‘The Neighbourhood Cums: Ding Dong! Dick’s Here!’: SketchySex and the online/offline cultures of group sex between gay men

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This essay explores contemporary sexual practices of group sex between gay men facilitated through the cruising apps and websites Grindr and BarebackRT, and its depiction by the gay porn studio SketchySex. I discuss themes of community among those partaking in group sex, tracing historical cultural shifts as neoliberal ideologies have developed, as well as focusing on the shifting understandings of public and private spaces. I argue that gentrification has forced once-public activities into the private home, which brings unique risks for individuals to negotiate, and consider the extent to which digital technologies have helped to facilitate this. This culminates in a critique of the diversity of SketchySex, who seem to be selective in the types of people that can attend their parties; this is read alongside the practices of gay men cruising online, and seeks to identify a community utilising their public/private, online/offline spaces for more radical sexual ends.

Keywords: gay porn; Grindr; group sex; community; risk

# Introduction: SketchySex, the studio

Beneath a header displaying various close-ups of erect penises post-ejaculation, anal creampies, and a boyish-faced performer displaying semen dribbling out of his open mouth for the camera, is the ‘About Us’ tab for the US-based gay pornography site SketchySex. Clicking this link directs to what reads like a mission statement for the studio:

Me and my roommates are sex addicts. Addicted to big cocks. Our cum dumps are hungry 24/7 and we will only take it raw. We know its [sic] dangerous but we don t [sic] care. . So keep your judgments to yourself.

We met while working in the porn biz here in Cali. That’s when our addiction got really bad. Now we spend all day cruising the internet looking for another big dick. None of us have jobs anymore. But were [sic] not stupid. We used our porn business connections to create this website. We regularly post videos of our hookups on the site, so we can make a few bucks. So if you like the vids, try joining the site and help keep our cum dumps full.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Before progressing to viewing any of the studio’s video output, a number of elements can be inferred about the contents. The first is that the sex will be bareback; that is, condomless anal sex between the male performers, signified by the reference to only taking it ‘raw’. Second is the emphasis on sex addiction, suggesting that the videos go beyond sex between two performers per scene and are more likely to feature scenes of group sexual encounters. Thirdly is the reference to ‘cruising the internet’ and ‘hookups’, inferring a recourse to digital cruising apps and highlighting the place they have come to inhabit within gay sexual cultures. Finally, there is a narrative constructed seemingly in order to market the videos produced by the studio as separate to professional studio pornography; this is evident through the references to ‘working in the porn biz’ and using ‘porn business connections’ to create the website, suggesting that the website is not situated within the aforementioned ‘porn biz’, and that any similarities are the result of working with connections who are inside the porn industry.

SketchySex is certainly located within the porn industry, and a number of factors point to this. By following their link to ‘Be a model’[[2]](#endnote-2), there is a statement that performers are flown in from all across the United States with expenses and meals paid for – a somewhat impressive feat financially if the above statement about those supposedly running the site no longer having jobs is true. Furthermore, in an interview with Dakota Wolfe – a model who has starred in one of SketchySex’s videos – he was asked about the location of the film: ‘The scene was filmed in a run down house in Las Vegas. The studio definitely leaves the place a wreck to make it look a lot more sketchy than it is.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Wolfe’s direct reference to ‘the studio’ reveals that SketchySex is a much more professional content provider than their website – with banners reading ‘Homemade videos from real sex addicts!’ – would have you believe. However, the most telling signal that SketchySex is indeed a porn business located within the porn industry is the very small link to ‘Webmasters’ located at the bottom of every page of their website; clicking the link directs you to MaleRevenue[[4]](#endnote-4), a gay pornography conglomerate that creates and maintains various studios including SketchySex. The adult industry news website XBIZ[[5]](#endnote-5) reports that SketchySex was created between MaleRevenue and former porn star turned producer Jeremy Hall, who is also responsible for the gay porn studio FraternityX which bears many resemblances to SketchySex via its aesthetics, performers, and depictions of group sex. Against a backdrop of references to ‘homemade videos’, ‘cruising the internet’, ‘hookups’, and the narrative that attempts to place a distance between the studio and the ‘porn biz’, we can infer that SketchySex intends to create the fantasy of group sex taking place between anonymous strangers; we are to believe that these strangers have been procured through cruising apps and websites in an attempt to satiate the excessive libidos of those inhabiting the home environment in which all of SketchySex’s videos take place.

