‘oh I’m too’ – like oh they’re too good for me like, it’s not going to work out. Where if they’re confident with themselves they’ll go take that extra step and make that connection.

Within the context Stephen described throughout his interview, he was a participant who identified the importance of knowing your role or ‘place’ on Grindr. By utilizing comparisons (i.e., evaluations of any sort) he was able to better dictate the way he explored his body within the context of Grindr, especially regarding positive affirmations about being attractive. He continues,

It definitely changed my feelings about my body, because it allowed me to see a whole bunch of other bodies, and in reality, and to see what that is like and...and umh, in a way, analyze how they look in comparison to how I look and to see where I want to go and where I see my image in the future. So, that is a way that I feel, in a way to see that I’ve changed, like ya this is actually obtainable type of image.
As I illustrated in the literature review, men like Stephen, as well as the majority of the other participants, use media images (in this case geo-social media) as a point of positive comparison to set body-oriented goals for themselves. They believe in the attainability that is displayed before them, and possibly as a self-protective measure, evaluate the experience as positive reinforcement to keep ‘taking the extra steps’ to achieving their body goals. Uniquely for men in this context, the presence of the ideal, while causing some negative body image outcomes, did not deter them from remaining consistent (long-term) in their attempts to achieve their version of the ideal, even if it meant ascribing to problematic appearance-focused behaviors.

Although using other people’s opinions and body evaluations as a measure for one’s body image may be volatile, Grindr was effective for some in reinforcing participants’ confidence and heightened body-esteem, while remaining explicitly appearance-focused. Several participants reported events where they went on Grindr when they were feeling poorly about their self-image, interacting with others, and then experiencing a temporary or lasting boost in their confidence. This was also expressed to occur when individuals already felt proud of their appearance; in this case participation on the app was to further reinforce these positive feelings. Additionally, Grindr also appeared to provide opportunities to normalize/destigmatize disliked parts of participants’ bodies.

Billie: So like even if I don’t want to you know, hookup, or am in the mood for sex, maybe I just want to feel some attention, or to feel desirable to other people, because maybe there’s times when I don’t and I wanna feel that, and there’s times when I feel really hot and I’m like ‘bitches gotta know!’
These experiences reaffirm findings reported by other researchers when conducting studies with populations that use dating apps like Grindr. Licoppe, Rivière, and Morel (2016), when describing Grindr hook-ups as interactional achievements between MSM in regards to facilitating the affirmation that an individual aligns with the appearance ideal, identified that Grindr not only facilitates quick gratification (via sex and objectification), but also covertly informs its user base about their appearance or sexual value to other users via spacial proximity and the standardization of a checklist orientation (meaning that profiles are designed for explicit purposes). While my participant cohort may have not explicitly discussed hook-ups, interactional achievements regarding gratitude and confidence remained apparent, possibly alluding to some answers pertaining to the queries of studies conducted by Miller n.d. (see Miller, 2015b, 2018).

Lastly, there was the presence of non-body focused expressions of positive body image. Where the development of more important relations, including friends with benefits, platonic friends, or romantic relationships invigorated aspects of positive body image, including what appeared to seem like satisfaction, self-confidence, being kinder to oneself, and not objectifying themselves. When asked about intimacy in relations formed from Grindr, Samuel expressed the role sexual chemistry via romantic/platonic love held in allowing him to be comfortable and present in his body during the sexual experiences he had.

*Samuel:* Yes, cuz some guys I feel like, like for example, mainly with my friends with benefits situations, is where I feel most comfortable with my body to be honest, cuz it’s like, not only have I shared my body with the other person, but like they do like, tell me how they think I’m beautiful, and other characteristics about my body versus when I’m just hooking up with some random guy, I feel more pressure to like uhm...look this certain
part or like…uhm, have like a certain body for them, cuz they like, don’t know what to expect from me, and I don’t know what to expect from them.

In the experiences of another participant, forging strong platonic bonds allowed him to find the confidence and connections he needed to eventually stop using the app and build a chosen family within his community. He did not feel the pressure or obligation to continue pursuing lackluster connections within a hyper-sexual environment like Grindr.

Robert: I think it affects because English is not my mother tongue, so…when I come here, I don’t talk much with people because I am very shy, but I am more open when I use the app because I talk with English with all the people, like some- some people really have connection with me- like I still chatting with one people uh about one year, more than one year, we used to date but not anymore, we are now friends. He teached me a lot of things about English and something else, like he gave me more knowledge, he gave me confidence. Like sometimes when I have sadness or something, I go to talk to him, or he comes to talk to me, he sharing with me or something, I think building connections can happen on Grindr, ya.

Although these positive experiences have the opportunity to occur on Grindr, I appraised them with the critical awareness (from experience) that even platonic or emotionally connected relations may still be bounded by appearances. The decision to actively pursue someone on Grindr is not arbitrary nor is it uninformed by the context norms of the app within its given location. As with all users of Grindr, the participants were all aware of who they had access to and where they could succeed/find positivity based on their and others’ appearances. When evaluating these discussions within any framework of scholarly understandings of positive body image or embodiment, they do not match up. Consider Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), as
well as Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010), where positive body image was concretely defined as a framework of unconditional love, appreciation, and comfort with the body along with a mind-body connection, self-protective behaviors, and the maintenance of positive body image through reciprocity. Therefore, Grindr users facilitating gratitudinal use, increased confidence, and even non-sexual relations with other MSM from Grindr, can still be considered to be partaking in self and other appraisals/evaluations, identifying a possible contact, and maintaining interaction using their sexual or appearance capital as a mediator.

It is also fair to assess that there remains widespread incongruence with what body image is as a whole, and what positive body image is specifically between the scientific community and the general population. As part of a larger study in assessing the BIAS (Body Image Awareness Seminars) knowledge exchange intervention, Bailey, Gammage, and van Ingen (2017) investigated older adults’ understanding of body image definitions utilizing focus groups and one-on-one interviews. They also identified the incongruence between study participants and researchers regarding body image. Some of the relevant themes identified by participants included that body image is about weight or appearance, body image is on a single continuum (between negative and positive body image), body image is a unidimensional concept (i.e., simple), and that it is similar to self-esteem. My study further explores these gaps in knowledge as even a cohort of appearance-focused, young adult MSM were misinformed or had little knowledge as to how expansive body image is. These ongoing findings identified through qualitative research may be alluding to the necessity of greater transparency and knowledge translation between body image researchers and the populations they hope to assist.

Reflecting on this, the question then becomes, how does an individual with a more stable positive body image or self-image configure themselves on the app. Genuine positivity towards
oneself in relation to their body, their mental wellbeing, and their space in the world was reflected as considering Grindr as any other arbitrary/unimportant social media app. Ultimately, participants described the process of decoupling themselves from Grindr as one of the best ways to improve their body image. This finding expands on the current understanding of self-protective behaviors/coping mechanisms reported by Grindr users. Similar to Filice et al.’s (2019) reports of participants having higher self-esteem, higher body satisfaction, resilience, and interpersonal support as a way to protect from the issues of Grindr, participants in my cohort who described having genuine positivity towards themselves outlined the importance of devaluing others’ opinions, focusing on being happy with the body they have, finding non-Grindr-related relations, and ultimately getting off the app entirely. The aspect of rejecting the app as a whole was a common thread amongst many of the participants in the study, and as an interesting note, may be a greater factor in the improvement of one’s body image experiences than simply having coping mechanisms. It does raise questions as to whether there are any tangible interventions that can assist Grindr users from negative body image experiences, or whether it is better to simply not use the app. Additional questions may perhaps be raised then in relation to how the participants actually used the app. This leads into theme two: experiences of using cyberspace dating on body image, where the narratives of investment, technology, and cyber self-presentation are outlined.

*Grindr doesn’t allow for… people to really express themselves: Experiences of Using Cyberspace Dating on Body Image via Investment in Grindr, its Interface, and Self-Presentation*

This theme was designed to outline the actual user experiences of the app, Grindr. It sets the context for how the app and its user base codify meaning through cyberspace via its interface, the nature of app-based investment, and Grindr as an extension of self-identity via self-
presentation/representation of the actual versus ideal self through imagery and profile formatting. Additionally, in this theme, I interconnected experiences of sex and sexuality along with body image through the lens of Grindr. The intersectionality of in-person and online sexual experiences and body image are unpacked in several sections.

