

**Taking off the ‘Masc’: How Gay-Identifying Men Perceive and Navigate
Hyper-Masculinity and “Mascing” Culture Online**

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Together we can tell the stories of the queer community to break down the barriers which hold us back from being our true selves.

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ABSTRACT-

Drawing on 21 qualitative interviews with gay identifying men (ages 18-23), this paper explores how gay men navigate hyper-masculinity and “mascing”¹ culture online. I extend Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to analyze how these gay men manage their online (front stage) and offline (back stage) presentations and furthermore, how these gay men view their own “authenticity” online. Main findings include the overwhelming recognition of the prevalence of mascing culture online, the connection between mascing and racial discrimination, and the understanding of mascing as a geographically linked behavior.

KEY WORDS

Hegemonic masculinity, gay dating apps, hyper-masculinity, inclusive masculinity, Mascing, gay, queer, dramaturgical analysis, Goffman, Twink, Fetishization.

¹“Mascing” is defined by (Rodriguez et al. 2016) as a pattern of behavior amongst gay men online where men will exaggerate one’s masculine traits and suppressing one’s feminine traits. Mascing reinforces the masculinity of gay males while also maintaining masculine norms by exclusively seeking out other masculine partners. This phenomenon reinforces a masculine elite within the digital queer community. Other research on similar subjects has described this phenomenon as “masc4masc” culture, a term stemming from common bios used by gay men on hookup apps. I will use this term throughout the paper without the use of quotes as it is an established term within the field of digital masculinities.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of gay online spaces and the ability to experiment and explore one's own sexual identity have made online platforms increasingly significant in the social, romantic, and emotional lives of gay men. For many gay men, online spaces serve as sanctuaries to meet other gay men, experiment with their personal identity construction, and cultivate queer communities. Studies have shown that gay and lesbian people use a larger number of social networking sites (SNS's) and are spend more time online than their straight counterparts (Gudelunas 2012; Lucero 2017; Albury and Byron 2016). Scholars have identified a number of factors which have contributed to increased engagement with online platforms amongst the LGBTQ community. For one, the internet has helped to normalize queer identities and the anonymous and disembodied nature of online engagement allows for individuals who are questioning their sexual identities to explore and experiment with their own identities without fear of judgement or persecution. (Gosine 2007; Lucero 2017). Gay online platforms have transformed from simple forums and websites into sophisticated and highly popular hookup and dating apps. Some researchers have argued that these dating and hookup apps have grown so successful they are beginning to replace the demand for physical gay spaces (Ghaziani 2015; Holt 2011). These modern apps have been called "hybrid media" because they blend the offline and online experience of users and complicate the distinction between the offline and the online self by providing gay men the possibility of turning digital sexual exploration into physical sexual encounters (Reynolds 2015).

While applications like Grindr and Tinder have exploded in popularity and provide many gay men with a safe space to foster relationships that extend into the offline world, not all users

have been able to enjoy these online spaces equally. Much of the homophobia, racism, and classism which affects gay men in the physical world is crystallized and exaggerated online. Recently, a budding body of literature has examined how these online are ripe with discrimination against men who do not conform to narrow conceptions of hegemonic masculinity (Rodriguez et al. 2016; Reynolds 2015; Wu 2018). This gendered discrimination is perpetrated largely by white, muscular, cisgender men who advertise themselves as hypermasculine and only seek other hegemonically masculine partners. These men perpetuate a gendered hierarchy which privileges hypermasculine, straight-acting, young, white men and marginalizes non-white men who are less hegemonically masculine and display more feminine traits. (Riggs 2013; Kimmel 1994). This culture of “mascing” marginalizes many gay men and creates exclusive and discriminatory spaces online (Rodriguez et al. 2016). Mascing culture is enabled and enhanced by the anonymous interface offered to users, who are emboldened to use discriminatory language and are largely shielded from social criticism online.

While there have been a limited number of studies focusing on gendered discrimination within queer spaces online, these studies have predominantly employed content analysis as the method of inquiry. (Clarkson 2006; Reynolds 2015; Han 2006; Riggs 2013; Rodriguez et al. 2016). While this method is effective at identifying visual and rhetorical strategies employed in mascing culture, content analysis does not enable researchers to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the users who operate within these gay spaces. The lack of interview-based studies within this field provides the opportunity to engage the gay men who have experience navigating mascing culture and ask them about their experiences and opinions. This paper seeks to take advantage of this opportunity and asks the research question: how do queer-identifying men understand and navigate the pressure to construct and perform a hyper masculine self online?