This essay, therefore, will consider the significance of depicting cruising apps and websites being used by performers in SketchySex’s video outputs in order to facilitate anonymous group sex between men (or at least to facilitate the fantasy of it). The significance of choosing SketchySex is located in the fact that, to my understanding, it is the only professional gay porn studio that centres on gay hook-up apps (supposedly) facilitating the group sex that takes place. This will be framed by a discussion of group sex between gay men as a historical practice within gay sexual cultures, both pre-dating and post-dating the emergence of cruising apps such as Grindr and websites such as BarebackRT[[6]](#endnote-6) (commonly referred to by users, and the site itself, as BBRT). Literature within the field of digitally-mediated group sex argues that these group practices have the potential to transform sexual and social hierarchical relations (Hakim, 2018; Florêncio, 2018; Race, 2015), however through a critique of masculinity, race and diversity read alongside ethnographic practices of group sex, I posit that SketchySex reinforces these hierarchies. Issues of representation within the sexual practices that SketchySex depicts will be considered in parallel to the attitudes and behaviours regularly encountered on Grindr and BBRT, therefore. In discussing these practices, notions of community formation, app use and risk negotiation become additional points of consideration through a critique of gentrification within the wider context of neoliberalism as defined from a Foucauldian perspective. This is a perspective that considers ‘the different modes by which […] human beings are made subjects’ (Foucault, 1982, 208), and therefore comes to shape the ways, and environments, in which people live. These factors become component parts within the wider culture of digital hook-up apps that are driving people away from gay public spaces and towards gay virtual spaces, and then towards the gay private space of the home – that has had to become public. Considerations and critiques of the effect of gentrification upon gay men’s group sexual practices will help inform the wider argument of this essay, then; an argument that primarily offers a critique of SketchySex’s problematic representations of digitally-mediated group sex in light of the existing literature on this topic.

# Group Sex and Community (Non-)Formation

Group sex and its documentation as a cultural practice among gay men is hardly a new phenomenon. Perhaps the most lucid accounts come from Martin Levine’s ethnographic study of the homosexual clone in his work *Gay Macho*, written throughout the 1980s and later published in 1998 (for more on gay men and group sex, see also Warner, 2002; Dean, 2009; McInnes, Bradley and Prestage 2009 Race, 2015; Meunier, 2018). Levine describes the figure of the gay clone in the 1970s and 1980s as embodying ‘traditional American definitions of masculinity’ and ‘the self-fulfilment ethic of both the counterculture and the “sexed-up, doped-up hedonistic” styles […] of the 1970s’ (1998, 11). Integral to the ‘sexed-up’, ‘doped-up hedonistic’ lifestyle, Levine situates group sex as being one of the defining features of the clone experience, although there is some contention as to whether these orgies helped to foment any real sense of community. On the one hand, we have accounts from Levine where he describes the stories of others who were party to such gatherings:

One man described his participation in an orgy: Frank finally invited me to one of his orgies. Boy it was something else. The first thing you did was take off all of your clothes except for a jock strap. Then everyone drank this punch that was filled with MDA. Once everyone got off, the party started. (96)

In this instance, we see that there is an element of friendship through an invite from Frank, and the sense that there is some element of socialising through drinking, drug taking, and partying. In distinction to this, Levine also offers more impersonal accounts:

Erotic locations were important places on every clone’s circuit; this was where the men went to find impersonal, often anonymous, sexual encounters […] These men engaged in “sleaze sex” – impersonal sex with multiple partners, often in group settings, in public places, and engaged in anal fisting and urophilia. (53)

A distinction has already been created here, whereby the first example – occurring at Frank’s place – was more social, whereas the latter encounters taking place ‘in public spaces’ are more ‘impersonal’ and anonymous largely due to the acts taking place within dark rooms and those environments having a very fit-for-purpose atmosphere where conversation is not a high priority.