**Grindr’s interface and novelty attractions**

From the first point of entry into Grindr, the participants described an unintuitive app that was filled with unverifiable (mis)information. However, the initial novelty for many when gaining access to a vast array of individuals like themselves hid the inaccessibility of Grindr, particularly if the participants began using Grindr at a younger age. Most, if not all, of the participants had long term usage on Grindr beyond the recruitment qualification for the study (six months). Having a group with such expansive usage, there were clear indications that they did not enjoy the interface and profile-making aspects of Grindr, either for its faulty technology or its relationship with their body image.

**Verifiability.** Several participants described the difficulty in verifying and interpreting the numerical and categorical self-descriptors used (e.g., height, weight, age, body subgroup, sexual position preference) on Grindr as a measure of visualizing others’ bodies. Ward (2017) reported in a study conducted among \( n = 21 \) participants (10 women, 11 men) who used Tinder to investigate impression management and self-presentation, that users of dating apps continuously experiment with ‘accurate’ but controlled presentations of the self to garner attention via superficiality without being filtered out by other users using the interface. Goffman (1959) described this as impression management where an individual controls one’s setting, appearance, and behavior, in these cases, to gain the interest of a potential romantic or sexual partner. Leary and Kowalski (1990) further informed the notion of impression management,
stating that the facilitation of self-presentation was driven by specific motives (in this case, sex or gratitude), and individuals facilitated these motives by informed decisions that depicted the self in a favorable way (i.e., a masculine jock looking for sex with others similar to him may post an appearance-focused image and have his profile curated for said purpose). While these investigations in impression management heavily focused on imagery, it is fair to argue that numerical fixations on Grindr are also of sexual capital. Therefore, the controlling or withholding of information to construct a positive self-presentation is a valuable experience to unpack regarding verifiability for Grindr users. For example, Cassidy described the experiences of users who both have and do not have filled-in profiles being asked for stats (e.g., numeric measures of height, weight, age, penis size, position, sexual preferences) and his opinions on the nature of specifying body metrics on Grindr (considering that apps like Tinder – marketed more for heterosexuals and for long-term dating – do not require body-focused descriptors),

_Cassidy: I’d say 90-95% of the time, (the users) cannot imagine that on a person, uhm...so I think ya, when it comes to the app, there’s actual limitations, because somebody can see numbers, and especially with the gay numbers, one of the first messages you get is ‘Stats?’...uhm, 99% of people can’t really imagine what that looks like...unless you’re willing to show your pictures, unless you’re willing to basically have a head-to-toe image of yourself, most people can’t image that, so it’s a little bit- I dunno, a little bit skewed._

Although putting one’s height and weight on the app makes it easier for others to find what they are attracted to via filtering, as Stephen stated, ‘you wanna be real with yourself and with others, so from that point, it’s essentially giving them a preview of who they are.’ The information presented on profiles and discussed in chats is not regulated. This issue caused
participants to actively seek out more verifiable information while remaining doubtful of the person on the other side of their phone screens.

_Elliot:_ ...I’m not the most trusting of it (when others say attractive things/their stats), but if it is relevant to the situation, whether it’s a chat or a hookup, words just don’t do it for me, I kinda want more...and that’s when that image or images would come to play so...I guess, just images...are more...heavily regarded on the app.

_Interviewer:_ So, there’s a greater sense of trust if the person exposes who they are?

_Elliot:_ Ya. I guess, and...I guess, almost that vulnerability lets the person know...who you...or, know what you’re about, who you are...or you know, how they see that you are, cuz again, it’s just a picture, it doesn’t really...(represent who the person truly is).

Considering that profile information and images are the first point-of-contact between users, many men use them as a point of comparison and self/other evaluation that may lead to poor body image experience. Referencing previous literature, Robinson (2016) discussed the quantifiable body in reference to the accessibility that MSM may have based on body quantifications via self-presentation. Hence, verification of the quantified self-presentations become critical so as to not only be a measure of self-protection in regards to evaluations and appraisals, but confirmation that who you are contacting is in fact who they say they are; that is, sexual and social capital promote fictitious profiles and lying due to the extreme prejudice towards the unideal on Grindr (Tran et al., 2020).

**Body exclusions.** Grindr’s interface was described as limiting and exclusionary for unideal bodies to portray themselves in meaningful ways. Although Grindr does have the option for someone to categorize themselves as a ‘bear,’ or ‘large,’ and the freedom to place one’s true
height and weight on profiles, the minimalizing of these bodies was still observable in their media space (the apps advertisements and influencers beyond their social media through sponsorships). Additionally, the appearance norms described previously made participants feel that Grindr (its user base and interface) projects/reinforces a fear of fatness and the avoidance of sexualizing larger bodies (or other un-ideal bodies). These findings strongly corroborate previous reports of weight stigma and bias present on dating apps like Grindr (Filice et al., 2019; Goedel et al., 2017; Meanhey et al., 2020). In accordance with Filice et al.’s (2019) findings, several participants describe a feeling of negative stereotyping of un-ideal bodies. For example, Samuel dealt with the challenges of understanding the issues of body exclusions yet appeared hesitant to allow others to see himself in an ‘un-ideal’ manner.

*Interviewer*: So as an off-shoot of that before we move forward, do you think that...Grindr, I guess, or even the community, promotes the idea of fatphobia, that people are genuinely not hateful, but even being afraid of having a conversation about fatness?

*Samuel*: Definitely, I’d say like, a lot of it is like, viewing fat people’s bodies as non- sexual, and the context of Grindr, oh this person can’t be sexy but still fat...uhm, so...I’d say that, but also like the representations of fat people in our community is either they’re like malicious, or kind of a comedy act, to be honest, uhm...but even at pride, the way by which like...fat bodies are...even like given the looks, you’re taking up space, basically, and even like...in that example, disabled bodies too, as... like, let’s be honest, pride is not an accessible event, so like, the way...those bodies are taking up space, is how they’re viewed.
Interviewer: And then, even in terms of the interface on Grindr, let’s say the options that people are allowed to have, in terms of describing themselves, are fat bodies or disabled bodies, able to properly you think, and equally, represent themselves on the app?

Samuel: Hmmm, I would say…no…only because I can kind of predict the questions, especially like, disabled bodies would get, for example, especially in regards to sexual positions, to be honest, it is the first question most people ask, as annoying as it is, so, and then like, even fat people too I guess, since you’re only given that picture, or like-when you don’t show a picture, like, I’ve even found people who talk to me…like have been like, cuz I usually ask for a picture,…they’re like, you’re probably not going to like me, I’m fat, or something like that. Uhm…so I’d say definitely like, but then there’s also the chubby chasers online too, so It’s like...I’d say, 90% of the time no, but there’s that 10% group that’s like into the people with those bodies.

It is understandable that for many MSM who use the app, the types of toxic body-focused attitudes are something that they may experience when using Grindr. These findings again corroborate the current literary understanding regarding the internalization and reproduction of implicit weight biases in MSM and the marginalization of un-ideal or non-sexualized bodies (i.e., niche sexualities via femme fetishization, Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Austen et al., 2020; Conner, 2019). It also understandable that many deal with a dissonance regarding this topic; as with Samuel, many do not want to promote toxic behaviors but still knowingly align themselves with them. As seen in the study conducted by Saraiza et al. (2019), MSM face the ongoing issue of both not wanting to come off as discriminatory, while also not wanting to accommodate for the un-ideal, something that was very present in my study as well. Similar to their study, the use of language regarding attraction was confined to what was perceived as masculine and muscular,
not feminine and unathletic. This adherence may be due to a fear of rejection. As Breithaupt, Trojanowski, and Fischer (2020) reported in a brief cognitive dissonance intervention (two sessions) study among college aged students ($n = 156$, mixed sex population with no indication of MSM), while minimal, the presentation and feedback understanding of anti-fat attitudes may reduce explicit anti-fat attitudes (as opposed to implicit). However, the implicit biases may remain due to the limited exposure of seeing or experiencing success within the app and in media regarding obese or un-ideal bodies (i.e., fatness is still seen as socially undesirable). While this intervention-focused study and its population are disparate from the current study, it alludes to the internalization of anti-fat attitudes that present in college aged populations, similar to my cohort.

