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The Impact of Gay Social Networking Applications on Dating in the Deaf Gay Community

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Recommended Citation

Cheslik, B., Wright, S.J. The Impact of Gay Social Networking Applications on Dating in the Deaf Gay Community. *Sexuality & Culture* 25, 1025–1040 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09807-4>

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The impact of gay social networking applications on dating in the deaf gay community

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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the following people for their editing support on this paper: Dr. Gloshanda Lawyer, Natalie Delgado, and Ashley Greene-Woods.

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Abstract

Dating between Deaf gay men who are ASL users and hearing gay men who use spoken language has historically been a challenge, creating a binary in Deaf-Hearing relationships. The dating game has been revolutionized by the creation of geo-social networking (GSN) apps, where people communicate through the medium of written English and digital photographs. Furthermore, GSN apps have created a network for meeting other men who identify as Deaf and gay, as well as revealing the existence of a sexual fetish for Deaf partners. The main research question driving this investigation is: What are the impacts of gay geo-social networking (GSN) apps upon the dating and mating rituals of Deaf gay men in the United States? Using Grounded Theory Methodology, findings indicate that GSN apps have lifted previously-encountered communication barriers between Deaf and hearing men, creating a causeway for communication that gives rise to increased comfort, but leads to an increase in rejection based on being Deaf.

Keywords: *Deaf Dating, Gay Dating, GSN Apps, Geo-social Networking Apps, Dating, Communication*

Author note:

The research protocols employed for this study were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. All participants were provided with appropriate informed consent.

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In the United States, technology impacts almost every aspect of daily life today from reading the news on smartphones to sending a text with little more than the swipe of a finger to using features in the home with smart home gadgets, and even self-operating cars. Technology has branched out into the dating world, in which people are finding it easier to search for possible romantic partners in the comfort of their own phones without the reservations that come along with awkward blind dates. Dating websites such as Match.com, E-Harmony, Gay.com, Manhunt.net., and OkCupid, have become more mainstream in acceptance, and operate as a product of universal design where Deaf¹ gay men are concerned. Present day dating, with the creation of the smartphone and downloadable applications, has become digitized as one opens an app and becomes their own virtual matchmaker swiping left and right on personal profiles. According to Johnson, Vilceanu, and Pontes (2017), “One of the advantages of using online dating services is self-identification of sexual orientation, interests, and availability—something not easy to ask or identify when seeking casual or long-term sexual encounters” (p. 62). Technology has advanced the simple act of swiping a finger to a powerful act that allows the users to find potential dates, new friends, a new love interest, professional connections, and sex. These apps, or *geosocial networking applications* (GSN), have revolutionized the gay dating world by making it easier to screen your potential mates based on looks, common interests, and even geographical distance from you by allowing the users to screen for active app users who are merely a few feet away at that very moment. Apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Growlr cater to a specific flavor of men. To iterate, Scruff targets men who like men with facial hair as evidenced by their advertisements and visual media representation. Growlr is more upfront and advertises

¹ In this article, we use the term “Deaf” instead of “deaf” to identify those who are culturally Deaf and use American Sign Language.

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that they are "the complete social networking app for gay bears" (Growlrapp.com). Grindr is a hub for all types and preferences, labeling itself as "the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people" (Grindr.com). Clearly, apps have diversified into sub-genres which cater to very specific interests within the gay community. As a result, the familiar past time of clubbing or bar-hopping now gives way to different norms of social interactions in a digital age.

Prior to the rise in popularity of geosocial networking apps and internet dating, gay men would meet up at the nearest gay bar with friends, drink a cocktail, and be on the prowl for activities such as consensual sexual play, finding a romantic partner, or forming a platonic relationship with another gay man. An evening ritual for participants of this study prior to the use of GSN apps might look something like the following: spot an attractive man, approach them nervously and utter that first, fearful salutation with the possibility of rejection or acceptance lingering in the air. This fearful approach is exacerbated for Deaf gay men not only because of the externally presenting reasons for rejection based on appearance but because there are additional barriers present for Deaf, gay men. Chiefly among these barriers is an obstacle regarding communication that exists between aurally delivered languages and American Sign Language (ASL). Secondly, the perception that Deaf individuals are perceived as lesser, inferior, and disabled is still ripe in today's digital world (Ladd, 2003; Wright, 2016).

Nowadays, Deaf gay men no longer need to have an awkward experience approaching someone at a bar to make a connection or experience the pain of rejection on multiple fronts. With the advent of GSN apps, Deaf gay men have the option of making an connection behind a screen before meeting in person. However, there is a paucity of research pertaining to GSN apps and

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their potentially positive impacts on dating, such as bridging communication barriers in the Deaf gay community.