In this paper, I review the literature pertaining to the significance of online platforms amongst LGBTQ people, the presentation of self in the online world, and the patterns of in-group discrimination within marginalized populations through history. I analyze masking culture and the behaviors of participants using Goffman's dramaturgical analysis as a theoretical framework to uncover how the online presentations of gay men reinforce and provide nuance to contemporary understandings of Goffman's theory as it pertains to the digital world. Additionally, I investigate how in many online spaces racial fetishization and internalized homophobia limit the ability of gay men to authentically present themselves online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Growth and Significance of Social Networking Sites in the LGBTQ Community

Over the last two decades, social networking sites (also known as SNSs) have exploded in number and in importance. Once taking the form of websites like Napster and Facebook, SNSs now have transformed and expanded into "new media" which describes apps, blogs, and forums through which people communicate and connect. SNSs have made a massive impact and reshaped a number of communities, one of which being the LGBTQ community. Existing research has shown that queer people, and queer youth especially, have embraced SNSs to find friends and potential partners, explore their own identities, and build community (Gudelunas 2012; Lucero 2017). In his research into the online lives of sexual minority youth, Stephen Russell (2010) argues that online spaces are "horizontal" and "free" spaces which create "opportunities for the development of relationships and identities that are not supported in the other contexts of their lives" (p. 261). Until recently, most of the research examining the

experiences of queer youth online has been driven by public health concerns and have tried to understand the potential for interventions in an effort to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS (Rhodes 2004). For many queer people, their online interactions may be the only place where they are “out,” and online may be the only place where they know or speak to other queer people. Additionally, for some, online is the only feasible place to find a partner or a hook-up, making online interactions incredibly important to study. While the field is relatively new, a number of scholars have identified the significance of the online-self amongst queer people and are investigating the power structures and inter-personal dynamics within queer spaces online. (Berry et al. 2003 ; Birnholtz et al. 2014 ; Davis et al. 2016 ; MacKee 2016). This section will examine how different scholars have used Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis as a theoretical framework to understand the significance of the online self, the historical trend of in-group discrimination within marginalized populations, and the existing body of research focusing on masking culture with an additional focus on its methodological limitations.

Goffman and the Presentation of Self in the Online World

One theory which has been used by scholars to understand the creation and maintenance of online profiles is Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis which he puts forth in his foundational work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1951). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that Goffman’s theory can be extended to the online world and is useful in understanding and analyzing a number of behaviors and environments. They apply his dramaturgical analysis to argue and argue that the online self can be understood as the “front stage”, with the offline self-acting as the “backstage” (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, p.103). Additionally, these researchers view online participants as “actors” who are conscious of

their audience and attempt to create performances which are within the accepted rules and social conventions out of fear of “losing face” (p.101). Furthermore, they argue that the distance between the performer and the audience online gives provides more opportunity for control and embellishment (p. 102). However, they do not argue that this results in a “divided self” and instead align with the argument that these virtual identities are a kind of “blended identity” where the online self is merely a mask that the performer wears when interacting in online spaces (Baker 2009). These masks enable users to emphasize certain positive characteristics while minimizing negative ones, and can be maintained if interacting later in person.

Goffman himself argues that it is not a historical coincidence that the word “person” derives from the Latin word “persona” which meant “mask or false face” (Goffman 1959). Goffman argues that the mask we wear represents the conception we have of ourselves and who we want to be, and that our masks are “integral to our personality” and wearing these masks becomes second nature (Goffman 1959, p.12). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that Goffman’s idea of the “mask” can be accurately applied to online spaces and that the ability to mask and unmask oneself online enables users to perform “identity tourism” online. “Identity tourism” refers to the practice of experimenting with different self-presentations online, often leading to users creating “leaner, younger, and more fashionable versions of themselves” Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013, p. 103). While many users of SNSs are very authentic in their presentation of self-online, some are more afraid to show their true self online and are what Bullingham et al. calls “cynical performers” who feel that their audiences “will not allow them to be sincere” (p. 103). Unfortunately, there is a growing range of literature which examines why users of SNSs, especially queer users, use a mask when interacting online and are weary of the judgement and reaction of other users online.

The Persistence of In-Group Discrimination Within the LGBTQ Community Online

Because of the structural marginalization of the LGBTQ community and the systemic discrimination which queer people face, one might think that queer online spaces would be an oasis of acceptance and authentic self-expression. However, a number of studies have investigated how in-group discrimination and the construction of hierarchies based on historical norms and expectations persist in historically marginalized groups even as they continue to attain legal protection and earn public acceptance. Colorism, classism, and sexism are used to limit the opportunities and recognition of some minorities whilst giving status to others. This phenomenon of in-group discrimination is not unique to the LGBTQ community. In-group discrimination was persistent in the Civil Rights movement where the issues of black women were neglected and violence against black women was not made a nationally salient political issue (Urban 2002; Johnson-Bailey 2003; Hartmann 2002; Lewis 1997). Furthermore, in the feminist movement of the 20th century which resulted in lopsided gains for wealthier women and white women, whilst once again ignoring the interests of poor and non-white women. (Jonsonn 2016; Marbley 2005).