Turning to documentation and discussion of more contemporary arrangements of group sex among gay men, located within a more technological age, we can see a number of ways in which the development of digital platforms has continued to play a role in problematising the formation, or indeed non-formation, of communities among gay men. Following research into chemsex chillouts (Race, 2015) – the practice of groups of gay men meeting to take the drugs GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate)/GBL (gamma-Butyrolactone), mephedrone, and crystallised methamphetamines in the private space of the host’s home or apartment – Jamie Hakim, in an article entitled ‘The Rise of Chemsex: queering collective intimacy in neoliberal London’, reveals how a number of participants gather at these meet-ups that have been facilitated through the cruising app Grindr. The many accounts detailing the participants’ motives for attending these chillouts go beyond the purely sexual, and were often founded within notions of community formation. Hakim recounts: ‘Antonio [one of the informants] estimated that the ratio of sexual to non-sexual activities was ‘70/30’, Daniel [another informant] at ‘50/50’’ (2018, 10). Hakim also goes on to reveal how a number of respondents recounted other activities that these group encounters facilitated through Grindr: ‘One of the key activities that took place was ‘a lot of deep emotional talk’’ (10) and how a lot of the non-sexual activities that took place – which Hakim lists as ‘talking, dancing, discussing well-liked pop icons, browsing YouTube’ – generated a joyful affect that ‘could bond the participants’ (11). The contemporary formations of chemsex and the chillouts that are integral to them are distinct in that they have their own set of cultural practices and are understood as separate from group sex; the distribution and consumption of drugs is not always present in the latter and so the proliferation of certain behaviours (such as being talkative and more likely to engage in chatting, which are known side effects of the chemsex drugs), may be less likely. Both Levine and Hakim’s research demonstrates the long-standing cultural significance of group sex to gay cultures and lifestyles in their various subcultural iterations. However, what ties Hakim’s research on the facilitation of chemsex chillouts more distinctly to this paper’s discussion of the video outputs of SketchySex is the use of digital technologies, including smartphones and geolocational applications designed for cruising, as a means through which to organise and sustain practices of group sex among men. Levine’s ethnographic research demonstrated a distinction between the formations of communal bonds between the participants of group sex based upon the location, with community development more likely to occur in the private space of the home as opposed to the public space of the sex club. Hakim’s research furthers this narrative, albeit within a different framework and with the inclusion of digital technologies as the primary means through which group encounters are enabled. Central to the shifts in the cultural practices of group sex among men highlighted here are the differences between public and private, the effects of gentrification, various degrees of risk and the narratives surrounding them, and the representations of group sex. Whereas SketchySex is a US-based studio, and Hakim’s study is located within London, the common connections are gentrification under a model of neoliberalism as previously defined, and the turn to digital technologies by gay men to facilitate group sex. The two provide evidence of a wider pattern into the ways in which gay sexual behaviours are adapting to a climate in which traditional gay neighbourhoods are diminishing or changing (Gorman-Murray and Nash [2017] provide evidence for this in the Canadian and Australian context; Andersson [2011] provides insights to the UK context), and also a climate in which, as Fred Pailler and Florian Vörös demonstrate, the orientation of sexual desires can be mediated through the design, mediation and use of apps and websites (2017). Evidently, there are newly developing shifts in the way that group sex between gay men is facilitated and the social dynamics that occur within such scenarios. Yet, it is questionable as to how far SketchySex represents the extent of this shift, and the transformation of sexual and social hierarchies as discussed in the existing literature on gay group sex and community formation. As such, a consideration of SketchySex’s mediated outputs of group sex combined with a discussion of ethnographic representations of group sex online provides an ideal case study through which to unpack these issues and discuss the similarities and differences.

# SketchySex and the depiction of group sex

As alluded to in the opening of this essay, SketchySex is an American gay pornography studio that produces video content of group sexual encounters between male performers, often featuring at least 10 performers per video (lasting roughly 20 minutes in length). In what is perhaps a direct contrast to the accounts of community formation – and perhaps even the development of kinships – recounted by informants of Hakim’s research, SketchySex has no such focus or investment in showing bonding beyond penetration and ejaculation; as soon as a performer has climaxed, he is regularly seen re-fastening his jeans and belt buckle and leaving the large house in which the filming has taken place. The similarity between SketchySex and the group encounters of Hakim’s research, however, is the focus on digital technologies as a means through which to procure the participants of the group sexual activities discussed and represented. Of course, in the case of SketchySex, however, we know this to be a fantasy and indeed the gimmick central to the studio’s output; models are procured through the usual channels of agencies, and so the use of digital technologies in this instance is used as a means through which to create and sustain a fantasy – a fantasy, though, that is possible to realise by individuals who are not pornstars so long as they have similar access to the technologies depicted and a suitable private venue. As cited previously, the ‘About Us’ section relays the information that the performers ‘spend all day cruising the internet looking for another big dick’, demonstrating a focus purely located within quick and consistent sexual gratification as opposed to any desire for the potential of community formation.