The Deaf community in the United States is quite small, and the vast majority of community members know one another intimately. This is in large part due to matriculation at Gallaudet University and The National Technical Institute for the Deaf, the only two universities in the nation uniquely qualified to meet the needs of Deaf individuals. As a close-knit community with a shared language, the Deaf community does not have "six degrees of separation" as is thought to be with the public at large (Ke, 2010; Zhang, 2009). Although no data exists on the degree of separation for the Deaf community, the researchers rely on anecdotal evidence and personal experience as members of the Deaf gay community to estimate one degree of separation, which is exacerbated by social media. In essence, the likelihood that a Deaf researcher will know their participants is extremely high, making personal and often secretive or "taboo" behaviors difficult to share.

It is difficult to accurately provide a snapshot of how many Deaf gay men use GSN apps, let alone how many individuals in the United States identify as Deaf and gay. In order to get an idea of these numbers, the researchers looked at various reports that account for either hearing status or sexual orientation, as no singular report exists that expressly counts culturally Deaf gay men in the United States. According to the 2012 report by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), there are approximately 37.5 million American adults who are Deaf or hard of hearing to some extent. According to the 2017 Gallup report, approximately 10 million American adults identify themselves as LGBT (Gates, 2017). Earlier studies suggest that the number of individuals who are labeled as deaf in the United States is approximately 200,000 (Mitchell, 2005). However, Mitchell also indicates that it is difficult to pinpoint the number of individuals in the United

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States who follow Deaf cultural norms, due to the inconsistent definitions of terms used as a sociolinguistic minority as opposed to a pathological loss.

For a Deaf gay man, the dating process is convoluted due to communication barriers and the increased possibility of rejection based on a hearing romantic partner's inability to sign or otherwise communicate with a potential Deaf partner, or the hearing partner has a negative perception of disability. With the rise in GSN app usage, making potential dating and sexual partners more accessible, the present research is limited to studies on the correlation between GSN apps and sexual risk practices. Research pertaining to geo-social networking apps and their usage tend to focus on the impact of dating, sexual encounters, and associated risk factors, such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's), and sexual abuse (Halloway et al., 2015, 2017; Hahn et al., 2018). Therefore, the researchers utilized literature pertaining to GSN apps within the hearing straight and gay communities, and discuss their implications to the Deaf gay community.

GSN Apps

Drawing upon positive correlations with GSN app use, and the subsequent analysis of research related to Deaf dating scripts the delineation that Deaf gay men in terms of both dating and the usage of GSN apps is missing from the literature. Goedel and Duncan (2015), aimed to study GSN apps and sexual behavior of gay men in Atlanta. They found that gay men use multiple GSN apps and "spend a significant amount of time on them" (p 1). The study, which comprised of 92 users who completed a survey that was advertised on Grindr, found that 38% of the participants use apps to find sex, 17.4% use it to find friends, 14.1% to find a boyfriend or relationship, 10.9% for dating and 18.5% use the apps when they are bored. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 66, with a mean age of 31.73 years of age (p. 5). Additional

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variables focused on sexual practices and risk factors. On average, participants logged into the app at least 8 times a day, totaling 1.3 hours daily; this finding suggests that GSN apps are a veritable part of gay men's social networking and a tool for communication.

Johnson, Vilceanu and Pontes (2017) aimed to investigate the correlation between GSN apps and sexual orientation. The study utilized data that was obtained from the Pew Foundation's "Internet and American Life Project Tracking Survey", which consisted of telephone interviews conducted in 2013 on adults eighteen years of age and older. Johnson, Vilceanu, and Pontes (2017) concluded that lesbian, gay and bisexual adults were more likely to use dating apps than heterosexual adults (p 64).

Even among heterosexuals, dating apps are becoming increasingly popular, with "Tinder alone matching 26 million pairs of users per day" (Zhang and Yasseri, 2016, p 1). In a study conducted by Zhang and Yasseri, they examined two million Tinder conversations and deduced that 79% of the conversations were started by males (p.1). Pauley and Emmers-Sommer (2007) conducted a study on how internet technology has impacted relationships that were formed online. For this study, they surveyed thirty-six participants with a forty-four question survey about online relationships. They questioned if people who are in relationships are able to feel excited about future hook-ups and are free to play, it reduces the uncertainty factor in the relationship because it helps them feel more secure and develops emotional intimacy (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007, p. 413). A total of forty-five participants were collected via online chat room messages and through a university communications course. Nine participants were removed from the study because their online relationships were not labeled as romantic (p. 417). The remaining thirty-six participants consisted of eight men and twenty-eight women, with a mean age of 25.33 years and a standard deviation of 8.46 (p. 417). Their weekly internet usage averaged 32.29 hours with a

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standard deviation of 29.35 (p. 417). The study was limited due to the small number of participants.

