

Chapter 21

“That’s Straight-Up Rape Culture”: Manifestations of Rape Culture on Grindr

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Abstract

Rape culture, described as when “violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent” (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993, p. vii), exists online and offline (Henry & Powell, 2014). Much of the research on rape culture focuses on the experiences of heterosexual women, and few studies have explored rape culture in the context of dating apps. This chapter explores how men who have sex with men (MSM) understand and experience rape culture through their use of Grindr and similar dating apps. A thematic analysis of interviews with 25 MSM dating app users revealed problematic user behavior as well as unwanted sexual messages and images as common manifestations of rape culture on dating apps. Participants explained that rape culture extends beyond in-app interactions to in-person encounters, as evident by incidents of sexual violence that several participants had experienced and one participant had committed. Participants were unsure about the extent to which MSM dating apps facilitate rape culture but asserted that some apps enable rape culture more than others. This chapter demonstrates the importance of investigating sexual violence against people of diverse gender and sexual identities to ensure their experiences are not minimized, ignored, or rendered invisible.


Keywords: Rape culture; sexual violence; dating apps; gay; queer; MSM

Introduction

During the 1970s, second-wave feminists began critiquing myths about women and sexual violence and introduced the term “rape culture” to articulate how society normalizes and condones sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975). Since then,

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scholars, activists, and others have conceptualized rape culture as “the social, cultural, and structural discourses and practices in which sexual violence is tolerated, accepted, eroticized, minimized and trivialized” (Henry & Powell, 2014, p. 2). In a rape culture, there are blurred lines around consent, male sexual aggression is accepted and encouraged, and victims are blamed for the violence they have suffered (Phipps, Ringrose, Renold, & Jackson, 2018; Sills et al., 2016). Perpetrators are excused, and sexual violence is rendered acceptable, attractive, and inevitable (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2018; Smith, 2004).

One of the most cited definitions of rape culture comes from Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (1993, p. vii) in their book, *Transforming A Rape Culture*:

It is a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm.

Consistent with other authors, Buchwald et al. (1993) describe rape culture as the ideologies and systems that have normalized and condoned sexual violence. They explain that sexual violence exists on a continuum that includes harassment, coercion, threats, and emotional and physical harm (see also Kelly, 1988). This notion of rape culture, however, presents a challenge when considering the systems and practices that trivialize and perpetuate sexual violence against people of diverse genders and sexualities, such as men who have sex with men (MSM), women who have sex with women, and trans and gender diverse people. Problematizing – or queering – rape culture in this way exposes the fact that rape culture is a heteronormative concept framed as sexual violence that men perpetrate against women. When we conceptualize rape culture in heteronormative terms, MSM are implicated without being affected. MSM participate in systems and practices that normalize and condone sexual violence against women but are not recognized as targets of such violence. However, if we consider rape culture in broader terms – without restricting the normalization and condonation of sexual violence in society to people of a particular gender or sexuality – then the concept can also apply to MSM.

It is not within the scope of this chapter to scrutinize the various definitions of rape culture or to propose a new conceptualization sensitive to people of diverse genders and sexualities. Rather, I have adopted Shariff's (2017, p. 56) definition of rape culture: “the way in which sexist societal attitudes and language tacitly condone, minimize and/or normalize sexual violence, mostly against women, but also against other genders through institutions, communities and individuals” (p. 56).

This aim of this chapter is to explore how MSM understand and experience rape culture through their use of Grindr and similar dating apps. There are several reasons why it is useful to investigate these experiences. First, MSM are avid users of dating apps. Grindr, the most popular of the MSM dating apps (Badal, Stryker, DeLuca, & Purcell, 2018), recently reported that it has 3.8 million

daily active users worldwide (Clement, 2019). Second, MSM dating apps are highly sexualized spaces (Race, 2015), and MSM may feel pressured or expected to engage in sexual activity even if they do not want to (Gavey, Schmidt, Braun, Fenaughty, & Eremin, 2009; Klesse, 2016). Third, MSM may dismiss or trivialize their experiences with sexual violence because of the assumption that men always want sex (Hollway, 1998). Although MSM dating apps are highly sexualized spaces, MSM actually use the apps for a variety of reasons, including to socialize and pass the time (Albury et al., 2019). This means that MSM may presume all dating app users want to engage in sexual activities even though some users may not be interested in anything sexual, thereby creating the possibility for unwanted sexual advances. Lastly, there are high rates of sexual violence against MSM (Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011), and MSM dating app users are concerned about experiencing sexual violence through their use of dating apps (Corriero & Tong, 2016). Thus, in order to investigate manifestations of rape culture against MSM, it is beneficial to explore their experiences with dating apps.