That being stated, the dissonance between participants stating that they did not want to discriminate but implicitly remaining discriminatory in behavior may be a result of how ingrained and normalized covert/subtle forms of appearance-discrimination are in MSM populations. While the participants said they did not want to discriminate against the un-ideal, subconsciously they wanted to remain in the statuesque to ensure their own success via self-preservation in a volatile environment like Grindr. These findings perhaps reflect a more complicated relationship with reflexive embodiment along with dissonance. Williams and Annandale (2020) investigated reflexive embodiment in overweight and obese individuals in relation to stigma and identified that while there was an understanding that there are numerous factors that amplify the potential for becoming or maintaining an overweight status, the moralization and individual resolve of achieving a healthier body and acceptance remained a determining factor in how individuals ‘felt’. This notion of feeling was related to the embodiment of emotional sensations of personal failing due to knowing – reflected in social
awareness/norms – oneself in participating in stigma associated behaviors, e.g., eating bad foods.

Similarly then, while participants in the present study wanted to remain kind to the un-ideal others on the app, their possible implicit bias rationalized their personal dissociation from being the un-ideal other. This dissociation from the un-ideal other stems from the fear of rejection due to fatness from non-overweight users and the stigma that comes from using categories that emphasize a larger body on Grindr and is strongly linked to appearance and social ideals present in MSM culture. Cassidy stated,

“It’s interesting to see how, so many people…are basically looking for a perfect body (on the app/interface) …and if they don’t find what they want, they’ll move on to the next person and the next person, until they’ve either blocked everyone within a 20 km radius …

...It’s something that has been brought up in the past, it’s very prevalent in gay culture outside of Grindr, no fats no femmes, that’s a very common talking point especially when it comes to Grindr nowadays… just when it comes to describing who you are and your body type…definitely promotes this fear of being able to be open about who you are… thinking of messages that I get in the past…people who might be a little heavier on the average build, or a little bit larger, a little bit heftier…and it breaks my heart a little bit... like they’ll say, I’m a little bit larger is that okay, and…the fact that…that app has instilled fear in others to be...to be afraid of who they are.. and to be able to express who they are...fuck I hate that app for that...unfortunately it is the primary app for communication with other gay...bisexual, questioning, transgender people, uhm, it basically is the number 1 app for it, but the fact that this app has instilled fear in those, and basically being, I’m a little bit larger is that okay, I’m a bit more effeminate is that
okay, the fact that this app has done that to some people is... it just, it breaks my heart personally, and it’s harsh *exhales*...

The exclusion of the un-ideal from the app’s interface, adverts, and categorizations led some participants to feel that they either had to use the app in a different way (to stick to their niche; Ponce, 2020) or remove themselves from it. Josh was initially subject to the un-ideal exclusion found on Grindr. Having lost a considerable amount of weight, his success and acceptability on Grindr changed. He went from feeling that the app was ‘stupid’ and its user base was all ‘assholes’ to finding that he had more success on the app once he was able to present himself closer to the MSM ideal. Not only does this objectifying reinforcement from other users amplify the importance of the appearance ideal to users like Josh, but also exacerbates his rationale for internalizing the appearance ideal to a greater extent. This further confers the resilience of subjective biases against the un-ideal, as his and others’ experiences reflect feelings of body-focused discrimination, while also partaking in it.

The novelty of hook-up culture and body image. When asking questions to gain in-depth information about the hook-up practices of many of the participants, I had difficulty getting straightforward answers. Respecting the participants’ (un)willingness to discuss sexual matters, I allowed them to provide what information they felt they wanted to describe, however vague, and left further interpretation through surmising about what was and was not said to understand the true nature of the effects of hook-ups on body image for myself. The participants inadvertently gave me information about the effects of hook-up culture when answering other questions, but for many, when asked about their usage of Grindr or their participation in hook-up culture, many dismissed it (hook-up culture) or described the usage of hook-ups as low. It was interesting to identify a codified level of shame in having hook-ups, although not explicit.
A key novelty of Grindr is the quick access to no-strings attached sex with strangers (refer to Anderson et al., 2018; Goedel et al., 2017; Miller, 2015b; Robinson, 2016; Smith, 2015 for further explorations on Grindr and hookups). The participation in MSM hook-up culture is normalized in gay culture in general and has been increasingly normalized through apps like Grindr. While the concept of a hook-up (or casual sex/one-night stand) is not new, the ways in which geo-social apps like Grindr provide access to hook-ups via real-time GPS and an interface designed for sexual preferences (i.e., sexual position, body subgroup, body type) is a relatively contemporary and profoundly unique concept for an app that is designed to be so mainstream (Miller 2015a; Enguix & Gomez-Narvaez, 2018). While other similar apps do exist for both heterosexual and MSM populations, Grindr is one of the very few to promote sexual promiscuity since its inception in 2009. As I have previously described, Grindr allows for the public display of non-explicit images (e.g., face, torso) on public profiles and the sharing of explicit images (e.g., full body nudes, genitals) in private one-on-one chats. Sharing self-objectifying imagery is one way of gaining access to the hook-ups that take place off the app. The online-objectification via sharing of images was consistent with the conceptual model of online objectification presented by Breslow et al. (2019), which attempted to observe a mediated relationship between number of dating apps and time spent on dating apps, online objectification, and body image outcomes, but found little support for their model. While the present study did not assess or report pathways to poor negative body image outcomes, it is important to open discussion on the correlates that can be regarded as intermixing in these self-objectifying experiences. In this study, the participant cohort collectively used Grindr for a fairly long period of time (as opposed to addressing the number of apps used as with Breslow et al., 2019). They also had increased self-objectification via online objectification when they were highly invested in the app, which
reinforced body surveillance. The increase in self-objectification experiences also perpetuated an explicit and implicit bias for the appearance ideal, which was described as making participants feel worse about themselves and their bodies (lowered body satisfaction and lowered self-esteem). Although Breslow et al. (2019) only presented minimal support for their model, a complex pathway such as the one described above may be further served with more intuitive qualitative methodologies, as in this study. At present, I argue that the model of online objectification is further rationalized in MSM populations, particularly for intensively sampled, homogenous samples.

It is important to consider that the objectification and comparisons of bodies do not end at the point that a hook-up is set up (i.e., online objectification). The participants described how in-person meetings held more importance in judging bodies than images or stats on profiles. These findings follow similar reports of participant experiences to those of Saraiza et al. (2019), however they add to the notions of the importance of online versus offline self-presentation in MSM meet-ups in a university town context. It also adds to similar works of motivational orientation research, as conducted by Dondzilo, Rodgers, Turnbull, and Bell (2019), who reported that their participants ($n = 83$, male, aged 17-37) were quicker to approach and be motivated by images of the appearance ideal over their stigmatization and dislike for the un-ideal. However, while their study limited their findings to simply images, the current findings begin to allude to the importance of ‘facing reality’ and the importance of matching presentations. The quantifications and ideal self-presentations explored online fundamentally require more than a semblance of accuracy to reality as the cultivation of masculine fetishization hinges on outsider perspective (Brewer, 2018). This ‘body-appraisal’ was described as a stressor for participants because they had to match their online presentation and also deal with internal
dialogues regarding the further in-person evaluations that took place consciously and subconsciously during dates or sex. An example of this internal dialogue was described by Lincoln, where the evaluations of his partner’s or his own body gave him the drive to further align himself with appearance-focused health behaviors, including regimented exercise adherence.

*Interviewer:* ...when you’re actually experiencing the hookup, like it’s actually happening, are there any thoughts happening regarding your body?

*Lincoln:* uhm ... *long pause* ... well it depends on the person

*Interviewer:* okay, can you give me an example?

*Lincoln:* Yes, if I perceive that that person has a better body than me, yes, I think I will... I need to like workout harder... and to get a better body- if that person... well that is my opinion- if that person have like, I have a better body than that person, I feel like ‘oh I’m doing a great job’ you know? It depends on the situation.