Despite gaining the right to marry and being increasingly accepted by the majority of the U.S. public, the queer community is struggling to accept one another. (Fetner 2016). The body of existing research on in-group discrimination within the gay male community reveals the prevalence of racism, sexism, classism and ableism amongst gay men, not only in physical spaces, but also in the election and promotion of gay political figureheads (Riggs 2013; Caluya 2006; Han 2006; Hopkins 1997; Baird 2009; Rapley 2001). The presence of in-group discrimination and the construction of masculine hierarchies has been seen in a number of

settings, particularly in physical LGBT devoted spaces such as gay bars and LGBTQ advocacy spaces (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Riggs 2007). While in-group gay male discrimination has traditionally been examined in the physical world, the rise of dating websites and more specifically gay dating apps has raised the question about the gendered discrimination is being performed and masculine hierarchies are constructed in the digital world.

Over the last two decades, the usage and popularity of apps such as Grindr, Tinder, GROWLr, etc. has exploded, with a high proportion of queer and gay men engaging with at least one of these apps. (Rodriguez et al. 2016; Gudelunas 2012). Many of these apps are inherently discriminatory and encourage users to make snap judgements about potential partners based on their photos, bios, and name (Rodriguez et al. 2016). Additionally, some of these apps offer additional features to help users filter out potential partners who they are not interested in, based on that user's race, age, or sexual preferences (Wu 2018). These features crystallize in-group discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and class and make dating apps a particularly interesting place to study the construction of gendered hierarchies within the "erotic marketplace."

Hyper-masculinity, Homophobia, and the Prevalence of Masing Culture

The anonymous and depersonalized environment of online platforms puts users under heavy pressure to conform to existing norms and hierarchies in place. The users of these apps do not fear reproach for their choices and are protected from criticism by anonymity when seeking partners. All of these components make gay dating apps an incredibly fruitful place to study the patterns of in-group discrimination because all of the actions users take are measurable. While there is not an abundance of research on patterns of discrimination on gay dating apps, research

that does exist relies primarily on quantitative studies of user's behaviors based on content analyses of user's photos, "bios", and messaging patterns (Caluya 2006; Han 2006). These studies have found certain norms and patterns that permeate the dating app world, one of the most significant being the value placed on traditional hegemonic masculinity, the stigmatization of femininity, and the desire for traditionally "straight-acting" gay men (Connell 1992; Rodriguez et al. 2016; Holt 2011; Nardi 2002).

While the research on discrimination amongst users on gay dating apps is limited, the existing research suggests that hegemonic masculinity is highly coveted in the "erotic marketplace." (Kimmel 1994). Similar to Goffman's suggestion that people put on a particular kind of performance when interacting to avoid reproach, Rodriguez et al. has identified a pattern of behavior amongst queer men online where men will exaggerate one's masculine traits and suppressing one's feminine traits, a process that has been deemed as *mascing* (Rodriguez et al. 2016). This is largely out of a fear of being reproached as a "sissy" or "fem" user and is driven by persistent homophobia which lingers in the queer community (Reynolds 2015). This mascing behavior stratifies queer spaces in a way that places "straight acting", young, athletic, lean men at the top and less masculine or "sissy" and "fem" users being lower within the gendered hierarchy (Eguchi 2009).

Mascing is also a "raced" behavior, rewarding white and white passing presentations (Clarkson 2006). Mascing behavior has been documented across many of the largest dating apps, including Scruff, GROWLr, GuySpy and Hornet, and even on dating websites like Match.com (Rodriguez et al. 2016; Reynolds 2015). Many men explicitly uphold this hierarchy by either advertising their valued characteristics or by seeking out "masced" men. This performance of masculinity can primarily be seen in the photos of user's photos and their bios. These are spaces

in which men have the opportunity to either show off what valued traits they have, or to leverage some other aspect of their personality to make up for their lack of valued traits (Clarkson 2006; Eguchi 2009; Ellison 2011; Kimmell 2004).

Shortcomings Within Previous Literature

The vast majority of studies on “mascing” behavior use content analysis as the primary method and seek mostly to describe the visual and rhetorical strategies employed online by analyzing profiles. (Caluya 2006; Han 2006; Riggs 2013). While this methodology is good at describing the kinds of things queer users advertise on their profiles and the and pictures they show off, it does not provide information about the attitudes or experiences of users. An interview approach would be effective at going “behind the curtain” to ask users how they feel about the pressure to project a hegemonic masculine self or how they decide to present themselves online. Not all users conform to “mascing” pressure and their experiences and attitudes are excluded by content analysis studies.

In my study, I conduct semi-structured interviews in order to obtain more detailed descriptions about how queer users experience “mascing” and how they make decisions as to how they present themselves online and how they manage their “front stage performance.” I hope to understand how people’s racial and geographic backgrounds inform how they present themselves online. This study contributes to existing research which extends Goffman’s theories to the online realm as well as existing studies on the prevalence and significance of homophobia, and in-group discrimination amongst the queer community. As previously expressed, online spaces are especially important to the queer community, and thus research into understanding how queer men navigate complicated and challenging pressures online is essential to

understanding the modern queer experience.