One of the main draws of GSN applications is the ability to sort through the profiles using specific criteria that you are looking for. Not only can you search by age, ethnicity, and location, but also by body type, relationship status, sexual position, HIV status, and what specific goals you may wish to accomplish.. GSN profiles help users create a sortable persona that will attract members of the same gender for whatever satiates their needs at the moment, creating a game-like atmosphere of cruising and self promotion (Race, 2015, Tsziallas, 2015, Aunspach 2020). A 2015 study on the use of online hook up devices found that the various categories within the online profile allow users to sort by identities and desires, which users construct fantasies together via sexual interchange, thus allowing a user to determine if the other person meets their sexual criteria (Race, 2015). The study found that users participate in “serosorting”, which occurs when a person is seeking out users of the same hiv status as themselves, allowing them to sort out those of differing sero status. As Aunspach, 2020 suggests, GSN applications allow users to create their sortable self in order to attract others.

The studies related to gay GSN applications are also somewhat limited due to small numbers of participants. A common factor seems to be the recruiting method, specifically the use of in app pop up messages. One could deduce that people ignore the pop-up ads and survey ads in order to get down to business. However, while these studies do provide a loose framework for future research, they are not expansive nor are they applicable to all communities, especially sociolinguistic minorities, such as Deaf gay men.

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Deaf Dating

A study conducted by Glibert, Clark & Anderson (2011), found that the dating scripts of heterosexual Deaf college students differ from that of hearing people. This study, which researched Deaf college students' experiences in three settings: the initiation/meeting, date activities, and outcomes/conclusions. Participants stated that they met in public, through shared interests, or from family/friends. Dating activities included group events, going to a movie, dinner or talking. Outcomes reported were a goodnight kiss, a hug, relationship development, or taking the date home. Relationship development accounted for 46% of the outcome responses, which is a similar result for hearing college students. The overall findings of this study show that Deaf participants had different ideas of what constitutes a date, with many participants using group events as a date instead of the traditional one-on-one setting. A similar study on Deaf dating scripts was conducted in 2018 by Clark, Sweeten, DeMayer, and Kobek-Pezzarossi, which confirmed the results of Gilbert, Clark & Anderson (2011). However, both of these studies are unable to be applied to this study since all LGBTQ participants were eliminated from the study stating that members of the LGBTQ community follow different dating scripts.

Since there is no known research that seeks to specifically analyze how Deaf gay men use GSN apps, and what potential benefits arise from such apps, this study seeks to uncover how GSN apps are used among the Deaf gay community. Therefore, the thrust of this study is guided by the main research question: How have GSN apps impacted dating and communication for Deaf gay men?

Methodology

Using Grounded Theory methodology, the researchers aimed to determine how gay GSN applications have impacted the dating scene for Deaf gay men. Grounded theory is an inductive

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4 method of analyzing data in order to generate a hypothesis that is derived from allowing the data
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7 to “speak to” the researchers (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Seven participants were obtained by
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10 a snowball sampling via a recruiting video posted to Facebook. Through the use of interviews
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12 among seven participants, data was collected by the researchers by recording conversations in
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14 American Sign Language via Zoom video conferencing. The data was combed through, using a
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16 line by line method known as open coding or substantive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).
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18 In this stage, concepts were noted sentence by sentence through each of the seven participants as
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20 their video interviews were played back and recorded by the researchers. The concepts identified
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22 were then subjected to subjective coding, which identified open themes or components that
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24 surface from the data. These open concepts were used to guide researchers in selecting specific
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26 data with the core in mind, which is known as theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1998). In the final
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28 step, axial codes were used to piece together fractured data that was taken apart for analysis,
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30 resulting in the generation of a hypothesis that rises from the interpretation of saturated data
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32 (Glaser, 1998). Member checks were conducted and an auditor was employed to enhance the
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34 validity and trustworthiness of this study.
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41 In this study, participants are referred to as Mr. Red, Mr. Orange, Mr. Yellow, Mr.
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43 Green, Mr. Blue, Mr. Purple, and Mr. Pink. All seven participants identified as either Deaf or
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45 Hard of Hearing, and either Gay, Queer or Pansexual, all ranging in ages from 24-65. Four of the
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47 participants identified as white, two as hispanic, and one as African American. ASL was the
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49 preferred language of communication for all participants as well. Each participant has reported
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51 having experience using one or more gay GSN apps available such as Scruff, Grindr, Growlr,
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53 Jack'd, Daddy Hunt, Manhunt, Adam4Adam, and Tinder.
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Due to the small population of Deaf gay men in the United States, it is possible that participants could be identified by people they know based on the experiences they shared.