The titles of two films from SketchySex perfectly indicate the practices discussed in this paper, and have formulated the title of this essay: *The Neighborhood Cums* (2014) and *Ding Dong! Dick’s Here!* (2014), both of which already imply a focus on group sexual encounters, and indeed a very functional free for all. Other titles include *Neighborhood Watch* (2016), *Drop Load Leave* (2014), and *Cum Drop-Off!* (2014). Scenes from both of the videos featured in the title, as well as others, depict individuals supposedly utilising digital technologies to extend the length of the action in terms of time; the number of men participating who are all (again, supposedly) procured from within the local neighbourhood; the number of dicks; and the number of loads of cum. Scenes regularly depict men in their 20s, who adhere to the American college ‘frat boy’ in appearance, bent over furniture such as sofas or tables placed near to the front door of the house ready for the next attendee to arrive. Those who are already present walk in and out of shot, preoccupied with looking at their phone screens more than they are with the sex that is taking place around them. A scene of oral sex, filmed from above, shows one man underneath a table performing fellatio upon a seated individual; with one hand, he holds up his t-shirt allowing for a better view for the camera, and in his other hand is a smartphone displaying the distinctive interface of the geolocational gay cruising app Grindr. His attention is equally divided between the oral sex he is receiving, and the phone in his hand; the camera gradually moves down until the viewer is placed in the position of the performer under the table, looking up at the back of the phone. Other scenes from the studio’s output include a fixed shot of a performer bent over a desk with his gym vest still on, being penetrated from behind by a performer whose face we never see, who is still wearing his t-shirt and the hastily unbuttoned shorts are still visible around his thighs. The individual on the receiving end is preoccupied with a laptop on the desk that he is bent over, and can be seen to be messaging and replying to chat windows open on the screen; the website looks to be similar to Craigslist however it is not entirely clear. The camera zooms out slightly to bring an erect penis into the right of the screen, alluding to the queue of men waiting for their turn. Other films regularly feature guys waiting their turn, using their phones, and we regularly see the familiar interface of Grindr and its photo grid display of other nearby users that are cruising for sex. There is no soundtrack to any of the videos and very little dialogue (and this point shall be elaborated on shortly), but it is not uncommon in some SketchySex videos to hear the ‘new message’ alert from Grindr; each time that it is heard to play, it sounds with a consistent and unfaltering clarity that would suggest that it has been edited in during post-production. The advancements made in technology have surely made encounters such as the ones described above depicted by SketchySex more feasible outside of pornography, but as the editing in of Grindr message tones along with all the other evidence to the contrary suggests, SketchySex is selling the fantasy of all these men being procured via hook-up apps. That many scenes are filmed using a hand-held camera – and at times other performers can be seen to be recording the action on their phones – draws parallels with the genre of gonzo porn and adds weight to the feeling that the events depicted in SketchySex’s films could be taking place semi-spontaneously, joining a host of shaky amateur videos uploaded to Xtube and other tube sites depicting scenes of group sex. Certainly, SketchySex gives visual credence to the oft-deployed notion in media outlets that dating and cruising apps are responsible for providing potential sexual partners through a conveyor belt-like mechanism (Yeo & Fung, 2018).

As there are usually more performers taking on the active role than there are those who are receiving anal sex or performing oral sex, this idea of a conveyor belt system seems to serve the excessive pleasurable needs of the latter performers. Those performers in question taking on the role of the bottom are often heard to demand from those fucking them that they ‘want their load’, to ‘cum in my hole’, and as soon as one of the active performers has done so, for the bottom to then declare that he ‘needs another dick’. With regards to aforementioned notions of community formation, there is little of the sort at stake in these videos. The limited communication that serves only to express the voracious sexual appetites of the performers taking on the role of the bottom affords no opportunities for the kinds of bonding that occurs in a group sex context as researched by Hakim (2018). As such, SketchySex allows for the focus to be purely on sex and desire. However, what this limited communication – largely coming from the bottom performers – in SketchySex *does* serve to provide is a complication surrounding masculinities. As noted in his discussion of the output of the gay porn studio Treasure Island Media, a studio specialising in the extreme representations of bareback sex and the transmission of large quantities of semen usually to a single perfomer, Florêncio states that ‘through heroically enduring relentless ‘breeding’ [that is, either taking semen directly in the anus or having it later inserted in some method], [Blue] Bailey [the bottom in the video discussed] reiterates the norm of athletic masculinity’ (2018, 9). This echoes similar points made by Lee (2014), who has also stated that this representation of receiving unprotected anal sex from multiple partners as an act of endurance transcends the cultural stereotype that for a man to be penetrated is an emasculating experience and position; the historical figurations of the male body as feminised by penetration is discussed at length by Kemp in his 2013 publication *The Penetrated Male*. As noted, however, it is not just the ‘athletic masculinity’ of the bottoms in SketchySex that serves to bolster their masculine identity. Communication is limited but pivotal in aiding this too, and Levine, as cited previously in this essay, most pointedly refers to the masculinisation of language among gay men as a means through which to shift away from the cultural stereotype of an effeminate subjectivity. Levine refers to ‘dishing’ among gay men, a practice of speech that included ‘bitchy retorts, vicious putdowns, and malicious gossip’ adopted by closet homosexuals as ‘a means of articulating their feminine identification’ (1998, 72). However, as clone culture centred on an emulation of machismo, ‘dishing’ shifted into what then became known as ‘dicking’, signifying a masculinisation of ‘dishing’ and now focusing on ‘erotic banter’ (74). In order to masculinise speech, therefore, a reliance on speaking about explicit sexual acts in a direct manner became appropriate. SketchySex represents the masculinity of the bottoms both through their athletic endurance of multiple bareback partners, and through their directly sexually explicit language. However, users of the geolocational cruising apps such as Grindr that are featured in the videos of SketchySexalso consider certain modes of speech online to embody masculine traits and qualities, too. This is evidenced in a separate and ongoing ethnographic research project into the cultures of masculinity on cruising apps that I am currently undertaking and overseeing, whereby informants have highlighted contemporary examples of the sexual scripting theories pioneered by John Gagnon and William Simon in their 1973 text *Sexual Conduct*, and which is also discussed by Roach (2015) in the context of apps. Gay men sometimes adopt a masculine script when chatting online by becoming less conversational, more direct and ‘to the point’ with regards to their desire for sex, and by adopting typically masculine nouns such as ‘mate’, ‘man’ and ‘dude’ to refer to one another; their reasons for doing so are to better their chances at procuring a sexual hook-up (Sarson, in publication).

