

STS Research Report

Grindr in Design, Leadership, and Practice: Understanding Responsibility with Care Ethics

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction

Grindr is a social networking and dating app for smartphones that began in 2009 with the explicit purpose of connecting men who have sex with men (MSM). The app now a centerpiece of modern queer life, being used by 3.8 million people – gay, bisexual, and trans – every day (Isaac, 2016). The app is at the center of controversy for violating data privacy, worsening user’s health, and sustaining and enforcing bigotry. Current methods of understanding these issues have largely focused on the actions of the company and the experiences of users in isolation. However, ignoring the relationship between company and user when the user community is composed of marginalized communities ignores the important ethical implications of corporate action. Without understanding the relationships of power among Grindr users and Grindr as a company, it is impossible to understand where responsibility lies to in creating an online queer space that is safe, healthy, and inclusive. Consequently, I investigate the ways power can inform responsibility and define just action by applying a framework of care ethics to recent controversies in Grindr. In this lens, it is evident that Grindr has failed to implement effective care in data privacy, app design, and inclusivity.

Background

The App

As of 2019, Grindr has 3.8 million daily users around the globe. Currently, the app advertises itself as a “gay chat” app open to gay, bisexual and trans individuals. A 2016 online survey of 2,023 gay singles found that 74% of respondents used Grindr, making it the most popular app used for gay dating by over 40 percentage points (Woodley, 2016). The founder of Grindr, Joel Simkhai, maintained majority control of the company until June of 2016, when 60% of the company was sold to Beijing Kunlun Tech Company, a Chinese gaming company (Isaac, 2016).

The service works with geolocation to show users those closest to them. Other users appear in a grid of profile pictures arranged by location. By selecting on another user's picture in the grid, the user can see a name, a short "About Me" section, more photographs, and various metrics chosen by that user to display. Users are free to message any users visible to them on the app. This includes sending pictures, video, and audio through the app. Users can also send "taps" to indicate interest without engaging in conversation (Lavalle, 2009; Shadel, 2018).

Metrics that Grindr has for users to display on their profile including age, weight, body type, ethnicity, relationship status, "tribe," "Looking For," gender, pronouns, and HIV status. "Tribes" are gay subcultures that users can self-identify into. These categories are primarily based on physical attributes. "Looking For" refers to what expectations the user has around their interactions on the app. These range from chatting and friendship to dating and hookups.

Literature Review

Being at the epicenter of modern gay life online, Grindr has been extensively analyzed by the academic community. Analysis has come from the fields of public health, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. These approaches have put Grindr under the lens of epidemiology, the self-disclosure hypothesis, objectification theory, socio-sexual networking, intersectionality, and discourse analysis. None of these provided an ethical assessment of Grindr's design and use, which I will provide later.

Landovitz et al (2013) examined HIV status and *sexual risk behaviors* among Grindr users in Los Angeles. They did not examine mental health of Grindr users, but rather the health and sexual behavior of users. They found that while Grindr does not explicitly market itself as a tool for sexual partnering, it is inadvertently the primary way gay men find partners for casual sex. This epidemiological study also discovered high rates of substance use in these sexual encounters, which increases the risk for unsafe sex and the transmission of STIs. In the past month, 91.7% of those surveyed used alcohol during sex, and 59.7% reported using cannabis. This study was primarily interested in the sexual risk behavior of those on

Grindr, with a particular interest in HIV. It did not, however, investigate the impact of Grindr use on the wellbeing of its users.

Another study by Taylor et al (2017) applied the *Internet-Enhanced Self-Disclosure Hypothesis* (IESDH) and surveys to understand mechanisms by which Grindr can provide psychological benefits. Self-disclosure is the act of sharing intimate personal information with others in a safe setting that provides psychological benefits and reduces feelings of loneliness. The study proposes IESDH as the mechanism by which Grindr can provide opportunities for self-disclosure among queer folk. The original IESDH was that self-disclosure improves outcomes more when it occurs in stronger interpersonal relationships. However, by surveying Grindr users, it was found that directed communication through Grindr's private message mechanism can provide many of the same benefits as self-disclosure in existing interpersonal relationships. They suggest that online communication among queer individuals helps reduce the internalized stigma surrounding queerness that comes from broader society. Interacting with others on Grindr, even if they are strangers, can help people feel more comfortable with their identity. Grindr-mediated self-disclosure was correlated with reduced feelings of loneliness, while sexting was uncorrelated. The report highlighted the fact that Grindr has multidimensional uses, and the frequency of non-sexual motivations on the app are relatively high. This is something that the previous study ignored by only looking at Grindr through an epidemiological lens that did not include mental health.