Although a small sample size of seven was obtained for this study, it is necessary to note conditions unique to the Deaf gay community that make participation dangerous for some individuals. For this reason, unique pseudonyms were selected to protect the identities of participants to the maximum extent possible for the reasons outlined below.

First, ASL by nature is a visio-spatial language that requires the use of vision to comprehend. Interviews conducted in ASL do not give participants complete anonymity in any given situation, as their physical identity must be viewed in order to communicate and vice-versa for researchers conducting interviews. Although the researchers made every effort to keep data absolutely anonymous, confidential, encrypted and scrubbed of any personally identifiable information, the public perception of research in the Deaf gay community is delicate.

Lastly, GSN apps for the gay community are generally used for sexual and romantic purposes that range from recreational sex to fetishes and from the mundane to the esoteric. Such behaviors are unique to each member and are often viewed as taboo or unacceptable by heteronormative standards. The desire to keep such personal preferences in the bedroom, so to speak, poses a challenge in getting participants for a study such as this one as the visual nature of American Sign Language requires that researchers see participants face-to-face, thus bringing the aforementioned personal preferences to light. As previously mentioned, due to the small number of the Deaf gay community, the likeliness of researchers and participants meeting again at Deaf gay events is extremely high and that possibility often leads to many potential participants being hesitant to participate in such studies. The next section analyzes the results of seven one-hour

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interviews which reveals six open codes, two axial codes, and a final category that emerges from the data.

Results

After conducting a constant comparative analysis of the data and coding process, the data concluded in the creation of six open codes. The six open codes are: *Rejection due to Deafness*, *Hiding Deaf Identity*, *Conversation Starters*, *Everyone Wants Sex*, *Who Slept with Who?*, and *Meeting Other LGBTQ People*. These six open codes were then re-coded to develop two axial codes: *Fear of Rejection* and *Sex Seeking & Advertising*. After careful re-coding using the aforementioned axial codes, one final core category emerged: *Accessing the Cock, Talk & the Flock*.

Fear of Rejection

All seven participants stated that they experienced rejection from hearing men due to being deaf, both in person and on the apps. Some participants decided not to disclose their hearing status in their profiles, only to reveal that information after getting to know the person. Through the use of GSN apps, men are able to screen their potential partners on a variety of factors in order to avoid the possibility of rejection. Four out of seven participants indicate that they do not explicitly state that they are Deaf in their online profiles because it leads to outright rejection as Mr. Orange relayed: "I don't state that I am Deaf in my profile because I have noticed that when I do, people do not want to talk to me." While Mr. Purple stated that "If I am direct and tell them up front that I am Deaf, they will block me on the apps." Whether participants are implicit or explicit in disclosing that they are Deaf, there is the ever-present reality of stigma connected to being Deaf and moreover, the ability to communicate in spoken English, which often for participants leads to blacklisting, as summed up by Mr. Green: "One

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guy realized that I am Deaf and told me ‘Nevermind, I don’t want to waste my time on limited conversations.’ This type of encounter translates to the Deaf user being “blacklisted” or blocked from future communications with the hearing individual who has rejected them based on their hearing status. Such an encounter was reported to be rather common by all participants of the study.

Rejection whether virtually, or in-person due to the stigma of being Deaf was experienced to varying degrees by all participants. Some felt that it was a better strategy to weed out discriminatory partners by being forthright within their profiles, while others felt it better to disclose in person. Regardless of the strategy, all participants equivocally indicate that the pain and humiliation from rejection is a common and frequent experience for Deaf gay men using GSN apps. Although rejection was a common fear, participants persisted in utilizing GSN apps as a method of equalized communication between Deaf and hearing users. GSN apps provide a way to start a conversation due to the language barrier between ASL and spoken English users. Participants felt more comfortable opening up and chatting freely on the apps. This is in large part due to the bilingual nature of Deaf individuals, as most Deaf individuals have varying degrees of fluency in the English language, the ability to communicate in the same language in an accessible medium puts participants on an even playing field. Since all GSN apps offer a detailed profile of members, participants felt that it was easy to get to know potential partners by screening this information in an accessible format, instead of attempting to tease out commonalities in spoken English in a public physical encounter, which is inaccessible. For instance, Mr. Blue claims that he feels “like the apps benefit the Deaf gay community because it makes that initial contact easier than if you were in a bar.” Mr. Blue further states that he does prefer to meet men in person, “but the apps make it easier to communicate with guys.”