DATA & METHODS

Participant Selection & Demographics

This study includes 21 individuals who are between the ages of 18-23. The average age of all of the participants was 20.57 years old. All 21 participants self-identified primarily as gay men, with one participant identifying additionally as pansexual. Two men identified as transgender in addition to two men who felt comfortable being identified as gender fluid, . These participants attended college various colleges in Southern California and were from a number of states throughout the US. The states with the most representatives were California and Washington each with 3 participants. I used a number of methods to find participants for this study. I reached out to the queer student organizations at a number of schools throughout Southern California and introduced myself and the research question of this project. I made clear that all interviews were completely anonymous, that participants would be protected with pseudonyms, and that all participants would receive \$30 in cash in compensation for a one hour interview as honorarium. In addition to reaching out to these student organizations directly I used a snowballing method, asking participants if they knew any other gay men who were willing to participate in a study on the topic. While snowball and convenience sampling are not ideal by any means, when conducting research on a minority group like the LGBTQ community it can often be the only way to find willing participants. Additionally, I found a number of subjects who were interested in the focus of the study, but felt uncomfortable sharing information about their personal dating lives, and therefore declined. While this was

discouraging, I expected to have to work harder to find subject for the study when the material being studied is as sensitive and pertains to an individual's romantic and sexual life.

Table 1. Participant Demographics	# of Participants (Out of 21)
<hr/>	
Age	
18	3
19	3
20	4
21	4
22	4
23	3
Gender Identity	
Cisgender man	19
Transgender man	2
Racial /Ethnic Identity	
Asian	2
Black / African American	3
Caucasian / White	12
Hispanic / Latinx	2
Native American or Alaska Native	0
Pacific Islander	0
Prefer Not To Answer	2
Schooling (K-6)	
Public	13
Private	8
Schooling (High School)	
Public	12
Private	9

Methods

I conducted 21 interviews in private, neutral locations which were arranged over the phone in advance of the interview in addition to three interviews which I conducted over the phone. Before the interview began I spoke to participants for a couple of minutes and asked them about their day, how they were doing, and what plans they had later. I had all participants fill out consent paperwork before beginning the interview and before turning on the tape recorder to try and make the experience as comfortable as possible. Once participants signed the necessary paperwork I gave them the \$30 cash in advance of the interview, so that they did not feel like the money could be withheld for some reason. Once participants signed the paperwork I would start recording and begin the interview by talking about my personal interest in the research question and what drew me to the topic of mascing. While this was in part to get participants to start thinking about masculinity and online interactions, it was also an opportunity to share my own experiences as a gay man online and try to convey as best as possible that I was not intending on exploiting the information of these participants as an outsider but that I was a member of the LGBTQ community who was seeking to generate more knowledge and awareness within an understudied field.

I used a questionnaire to guide the questions that I would ask throughout the interview but would continue conversations that were especially productive and allow for tangential conversations especially if they were personal anecdotes or stories about participants' personal experiences with mascing online. Even after asking all of the primary and follow up questions on my questionnaire, I would often try to revisit particularly potent stories or observations in the interview in order to try and get the best data possible. The 21 interviews averaged 52 minutes in

length and when transcribed averaged about 7,300 words per interview.

My initial coding process enabled me to remain open to a wide array of theoretical interpretations and directions, and helped me to identify and organize the common ideas and frameworks expressed by participants. Through thematic coding and line-by-line analysis of the fourteen transcripts, I was able to identify four codes, these codes were for (1) the importance of online platforms to gay men, (2) perceptions and experiences of mascing culture (3) the role of race in mascing culture (4) and geographical factors related to mascing. These codes were able to help me identify quotes in the transcripts which helped to find significant evidence which could help support my research question, specifically, how these gay men perceive and navigate hyper-masculinity and mascing culture online.

FINDINGS

In the sections that follow, I discuss a number of findings which both reaffirmed existing findings in the literature in addition to adding nuance to phenomena which have previously only been studied through content analysis. The first of three major categories of findings which I identify relates to how these gay men perceive and navigate mascing culture, specifically exploring why online spaces are so important to them, and the role of hyper masculinity and homophobia in contributing to a mascing culture. The second major category outlines how participants describe mascing as a ‘raced’ behavior and how their race determined the extent to which they could be flexible in their masculine presentations without fearing racial discrimination or fetishization. Third and finally, I examine how participants expressed that mascing culture changes from coast to coast and city to city, with many participants arguing that

Los Angeles produces a particularly intense pressure to present a hyper-masculine self .

Navigating Mascing Culture Online

Significance of the Online Self

All of the participants expressed in their interviews that social media, dating apps, and online platforms in general were particularly important to gay men and the queer community in general. Many participants discussed at length how online platforms and social networking sites facilitated their own gay identity formation and have been essential in meeting other gay men, seeking potential sexual partners, and generally feeling a sense of community within the greater LGBTQ population. Participants also expressed that meeting people in the physical world was extremely challenging, raising the stakes for their online interactions. One participant named Michael expressed how he felt like the importance of social media amongst gay men is universal, saying:

“Social media has been the foremost, important tool in both my identity and narrative as a queer person but also our generation’s tool. I think every single last queer kid who has access to the internet has used the internet at their disposal as a way of connecting dots. By connecting with other people, by connecting with other stories both me and a lot of the other queer people I know have been able to both express themselves online, but also kind of figure it out.”