This chapter presents findings from an empirical study conducted with 25 MSM dating app users. Applying thematic analysis to the interview data, I found that participants talked about a variety of user behaviors indicative of rape culture, including imposing, aggressive, assumptive, and coercive behavior. Participants identified unwanted sexual messages and unwanted sexual images as two common manifestations of rape culture on dating apps and discussed how rape culture extends from in-app interactions to in-person encounters. Several participants disclosed that they had experienced sexual violence from MSM dating app users and one participant admitted that he had committed an act of sexual violence. Participants also reflected on the ways in which apps facilitate rape culture, though there was not consensus among participants regarding the extent to which dating app companies should be held accountable. I discuss the challenges in addressing rape culture and sexual violence against MSM, while also considering the sexual norms of MSM communities and the unique positionality of MSM as perpetrators and victims of sexual violence. The chapter closes with a call to (re)conceptualize rape culture so that definitions and understandings take into consideration the unique experiences of people with diverse gender and sexual identities.

Manifestations of Rape Culture

Rape culture manifests across society, including in law, medicine, education, and media (Dietzel, 2019; Phillips, 2016; Shariff, Dietzel, & Jaswal, 2017). Institutions such as these excuse perpetrators, fail to offer adequate support or resources to survivors, and contribute to social structures that perpetuate gender inequality and violence (Buchwald et al., 1993; Burt, 1980; Henry & Powell, 2014). These macrolevel manifestations illustrate how sexual violence has been condoned and trivialized in society, further evident by the high rates of sexual violence against women and MSM (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Rothman et al., 2011). However, rape culture is also present at the microlevel, such as when individuals blame victims

for the sexual violence they have suffered or make jokes about sexual assault and rape (Henry & Powell, 2014). Of course, these manifestations reflect societal structures, gendered power relations, inequality, and social ideologies that condone and trivialize sexual violence against women.

Rape culture also manifests online. In some cases, rape culture is reproduced in virtual spaces; people in online communities perpetuate rape myths and trivialize sexual violence (Phipps et al., 2018; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, & Cosby, 2018). In other cases, technology creates new problems, such as the nonconsensual distribution of intimate images and videos (Powell, Henry, & Flynn, 2018). Although most of the research investigating rape culture online has focused on the experiences of heterosexual women and girls (e.g., Henry & Powell, 2014; Keller et al., 2018), these studies still offer a valuable starting point to explore how rape culture can manifest in the experiences of MSM. Like women (see Cama, this volume), MSM are targets of male sexual aggression, can be exploited and coerced into engaging in unwanted sexual acts, are often blamed for the sexual violence a perpetrator has committed against them, and may not be believed or taken seriously when they disclose or report an incident of sexual violence (Braun, Schmidt, Gavey, & Fenaughty, 2009; Davies, 2002; Gavey, 2005). Similar to women, MSM face rape myths and stereotypes that serve to silence their experiences of sexual violence (Mortimer, Powell, & Sandy, 2019). Moreover, concerning manifestations of rape culture online, women and MSM both experience high rates of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Powell, Scott, Flynn, & Henry, 2020).

Technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) is an umbrella term that refers to a range of behaviors in which technology is “used to facilitate both virtual and face-to-face sexually based harms” (Henry & Powell, 2016, p. 1). TFSV includes image-based sexual abuse, psychological violence, sexual harassment, coercion, cyberstalking, threats, hate speech, and the use of digital technologies to commit sexual violence in person (Henry & Powell, 2014). One example is online sexual harassment, or cyber-sexual harassment, which refers to unwanted or unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature (Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, & Ritter, 2002; Ritter, 2014; Schenk, 2008), including unwanted sexual attention and uninvited sexual advances (Van Royen, Vandebosch, & Poels, 2015). People may also use an online space to make threats of sexual violence against someone and then share their personal details in an effort to encourage others to commit violence against them (Fairbairn, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2017).