As with Lincoln, several of the other participants described a similar interaction where a hook-up consciously or subconsciously informed their decisions to change their appearance-focused behaviors. These hook-up related health-behavior changes critically add to our current understanding of MSM body image. Not only did participants describe the importance of sexual encounters for managing body image and sexual body image, but also conferred the ongoing adherence to these health-behaviors due to negative body image experiences. This opposes the understanding that adherence is related to aspects of positive body image, as identified in college-aged women participating in a yoga intervention study conducted by Cox, Ullrich-French, Tylka, and McMahon (2019). This cycle of evaluation is one of the ways in which the
participants tried to circumvent negative perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their bodies, or to reinforce a ‘positive’ body image. However, it is important to note that participants’ perspective on positive body image misalign with what the body image literature genuinely conceptualizes as positive body image (refer to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It appeared that if the participants felt that their bodies were included in the appearance ideals they ascribed to, they felt more positively about themselves, thus conceptualizing their perspectives on what positive body image was.

In addition to the comparison or evaluation-driven ‘positive’ body image, validation of one’s appearance and the gratification of using Grindr for body-focused interactions were also identified to be important ways in which participants’ body images were affected during interactions, especially when participants have the ‘idea of wanting to be validated and then subsequently not (Lincoln).’ This matches a similar narrative described in the tweets studied by Ponce (2020) in describing how individuals used Grindr for the sake of pursuing some form of validation regardless of the actual outcomes. It additionally adds to the present understanding of gratitude use and social media but regarding MSM and dating apps. Specifically, it is possible to identify that dating apps have similar quasi ‘positive’ outcomes to those of other social media, while still strongly focusing on outward appearances, unless one meets the threshold of the ideal. These experiences may have been more strongly reported in my study due to close inter-relational experience and understanding between myself as the interviewer and the participant, justifying further exploration in qualitative, emic-focused, community research in understudied populations. This is especially true for populations which typically report greater rates of negative mental health, wellbeing, and body image outcomes, as described, from using the app for such purposes. Even so, several participants described how hook-ups were initially an
explicit way of finding positive reinforcement about how their bodies were attractive or sexy. Consider the excerpts from the interview with Cassidy, who describes his initial experiences of the novelty of hook-up culture on Grindr and his self-distancing from the culture.

*Cassidy:* I think *coughs* at a younger age (Grindr’s hook-up culture) influenced a lot more with how I perceived my body, especially I mean 18-19, barely turning 20, that time I felt...a lot less comfortable with my own body, and so I think that... gaining gratification and attention from others...through hook-ups, helped me feel more normal about my body or made me feel in general better about my body. Uhm, but now that I’ve strayed away from Grindr using it for hookups, uhm, I find that it has influenced less...it’s just that that I’ve had less influence from the app itself on my own body image uhm, because I’m not- primarily I’m not gaining any gratification from others on the app, I’m not there to gain gratification.

... now that I’ve moved away from... hookup culture... it definitely opened my eyes more... as to... how much... it was actually impacting me... and... being able to... disconnect... others’ opinions on me from the app and then basically disconnecting that from how I actually view myself... has brought forth... a lot more positive aspects... because I feel like I don’t need to... get gratification from anybody else now.... I mean, I see it myself... I mean yes, some days I still get down on myself for my own body, but I don’t need anybody else’s gratification to tell me that I look great now.

Understandably, for many younger MSM who are first beginning to use Grindr for hook-ups, the importance of successful hook-ups and attention may be a marker of their space on Grindr and how they are able to conceptualize their body image. As with Cassidy, a reoccurring pattern among many was the process of withdrawing from hook-up culture. Decoupling from
hook-up culture was to dismantle its importance and unpack its toxicity. For example, Samuel’s excerpts described how hook-ups made him feel a pressure to abide by covert rules about bodies during sexual interactions (e.g., what a bottom or top does or looks like).

*Samuel:* …when I’m just hooking up with some random guy, I feel more pressure to like uhm...look this certain part or like...uhm, have like a certain body for them, cuz they like, don’t know what to expect from me, and I don’t know what to expect from them...

... In regards to my body, it’s often a lot of self-monitoring, uhm...cuz like, especially with friends that I have like, in other cities, because I don’t have a lot of queer friends here, they’re all pretty much, very good looking, very fit for the most part...there’s different definitions of fit right, umm, so definitely a lot of self-monitoring because I don’t want to be excluded from that friend group, but I also don’t want to be excluded from hooking up and not being seeing as hot or sexy enough to have sex with.

Further, he also describes how hook-ups in general had a negative effect on his well-being.

*Samuel:* I found I needed that break from physical...like sex, to be honest, I felt myself...kind of feeling like, I was just throwing myself at anybody who would want me, if that makes sense...so, I’d say in regards to physical intimacy, Grindr definitely makes it very hh- like...temporary, cuz like, the first couple guys you hook-up with in a given time, it feels really good, and you’re just like, this is awesome, but then like, as you keep going...it feels less and less good, and less and less special, and like, less like your body is even appreciated, to be honest with you, especially in regards to like...hook-ups, I feel like it’s like, a quick like...fuck and chuck, ya, and you’re just like, okay bye, never talking to you again likely.
Several other participants described a similar issue, where hook-ups not only affected their body image in numerous ways, but also affected their emotional and intimate selves by normalizing negative behaviors including withholding their emotions (e.g., by being a ‘hard person’ and withholding romantic feelings to partake in hook-ups). Present disciplinary understandings present the argument that those MSM who participate in casual or risky sex such as hookups are more likely to experience negative body image (Goedel et al., 2017). These negative experiences are either in relation to the casual sex experience, as I have identified, or as a possible reason for them to pursue greater frequency of casual sex. What is clear however, is that hook-ups also affect the emotional self to a degree that remains understudied. As with all dating apps, a common and very important aspect of their functionality is that users understand the underlying norms (i.e., language, behavior, expectation). In saying this, dating apps and hook-up culture may in fact be rationalizing not only discriminatory actions towards others (Licoppe et al., 2016; Stempfhuber & Liegl, 2016) but also disembodiment from the self. Consider the blatant misalignment with one’s wants and needs, subjectivity, attunement, and love and respect for their body that Piran (2016) outlined, which are being completely de-rationalized from the experience of hook-ups. Essentially, those who are participating in hook-ups may in fact be training themselves to be more emotionally disunited from the other and the self, together, which may have long-term implications that should be investigated.

‘Pressure’ and the nature of app-based investment

The nature of app-based investment describes the time and attention given to Grindr throughout the period of its usage. During the interviews, a range of low to high investment in Grindr was described to me through the experiences of the participants. Participants described usage ranges from six months to eight years, with repeated daily use being normal, which
matches other participant cohorts reported from other studies (Badal et al., 2018; Breslow et al., 2019; Smith, 2015). Similar to other studies reporting the relationships between high app-based investment and body image, the variation in investment was often correlated to how the participants felt and thought in general, and more specifically regarding their bodies. As initial users in their teens, all the participants described a higher investment in the app possibly due to the novel experiences found on Grindr, as described previously. Many detailed how the app initially was very ‘consuming’ of both time and mental space (i.e., considerable rumination of Grindr experiences). This is also often described regarding other social media and level of investment, as the notions that apps take over one’s life are not uncommon (Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016; Ponce, 2020). A key factor of this investment was others’ view or evaluations of the participants’ bodies (i.e., the pressure to conform to the expectations of others). Billie is one of the participants who described the internal dialogue of feeling the need to invest time into self-correcting for the pleasure and approval of others.

Billie: If someone who is bigger than me like continues to talk to me, because I sent a picture and my body is not the type that they’d want, that would affect me in the sense that, ‘that’s weird, like why-why is that the case’ but also like okay ‘how can I, going forward, appeal to not that person, but more people like that’ and then you try to... maybe overextend and like appeal to this... I dunno, group of people that look like this one person or...make your profile look different ...use a different picture, use no picture, I don’t know, just to try and appease other people.

Some of the negative body image attitudes described from higher investment in Grindr included thought patterns, including many participants feeling that they look nothing like the guys on Grindr or feeling out of place, negative feelings (e.g., insecurity, personal doubts,
depressive or anxious symptoms), and the aforementioned behaviors and evaluations (increased exercise, checking if their health behaviors matched those of the individuals they considered ideal, grooming for other’s ideals, and self and other objectification). Regarding the listed examples, participant Cassidy described dealing with the pressure of conforming to ideals when highly invested in Grindr and its espoused negative body image outcomes/experiences.