Many other participants echoed Michael’s sentiment that social media and online platforms have been important in the process of identity formation. The ability to watch gay coming out videos on the internet and follow gay men on platforms like Instagram helped many participants come to terms with their identity. Furthermore, contact to online platforms and social media helped

many men to overcome internalized homophobia and come to accept their sexual identity as something that should not be stigmatized or demonized. Numerous men expressed that following gay celebrities and musicians on Instagram and other platforms was an important stepping stone in their own identity formation process:

“I think maybe especially for people who like aren't out in high school, seeing the social media of like other gay people is a way for them to kind of connect or, you know, see people and like kind of like approach visibility in that community which like I feel without social media would be a lot harder for them to do.”

Participants expressed how online spaces are a crucial tool which provided the opportunity for many young gay men to, as one man said, “find a label that fits,” and get exposure to the gay community at large.

Beyond personal identity formation and promoting self-acceptance, dating apps like Tinder and Grindr and other social media platforms such as Instagram are seen by many as the only way to find other gay men. While physical spaces dedicated to the gay community such as gay bars and gay clubs provide some opportunities for mingling, participants expressed that online platforms were far more popular and accessible, especially for younger gay men under the legal U.S. drinking age. One participant, Alex, expressed how he felt that “online spaces have been super important, and obviously for meeting people, it’s kind of the only way.” When asked why he felt that the “real world” was not a viable space to find dates or hookups he explained:

“If I saw like a guy who I wasn't sure if he was straight or not, I would never feel comfortable going up to him and saying, hey, are you into men - what's the situation there? And so, when you're online that’s the really the only safe way we can find guys”

Many other men echoed Tyler's sentiment, expressing that sexual orientation was openly established in online spaces like Tinder and Grindr, that they didn't have to worry about questioning whether or not another man was straight.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed that online spaces had a special and heightened role within the gay community, and that dating apps and social media fill a crucial need which their straight counterparts do not have to the same extent. The importance of dating apps and online spaces amongst the queer community raises questions about whether or not these spaces are equitable and furthermore, what kinds of social dynamics and hierarchies exist online.

Hypermasculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity Online

The men who I interviewed overwhelmingly expressed that hyper-masculine and "straight acting" men are glorified within gay spaces online, and furthermore, that deliberately making oneself appear more masculine online is a common practice, one which many of the men whom I interviewed agreed that they to some extent have taken part in. While none of the participants had ever heard of the term "mascing," when read the definition and asked if they believed the term described what they saw online, all of them agreed. One respondent Albert explained: "Oh, one hundred percent that's totally a thing" one respondent immediately responded, "so many gay guys on Tinder try to make themselves seem like super straight 'bros' when you know in reality they're super gay. Most of the guys who post photos at their college sports games or with their cars don't actually give a shit about sports or cars or whatever." Some participants called this "masc4masc culture,"² and discussed how what is seen as "masculine" is

² "Masc4masc culture" comes from an often-used Grindr bio name where men will declare themselves as "masc" and only seek other "masc" guys. Many users with these profiles also declare the list of who they are unwilling to speak with, as one participant named Alex explained saying, "their profile picture is a photo of them at the gym with their face cropped out and in their bio is the list, no: femmes, no sissies, no blacks, no Latinos." Many of these profiles write off this kind of exclusion as "just a preference"

very tightly interwoven with what is seen as “straight.” Participants agreed that men who used terms to indicate that they were experimenting with men, but not “fully gay” such as “straight but experimenting” or “dl” would earn them more attention on gay dating apps and hookup apps.³ One participant, Andre, explained why he thought these men got more attention online:

“If you look at profile with like the same stats, let’s just say they’re a tall white masculine man, if one profile says like “questioning” or “haven’t really done this”, that profile gets like more attention because there’s a whole fantasy around maybe turning someone gay or just experimenting with a bi guy or like a fully straight guy, you know? I feel like straight guys are seen as more desirable just because like they’re not minority, like who wants to be a minority like it sucks?”

By distancing oneself from the gay community, Andre argues, men on apps like Grindr and Tinder get more attention because they play into a fantasy about “turning” straight guys, a fantasy which has been heavily perpetuated and propagated by pornography.

Some participants disclosed how they themselves bought into “mascing culture” and explained how they would alter their bios, manipulate the way they texted, and change their tone while interacting online. Some of these men performed hegemonic masculinity and embodied a more “straight acting” self when texting on apps like Tinder and when building online profiles. George spoke at length about how much effort he put into his bio, and self-conscious of his presentation of masculinity on Tinder:

“But yeah, I definitely put way too much thought into making my bio when I was taking Tinder more seriously. I know most people don’t even read them but I was so set on finding a boyfriend or whatever so I wanted to make sure I had a cute profile. I’m not

³ “dl” is an abbreviation for “down low” a euphemism for discreet, closeted, or experimenting within the queer community.

super outdoorsy but I would put like “hiking, camping, climbing” type stuff in my bio to make me seem more like a chill natural guy and not more of a super gay up tight LA guy who cares a ton about how they look or whatever.”