One of the most common experiences of TFSV is image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). IBSA is “the nonconsensual creation of nude or sexual images, the nonconsensual distribution of those intimate images, and the threat of distributing intimate images” (Powell et al., 2018, p. 306). Sometimes referred to as “revenge porn,” IBSA occurs when a perpetrator seeks status, money, retribution, or personal enjoyment (Powell et al., 2018). IBSA refers to a range of behaviors, including voyeurism (i.e., sharing sexual images for sexual pleasure), sextortion (i.e., trying to obtain money, sexual images, or sexual acts by threatening the dissemination of sexual images), and sexual assault image sharing (i.e., distributing images or videos of a victim of sexual assault or rape) (see Powell & Henry, 2017).

Research has shown that MSM experience high rates of IBSA compared to heterosexual people. Henry, Powell, and Flynn (2017) found that 39% of MSM reported being victims of IBSA compared to 21% of heterosexual people. Some research has estimated that MSM dating app users are more than twice as likely as the general population to experience IBSA (Waldman, 2019), though other research suggests MSM may suffer IBSA at a rate five to six times higher than heterosexual people (Lenhart, Ybarra, & Price-Feeney, 2016). In a recent study, Powell et al. (2020) found that over half of MSM have experienced IBSA.

It should be noted that men are more likely than women to be perpetrators of IBSA (Powell et al., 2020). This finding holds true for MSM. Henry et al. (2017) found that 80% of MSM who had experienced IBSA reported that the abuse was perpetrated by another man. Similarly, in a study by Garcia, Gesselman, and Siliman (2016), MSM were more than twice as likely to distribute another person’s sexual image without their consent. These findings suggest that MSM occupy a unique position relative to IBSA: although they experience high rates of victimization, they are also frequently perpetrators.

In addition to online sexual harassment, IBSA, online threats, and other sexually aggressive behaviors online, another manifestation of TFSV is the use of dating apps to perpetrate a sexual assault in person (Fairbairn, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2017). In their investigation of sexual assaults related to dating app use, Rowse, Bolt, and Gaya (2020) found that 14% of alleged sexual assaults happened after meeting someone from a dating app; over 50% occurred at the perpetrator’s private residence; and, in over 80% of cases, the assault was committed the first time the dating app users met in person. Although Rowse et al.’s (2020) study did not include statistics on MSM, there are reports of men experiencing sexual assault from someone they met through online dating (see National Crime Agency, 2016).

TFSV is a concern for MSM dating app users. In a study on perceived risks related to dating app use, Albury and Byron (2016) noted that same sex attracted individuals were more worried about sexual predators and nonconsensual sexual relations than sexual health. Bauermeister, Giguere, Carballo-Dieguez, Ventuneac, and Eisenberg (2010) found that about half of MSM worry about their physical safety when meeting someone online, and more than one in 10 are specifically concerned about forced sex and rape. Similarly, Corriero and Tong (2016) reported that fears of sexual violence – such as harassment, physical harm, and rape – are common among MSM dating app users. These concerns are not unfounded. Waldman’s (2019) study found that MSM have experienced harassment, catfishing, sextortion, and IBSA through their use of dating apps.

Method

The data presented in this chapter comes from a qualitative research project examining the experiences of MSM dating app users. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 MSM dating app users in Autumn 2017 in Montreal, Canada. Participants were required to identify as an MSM dating app user and be

at least 18 years old. Participants were recruited for three months using snowball sampling and flyers posted at a large Canadian university and in Montreal's gay neighborhood.

Following [Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott's \(2015\)](#) approach for collecting data, participants were offered three interview options – in person, by telephone, or via an online chat – and were encouraged to choose the option best suited to their desired level of comfort, accessibility, and anonymity. The majority of participants chose to interview in person ($n = 19$), although a few interviewed by telephone ($n = 3$) and online chat ($n = 3$). Each interview lasted about one hour and was conducted in either English or French (with French interview data later translated into English).

All participants self-identified as MSM dating app users, with 24 identifying their gender as male and one identifying as gender-fluid. Most participants identified as gay, though two identified as queer and one identified as bisexual. No participants identified as transgender. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 62 years. While the majority of participants identified as White ($n = 14$), participants also identified as Middle Eastern ($n = 3$), Hispanic ($n = 3$), Multiracial ($n = 3$), Asian ($n = 1$), and Black ($n = 1$). Pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter in order to protect participants' identities. The most used MSM dating app among participants was Grindr ($n = 23$), though many participants also used other apps and websites, including Tinder, Scruff, Hornet, and OkCupid. Participants reported that they mainly used the apps to seek sex, meet people, and find dates or relationships.