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All participants unanimously state that apps provide a gate to communication previously inaccessible in Queer spaces. Communicating at a nightclub or a lounge, for even the most experienced of lip-readers presents several challenges. Lighting in bars and nightclubs tends to be dim, which prohibits visual communication, while pulsing lights and loud music, coupled with the general chatter of a public place further compound communication. With GSN apps, such issues disappear initially and often provide an avenue for ongoing communication outside of popular meet-up places such as bars and nightclubs. Most participants indicate that using GSN apps is a good way to suggest alternative places to meet such as a coffee shop or a bookstore which is generally more conducive for visual communication among ASL users and non-ASL users.

Sex (Seeking & Advertising)

Participants felt that the apps were hypersexualized due to the advertisements and models used to promote the apps. Mr. Pink and Mr. Yellow stated that people would send X-rated photos immediately as a way of saying hello. Several participants, Mr. Red, Mr. Green, and Mr. Blue, felt that men on the apps were only interested in dating or having sex with them because they were Deaf.. Mr. Blue states that “advertising on apps are very sexually suggestive, which impacts the use of the apps.” Mr. Pink feels the same, citing that “apps make the gay community worse, they make it all about sex.”

Most of the participants did appreciate how GSN apps make sex more easily accessible. Mr. Purple and Mr. Yellow are both in long term relationships, however, they utilize the apps to find sexual gratification outside of their partner. Participants like to use the apps to search and find other Deaf gay men in order to make new friends. Several participants stated that they like to use the apps with their friends to discuss their shared experiences, such as who slept with

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whom. Some participants use the apps to learn more about the LGBTQ community in their area.

Mr. Green admitted that "the apps and the guys on them make for good conversation for my friends and I. We will show each other profile photos of the guys we are talking about." Mr.

Green also added that "the apps helped me to learn more about the LGBTQ community and what it stands for when I first came out."

Socializing is often a struggle for Deaf people in a hearing dominated world. GSN apps can help provide an easy way to get to know someone. They act as an ice breaker for making new friends. Although GSN apps provide a platform for access, the intent behind the use of such apps for Deaf and hearing gay men appear culturally different. Participants tangentially report that the use of such apps is primarily focused upon a desire to connect and communicate with the hearing gay male community. Such efforts are described through the desire to form new platonic friendships, sexual encounters, and more often than not, participants report a desire to find a romantic partner. However, participants unanimously state that these experiences conflict with the intent of GSN app usage among hearing gay men. Hearing gay men seem to focus on a hyper-sexualized experience where the apps are used strictly for the purposes of "hooking up, or starting every conversation with a dick pic [picture]" (Mr. Red). While participants report that communicating with hearing suitors is easy, the reasons for doing so seem to clash culturally. For Deaf gay men, such searches are communication based, whereas for hearing gay men, such searches are hyper-sexualized and often conflict with Deaf cultural values.

Accessing the Cock, Talk & the Flock

Participants enjoy using GSN apps as a way to open the lines of communication with potential dating/sex partners. Many mentioned that they appreciate the level of anonymity provided by the apps in order to hide their deafness or their physical identity, which allowed

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4 them to be more open with their communication and share more information. Since the Deaf
5 community is small and geographically dispersed, participants enjoyed using the apps as a way
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7 to locate other Deaf gay members for friendship, or gossip. The apps allowed participants to
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9 provide visual material (face and nude photographs) when gossiping with their friends and
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11 discussing their sexual conquests. Gay GSN apps help expand communication access to hearing
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13 men, which widens the pool for company, be it friendship, dating, or sexual encounters in light
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15 of geographic disparity.
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21 However, while GSN apps have increased the pool of men by opening the lines of
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23 communication with hearing men, it has also led to an increase in rejection due to being Deaf.
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25 Additionally, participants felt the apps are overly sexual due to the sexually explicit
26
27 advertisements within the apps, which leads to the hypersexual nature of the communication
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29 between participants within apps. This highly sexual nature of communication, in turn, often
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31 results in the comparison of hearing partners that have been shared among a small, intimate Deaf
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33 community, as evidenced by these anecdotes:
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38 Mr. Red: "I had an experience with one guy who asked me if I knew these other Deaf
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40 guys after I disclosed my status to him. He had already slept with them. He loved
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42 sleeping with Deaf guys and felt that they were better in bed. I found that conversation
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44 interesting because I had never heard of that. My theory is perhaps the noise. Deaf people
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46 make more noise. It seems that there is a Deaf fetish out there. People want to sleep with
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48 Deaf people."
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52 Mr. Green: "Often they felt no issue until they realized that I am literally Deaf. Some felt
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54 it would be interesting to go on a date with a Deaf guy, and were willing to try it."
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The final category encompasses the three primary goals that the participants utilize GSN apps to achieve. They use the apps to network for conversation, make new friends, or as entertainment for their existing friends, and to locate sexual encounters. However, cultural conflict is an overarching theme in each of the axial codes. While participants unanimously report that such a platform lends itself to platonic interactions with hearing gay men, the hyper-sexualized intent of use by hearing gay men lends itself to a fetishization of the Deaf body. If Deaf gay men are not outwardly rejected, as reported by participants, they are then seen as a sexualized being. Mr. Red and Mr. Green unequivocally state a mutual experience shared by all participants, in that the absence of rejection lends itself to a suspect encounter. Such suspect encounters reveal themselves to be a hearing gay man who wants to experiment or try something novel with the Deaf body, and in doing so - reifies the Deaf body as a stigma.