*Cassidy: ...but I think Grindr then. amplifies that idea ‘well you have to be masculine, and if you’re not, then you’re in this group of outcasts’ uhm...so I feel especially Grindr at a younger age, it pushed me...to think pretty...eat, think- to be a certain way when that wasn’t me... I don’t remember when, at one point. I kinda just said fuck it, I’m not going to be here for your own gratification, this is me, I want to be me, I don’t wanna be 90% me, I wanna be 100% me, so...uh, I mean I go through periods of wanting to shave my chest hair, and I go through periods of not wanting to have much body hair, and sure, but that’s on my own accord now. While definitely when I was younger, it was because of society and especially Grindr and apps like those...that pressured me to...want to definitely perceive my body differently.*

As shown above, a large factor of investment on Grindr related to assimilation to the ideal (Cascalheira & Smith, 2019; Jasper, 2016; Miller, 2020). Unfortunately, being accepted or aligning more with the ideal on Grindr comes with the expectation of specific kinds of traits and behaviors that may be unnatural to the users, including self-sexualization and identity essentialization (i.e., needing to act a certain way due to appearance; Brennan et al., 2019). The minority stress model may address some of these unnatural alignments, as they not only alleviate external group stressors via a reduction in stigma, but in-group stress related to the rationalized
normativity of homonegativity within the community (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2018; Meyer, 1995). Consider the following two examples of feeling the need to share explicit images or making the conversation sexual with other users to be able to ‘succeed’ in the community.

Stephen expressed the pressure of needing to share images,

   People want to see who you truly are, and your full image before you meet them, but at the end of the day, someone is not comfortable with it, I don’t think it’s right to demand that kind of images. But I think feel pressured to be able to provide it.

Lincoln described the pressure to change to more sexually focused conversations to keep others’ attentions,

   ...So, if you’re trying- there are some people for example, they are saying they are looking for friends or chat, try to keep a conversation with that people to make a real friend... they would be bored... for example, if you are like getting the attention you want to... Because at the beginning I try to be nice and be like ‘hey how are you, how are you doing’ they get bored. But if you want to get back their attention, you need to ask them whether they are a top or a bottom.

Implicitly, there appears to be a pressure on Grindr that pigeonholes users to these sorts of behavioral patterns. For example, when discussing issues of body image and space, Jos shared the complex relationship between self-monitoring to be more comfortable with himself, as well as previously feeling the need to self-monitor (or objectify) himself for other MSM to find him sexually attractive.

   Interviewer: And when...the monitoring is occurring, are you almost exclusively doing it for an external view of yourself, or are you doing this as a benefit to yourself?
Josh: I’d say...self-monitoring, as...like a tool for like others, an external thing, I would say exercise in general though, it’s me, cuz it makes me feel good inside and it like helps...uh, keep my emotions regular to be honest, it makes me feel good, but I’d say in regards to self-monitoring me, it’s definitely how other people are going to perceive me, where am I going to be included...where am I not going to be included...ya

I’d also...don’t try to get everyone’s approval, cuz you’re not gonna get it, you’re not everyone’s type, whereas like, when I was younger, when I was thinking about dating, I felt so distant from it, I wanna be everyone’s type, I wanna be a people pleaser all the time, whereas I think, now there’s still that aspect of people pleasing that I want to cater to, but then I’m like, but then I’m like, you’re self-worth and wellbeing comes first.

These kinds of experiences where individuals prioritized the app’s perceived socio-cultural significance in the MSM community were the underlying reason it affected their body image. For example, some participants describe the ways in which Grindr was a socio-culturally impactful cyber-space that was also important in how MSM should exist offline as they do online (i.e., participants felt that ‘Grindr has an important influence in the way we look and the way we want to look (Lincoln).’ Following previous reports of Grindr users’ perceptions of Grindr, it remains culturally impactful seemingly regardless of location and cohort, as it does appear to be a key information gathering and sharing tool for one’s identity, sexuality, and body image, particularly to those who identify closely to it (Brubaker et al., 2016; Jaspel, 2016; Woo, 2015). Thus, there appeared to be incentive in wanting to assimilate or succeed in the app. The higher investment in the app was surmised to be the normative experience of most MSM by several participants. The event of placing higher importance in the app or normalizing the described behaviors created a strained ‘pressure’ for users to participate in body-focused
attitudes to a high(er) degree than they otherwise would. I have already outlined how using Grindr increased several participants’ attachment to appearance-focused health behaviors, appearance evaluations, and appearance comparisons. However, discerning how investing importance into the app affected body image emphasized the concept of pressure, where participants felt the need to conform solely for other users’ approval.

*Lowered investment with time.* Interestingly, all the participants described the experiences of lowered investment in Grindr with extended use and time. Unique to very few studies (see Brubaker et al. 2016), coping mechanisms to protect body image and well-being from Grindr use were not any form of adaptation or external measures to assist with Grindr, but the abject removal of it from one’s life. The lowered investment resulted from several key factors revolving around norms, ideals, and hook-up culture. This included the user base’s toxicity surrounding appearance and masculinity, the loss of novelty in hook-up culture, finding meaningful relationships, and being mentally drained. In line with the current study, developing an improved body image or aspects of what could be identified as positive body image in some participants’ lives was a key factor in lessening their investment in Grindr and hook-up culture as a whole. From one of the previous examples during my discussion with Cassidy, he described the lesser importance of gaining something from the app, particularly from hook-ups, as well as being able to delineate between his own self-constructed body image, as well as the body image he has that is influenced by others. This excerpt aligns with our current understanding of more evidence-based positive body image constructs as opposed to participant understandings of ‘positive’ body image addressed previously. Consider Wood-Barcalow et al.’s (2010) outline of the processes of positive body image, including reciprocity, filtering, and fluidity. Cassidy identified that other users are a type of information source pertaining to their body image norms
and ideals. He then discusses his process of filtering this information which was done by lessening its perceived importance in comparison to his own beliefs (i.e., placing greater importance on internalized cues, wants, and needs pertaining to his body). He also presented a greater amount of fluidity with his body image in our interview together (flexibility with how his body appears during his fitness journey). This also shows considerably greater alignment with the body image literature in regards to understandings of embodiment (see Piran, 2016), as opposed to more abstract concepts of embodiment pertaining to the internalization of sociocultural object-subject dichotomies of masculine ideals (Csordas, 1990; Duncan, 2010b).

During our conversation, he also stated,

*Cassidy: Uh, but now that I’ve strayed away from Grindr using it for hookups, uh, I find that it has influenced less...it’s just that that I’ve had less influence from the app itself on my own body image uh, because I’m not, primarily I’m not gaining any gratification from others on the app, I’m not there to gain gratification. I’m there to talk to people, get to know people, and I mean, sometimes...basically people will I mean, if it’s not one of the first two messages you get from somebody, they ask for pics, uh...so, I have sent pictures of basically what I feel comfortable disclosing, and with comfortable showing, I mean most of the time people are like ‘oh ya you have a great body’ and I’m like okay thanks, moving on...I’m there to talk about more than my body or sex, I mean if that comes up, and I feel comfortable with it, cool, tell me about your day, tell me about what you’re interested in.

Whether it was due to an increased awareness of the difficulty in achieving the appearance ideals that were glorified on Grindr, or from negative experiences including, ‘ghosting, blocking, uh... name calling, insults...’ (Cassidy) the presence of toxicity on Grindr
was more than enough to hinder or limit participants’ want or need to use the app. Along these lines, spending time away from the app allowed participants momentary respite to cultivate a body image absent from the competing/challenging viewpoints of Grindr. This growth represented itself in several notions of what could be interpreted as positive body image. The overall lowered use and/or investment was linked to greater information filtering, less importance placed on other’s opinions, and overall more self-preserving/self-protecting behaviors (i.e., being more careful with who you interact with and how you interact with them). While not concrete, the relationship between lowered investment and positive body image appeared to be bi-directional; those who gradually lessened their use began to feel better about their bodies due to reduced opportunity for comparison, evaluation, and objectification as identified with Cassidy, and those who began to develop positive body image experiences outside the app began to invest less time and effort into it as was described with Josh’s weight-loss journey changing his perspective about himself and the app.