In the interviews, I asked participants about their experiences with dating apps, including any unwanted sexual interactions they may have had while interacting with other MSM online or in person. I also asked participants if, and how, rape culture manifests on Grindr. Participants were not provided with a definition of rape culture, nor were they corrected if their definition did not align with the definition I adopted for this research. I thematically analyzed the data following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) approach. Thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" such that "it minimally organizes and describes [a] data set in (rich) detail" ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#), p. 79).

Findings

Participants said that MSM dating app users regularly imposed their sexual desires on other users and presumed another user's consent without asking. According to Michael (18, gay, male, White), "they don't know or care if the other person is attracted to them... if the other person is even looking for a sexual relationship." Ang (36, gay, male, Asian) similarly felt that users "assume that they have the right to do everything that they want." Robert (23, gay, male, White) figured this was because app users share common sexual identities: "gay guys are, you know, everybody thinks that we always want sex."

Participants talked about how MSM presume what another dating app user wants because of the information available on their profile. Robert (23, gay, male, White) explained that "if your profile says, 'looking for hookup' of course

you're going to think, 'Oh, he wants naked pictures.'" Jadyn (32, gay, male, Black) gave another example: "someone may put on their profile that they're 100% a power bottom and someone just automatically messages them and is like, 'Oh yeah, you like to take it up on the ass or get gang banged.'"

Some participants discussed race and ethnicity in relation to rape culture. Charlie (24, gay, male, White) identified the fetishization of racialized MSM dating app users as one of its manifestations. Jadyn (32, gay, male, Black) talked about a user profiling him because he is Black: "he hits me up, and we start talking a little bit, and he went on to say, 'You look like you'd be a great rapist.'"

A few participants talked about situations in which MSM dating app users had pressured them or tried to persuade them into engaging in a sexual activity, even if they said they were not interested. As Nicolas (62, gay, male, Multiracial) explained, "they think that they'll be able to convince you, that you're almost playing hard to get, as if it's a game." Alexandre (25, gay, male, White) found that "some people can't understand that you're not interested in them and keep insisting." Similarly, Mason (26, bisexual, male, Multiracial) said some users do not take "no" for an answer: "if they're insisting and you made it very clear that you're not interested, that could probably be one way that rape culture could manifest itself on Grindr."

Participants were not always on the receiving end of this behavior. Some participants admitted that they may have interacted with other users in problematic ways. Gabriel (21, gay, male, White), for example, reflected on why other users had blocked him on the apps: "I imagine that I might have been insistent." Similarly, Robert (23, gay, male, White) said, "I may have been pushy one or two times with someone." Jadyn (32, gay, male, Black) also recognized that his behavior could have been an issue sometimes: "maybe I was the one who was being persistent or maybe I said something that was not savory or classy or... I mean, we're not perfect, right?"

The two most commonly mentioned experiences of rape culture on MSM dating apps include unwanted sexual messages and unwanted sexual images. As Oscar (22, gay, male, White) explained: "that's its manifestation on Grindr, when there's been no consent or there's been no context to go further sexually by text or images." Below I discuss participants' experiences with messages and images and also explore how rape culture extends from apps to in-person encounters. This section closes with reflections on the ways in which apps facilitate rape culture.

Messages

Participants talked about MSM dating app users who impose themselves on unwilling, uninterested recipients by sending "aggressive" and "invasive" messages. Jadyn (32, gay, male, Black) gave the following example: "the first message, you open up to a guy who is like, 'I want to take you, grab you by the hair, and fuck you hard in the ass.'" Charlie (24, gay, male, White) said these messages "might make you feel threatened for your physical safety or for your own personal integrity," while Noah (28, gay, male, White) described them as "degrading" but "normalized in the gay male world."

Skyler (28, queer, male, White), who had experienced this “super pushy” and “violent” behavior from users despite not giving any indication he was interested in them, explained that these messages imply “someone is purely meant for someone else’s sexual gratification.” Elijah (18, gay, male, White) said these messages reduce people to sexual objects: “you’re not necessarily treating them like a person, you’re just treating them as someone to have sex with.” Talking about how he felt when he received such messages, Nicolas (62, gay, male, Multiracial) said, “it’s almost like being violated right off the bat.”