By incorporating the supposed utilisation of digital technologies to facilitate group sex with the use of language associated with masculinity as a means through which to procure hook-ups, SketchySex continues to straddle the border between fantasy and reality with regards to the type of sexual practices that it depicts and the scripts that everyday users of apps such as Grindr adopt in order to realise sexual encounters. Discussions of ‘real-life’ and the ‘real’ is a vexed area within Media and Cultural Studies. What I now wish to do, therefore, is turn towards the ethnographic representations of group sex practices online as opposed to those confected for SketchySex and to further examine the similarities and differences between the narratives created by the porn studio and those within the practices that it claims to represent – practices largely borne out of the rise of digital technologies. Sexual practices represented on both Grindr and BBRT would suggest a transformation of social hierarchies through the facilitation of group sex between men, which are concordant with extant literature on digitally-mediated group sex encounters. The (re)negotiation of risk enacted by men facilitating group sex online is one area in which the transformation of social hierarchies can be explored; a risk that is quite distinctly different to that which SketchySex presents.

#  ‘Door Open NOW’: considering risky behaviours

Aside from the disclosure on the website’s ‘About Us’ page that they are addicted to sex and spend hours trawling the internet for the next guy to come round and join the group, there was also the reference to sex without condoms, or barebacking, and danger/risk. A tangible sense of the risk attached to such practices of anonymous bareback sex is articulated by Levine in the main throes of the AIDS epidemic: ‘many of us now regard our once-glamorous and exciting lifestyle as toxic […] Do all those years of frenzied drug orgies at the baths mean it is only a matter of time before we will be stricken?’ (1998, 139). However, whether the danger and risk signposted by SketchySex is comparable is debatable; knowing that all of the models procured for their films are done so via well-established modelling agencies for adult entertainers, the likelihood for outcomes similar to those recounted by Levine is questionable. In an age of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), and routine testing for performers in pornography, certainly the risk of STD transmission and HIV/AIDS is significantly reduced. Whereas limited free-of-charge availability of the antiretroviral drugs PrEP and PEP means this perhaps applies less so for members of the public, in the case of SketchySex at least – and in terms of their unique selling point, which is the fantasy of anonymous sex in the home facilitated by online apps and websites – there is perhaps more of a risk inherent in opening up the private space of the home to members of the public. Research conducted into how digital technologies are allowing for a rethinking and reimagining of the ways in which physical and digital spaces are interlayered and mapped over one another has demonstrated the creation of hybrid ecologies, and explored the ways in which these have a tangible effect on the lives of gay men in particular (Mowlabocus, 2008). The lens of queer theory has allowed the tension between those spaces classed as public and private, queer and straight, physical and virtual and digital, to be scrutinised in a way that goes against a heteronormative understanding of time and place (Freeman, 2010); the emergence of cruising apps and online communications has demonstrably contributed to this debate, as they invite a degree of publicity into the once private home, clearly represented by the video outputs of SketchySex. Licoppe et al.’s 2016 article ‘Grindr casual hook-ups as interactional achievements’ revealed sentiments among gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM) that allude to the reasons for the shift towards the privatisation of initialising sexual encounters; users of the app Grindr revealed that attempting to cruise other men for sex in an offline environment makes them feel ‘uncomfortable … uncertain … and potentially unsafe’ (2016, 2546). Additionally, Jaspal (2016) reports that users of Grindr also stated that cruising for sex offline required far greater effort, particularly in relation to initiating their interest via small-talk, and as a result they were more likely to rely on online communication to arrange hook-ups within the home. The significance of cruising offline and sex in public to gay sexual cultures is well documented (Humphreys, 1970; Chauncey, 1994; Houlbrook, 2005); Levine’s ethnographic research demonstrates the importance of group sex in public spaces to the gay clone lifestyle (1998), however where Levine notes that the more anonymous encounters tended to happen in the public spaces, SketchySex and cruising apps now bring these into the private home.