*Presentation of the self and/or the ideal self on Grindr: How technology is used to present the self through in-group meaning*

Self-presentation can be described as a curated performativity in relation to how Grindr users photographically capture themselves in the most genuine and/or ideal ways to garner the type of attention they would like. The nature of the ‘curated’ and ‘performed’ self in this case is an inherently disembodying experience. With many of the participants’ experiences being analyzed, while reflexive in their curation of the idealized self for the objectifying other, there was the potential for them to disengage with their true selves for the sake of an aesthetically pleasing picture. As Stephen states in the excerpt below, one’s primary value on Grindr is placed on these images, not who they were as individuals,
Uhm, I think that people that always reach out to me - there is definitely always something that draws them in, that drags their attention... and whether that be... uhm your profile, in terms of your bio... and your stats etc., or... an image. I think at the end of the day, I think they are only going to message you if they’re going to find something in... in your images attractive.

Further, self-presentation can be described as the summative concept regarding a vast majority of the subthemes previously described in this chapter, including those based on body exclusivity, verification, and the pressure to conform, to name a few. It ecologically demonstrates the utility of, adherence to, and proliferation of, the appearance and social ideal in MSM’s usage of Grindr in relation to their perceptions and attitudes regarding their own and others’ bodies (see Anderson et al., 2017; Robinson, 2016). Whether it was overt or not, the importance of how the participants self-presented was inherently related to their body image experiences and their genuine interests on Grindr. To better illustrate the connections between body image, self-presentation, and technology, I have created Table 4-2 describing the ways the participants illustrated how they use the interface to present themselves.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Cumulative Use</th>
<th>Daily Use</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elliot</td>
<td>Partially out</td>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>Twice daily</td>
<td>Chats, friends, hookups</td>
<td>Used images of himself in activities, displaying his athletic interests, and shirtless images. Limited information on profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Six months</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Friends, dates, relationships, hookups</td>
<td>Primarily used face pictures, occasional body picture, no use of self-descriptor options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Nine months</td>
<td>Two-three hours daily</td>
<td>Friends and sex</td>
<td>Uses face and clothed body pictures, uses sexual preference, health status self-descriptors, adds interest via quotes in bio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Mostly out</td>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>Every other day</td>
<td>Friends, dates, chat, networking</td>
<td>Uses pictures he is comfortable with Not much else included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>One and a half years</td>
<td>Once or twice a week</td>
<td>Friends and dates</td>
<td>Face pictures emphasized only looking for friends and dates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Timeactive</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Nine months</td>
<td>Twice daily/six times a week</td>
<td>Chat, friends, dates, hookups</td>
<td>Use self-descriptors, his ethnic/racial background, his dating status, what he is looking for, uses only one picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>Five days a week</td>
<td>Hookups, friends, chat</td>
<td>Uses a variety of images to portray himself, describes his ethnic/racial background, gender, what he is looking for, and health status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billie</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>Few times a day</td>
<td>Attention, connections, dating/sex</td>
<td>Minimum information provided for other users, only body pictures, lists height and weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>Out fully</td>
<td>Seven to eight years</td>
<td>Mostly every day or when looking/bored</td>
<td>Fun, friends, dates, hookups, sex</td>
<td>Changes display name to fit his mood, bio is fully complete (self-descriptors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the participants stated several times over, these representations, particularly in images, are the most important evaluations present on the app as they not only allow you to know who you are speaking to, but also provide a sense of trust and vulnerability for the users (see Miller, 2020, for image social disclosures). This aspect of one’s profile and in-chat presentation are probably the most user-focused and free regarding self-expression and presentation (Conner, 2019; Jaspel 2016; Ward, 2017). The cohort had numerous opinions about self-presentation on the app that were directly related to body image and those that were less related. I will first quickly address those that are less related before fleshing out the body image related topics.

Aspects of self-presentation that were not related to body image were regarding one’s choice of anonymity, investment, safety, and ‘out’ status as an MSM. The option to only post body-focused images or only sharing face and/or more explicit images in the chat, gave users/participants who felt that they would like to stay ‘down-low,’ ‘anonymous,’ or ‘discreet,’ the freedom to do so. These examples strongly reflect contemporary works with MSM using Grindr by Miller (2015a for curiosity towards why people self-present the way they do; 2015b as to why people use the app for gratitude even when they do not receive it) and others regarding the importance of social disclosure and its relation to impression management while also seeking flexible anonymity. Regardless of how they felt about themselves, the participants who practiced these social disclosure behaviors expressed not wanting strangers (in real-life situations) to know information about their personal life. Limiting one’s self-presentation was described as a measure of privacy they liked to retain to circumvent any gossiping that could occur in their relative environment. Similarly, safety was another reason to practice the ‘no face’ or ‘no nudes’
rules, as one participant described the concern that they do not trust anyone on the app and did not want to get into confrontations.

Regarding ‘out’ status (i.e., one’s openness about their sexuality to their family, friends, and the public), a common thread among this study’s cohort, were the interactions between them and MSM who were not out. Those who were closeted or private about their sexuality (among the cohort and those they interacted with) did not want to be grouped into the same cultural group as those who were out, due to stereotypes and stigma. While other studies have correlated out status, sexual imagery usage, self-perceptions, and self-evaluations (Goedel et al., 2017) to higher sex-seeking, casual sex, drug use, and unprotected sex behaviors, my participants did not express any of these behaviors as part of their regular usage, regardless of how they self-presented (Anderson et al., 2018; Badal et al., 2018). At present, it is not unlikely to find users who are just beginning to explore their sexual preferences on Grindr for the first time, as with participant Bryce, who described the courage it took to become comfortable with his sexuality and show his face on the app when he became of age to use it.

**Body image and self and/or ideal presentation.** Regarding the participants’ self or ideal presentations on the app, body image and its underlying constructs (e.g., the ideal, attitudes, perceptions) played critical roles in how the process was done, what was shown, and how important these presentations were. Lonergan et al. (2019) investigated the manipulation of selfies posted on social media, the importance of others’ responses to/opinions of these selfies, and whether self-compassion moderated the relationship between social media variables and body dissatisfaction among 89 Australian men and 95 Australian women. They identified that not only did self-compassion not moderate the expected relationship but the manipulation of one’s profile (e.g., picking, editing, filtering the ‘best’ image of oneself) affected both men and
women by increasing reports of body dissatisfaction. In line with Lonergan et al.’s (2019) study, my participant cohort identified the important process of ideal-self presentation via selfies and semantics on Grindr for the sake of greater positive opinion generating from possible partners.

However, unlike the global body image-focused measures of contemporary quantitative literature, when interpreting what the participants were providing in self-presentation and information, body-site (parts of the whole) satisfaction or dissatisfaction played critical roles in understanding self-presentation, with the (dis)satisfaction often focusing on physical or social attributes that aligned or misaligned strongly with the participants’ perceived ideals. Some examples include emphasizing muscle size and shape of idealized sites (e.g., shoulders, chest, abs), presenting overtly masculine images, focusing on their faces, or avoiding showing one’s ‘unfit’ body, and hiding physical cues to being more feminine (via dress or posture). For example, one participant who described making many upwards or lateral comparisons and having negative thoughts about his body emphasized his muscular upper-body (e.g., chest, arms, shoulders) physique without showing his face or sites he is dissatisfied with (e.g., lower torso). Several reasons were given for this presentational style, mainly pertaining to wanting others to boost his confidence or for him to reinforce his self-confidence. I also interpreted this self-presentation to align him with his sexual and use preferences on Grindr. He stated,

*Billie: They’re probably going to act the same way or probably treat me the same way (regarding him sharing his images), there’s…a bias that comes in there and it’s just…tiring, cuz it’s just like…the app is so, judgmental enough without you already having the app give you…biases that like, again aren’t inherently there, but by using it you create them for yourself and then you project that onto others, and it’s just…so tiring. And in terms of my body image, I would say that…there’s, I’ve never been like*
super shredded and like abs and stuff, so like if I’m like using a... picture for my profile,...