Images

Participants said it was common for MSM dating app users to save and share other users’ sexual images without their consent. Oscar (22, gay, male, White) had exchanged photos with a casual sex partner and found his photos shared on Facebook. Noah (28, gay, male, White) had a sexual partner from years ago who saved and shared his photos and only became aware of it when a friend approached him at the gym and informed him that the person was distributing photos of his penis online. Both Jady (32, gay, male, Black) and Charlie (24, gay, male, White) reported that in the weeks prior to their interviews, numerous local MSM dating app users had their photos posted on an anonymous Tumblr account. Said Charlie (24, gay, male, White): “someone made a Montreal Tumblr blog where they were messaging all these people and getting their pictures and their dick pics, and they posted them all on this Tumblr.”

Charlie (24, gay, male, White) and Theo (20, gay, gender-fluid, Multiracial) referred to the nonconsensual dissemination of sexual photos as “revenge porn.” Charlie (24, gay, male, White) explained that revenge porn is “a form of sexual assault” and “a huge part of rape culture.” Theo (20, gay, gender-fluid, Multiracial) agreed that this was a clear example of rape culture from MSM dating apps: “the sharing of pictures without someone’s consent – that’s straight-up rape culture.”

Participants were concerned about the consequences that dissemination could have on their lives and careers. Ravi (28, gay, male, Middle Eastern) stated he and his friends do not trust anyone on Grindr out of concerns for their sexual photos being leaked. Ang (36, gay, male, Asian) agreed: “Given the fact that I am in the profession I am, I’m really reluctant to take such pictures. Anything that can get out could have devastating consequences.” Mason (26, bisexual, male, Multiracial) and William (25, gay, male, White) also discussed the ease at which sexual photos can become public and explained that an MSM dating app user could extort another person by using their photos as blackmail.

Participants identified unwanted sexual photos, such as unsolicited “dick pics,” as a manifestation of rape culture on MSM dating apps. Oscar (22, gay, male, White) and William (25, gay, male, White) explained it was common for people to assume that other users want to receive these photos, even without “any indication of wanting them.” Toby (20, gay, male, White) found “an unsolicited nude” problematic because “I can see that causing harm to someone who doesn’t want

to see it." Some participants admitted that they had sent unsolicited dick pics to other MSM dating app users: "If I'm really horny," said Elijah (18, gay, male, White), "sometimes I'll send one of those."

Robert (23, gay, male, White) described rape culture on MSM dating apps in terms of feeling coerced or pressured to reciprocate in sharing sexual photos, whether or not he had wanted to receive them from someone else. He explained, "you feel like you have to send a picture just because you received one. So that's part of the definition, I think, that applies to Grindr."

From Apps to In-Person Encounters

Participants emphasized that rape culture extended beyond their interactions on MSM dating apps to interactions they had in person. For example, participants talked about users who did not respect personal boundaries. Michael (18, gay, male, White) said there was a user who had stalked him online and used the social media accounts connected to his dating app profile to find and contact his friends. Nicolas (62, gay, male, Multiracial) expressed concern about users taking advantage of the geo-locating function of dating apps to pinpoint where he lived. Skyler (28, queer, male, White) said he felt uncomfortable when people found him in real life and gave the example of receiving a message from someone who said they had seen him on the street: "I think they're trying to be flirty, but it's a little bit creepy."

Participants talked about feeling pressured to follow through on a proposed sexual activity when they met an MSM dating app user in person. For example, Toby (20, gay, male, White) explained that users might feel obligated to have sex because of the amount of time they spent arranging and preparing for a sexual encounter. Toby (20, gay, male, White) commented that, "there's such an expectation, like if you traveled to get here, if you douched as a bottom, if you shaved or whatever, it's [sex] very much expected." Karam (46, gay, male, Middle Eastern) similarly spoke about feeling compelled to have sex, even if he was no longer interested in the user: "I wouldn't call that rape, but I would definitely start lumping it in." Jady (32, gay, male, Black) described the situation as such:

It's this weird fucked-up dynamic of when you are going through with something when you don't really want to and you're like, "I need to get this over with." In a sense, you are consenting, because you're like, "I am going forward. No one is holding a gun to my head or whatever." But it's a sort of social obligation gun-being-held-to-my-head and I feel like I'm doing something that I don't actually want to do.