Anderson et al (2017) investigated potential harms of using Grindr through the avenue of promoting objectification, both of the self and the other. *Objectification theory* posits that women are sexually objectified in a way that reduces them to the sum of sexually desirable body parts; this is other-objectification. This encourages women to self-objectify in ways that lead to negative health outcomes, like eating disorders and body dysmorphia. MSM are more similar to straight women than straight men in measures of self-objectification, which puts them at greater health risk. Despite Grindr's focus on visual cues, this study found that the app had no significant effect on levels of self-objectification. However, those who use Grindr were more likely to objectify others than those who do not. Other-objectification

was uncorrelated with risky sexual behavior. As a whole, this report exposed the correlation between Grindr use and other-objectification, but did not go further to explore the impacts of this on wellbeing.

Bryce Renninger (2019) addresses the negative affects Grindr has been accused of having on queer communities through the elimination of gay bars and the decline of “gayborhoods,” neighborhoods where queer people are the predominant demographic. Renninger argues against the common notion that, “Grindr killed the gay bar,” offering a more nuanced perspective based on ethnographic work. Renninger notes that many of the changes of the gay community has seen in the past few years have been from a broader range of sources, and that Grindr is one component of that. They argue that the widespread acceptance of many gay men into metropolitan society has reduced the need for such spaces, and that the expansion of cities has pushed many of these queer spaces out. Renninger still finds flaw in Grindr, however, arguing that there is something lost when Grindr allows you to be queer but not require that anyone get used to it. With this, it is evident that Grindr has a dual effect. The first is to both provide a queer digital space in a world where tangible queer spaces are less prevalent. The second is to make the encroachment of gentrification into queer space less noticeable.

Andrew Shield (2018) conducted ethnographic work of Grindr culture in Copenhagen, focusing on how people are using the app and the compounded stress of additional minority status on its users. According to Shield, Grindr is a useful tool for gay men who are new in town to find friends, housing, information, and even employment. This is part of what Shield describes as *socio-sexual networking*, where Grindr users engage in interpersonal communication that is open to platonic, erotic, romantic, and practical connections simultaneously. While this provides the added benefit of community, it does not provide it equally to everyone on the app. Many of those interviewed recounted experiences of racism, xenophobia, and ableism; as well as a hostility to those outside of gender and body norms. Grindr enables further exclusion of already marginalized groups by enabling filters based on ethnicity and body type for paid members. With this, the experiences of Grindr users vary based on other identities that intersect with their gay or bisexual identity. So, the benefits that the app provides are not distributed equally. Shield concluded by noting a gradual change in Copenhagen Grindr culture over time, with more people

advocating through the app for the acceptance of marginalized groups even if they do not identify with them. With their paper, Shield provides an *intersectional* perspective on how Grindr users interact with and draw benefits from the app.

None of the studies investigated the actions of Grindr as a company or the role of Grindr's design. Instead, they focused on the motivations of and effects on users. By connecting both of sets actors through an ethical framework focused on power and vulnerability in relationships, I will provide a more in depth understanding of responsibility to the problems surrounding Grindr.

Conceptual Framework

The morality of Grindr as a company running a queer socio-sexual networking can be best understood through the care ethics. Developed by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, care ethics emphasizes the importance of relationships and power when considering moral choices. Unlike other ethical theories, it does not have a strict system of rules. It states that in our relationships we have a duty of care, whether that relationship is familial, communal, or even environmental. What a duty of care entails is entirely specific to the nature of the relationship. Care can be shown in two ways, action and attitude. Care as attitude includes empathy, compassion, concern, and attentiveness. The two are related through four stages of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, which are described below:

Stage of Care	Definition
Attentiveness	Becoming aware of need
Responsibility	Responding to and caring for need
Competence	Providing good and successful care
Responsiveness	Considering the position of the other and power asymmetry in the relationship

In my analysis, I will be focusing on both the attitudes and the actions of those involved, paying particular attention to attentiveness and responsibility. I will also highlight the nature of the relationship between Grindr and its user, which does not fall into a clear category of family or community. Additionally, I will apply the care ethics principle that those in power should be protecting those without from exploitation by setting boundaries.