Yet, one thing that surely needs to be addressed when considering the practices of opening up one’s private home via digital technologies for unknown members of the public to enter in order to engage in anonymous sex (be that group sex or not) is the effects of neoliberalism upon gay cultures and lifestyles outside of the home. There is research to suggest that the ways in which some users of Grindr et al. do so is as a means of substituting the need to go to gay bars, clubs, and bathhouses (Miller, 2015). Certainly, when one takes stock of the myriad digital platforms aimed at gay men with their abilities to target very niche subgroups and tribes (often drawn from categories established within gay pornography and largely reliant upon body image, self-presentation, and age), it is feasible to conclude that this is a driving force behind the contention that apps and websites are supplanting traditional gay villages and venues. However, neoliberal processes of gentrification in once undesirable areas of cities that have historically been home to gay venues are having an equally devastating effect. London alone has seen a dramatic increase in closures to gay and queer venues across the city, although more specifically, in the historically gay area of Soho. Other venues regularly find themselves under the constant threat of closure, demolition, and redevelopment such as the now Grade II listed Royal Vauxhall Tavern; this listing was granted by Historic England following a lengthy campaign in order to secure the LGBTQ venue’s future. Sanders-McDonagh et al. argue that recent attempts to gentrify Soho ‘have intensified, with marginal and ‘undesirable’ groups specifically targeted by the state and private capital to create a sanitized space’ and makes specific reference to ‘gay bars, including Manbar and The Green Carnation’, which have closed within the last three years (2016, 2-3). It is feasible, therefore, to conclude that cruising apps and websites are being used in such a way that may be fuelling the way in which they are supplanting physical venues such as gay bars and gay clubs, but I contest that their role is secondary to the processes of gentrification and neoliberalism that are the real root cause.

With the theme of closures in mind, and drawing on the similarities and differences between gay cruising apps and gay bars as evidenced by Miller (2015), Mowlabocus has stated: ‘gay cyberspaces are similar to gay bars or clubs, with one important exception; these spaces do not close, they are not located within the gay villages of urban conurbations, they are not subject to planning and zoning laws and they are available, to everyone, 24/7’ (2008, 420). Whereas Mowlabocus’s statement is true enough, I would query the point that suggests these technologies are available ‘to everyone’, particularly with regards to class distinctions and that those who wish to use these apps and websites all have the sufficient funds to be able to do so. The use of these platforms depends upon the ownership of, or access to, smartphones and laptops or personal computers; with younger generations having less access to disposable incomes (Hur, 2018), and the fact that this generation and minorities are facing the extremely brunt end of years of austerity often leaving them in poverty (Mitchell et al., 2013), I am minded to add further nuance. Nevertheless, apps and websites such as Grindr and BBRT – these spaces that do not close, that are not subject to planning laws, that are open 24/7 – are enabling users and residents to open up the doors of their physical, private spaces to every other user, 24/7, if they so choose to. With this potential comes additional risks quite aside from the ‘risky’ behaviour of anonymous bareback sex as stated in the ‘About Us’ section of SketchySex’s website – a risk that, as stated, is significantly mitigated by the appropriate medication available to performers within the professional pornographic industry. Digital technologies are allowing gay men and MSM to negotiate different degrees of risk in opening up the private space of their homes to other users of these platforms who are, largely, strangers. Some users include broad references as to their location (for instance, their hotel or the area in which their house is located communicated via the first part of a postcode) and it is not uncommon to see others posting their full address for all to see, with accompanying statements such as ‘door unlocked now’ or ‘door off the latch’. It is also not uncommon for men seeking to match the sorts of sexual scenes depicted by SketchySex to also state that they will be blindfolded or hooded to ensure the anonymity of those who choose to enter – and leave – their home as strangers.