Discussion

Results indicate that there is a pervasive stigmatization of disability in the gay community where Deaf gay men are concerned. More pointedly, the results suggest that being Deaf is more salient in the gay community, especially where outright rejection occurs from potential suitors and within Queer spaces that are usually deemed safe. While GSN apps show promise for equitable communication among Deaf and hearing gay men, the cultural values of Deaf and hearing communities are at odds with the intent behind the usage of such apps. In tandem with this is the transition of ableism from a public queer space to a digital queer space which renders the Deaf body as rejective.

Deaf Gay men in this study employ tactics of stealth and veiled discourse to navigate physical stigma in a virtual arena that valorizes ableism (Aunspach, 2019; Race, 2015). The stigmatization or stratification of desirability in the gay community is rather covert. White, able-

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4 bodied, cisgender, "straight-acting" males are the desirable normate at the top of the hierarchy.
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6 LGBTQ disabled researchers contend that queer spaces are not designed to be inclusive of
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8 disability, in the same manner that gay persons of color are not necessarily inclusive of queer
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10 spaces (McRuer, 2011). Race (2015) and Aunspach (2019) assert that GSN apps serve as a
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12 platform to promulgate highly racialized and masculinized spaces in which such normates are
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14 deemed to be the most desirable, which supports our argument that able-bodiedness - or in our
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16 case - being Hearing is a trait of desirability that is not widely scrutinized in the literature where
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18 the Deaf community does not view the state of being Deaf as a disability, but rather part of a
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20 sociolinguistic minority (Wright, 2020) where Hearing Gay culture renders the Deaf body as
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22 disabled. Race also argues that stigmatized bodies, such as those who live with HIV employ
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24 tactics of veiled disclosure as a form of litmus testing interlocutors to determine whether or not
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26 they are engaging in a safe space. Serosorting is the term used to describe the practice of
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28 preventive identity practices among both HIV-positive and HIV-negative men to sort out
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30 partners of similar statuses and sexual desires (Race, 2010). Tziallas (2015) reaffirms the
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32 argument that "No" as a matter of unacceptable characteristics is a common occurrence on user
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34 profiles to denote what a user finds acceptable. Further, Tziallas (2005) iterates that the nature of
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36 text-based communication afforded by GSN apps allows for modulated disclosures which is a
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38 form of strategic ambiguity, not unlike that of serosorting.
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48 We find parallels to this practice among participants, where the majority of participants
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50 express varying forms of veiled disclosure by dropping hints about the fact that they are Deaf, in
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52 a form of bargaining to see whether or not their potential partners are accepting of this
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54 revelation. To that end, we refer to this phenomenon as Flaw Sorting. Flaw Sorting refers
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56 exclusively to the disclosure of disability by Deaf Gay men through a series of veiled
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4 disclosures. One participant in this study publicly advertises the fact that he is Deaf in order to
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6 avoid this process, which we believe to be another form of Flaw Sorting in that the onus on
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8 accepting the Deaf body as desirable falls on other GSN participants, where it is assumed that
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10 whomever contacts this particular participant is assumed to be friendly. Flaw Sorting works both
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12 ways on the parts of Deaf and hearing app users. Hearing men make decisions about the Deaf
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14 body (in tandem with other criteria), and determine whether to proceed or reject the Deaf
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16 participant entirely, as has been reported in our findings.
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21 All participants in this study point to rejection as a consequence of being Deaf, but
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23 indicate that there is more latitude for sexual encounters and less resistance to engaging hearing
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25 partners in the sexual act. Queer spaces are not inclusive of Deaf bodies whether virtual or in
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27 reality, and as a general rule are not inclusive of disabled and "other" bodies. Perhaps most
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29 notably, the argument that Pride Parades are overwhelmingly designed for white, cisgender, gay
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31 men speak to the inclusivity of such spaces, while gay men who are People of Color (POC), Deaf
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33 gay men as roped into the 'disability' segment are not particularly inclusive of these spaces of an
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35 "elitist white gay fantasy" (Henry, 2018). While it is true that ASL interpreters are commonly
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37 advertised as providing access to an overwhelming number of Pride Parades, the authors contend
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39 that such actions are more about lip service in checking off the box of 'accessibility' to appear
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41 'woke' but not necessarily providing such access. The researchers together have attended more
42
43 than 30 pride parades at various locations around the nation. As Deaf gay men (who are also
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45 white and cisgender), we note that such spaces are often hostile to Deaf gay men of color, and
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47 mildly lukewarm towards Deaf gay men who are white. The guise of access vis-a-vis sign
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49 language interpreters are routinely heterosexual hearing individuals who have no connection to
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the LGBT community. As such, access is convoluted as it is filtered through the systematic beliefs of one who is heterosexual, and may or may not taint the spirit of interpretation.