This method of analysis will allow for the analytical integration of user behavior and designer behavior in an ethical framework. Other studies and reports have focused separately on the effects of Grindr on the user and the behavior of those who run the company. Because of the power relationship between Grindr as a company and its users, we can apply care ethics to understand the ethics and responsibility of the app's multifaceted uses and impacts.

Analysis of Evidence

The relationship between Grindr and its users constitutes one that can be informed by care ethics and guided by its four principles of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Grindr has failed to provide effective care to its users in each of these areas. In failing to protect data privacy, it has violated attentiveness. In designing its app to encourage unhealthy use, it has violated responsibility. In failing to promote an inclusive community on its app, it has violated competence. In each of these cases, there is evidence that Grindr has failed to consider the power dynamic between itself and its users, a violation of responsiveness. There is a particularly large burden of care on Grindr because it is catering to marginalized demographics with high rates of mental illness and suicide (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2018). With care ethics as a guide, it is evident that Grindr has failed to implement effective care and consider the company's responsibility when serving marginalized communities.

Point 1: Data Privacy

On multiple accounts, Grindr has been exploitative of users' personal data, which shows a lack of attentiveness to Grindr users' needs for privacy. When Grindr was sold to the gaming company Kulun, the interim CEO moved much of the company's data operations to Beijing. This raised privacy concerns

when it was revealed that the company was sharing users' HIV status with third-parties. By 2017, the company stated that it would stop sharing users' HIV information with third parties. Some argue that demonstrates attentiveness through care ethics to fix wrongdoing. However, in 2019, the United States government declared Grindr's purchase by Kunlun to be a threat to national security because of concerns about the company sharing user data with the Chinese government (Mac, 2019). This is evidence of Grindr's continued lack of care to provide secure data privacy to its users

By gathering and storing the data of its users, Grindr as a company enters into a relationship of trust with users, where the power rests in the hands of the company. Here, vulnerability lies with the users who's potentially compromising medical data could be leaked to unvetted third parties and a government that does not protect the rights of its LGBT citizens (Wang et al, 2019). As such, through the lens of care ethics, we can see a distinct failing of Grindr to protect its users and their private data.

One could argue that the relationship is level because the users implicitly consent to their data being used. However, according to Reuters (2019), Grindr and its parent company are not being transparent with their data use, so their users cannot give informed consent. Because Grindr and Kunlun are aware of the data privacy concern, and have done nothing substantial to fix it, they fail to meet the Responsibility principle of care ethics.

Point 2: Design of the App

Grindr has demonstrated a lack of responsibility in the design of its app, making a product that prioritizes getting users hooked on the app rather than connecting them in healthy ways. Kulun, the owner of Grindr, is a Chinese company that makes smartphone games. Many of the same principles of smartphone games have been built into the app. Chief among these is called variable ratio reinforcement, which works through the same psychology as slot machines (Turban, 2018). According to a Jack Turban (2018), a physician and writer at Harvard Medical School, by incorporating these game-like aspects into a sociosexual networking app, it makes it harder for users to find lasting relationships. These intimate

connections from Grindr have been shown to provide the most mental health benefits through the app (Taylor, 2017).

The design of this app demonstrates a lack of care in action, and a lack of acknowledgement or response to the problem. Grindr is a company with design power over a group that is at higher rate for mental illness and suicide than their peers (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2018). As such, via care ethics, it has a responsibility of care to ensure that its product does not compound the mental health effects of internalized stigma – the reduction of this stigma being the primary mechanism by which the app benefits its users (Taylor, 2017). Doing nothing to change address the problematic mechanisms at the heart of their app indicates a failure of care as action.

Point 3: Attitudes of Grindr Leadership Towards Inclusivity

Grindr has failed to recognize its position of power over marginalized groups and provide competent care to its users. This is evident in how Grindr has dealt with inclusivity on the app over the years.