Grindr offers no functional features specifically designed for arranging hook-ups beyond the space within the profile bios and the chat function; BBRT, however, provides features specifically tailored towards facilitating group sex. BBRT offers to all free members of the website the function of viewing and posting ‘Quick Connect Ads’: you can select a duration of time from between 1 hour and 6 hours within which the activity is set to take place from the moment the ad is placed; a ‘Where To Connect’ dropdown menu offers you the choice of ‘Ask Me’, ‘My Place’, ‘Your Place’, ‘Hotel’, ‘Public Place’, ‘Bathhouse/Sex Club’, or ‘Don’t Care’; and a very small box for a couple of lines of text, in which the website specifies that the inclusion of ‘phone numbers, physical addresses, or E-Mail addresses’ is prohibited[[7]](#endnote-7). The ads appear to all other users located within the area in which you have specified that you reside, and act as a means for others to then access your profile and message you privately for further details. Paying members, however, can also list events in an additional feature called ‘Local Parties’; free members can view and request invites to these parties, but they cannot place adverts of their own without paying for one of the subscription fees – a point directly linked to that raised earlier about who actually has full access to the supposedly democratic nature of the internet and cruising online. The ‘Local Parties’ feature allows paying members to state the location, the ‘Type of Party’ from a dropdown menu (i.e. ‘Sex Party’), the date of the party, the time it is due to start, a headline about it, and a description of the ‘Party Details’. Users can request invites to the party, and if the invite is accepted, other potentially interested users can then see a list of all the attendees with links to their profiles in advance. Of course, this reduces some of the anonymity with regards to the fact that the party host can see the profiles of those requesting an invite (although that is not to say that all profiles display pictures of the individual in question’s face), but this perhaps goes some way to explaining the common references made by the hosts that they will be either blindfolded or hooded.

In 2016, Albury and Byron expanded the existing literature that already addressed the public health risks and concerns widely attributed to online cruising, and the practice of having casual and/or anonymous sex facilitated through digital technologies (Bale, 2011; Beymer et al., 2014; Holloway et al., 2014; Livingstone and Görzig, 2014; Bien et al., 2015). Their research explored the strategies employed by same-sex attracted young people online in order to remain safe and negotiate varying degrees of risk when cruising and subsequently meeting, such as the importance placed upon the ready availability of pictures to be exchanged in order to confirm authenticity of identity: ‘pictures… were seen as a crucial means of establishing trust with a potential partner’ (Albury and Byron, 2016, 5). As other digital platforms develop, new means of navigating and negotiating safety and risk also become available; it has not been uncommon for me to see included in Grindr bios the request that users have the picture-sharing app Snapchat as a further means through which one’s claimed identity can be authenticated. However, the practices of those individuals seeking anonymous sex – the kind depicted by SketchySex – hold very little concern with other users online actually being who they claim to be; how important can it be that an attendee of such a sexual encounter is actually who they depict themselves as online when the host is blindfolded, and when their primary concern is raising the number of partners per session regardless of any other factors? Whereas the risks of STI and HIV transmission frequently highlighted by research into the sexual cultures of gay men online remain present, and the risks of individuals claiming to be someone that they are not are also in place, the degree of risk taken by those individuals also opening up the private borders of their homes as well as their bodies takes on an integral role in the negotiation of safety. Users may choose to eventually share their addresses in the private chat or messaging features of digital platforms such as Grindr andBBRT following the kinds of strategies employed by the informants of Albury and Byron’s study, however in the organisation of anonymous sexual encounters through apps and websites it is apparent that discarding the mitigation of that risk is a necessary requirement. In the face of dominant narratives regarding risk and danger for gay men using cruising apps that so heavily focus on sexual health, STIs and HIV transmission (Newcomb et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2016; Ayala et al., 2018), I contend that hook-up apps and websites reveal not only levels of risk taken but also a measure of trust among communities of men partaking in group sexual practices with one another that shifts focus away from sexual health and onto the making public of their usually private home – a condition made possible by digital technologies. Yet, the cohort of men that the app users within SketchySex’s films seem to trust remains distinctly limited to those who are young, athletic and white, furthering the need for a critique of the studio’s problem with diversity against the existing literature and ethnographic practices that would suggest a different set of affairs.