George used his bio to try and convey a particular kind of masculinity, and further, to try and distance himself with a more urban, feminine self-presentation. George explicitly wanted to distance himself from a “super gay” presentation of self, and in order to do so, employed discursive “mascing” strategies to try and make himself appear more outdoorsy and less urban in his bio. Some participants responded similarly, reporting that their bios were a particularly sensitive place where “mascing” could be performed and where they could control how their masculinity was perceived by others. Other participants emphasized how they changed their texting and vocabulary when messaging with other guys on Tinder. One participant, Jesse, expressed how he tends to change the way he speaks when first messaging other matches on Tinder, and how he tends to use more “bro-ish” language that he typically wouldn’t use but feels a pressure to out of fear of seeming “too gay”:

“When I’m online and when I’m first talking to someone I’m always like “hey man,” or “hi dude” and sometimes I don’t know why because I literally never say that ever. . . I hate that, I hate . . . saying man or dude or whatever but I think when I first was on Tinder I was afraid of people thinking I was too gay or that I had a gay voice so now I say dude to everyone”

For Jesse, discursive “mascing” was a way to ensure that he wasn’t discriminated against for having a “gay voice” or appearing “too gay.” Jesse also expresses that this discursive “mascing” behavior is something that he feels conflicted about and is not totally comfortable with. Jesse later went on to describe how he eventually limited the use of “mascing” strategies because they

felt uncomfortable and he didn't want to appear or feel inauthentic when talking to other men on Tinder.

I found that many of my participants to some extent acknowledged they had portrayed themselves as more masculine in their photos, and that at least originally, they were more hesitant or reluctant to post photos which portrayed them as openly gay. George explained how one strategy of his was to choose photos of him with other men and photos of him wearing sports jerseys or at sports games, symbols traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity.

“I definitely spent a lot of time choosing the photos that I put on my profile, I tried to find photos where I was with other guys, most of my friends are actually girls but I only put up ones with my and guys in my fraternity at ‘darties’ where I’m wearing a ‘Sonics jersey that I borrowed from a friend, I don’t even own any jerseys but I remember that one being on my profile.”

Similar to George, Jesse explained how he used to be really uncomfortable putting anything on his profile that made him appear more feminine or “super gay” but that now he is less worried about engaging in performative “mascing” behavior on Tinder:

“Now on my profile there's one [photo] of me at the Gay Pride Parade decked out in pride shit and I never would have posted that when I first joined Tinder, because I would have been like oh that's like “that’s so gay.” I told myself "I'm gay, but I can't be like that gay.”

George expressed how when he first was creating his profile, possibly through internalized homophobia or a fear of being discriminated against for appearing as too feminine, he didn't include photos in his profile of him openly expressing his sexuality and feminine side. George did explain how since then he has grown far more comfortable with his sexuality and place within the LGBTQ movement, indicating that “mascing” behavior may be the result of

internalized homophobia and a fear of discrimination for presenting oneself as more feminine.

While some respondents reported altering their profiles to highlight their masculinity or avoid appearing “too gay”, many of the participants were comfortable with their masculinity online and felt that for the most part they authentically represented themselves online despite it being somewhat challenging. One respondent Taylor said “I try to stay pretty authentic on there, I mean that's as true as you can be but I try my best you know, it's just so hard to do.” While some men were more actively focused on trying convey an authentic presentation, others, like Alex, put less thought into how they present themselves online, saying “I feel like it's definitely hard to be authentic to authentically present yourself on any sort of social media platform and I don't really make a priority to do that either. . . I don't know I just kind of post things.” These men reveal that while there is a climate of hyper-masculinity and mashing culture, not all men are particularly focused on manipulating their masculinity online. Many participants echoed George's personal journey, saying that as they grew more comfortable with their sexual identity, the less they were concerned with their masculinity online.

In addition to men who were apathetic or less concerned with their authenticity online, men also observed how there was a rise of men who completely flouted hyper-masculine norms and presented themselves as very feminine and queer online, saying that “there still are those Instagram model guys who do makeup tutorials and are super openly femme on their profiles and stuff.” The rise in the popularity of more gender bending presentations comes in part from pop culture, as one participant said “people that would maybe be considered more gender bending or effeminate, I feel like those are the type of gay people that like pop culture puts up, especially because of drag race culture especially recently.” One participant Cody himself posted photos of himself in makeup and even posted makeup tutorials on YouTube, saying that when he entered

the ninth grade he started “posting very queer content and posting videos and pictures and makeup tutorials.”