Participants also discussed feeling passive and complaisant, and experiencing situations where they agreed to engage in an unwanted sexual activity. Robert (23, gay, male, White) recounted a time when he conceded to having sex because of how badly the other person wanted it. Pierre (22, gay, male, White) said there

were a few times when an MSM dating app user he was giving oral sex expected him to deep throat even though “the consent wasn’t there.” Elijah (18, gay, male, White) said he had been “taken advantage of” when he was younger because he would “just roll with things” and give “a hesitant ‘yes’ not a solid ‘yes.’” Logan (18, gay, male, White) admitted that there were times he “regretted having sex with someone” even though the sexual interaction was “not bad enough for me to stop.” Joe (31, gay, male, White) had this experience:

There was one man who came – and I like soft sensual sex and he liked really rough sex – and he just jammed it in there. And I thought, “I do not like that.” But instead of extricating myself from the situation, I just sat and finished and let him be on his way. And that made me uncomfortable because there was a point in the situation when I was no longer consenting, but it was still happening. And I didn’t feel comfortable enough to stop it from happening.

A few participants gave examples of sexual violence they had experienced from MSM dating app users. Hugo (23, queer, male, Hispanic) recounted a time when he was forced to give a blow job. Charlie (24, gay, male, White) talked about a user he had invited to his house to have sex with but was too aggressive and would not take “no” for an answer: “It actually ended with me almost calling the cops.” Ravi (28, gay, male, Middle Eastern) gave the example of a user who seemed fine online but when they met in person, turned out to be a “wild sex animal” who tried to bite him and force him into having sex. Luis (43, gay, male, Hispanic) discussed two situations in which casual sex partners prioritized their sexual interests over his comfort, safety, and wellbeing: “I have been raped twice as a result of the recklessness of people and the dismissiveness, the lack of respect for an already-agreed-upon conversation.” In one instance, Luis (43, gay, male, Hispanic) and an MSM dating app user had messaged and agreed about what they would and would not do during sex. When they met in person, however, the user disregarded their agreement and penetrated Luis without his consent.

As explained above, some MSM dating app users make assumptions about other users based on their profiles, which can lead to sexually violent behavior. Noah (28, gay, male, White), for example, had a casual sex partner who he thought liked rough sex, so he choked him. After they hooked up, Noah (28, gay, male, White) discovered that this partner did not like being choked and immediately apologized, but said that experience “kind of traumatized” him.

Reflections on the Ways in Which Apps Facilitate Rape Culture

Participants felt that rape culture manifests more on some MSM dating apps than others. William (25, gay, male, White) explained that because any user can contact any other user on Grindr, it is “more likely” to experience an unwanted interaction on Grindr than on Tinder. Elijah (18, gay, male, White) similarly

asserted that it is “easier” for rape culture to manifest on Grindr than Tinder because “on Tinder you have to give them the opportunity first – you both have to swipe right.”

However, there was a lack of consensus among participants regarding the extent to which MSM dating apps facilitate rape culture. Some participants felt that the apps were responsible. Diego (35, gay, male, Hispanic) said the design of MSM dating apps and the affordances of the internet, such as the ability to operate anonymously online, provide a “shield” for users to act however they want without any consequences. Ang (36, gay, male, Asian) asserted that the culture of the apps encouraged sexual violence: “For such applications, the base goal is fast encounters. So, when you go for fast encounters, you’re not necessarily going to have the time to cover all the angles of what you consent to and what you don’t.”

Other participants felt that rape culture on MSM dating apps was a reflection of societal norms. Toby (20, gay, male, White) said, “I wouldn’t vilify Grindr. I think it’s just the platform that we see rape culture occurring because of the society and the norms that we live in.” Similarly, Luis (43, gay, male, Hispanic) explained that even though apps may be the venue through which rape culture occurs, sexual violence is not the fault of apps, but is caused by “utmost selfishness of a human being.”

One participant held both perspectives. Although Dion (37, gay, male, Middle Eastern) felt that rape culture was made “easier” by MSM dating apps, he did not blame them for the sexual violence MSM may experience:

Grindr would be the facilitator, but not really the culprit.... As a hook-up app, you might go and meet a stranger in a sexual setting and this person might do things to you, or you do things to them, that is not consensual and it’s just part of rape culture.

Discussion

When considering how rape culture manifests on MSM dating apps, participants said rape culture appeared through the messages and images they received from other users. They spoke about being sent violent comments and unsolicited nude photos. These examples are not surprising because, by the very nature of being online, people’s behavior is limited to specific virtual actions and interactions. Messages and images are the main ways that individuals communicate and connect with one another online. The aggressive, dominating, presumptive, and unwanted behavior that comes about through users’ messages and images indicates the presence of rape culture on MSM dating apps.