*laughs* I’m like there’s no ab pictures to really use there...which is usually the thing that catches people’s eye and whatever, so like I do my best with what I have, and then you know, Ill change it...they’ll...you know you get attention when you change your picture I guess, you know like...after that initial wave I guess, fades, well you know you’re like, well why don’t these people like this picture? Like...does this...then it kinda of *inaudible*...avalanche of uh...questions of like “oh...” you kinda begin second guessing yourself, maybe you were confident in that picture...now you’re not so much uhm... that’s definitely happened to me before, but it hasn’t like...it’s not a huge deal ... I don’t think that affects my body image... on the whole, but it’s weird that it affects the way that I think about... what to present from... my body.... On the app... So, it’s not about body image, but it’s about the way I go about presenting my body image... *long pause* ...it’s connected...

It is interesting to note that although what was described to me did appear to be a relationship between self-presentation evaluations and body image challenges, Billie disagreed. Hinting back to a previous sub-theme (of body image among the cohort) the lexicon appears to be part of the issue here. It is unclear whether or not distinctions of the varied definitions of body image between studied populations and the scientific community are one of the key reasons genuine intervention and knowledge translation remains scarce. One of the key issues in appearance-focused populations, such as MSM, is that there perhaps lacks genuine interest to change. Consider what appearance allot's a MSM within both heteronormative society and homosexual social spaces. Whether or not they are pleased or feel comfortable in their body often is exchanged for acceptance, sexual confidence, and lowered social stressors, this being
reflected in their self-presentation and use of language pertaining to their body-identity. It remains that the reinforcement of rigid ideals makes MSM on Grindr feel that they need to objectify their bodies to be successful on the app. Several participants described that when their pictures on the app did not get them enough attention, they felt stronger negative feelings about aspects of themselves highlighted in those pictures, again reinforcing Lonergan et al.’s (2019) findings. Rather than identifying improved protective measures for the Grindr, participants found it easier to replace un-ideal images with images that aligned more to their perceived ideals, limiting their ability to self-present the way they would like to, but temporarily eliminating the crisis of failure.

As a key example, Josh experimented with how pictures changed his success rates on Grindr. He compared his interactions between having only his face picture, only his body picture, and one with both. He describes this in the following excerpt,

_Uhm...I dunno, I mean it does change the way for sure, so here's a quick example for me anyway. So I did one day where I didn't put my face and just my torso to see... who it was and...so people I knew, messaged the torso, and were just like 'oh hey how's it going' or people who may be uhm, I had messaged before who hadn't responded, who'd then messaged this torso, I don't play games with them, I'm not trying to play games with people's feelings, I'm just curious to see how it changes. So, in many situations I have found that that has changed the way people interact with me, for sure. And I dunno, ya... What was the question again?_  

_Interviewer: Who are you able to connect with, and...like..._
Josh: Oh that's right, who you are able to connect with. Uh...I would say generally speaking, I think it works out pretty evenly, either way- but I would definitely say in terms of just having the torso, it connects with more faceless people who are just looking for hookup, or trying to- a lot of the time, trying to get nudes off you, whatever...

Interviewer: And how I guess, have these presentations, in I guess, your self-presentation affected your relationship with intimacy? Whether it be physical intimacy, emotional, social...or at all...

Josh: Ya not a huge amount, on a personal level? (Interviewer: ya), not really, uhm...I guess maybe just having a body image, *stares* a body picture, I guess that might uhm...increase the way I feel about myself, in terms of ‘oh people are actually attracted to my physique now’ and so I guess in the intimacy level, I actually can feel, I can feel more sexy, or whatever with people. But then it’s, on the flip side, of having your body but also your face, and then people not messaging you, like wow, I might have a nice bod- people may like my body but they must think I’m fucking ugly, so I think it flips in terms of intimacy, I don’t think it changed much for me...

Unsurprisingly, Josh experienced the expected interactions amongst other users when he presented more body-focused imagery. As Grindr is highly appearance and sex-focused, even individuals who had previously only spoken to him as friends or ignored him, messaged him there-after. When he displayed only his torso pictures, the other users approached him more readily due to a possible expectation of something flirtatious or sexual in nature. The juxtaposition of his experiences alludes to how users sexualize/objectify themselves in codified (i.e., in-group knowledge) ways to garner the attention they want from particular demographics.
Implications

*Theoretical implications.* The present study identified the ongoing discrepancy between the body image understandings of studied populations and the scientific community. Even though the cohort that was interviewed was relatively more knowledgeable and aware of their body image, presentation, and how their bodies and identities work in sociocultural spaces, there remained a clear distinction between their understanding of body image and what we as researchers understand body image to be. Further, this study is one of the few that rectifies the need to further investigate embodiment models for the purpose of investigating body image. Although reflexive embodiment has limited representation in the discipline, it may confer a better understanding of the complicated relationship between embodiment and body image than presently is considered as it more critically looks at the self-awareness of embodied characteristics and their purposes. The body image and embodied experiences of MSM that were recalled and discussed during the course of this study are in part related to the individuals’ understandings of themselves and the world around them. However, while vastly beyond the scope of this research, it is critical to understand the historical roots of the physical and social appearance ideal for MSM that has heavily influenced the world they interact with. Having been labelled as a gay man’s disease, the AIDS pandemic further legitimized the marginalization, alienation, and outright violence towards gay men (in particular) during the peak of its outbreak and the public’s misunderstanding of sexuality and gender (while these concepts remain a tense issue for many). Any man who was attracted to, or had sex with, men, or was identified to be gay or queer was not only relegated to being a sissy, mentally ill (sexuality as a choice), but also a sickly individual who was slowly and painfully dying due to their sex practices. To socially circumvent these critical minority stressors, it appears that gay men began to reflexively align
themselves with outward performances of masculine presentation, adorned by powerful imagery of rippling muscle, sun-kissed skin, and an altogether picture-perfect representation of health. The rationalization for this is one can be gay and healthy/attractive: gayness does not equate to AIDS or being a sissy. While dated, studies such as those conducted by Harvey and Robinson (2003) and Tiggemann et al. (2007) hypothesis and contextualize this issue in regards to gay men’s body image, specifically. As a queer researcher, I feel the relationship between AIDS and the MSMs’ appearance ideal has become decontextualized and forgotten by the wider demographic (of scholars, MSM, and the public) when attempting to understand MSM life-histories. This is particularly true within investigations on body image outside of studies specifically focusing on AIDS/HIV. However, the underlying effects of this historical push and pull between two viciously opposing sides has clearly created a volatile environment for the modern-day MSM, regardless of space and place. Finally, the study remains one of the few body image-focused studies that looks at MSM dating applications and their relationship to body image outside of negative health outcomes, maladaptive behaviors, and objectification. It sets an example for purposeful, emic-based research for within community researchers to keenly identify the codified, and often covert rationalization for certain body-focused practices of appearance-focused communities. While I ran into several limitations (discussed next), I do attest that more intuitive, longitudinal, open-ended work with communities like MSM are better suited for a true understanding of their body image beyond numerical representations of sociosexual experiences. With all of this being stated, it is difficult as an MSM myself, having a long history of using applications like Grindr, having talked to many MSM with similar experiences, and generally being part of a queer circle that is openly critical of Grindr yet remains using it, to convincingly state that there is a theoretical, pragmatic, or even mundane way of reformulating
any dating or hook-up-based application. While there is a plethora of avenues for different interests, intentions, and individuals, many of these evidentially stumble back into a similar social space as Grindr, i.e., there is no escaping the sexualizing gaze of the objectifying other on these apps.

**Limitations.** As with any study, there were several limitations present for the current investigation. I had set out to recruit a diverse sample of individuals that interwove racial, age, body type, subculture, and lifestyle backgrounds, but was heavily limited to two student bodies that remained primarily homogenous in demographic makeup. Additionally, although time and consideration was spent to have online interviews for distant participants, the extreme limitation of only having one individual participate in that form opens up the possibility that there were errors present in my interview style (i.e., there was not enough time to improve the standards of operation). Finally, due to qualitative research heavily focusing on trust, rapport, and time, conducting a genuine investigation using these methodologies in a time-limited degree presented obvious limitations regarding my personal beliefs as a social constructivist researcher. I wanted to investigate the relationship between sex and body image among individuals who not only did not know me or the setting they were being interviewed in but also had no need to share or trust me. Ratification for this would have been greater investment into participant lives through a grounded approach as an ethnographer; this unfortunately is not often possible in time-sensitive endeavors, nor frequently administered within the disciplinary confines of body image paradigms.