While masxing culture is still extremely prevalent and hyper-masculinity continues to be valorized, many participants expressed that the culture was growing more accepting. Some participants themselves talked about how they used to “buy into” masxing culture but have since have decided to reject “masxing” behaviors altogether. Jesse, who previously was very conscious of how he represented his masculinity online, discussed how he no longer altered his profiles and presence in online spaces:

“Thinking back like the difference now is that when I was first making bios I thought that I could you know kind of “fake my way” with the bio and pictures or whatever but honestly, they're still going to look at me and see me for what I look like . . . and if it's not what they want that I don't want that either . . . I don't want to be with someone who doesn't want to be with me.”

Jesse’s experience speaks to both the prevalence of “masxing” as well as how it can make users uncomfortable or unhappy to feel like they have to present a different self-online. For Jesse, “faking his way” did not seem worth and for that reason, he quit “masxing” his profile altogether.

“I’m Not One of Those Gays:” Homophobia in Queer Spaces Online

Many of the participants whom I interviewed told stories about how they personally witnessed homophobia within queer spaces, and furthermore, how they perceived there to be an explicit subordination of men who present as more queer or feminine. As was previously discussed, many participants observed that “straight acting” or “experimenting” men on apps like Grindr got more attention. These participants told stories about how the men with these “straight

acting” profiles are typically the same ones who were explicitly homophobic. Cody, who was unafraid to express his femininity online, was frequently harassed for his presentation online, saying:

“Guys will say to my face ‘I’m not one of those gays’, or ‘I’m not one of your kind of gays’, which is as if to say ‘I’m more masculine’ or ‘I’m not a sissy’ or ‘I’m not fag’.

What I think those statements say is ‘I represent the ideology of masculinity and you break that apart because of your femininity.’”

By saying “I’m not one of those gays,” prejudiced gay men explicitly created separation between their own personal identity and those who they deem as “feminine.” Cody’s experience with homophobia reveals that lack of a communal identity within the gay community and supports what has been published in existing literature on the persistence of homophobia despite advancements in gay rights. One trans participant, Theo, drew similarities to the pressure that exists amongst some trans men to “pass” and avoid upsetting cis-gendered people. Theo observed that often times trans men are stigmatized or shamed for adopting deviant or countercultural styles and not trying to “pass” as cisgender:

“Sometimes in the trans community, trans men [who can pass as cisgender] will be shitting on visibly trans people or trans men who have colorful hair and say ‘I’m not like them, I’m just a normal guy like you’ to try and appeal to cis, straight people. . . people are trying to convince straight people to treat them better and throwing everyone else under the bus.”

Theo’s observations were echoed by another trans participant Peter, who felt also pressure to try and “pass” in public as cisgender once he came out as trans. Additionally, Theo pointed out that in his experience many of his non-binary friends were shamed for not trying their best to be

“normal,” and were stigmatized for not conforming to the gender binary. The observations of Theo and Peter reveal that similarly to how homophobia continues to persist within gay spaces, transphobia has persisted amongst trans men. While LGBTQ spaces are growing more accepting and intersectional, it would be false to assume that they are devoid of discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation.

Participants had varying explanations for why homophobia and transphobia persisted even within spaces dedicated to gay men, but the most common was that many gay men themselves struggle with internalized homophobia. During their youth, many gay and trans men are taught to stigmatize queerness and develop negative attitudes towards openly queer presentations. This early socialization makes it challenging for many gay and trans men to accept themselves and the wider queer community later on in life. Many participants in this study argued that internalized homophobia was the cause of discrimination in gay spaces. Andre explained himself, saying “I feel like every gay man like low-key has like a little bit like homophobia inside them that like reflects out in like different ways,” later elaborating that one of those ways is to be discriminatory or bigoted towards flamboyant gay men.

The Role of Race: Compensation and Fetishization

Marginalization and Fetishization of Queer People of Color

Interviews with participants affirmed existing literature on the prevalence of racial discrimination in online spaces and revealed that race continues to play a massive factor in shaping and limiting personal expressions of masculinity online. The fear of racial discrimination was cited by multiple participants as a reason why they personally posted photos or wrote bios

which they thought were more masculine. One African-American participant, James, explained how he felt like many gay men on Tinder are less likely to try and match with him because he is black, and that in order to get the same level of attention, that he had to put on a more masculine performance in order to get matches.

“I don't think there's ever been a time when like I've had a Tinder profile without a photo of me without a shirt on or something like that, but that's less because of any kind of a masculinity thing but I personally feel like it's more of like a race thing? I feel like a lot of people won't swipe on me because I'm black if that makes sense? I still think I'm doing it to compensate for something in a way? Even just slightly.”

James, a college athlete, chose to always include a shirtless photo which showed off his muscles in an effort to gain masculine capital in an effort to overcome racial discrimination on the app. James was not alone in “mascing” his profile in response to racial discrimination on Tinder.

Russell, a Chinese-American college student, explained how when he first started using Tinder he tried to make his profile appear as “fratty” and “bro-ey” as possible in an effort to attract more guys who he felt were ignoring him.