The Deaf gay community has essentially recused itself from the mainstream LGBTQ scene, going on to form a handful of organizations such as Rainbow Alliance for the Deaf, Deaf Queer Men Only, and the LGBTQ section of the National Association of the Deaf to name a few. However, the ability to join such organizations and attend annual gatherings and events is geographically challenging for many. The cost of travel, lodging, food, membership, and partaking in activities around host cities comes with a price tag. As a result, such organizations largely attract white, Deaf gay men who belong to a specific socioeconomic status, based on the observations of the researchers. Even then, such organizations tend to remain small with fewer than 50 (excluding allies and LBT individuals) at best. Due to these constraints, it is easier and somewhat more pragmatic for Deaf Gay individuals to attempt to incorporate into LGBT scenes that are organic to their place of residence. It is worth noting that a handful of cities such as Washington, D.C. and Rochester, NY could be labeled as having gay scenes that are inclusive of Deaf gay men. This is in large part to the historical anchors of Gallaudet University in DC, which was established in 1864, and has since influenced the surrounding district by its proximity. There, one will find a higher likelihood of residents who are fluent in ASL or know rudimentary ASL to carry on a conversation with Deaf individuals. Rochester has a similar set up as it is home to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, established in 1965 which has similarly created an enclave for Deaf individuals, exhibiting welcoming attitudes towards Deaf citizens, as well as having a higher than average number of residents who are fluent in ASL. Both cities are progressive, liberal, and the likelihood of rejection for Deaf gay men among hearing suitors is less pronounced than in other cities. Cities such as Houston and Miami for example, do not share

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similar demographics in terms of widespread ASL use and inclusivity of Deaf people. The challenge is even more of a multifaceted for Deaf gay men in rural areas. The challenges then become manifold: The stigma of being gay, the stigma of being Deaf, access to Deafspace, access to Queer spaces, and the ability to form social networks is limited and often dangerous.

Although this study has a small sample size, it is remarkable that each participant of this study mentioned a type of “fetish” certain hearing men have towards creating sexual encounters specifically with Deaf men - some going so far as to “collect” or “conquer” Deaf men in bed.

Although participants use the term “fetish” to describe how they experienced being desired for their Deafness, we do not believe this to necessarily be a fetizh, so much as it might be a preference or an attraction. This study is too preliminary to directionally make that claim.

However, this observation from participants this led us to wonder if such behavior parallels that of devoteism, which is the sexual attraction to specific disabilities (Campbell, 2009). There is no research to indicate that Deaf people are part of this phenomena . However, findings from this study warrant future research to ascertain whether a fetish for deaf people exists, and the locus of reasoning behind such a fetish. Some posit that fetishes for disability stem from the feeling of needing to be needed as a power dynamic, control, and also the glorification of one being the savior to a disabled person in a sexual manner.