Participants discussed situations where rape culture extended beyond their online interactions with MSM dating app users. They gave numerous examples of technology-based sexual violence, including image-based sexual abuse, harassment, stalking, coercion, threats, and sexual assault. These results align with previous research, which has similarly found that TFSV spans across people’s online and offline interactions (Henry & Powell, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2017).

Participants also explained that incidents of TFSV were emotionally traumatizing, physically violent, and could negatively impact their lives and careers. Again, these results support previous research that has documented the detrimental effects of TFSV on people's safety, health, and wellbeing (Scarduzio, Sheff, & Smith, 2018), including emotional and physical harm (Fairbairn, 2015; Henry & Powell, 2016), as well as consequences on their jobs and relationships (Citron & Franks, 2014).

The online and in-person manifestations of rape culture participants described relative to their use of MSM dating apps demonstrate that rape culture is not limited to a space or context; rape culture is present throughout society. This was further evident as participants considered the extent to which apps facilitate rape culture. The socio-cultural societal norms that people embody, practice, and perpetuate mean that rape culture can manifest wherever people are: online, in person, and across these spaces. Technology does not create a separate world in which rape culture can manifest; rather, it extends and expands upon the experiences people have in physical space (boyd, 2010; Mowlabocus, 2010).

This notion was reflected in participants' comments about the extent to which MSM dating apps facilitate rape culture. As Toby (20, gay, male, White) explained, dating apps are "the platform[s] that we see rape culture occurring because of the society and the norms that we live in." Even though participants disagreed about whether the affordances of MSM dating apps made it easier for rape culture to manifest, participants recognized that MSM dating app users' behaviors were indicative of larger socio-cultural issues present in society.

MSM dating apps occupy a unique position in the lives of MSM because they can help address everyday manifestations of rape culture. For example, MSM dating apps offer users the ability to block and report users who engage in "bad behavior" (Grindr, 2020a). In 2019, Grindr added options for users to indicate on their profile if, or to what extent, they are open to receiving "NSFW [Not Safe For Work] Pics" from other users and where they prefer to meet another app user, such as "My Place," "Your Place," "Bar," "Coffee Shop," or "Restaurant" (Grindr, 2020b). While there is a need for researchers to investigate the effectiveness of these in-app features, their presence suggests that MSM dating app companies are cognizant of the sexual violence that can happen through their platforms and feel at least some sense of responsibility to help their users tackle such problems.

One challenge in addressing rape culture against MSM is understanding that MSM can be both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. This finding was reflected in the experiences of participants who described, in their interactions online and in person, situations where they had been both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. MSM occupy a unique position in society as they possess both majority and minority identities. As men, MSM are endowed with power and privilege, but as queer people with non-normative sexual and gender identities, MSM may also be marginalized: "This person might do things to you, or you might do things to them, that is not consensual and it's just part of rape culture," explained Dion (37, gay, male, Middle Eastern).

Participants spoke to this duality as they discussed the sexual norms of MSM communities, specifically as they asserted that gay men “always want sex” and that unwanted sexual advances are “normalized in the gay male world.” These comments reflect [Hollway’s \(1998, p. 63\)](#) male sexual drive discourse, which “sees men as sexually insatiable and male sexuality as naturally an uncontrollable drive.” When applied to the context of MSM dating apps, this means MSM dating app users may feel pressured to consent or follow through with a sexual activity, even when they are uninterested. It also suggests that MSM may assume other dating app users are always open to sexual advances, that other users always want to engage in sexual activity, and subsequently, that other users always consent.

However, as evident in the data, MSM can also be targets of sexual violence. Participants spoke of societal assumptions about them, such as always wanting sex, and about the pressure to engage in a sexual activity, in both their online and offline interactions with other MSM. On apps, participants asserted that users “assume they have the right to do whatever they want,” such as send sexual messages and photos to a recipient without “any indication of wanting them.” Participants discussed feeling pressured to engage in sexual acts with MSM on dating apps, such as feeling obliged “to send a picture just because you received one.” When interacting with MSM dating app users in person, participants similarly explained that sexual activity was “expected,” and described it as “a sort of social obligation” that they “didn’t feel comfortable enough to stop it from happening,” even when it was “not a solid ‘yes’” (see also Cama, this volume). Whether on apps or in person, MSM dating app users may presume the consent of other users and may expect themselves, and others, to engage in a sexual act, even when feeling coerced or disinterested ([Gavey et al., 2009](#); [Klesse, 2016](#)).