**Future investigations.** As I have alluded to in all of the previous sections, more work needs to be done to find rational, community-focused investigations and possible interventions (with genuine success) in appearance-focused populations, like MSM. At present, further work using Bailey
and Gammage’s (2020) modalities of knowledge exchange may be a good effort into bringing greater understanding of body image for members of the community. While the BIAS programming was formulated and administered to an older aged population, many with physical disabilities or chronic illnesses, the actual process of creating the programming is what I think would be a powerful tool for a potentially successful intervention protocol for MSM that are wanting to better protect themselves from apps like Grindr. Bailey and Gammage (2020) developed BIAS as a knowledge dissemination intervention utilizing mixed methods which addresses population specific body image, more specifically positive body image, over a six-week protocol. Although they formulated and assessed BIAS among older adults, people with physical disability, and chronic illness, adapting the intensity and structure of seminars to fit MSM populations may provide some form of successful intervention in maintaining genuine positive body image, as opposed to the appearance-focused misperceived positive body image described to me in this study. Rigid assessment would be required to test an online method of BIAS to hopefully reproduce similar sustained positive body image outcomes with populations that are technologically focused, and those who identify closely with social media. However, at present there does not appear to be rationale for Grindr users to decouple themselves from idealized physical and social norms, nor is there a more effective treatment for body image issues pertaining to Grindr other than deleting the app from their phone. We fundamentally understand the negative outcomes of using hook-up focused apps like Grindr, and therefore need to now move beyond exploratory-exclusive investigations like those we see presently (both quantitative and qualitative) and move towards a mixed-methods intervention with sound design and a wide-breadth of correction, which is far beyond the non-intuitive, structuralist modalities of present.
Additionally, as a queer researcher who is part of the MSM community and was an active user of Grindr for many years, the importance of positionality in future research endeavors needs to be paid heed. While only a subset of the population is fortunate enough to call themselves researchers, and an even smaller part of that cohort focusing on marginalized populations, it is critical to allow individuals with shared experiences, insider perspectives, and life-long histories with the cultures to be some of the figurehead investigators into their own community’s issues. Much of the nuance in the (potentially problematic) language that was used between the participants and myself, the unspoken understandings of our experiences, and the ability to analyze the data, came not from my experience as a researcher but my experience as a queer MSM. This is not to say that with critical awareness, love, and positive intention, an individual with outsider perspective could not capture these experiences, but a more extensive approach to research in any marginalized community would have to take place (e.g., understanding the historical nature of the AIDS crisis for MSM appearance, reflexive (dis)embodiment, the emotional self, and social development as an MSM).

**Conclusions and answering research questions.** This investigation sought out to answer key research questions to better understand and explore MSM body image and embodiment through an emic-focused, body image informed lens. The following summaries reflect the given answers to my theoretical questions.

The cohort’s conceptualization of their body image was at best an understanding of appearance-focused self-images that often focused on the deleterious and turbulent relationship between one’s own genuine beliefs and the importance placed on others’ perceptions of their bodies. Almost uniformly, the participant cohort described a linear appearance ideal that identically matches the disparate literature that was interwoven for this thesis regarding both
physical and social appearances. Finally, as part of the growing argument for better qualitative research for investigating embodiment in a body image setting, the participant cohort critically and with assurance described their decisions that would characterize reflexive embodiment in the setting of Grindr. Individuals were very aware of what behaviors, characteristics, and presentations were needed to occur (via experience and understanding) to succeed on the app. This reiterates the impassive stance many MSM taking regarding their identities, critically showing that outward expressions of themselves are made from self-aware analyses of the self.

The participants clearly understood that if they did not achieve certain idealized characteristics through their presentation, habits, and behaviors, that they not only would fail to gain much success on the app, but directly be targeted in discriminatory and dismissive behaviors by other MSM. In achieving the desirable traits, some participants described the ability to gain access to social circles that they deemed attractive, receive compliments, and remain in contact with potential social and sexual partners.

Participants were very self-aware and managed to rectify issues of impression management. At no point were they unaware of the importance of strict adherence to general or subcultural focused ideal representations. They were aware that if their body or face did not match the ideal, they would find a way to work with what they had to gain access to the attention they desired, whether for confidence, sex, or casual conversation.

Finally, while the vast majority of literature described Grindr as almost exclusively antagonistic to body image, I had attempted to investigate whether it was possible to proliferate some sort of positive body image using it. While participants described positive outcomes in relation to gratitudinal and confidence purposes, rationally speaking, they strongly misaligned with contemporary understandings of genuine positive body image as it was solely based on
objectification, evaluation, and comparisons. Ultimately speaking, Grindr remains a deleterious environment for the proliferation of negative body image experiences as well as inhibited reflexive embodiment experiences due to the highly sexualized and stressful environment.

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APPENDIX A

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: March 24, 2020

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: GAMMAGE, Kimberley - Kinesiology

FILE: 19-074 - GAMMAGE

TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project

STUDENT: Dushana

SUPERVISOR: Kimberley Gammage

TITLE: The case of Black and gay men's embodied image: an interpretive study for identifying the socio-cultural gay body image on new media

ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

The Brock University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

Modification:
- Moving focus group interviews to Lifesize, a teleconferencing application.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a renewal form before 11/1/2020. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Office of Research Ethics web page at http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:
- Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavorable implications for participants;
- New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

Lynn Dempsey, Chair
Social Science Research Ethics Board

Robert Steinhauser, Chair
Social Science Research Ethics Board

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to assure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.
APPENDIX B

Ice breaker: What made you interested in participating in a study that looks at Grindr and gay men’s body image?

What kind of body ideals do you think exist in the gay community?
- How is this reflected on Grindr?
- Do you feel it allows for other types of bodies to be accepted on Grindr? How so?
- Is there discrimination present on Grindr? If so, what kinds of discrimination do you think are present?

What is the definition of body image that makes the most sense to you? If you don’t know what body image is, what do you think it’s about?
- How do you identify your gender?
- How do you identify your sexuality?
- What tribes* do you align yourself with, and why?

From the time that you began to use Grindr until the present, what has your relationship been with these kinds of body ideals or expectations present on Grindr?
- How, if at all, have these topics affected your experiences involving your body?
- How do you feel about Grindr’s options (body tribes*, body measurements)?
- What characteristics (e.g., physical or social) may benefit one’s body-focused experiences on Grindr when trying to find hookups/dates?

What are your thoughts on the effects of masculinity on gay identities or experiences?
- Do you feel there are benefits if you are masculine on Grindr? What kinds of benefits or possible setbacks do you feel are present with being masculine on Grindr?

How do you feel about your masculinity/identity as a man and being gay? - /or/ How has your masculinity and your sexuality affected the way you experience your body?
- Can you elaborate on how this may affect how you allow others to experience your body on Grindr or in person?

How have the experiences on Grindr for your own purposes (whether short or long-term focused) affected your:
- Feelings about your body/hookup culture and body ideals?
- Behaviours pertaining to your body and hookup culture?
- Thoughts about your body?

(probes for any of the above questions)
- What kinds of things about your body do you focus on, on Grindr? How do you do this (text, images, emojis)?
- In what ways, if applicable, has this made you change the way you behave or interact with others or how you self-present/feel/act regarding your identity or body?)
• How may this effect who you are able to connect with?
• How does it change the way you feel or act regarding intimacy?

From your experiences using Grindr over an extended period, how would you describe the ways you live in or experience your body now? (This may include partaking in hookup culture, utilizing Grindr for access to other men, or everyday living)

Knowing what you know now and what we’ve discussed throughout this interview, is there something you wish you could tell your past self regarding Grindr, your body, or the expectations put on gay men?

Probing for embodiment: take me through your thought process regarding these choices, decisions, Was this an active choice or just going with expectations?
Are you fully aware of the decisions you make while on the app?

Are there/were there specific times in your life that you felt that using Grindr was more likely? (time of day, year, mood)
Are there specific spaces this may occur (at home versus St. Catharines; in a student house versus home house) - are the expectations different? Are the experiences different?