# Diversity in the Neighbourhood

Having made the necessary decisions to advertise one’s address and place trust in other users entering one’s home, it is also common to see statements along the lines of ‘no load refused’ within the quick ad or party details and descriptions online. The ‘About Us’ section of SketchySex’s website alludes to a similar sentiment when they state that they now spend all day on the internet ‘looking for another big dick’; there are no conditions placed upon who possesses that ‘big dick’, only the requirement that it be big. Yet, this raises a curiosity as to just how diverse the supposed neighbourhoods are within the vicinity that SketchySex’s videos are filmed. The studio provides viewers with performers that are arguably categorically linked to the archetypal ‘jock’ within gay porn; as John Mercer has written in his recently published work *Gay Pornography*, the figure of the jock represents ‘an athletic masculinity […] embodying athleticism, physical perfection and (usually) immaculately grooming’ (2017, 113). Other gay porn studios – some of which are ran and maintained by the same conglomerate that produces SketchySex’s content – such as SeanCody, Corbin Fisher, Falcon, and FraternityX all heavily rely on performers that fit the ‘jock’ image. However, there are other noticeable contentions raised by the demographics of the performers; for a neighbourhood that has a plentiful supply of 20 to 30 year old men with perfect tans and defined musculature, there are surprisingly few people of colour. In fact, of all of the SketchySex videos that I have viewed (and there are many; at the time of writing, the website currently has 125 individual films), I fail to recall seeing a single black or Asian performer, and only a handful of Latino men; when you consider that each film can often feature more than 15 performers within 20 minutes, this starts to feel increasingly noteworthy – and deliberate. The much-cited work of Richard Dyer (1985, 1989, 2002a, 2002b) has stated that pornography has played an integral role in shaping gay men’s understandings about sex and sexuality; when this pornography also represents multi-racial pairings or groupings, sexual practices and desires can also be subject to new modes of interpretation or thinking. True enough, there is a continued racialisation and fetishisation of black masculinity as dominant in porn (both gay and straight) (Collins, 2004), along with other racist tropes such as that of the feminised, passive Asian gay male (Chua and Fujino, 1999; Chong-suk, 2006); however, Subero (2010), following Muñoz (1999), states that as a result of the lack of positive images of gay men of colour in popular culture (until recently), ‘gay male pornography must also be considered as a site for self-representation and self-reference of homosexual men of colour’ (2010, 219). The problematic exclusion of gay men of colour from SketchySex’s videos – videos that claim to just draw in any gay man from within the vicinity, with the only stipulation being that he has a big dick – is echoed in the practices of the activities that they depict; that is, those activities contingent upon the use of gay cruising apps and websites. The use of filters on apps and websites in order to cut out certain ethnicities is commonplace (Robinson, 2015), and racist sentiments are frequently encountered in the bios of individual usersalong the lines of ‘not into Asians’ or ‘not into black guys’, often explained away as being ‘just a preference’ (Light et al., 2008; Riggs, 2013; Robinson, 2015). Based on a study whereby the gay dating and cruising website Adam4Adam.com was the platform through which participants were procured and interviewed, Robinson drew the conclusion that:

Users in this space further this racialization process when they only search for a particular race through the website’s “quick search” feature. Individuals do not even have to look at people of colour or interact with them online […] Racism has become digital and normalized in online gay dating spaces. (2015, 326-327)

These same filters are applicable to cruising apps such as Grindr, and so in this respect SketchySex may appear perfectly representative of cruising online for hook-ups and facilitating group sex, regardless of how problematic the practices may be. As such, whereas SketchySex focuses largely around the (often solo) passive performer – the bottom – his excessive need for anal pleasure is arguably placed within an environment where, following Hocquenghem (1972 [trans. ed. 1978, and later republished 1993]), a phallic model of desire is still dominant; a model that enforces hegemonies of masculinity (Connell, 1995), as well as hierarchies of body image, age, and race. In direct distinction to the phallic model of desire, Hocquenghem posits with great clarity and conviction an alternative: an anal model of desire that does not rely upon sexual competition and hegemonies. Taking gay male spaces such as saunas and bathhouses as his referents for the places in which a form of ‘sexual communism’ can flourish, Hocquenghem states that this model is ‘an annular one, a circle which is open to an infinity of directions and possibilities… The group annular model… causes the “social” of the phallic hierarchy… to collapse’ (1978, 111). Whereas it is indeed possible for users partaking in the practices that SketchySex depicts to still recreate the same barriers enacted by a ‘phallic hierarchy’ (such as those concerning race and body type, as mentioned), the annular model is arguably more represented by the men advertising the use of themselves online for anonymous ‘cum and go’ hook-ups, under the assurance of ‘no load refused’. These practices are largely advertised to take place within the home, a space not conventionally understood as public (unlike the sauna or the bathhouse) but which, under neoliberalism and gentrification, has perhaps had to become, to some degree, necessarily public. Nevertheless, their investment in a more radical approach to the gratification of sexual desires – an anal approach – collectively and libidinally undermines phallic models of desire and, in so doing, potentially weakens social hierarchies: hierarchies of masculinities, sexualities, body image, race, relationships, and kinships – hierarchies that SketchySex goes some way to maintaining, reproducing, and reinforcing.

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# Notes

1. https://www.sketchysex.com/about.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.sketchysex.com/beamodel.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.str8upgayporn.com/sketchy-sex-bareback-gangbang-porn/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.malerevenue.com/external.php [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.xbiz.com/news/172668/malerevenue-launches-sketchysexcom [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.barebackrt.com [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.barebackrt.com/members/default.php

Word count: 8745 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)