Sexual violence comes in many forms ([Kelly, 1988](#)) yet men, and MSM in particular, do not always identify themselves as victims or survivors of sexual violence ([Braun et al., 2009](#); [Davies, 2002](#)). Further, rape myths perpetuate stereotypes and assumptions about sexual violence against people of diverse gender and sexual identities in ways that further obfuscate MSM experiences with rape culture ([Mortimer et al., 2019](#)). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, MSM dating app users may also contribute to the trivialization and denial of rape culture against MSM and queer people.

Dion’s (37, gay, male, Middle Eastern) comment that “this person might do things to you, or you might do things to them, that is not consensual and it’s just part of rape culture” not only highlights the unique positionality of MSM but also dismisses the sexual aggression, harm, and violence MSM dating app users commit against one another. Similarly, other participants seemed to accept sexual violence as banal and unavoidable, including Noah (28, gay, male, White) who said this behavior was “normalized in the gay male world.” Comments such as these minimize and invisibilize sexual violence against MSM and also frame rape culture against MSM as “inevitable” ([Keller et al., 2018](#); [Smith, 2004](#)).

In a rape culture, a person’s body exists only as a source of sexual pleasure for another person, such that the body is objectified and, in the cases of racialized people, fetishized ([Smith, 2004](#)). These ideologies were also reflected in

participants' experiences, including for Skyler (28, queer, male, White) who explained that receiving messages made him feel like a sexual object, "purely meant for someone else's sexual gratification." However, it is important to note that rape culture does not affect everyone similarly. Racialized people face higher rates of sexual violence than white people (Black et al., 2011), and racialized MSM experience additional oppression and victimization that white MSM do not (Meyer, 2012). My findings similarly suggest that racialized MSM dating app users are uniquely targeted in rape culture. It would be valuable for future research to investigate issues of sexual consent and sexual violence specific to racialized MSM dating app users.

There are other limitations in this study that future research could address. Since this chapter focused on manifestations of rape culture against MSM, future studies could explore and develop a conceptualization of rape culture sensitive to people of diverse genders and sexualities. Similarly, a future study could examine how factors like culture, country of origin, and language affect MSM perceptions of, and experiences with, rape culture online and in person. Because participants were not given an "official" definition of rape culture, they may have held different or conflicting understandings. Furthermore, since men may not perceive of themselves as victims or survivors of sexual violence (Braun et al., 2009; Davies, 2002), some participants may have experienced sexual violence but did not identify it as such, or did not consider it as a manifestation of rape culture. Future research could present MSM with a definition of rape culture and a variety of scenarios to examine if, and how, they connect sexual violence with rape culture. Lastly, it would be beneficial for future research to take a quantitative or mixed methods research approach to explore potential connections between rape culture and different variables, such as MSM identities (e.g., age, sexual position, relationship status), sexual practices (e.g., condom use, drug and alcohol consumption), and app-related behaviors (e.g., profile image, profile content, years of usage, frequency of use).

Conclusion

Rape culture, described as when "violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent" (Buchwald et al., 1993, p. vii), manifests for MSM in a variety of ways on dating apps and in person. This chapter has documented rape culture related to the use of MSM dating apps and highlighted the range of sexually violent behaviors present in online and offline spaces and across those spaces. While this research is helpful as scholars increasingly explore rape culture against people of diverse genders and sexualities, these findings largely support current understandings of rape culture: sexual violence is tolerated and normalized in society (Henry & Powell, 2014); male sexual aggression is expected and condoned (Keller et al., 2018; Smith, 2004); perpetrators of sexual violence are excused (Phipps et al., 2018; Sills et al., 2016); men's consent is presumed (Hollway, 1998); bodies are objectified and fetishized (Smith, 2004); and racialized people experience additional victimization (Meyer, 2012).

If we continue to focus on heterosexual people's experiences with rape culture, the experiences of people outside of those identities risk being minimized, silenced, and rendered invisible. This can result in people who have suffered sexual violence failing to identify their own experiences as such because of a lack of awareness, representation, and understanding. Particularly in relation to connections facilitated by technology, there is an urgent need to understand how sexual violence manifests in and across online spaces and in-person spaces. It is crucial for research to continue to explore rape culture, sexual violence, and the lived experiences of sexually diverse and gender diverse people so we, as a society, can develop better theoretical and empirical understandings of these problems and work toward safe, healthy, and consensual sexual relationships for everyone in practice.

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