The majority of Grindr users are cis gay men. However, trans men and women use the app in similar ways, to date, connect, and hook up. They also benefit from the app in many of the same ways their cis male peers. However, Grindr as an app has not always been welcoming to trans identity. In 2013, it was discovered that Grindr banned, deleted, and censored the accounts of trans men and women using the app. (Lloyd & Finn, 2016). This is clear evidence of Grindr failing to provide successful, competent care that recognizes the relationships of power within its user base. Trans men and women are at statistically higher risk for suicide and violence compared to their cis LGB peers (Herman et al, 2019). By censoring trans accounts on its platform, Grindr was using its power to ensure a marginalized group would not have access to its community, violating the responsibility of care placed on Grindr by care ethics.

In response to backlash, “trans” was added as an option to Grindr tribes in 2017. Many saw this as a mischaracterization of trans identity, as gay tribes are typically not as central to identity as gender.

However, in 2017, Grindr added gender and pronouns to their profile section, signaling a move towards queer and trans inclusivity (Onofre, 2017). From this, one could make the case that Grindr was taking effective steps towards creating a more inclusive community. In fact, there is some responsibility of care on the users of the app to make an inclusive space because discrimination based on race, gender, and body were imported into Grindr by its users (Shadel, 2018). Some argue that discrimination and mental health problems pinned on Grindr are more a product of problems with gay culture. There is good reason to believe this, as over three quarters of gay men of color have experienced racism on the gay scene as whole (Jones, 2016). According to care ethics, as “digital neighbors,” Grindr *users* have a responsibility to maintain and repair the Grindr community so each user can live their best life (Poel & Royackers, 2011). This means assuming an attitude of attentiveness and responsibility towards the difficulties marginalized groups face in accessing the app’s community.

However, though some responsibility is shared with Grindr users, Grindr’s corporate leadership has failed to demonstrate an attitude of care and the responsiveness to address issues of discrimination and inequity on their app. As such, Grindr has a moral failing in its share of responsibility. The current Grindr CEO, Scott Chen, became president in August 2018. Since then, he and his lieutenants have been described as “poor cultural fits” for the company by former Grindr employees. The three leaders of the company are straight cis men running an app for cis gay males that has only recently opened up to include trans individuals (Mac, 2019). Further, in November 2018, Grindr’s in-house digital magazine, Into, published an article about a Facebook post made by Chen that expressed unsupportive opinions towards gay marriage. The comment led to at least one executive leaving the company in protest, but the published story led to Into being shut down. (Fitzsimons & Sopels, 2019). By not being in touch with and even actively worsening issues affecting its users, Grindr cannot provide adequate care. In another case, Chen mocked “Kindr,” a social media campaign by Grindr aimed at combating racism, femmephobia, and fatphobia in the gay community (Mac, 2019). Kindr aimed to help reduce discrimination against marginalized groups within the app. Care ethics asserts that those with more power have a responsibility

to understand and advocate for wellbeing of those with less power. By mocking Kindr, Chen shows a clear lack of empathy for those ethically under his care.

Care ethics states that effective care requires consideration of the position of the other: responsiveness. Because of their lack of connection to the experiences of its users, care ethics would dictate the need for exceptional responsiveness to consider the position of the other. However, these comments and behaviors from Grindr leadership show clear deficiency in “care as attitude” (Poel & Royakkers, 2011). This evidence shows a lack of empathy for the gay community and a lack of attentiveness to the concerns of racial and gender minorities using the app. Without these, Grindr cannot implement effective care.

Conclusions

Here I have argued that Grindr has failed to implement care as action and care as attitude in the areas of data privacy, design, and inclusivity. These failures arose primarily because of lack of responsiveness and attentiveness to the needs of marginalized group within the Grindr community, particularly trans folk and those who are HIV-positive.

With the insights gained from research, it is evident that much responsibility lies in the leadership and design of Grindr. This highlights the importance of responsiveness in leadership, listening and acting on the concerns of marginalized. The design of Grindr, informed by care ethics, shows how a lack of attentiveness to the vulnerability of the user can lead to the reinforcement of social disparities.

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