GSN apps show some promise in mitigating rejection and communication factors. As texting, sexting, and electronic communication become increasingly mainstream - often preferred by younger demographics instead of verbal communication as reported by participants, it is easier for Deaf gay men to access, thereby expanding the pool of potential partners. One of the nudging questions of this study that surfaced as part of semi-structured interviews was "Why not just date a Deaf gay man?" At face value, this seems to be the easiest solution, but participants

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point to the myriad reasons why this is not always feasible. For one, geography plays an important role- Deaf gay men are scattered across the nation, preferring metropolitan areas that have accepting attitudes towards the Deaf and gay community. However, those who live in such areas are a small percentage of the overall Deaf gay population. Responsibilities such as family, work, friends, and "home" were among the reasons why participants reported living where they do. Another reason is simply a matter of preference. Some participants felt that dating or finding sexual encounters within such a small pool poses a limited number of choices, while the hearing gay community is vast in comparison. As such, some participants felt that the options for potential suitors were more varied despite the risk of continual rejection. A majority of participants iterated that "playing" instead of dating within a small Deaf community runs inherent risks among them, possibly being easily "outed" or a partner would easily find out if one was partaking in activities outside the realm of agreements made as a couple.

Despite some risks and the inherent experiences of rejection, participants found that GSN apps improved access to dating and sexual encounters compared to life prior to the invention of apps geared specifically towards gay men. Communication is improved with the ability to access English in a text-based format which suggests that the dating world or rather the social-app world may evolve to garner Deaf gay men more access with new ventures into the field of GSN apps. However, we cannot ascertain that the stigma of being Deaf in the hearing gay community will change in a directional sense. Despite the guise of access afforded to Deaf gay men by GSN apps, the stigma of disability coupled with a hyper-sexualized drive behind the use of GSN apps as it pertains to Deaf and hearing cultural values often conflict. These conflicts manifest themselves in the form of outright rejection.

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Limitations & Future Research

This study is not without limitations. One limitation is due to the small sample size, (n=7), which is too small to be reflective of the population. Grounded theory methodology results are never meant to be generalizable or transferable. Older Deaf gay men may not use GSN applications, therefore, this study may not receive data responses from seniors. Another limitation within this study is that some men may not be willing to disclose their app usage reasons for fear of embarrassment. Married or coupled gay men may not answer honestly for fear of their partner finding out if their app usage is not a mutually agreed-upon activity within their relationship. Again, absolute anonymity is not certain. This study is also limited to those with internet access, as all recruitment was conducted via social media. All seven of the participants live in major capital cities, and therefore cannot be reflective of Deaf gay men living in rural areas.

Future research in this area should consider data collection that promises absolute anonymity such as an avatar which presents questions in ASL and the participant is allowed to answer in either long-form English or a video response that eliminates personally identifying information such as the face. Challenges in the latter exclude visual grammar from responses, which may hamper the interpretation of results. Confirming the existence of a Deaf fetish in the gay community - or sub-communities would merit further inquiry as part of critical theory discourse whereas disability as a fetish is a current focus of crip theory in sexual and social relations to dominant, able-bodied hegemonies.

Conclusion

While dating has always been a struggle for Deaf gay men due to the language barrier, utilizing a digital platform where they can vet their potential partners will aid in determining if

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they will be open-minded to dating or sleeping with a Deaf person. Gay GSN apps have proven to be a benefit, as they help to breakdown said language barriers that exist within Deaf-hearing dating dynamics. In addition, GSN apps can be seen as a tool for networking and meeting other gay men or Deaf gay men for friendship and support. Through participant interviews, three core categories emerged from the data: fear of rejection, ease of communication, sex seeking and advertising, and socialization.

Participants discussed the fear of rejection that comes with the stigma of being deaf and how GSN apps can mitigate the potential for rejection by the ability to screen and sort potential partners, communicating online before meeting up in person. GSN apps also prove useful in mitigating communication barriers by placing individuals in a virtual, accessible communication platform in typed English, as opposed to meeting individuals in public who are not fluent in ASL. The category of sex (seeking and advertising) demonstrates that the sexual nature of GNS apps is often at odds with the communication values of the Deaf community, and participants posit that there is an attraction or perhaps sub-group of individuals who find "deafness" to be a sexual fetish, which lends itself to the core category of accessing the cock, flock, and talk. Future research from this study suggests three things worthy of exploration: are Deaf people subjects of a fetish for certain hearing members of the gay community? Do GSN apps show more promise for communication accessibility as they evolve, and as a byproduct of more communication and consistent exposure to Deaf gay men, diminish the stigma of being Deaf?

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7 **Compliance with Ethical Standards**
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9 Conflicts of interest: Brian Cheslik declares that he has no conflict of interest. Dr. S. Jordan
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11 Wright declares that he has no conflict of interest.
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16 Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in
17
18 accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and
19
20 with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.
21
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23 This study involves the use of human subjects and was approved by Lamar University's IRB.
24

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26 Approval number: IRB-FY18-356.
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31 Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in
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33 the study.
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