“When I first got like on Tinder and stuff and when I first talked to white guys I was doing my "frat thing" like "hey, man, like what's up, bro?" and had photos of me in my letters and in sports jerseys which I never actually wear. Maybe that was because I was attracted to white guys in frats but that definitely also could have been because I wanted to make myself seem less Asian in a way.”

Russell, similarly to James, drew on masculine symbols like fraternities and sports jerseys in order to gain masculine capital which he felt might help him overcome the racial discrimination

he faced for being Asian.

These participants also noted, however that deliberately portraying oneself as more masculine online could have negative consequences. For black men especially, posting shirtless photos and portraying oneself in a “straighter,” less feminine manner put users at risk of being racially fetishized. James, elaborating on his experience, explained how when he did get matches with many men, especially white men, he felt as that he was being fetishized and that many of the men who he was speaking to were not swiping on him for his individual personality, but more so out of their interest in athletic black men in general. He explained too how he felt like putting his body on display, something he felt was necessary to participate fully on Tinder, put him in a position where he felt he was fetishized.

“I feel like I'm being fetishized a lot on like dating apps and I don't know if It's purely just like my body itself, but I always like had this like inescapable like thing of like. . . Can tell some do it was like somebody's into me because I think I'm attractive or hit because they think I'm black and attractive . . . Which is always interesting.”

Russell's experience speaks to why some men choose not to participate in mascing behavior online. For some, presenting a less masculine or “straight-acting” self-online lowers their chances for getting a match while presenting a hyper-masculine self might put them at risk of being fetishized. These gay men of color were often held up to rigid sexual stereotypes, with Asian men often being desexualized and black men being hypersexualized, which limited their range of masculine expressions which would be considered to be authentic online. Black participants in particular were met with racially offensive slurs online and were exoticized by men

who were attracted to them as a part of certain kinks and fetishes.

Rise of the “Twink” and the Flexibility of White Masculinity

While many non-white gay men continue to face fetishization and discrimination online, white gay men have enjoyed increased freedoms in the expression of their masculinity. One example cited by numerous participants is the rise of the “twink” in popular culture.⁴ Twinks were seen by many participants to represent the enhanced freedom given to white men in presenting their masculinity. The acceptance and adoration of skinnier, less typically masculine gay men was seen by many participants as the product of pop culture and films like “Call Me By Your Name” and “Love, Simon,” both of which portray and sexualize young gay white men who are not hyper-masculine. Alex also expressed that straight women contributed to the attention towards these men, saying “I see a lot of like twink idolization, through a lot of my straight female friends, largely in part because of movies like ‘Call Me By Your Name.’” The rise of the twink reveals how gay white men have been given more freedom in their masculine expression and do not have to present as hyper masculine in order to receive attention, both online and in popular culture.

One participant who is himself white, David, echoed this discrepancy and in saying how he felt that gay white men had far greater freedom in expressing themselves online:

“I think especially like in the gay community, for African American men I think being flamboyant isn't okay, it's frowned upon and I think for me as a white gay boy if I want to go out and dress up in drag or do some stuff like that or like just be super feminine like no one's going to question it but I think as it as a person of

⁴The term “twink” commonly refers to younger homosexual male with attractive, boyish qualities. Typically depicted in media and pornography to be under the age of 25. Often thought as young, smooth skinned, white, and fashionable.

color you are judged for that. . .”

David explains how even as a white gay man he feels less pressure to “masc” himself online, saying that he would feel comfortable going out in drag while men of color might be stigmatized or fetishized for similar behavior. The ability for white men to maintain masculine status despite expressing themselves as less masculine fits within understandings of synthesized masculinities and how marginalized men such as gay men are able to use their race and class to perform masculinity (Pascoe and Bridges 2015). Russell elaborated on how he similarly felt like white men did not have to think as much about how they present themselves online.

“White people can kind of just like get away with it because it's such like the norm that they don't even have to think about that. Like I have to be a little bit more aware of like, "oh, I don't want to just be like this random like object or fetishized version of myself.”

While non-white men have to walk a fine line when presenting themselves online in order to gain attention without being fetishized, white men have a range of masculine expressions which are seen as attractive and receive attention on apps like Tinder and Grindr.

Masching as a geographically based action

Los Angeles as City of Gendered Extremes

Another interesting finding which arose from the interviews which I conducted is that how “masching” is done, and what participants believed the hegemonic profile to be changed based on location. Many participants expressed how “masching behavior” was heavily dependent on what kind of a profile users believed would get the most “matches” on Tinder. What I discovered is that these men all had slightly different conceptions of what that “ideal profile” looks like and furthermore, that that “ideal profile” is dependent on location. This finding is in

line with Raewynn Connell's understanding of hegemonic masculinity as something that is dynamic and that changes over time and in different locations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). While all of my participants lived in Southern California, they grew up all over the country and explained how the hegemonic profile changed depending on where users were participating on Tinder. Jacob, who grew up in the Pacific northwest, explained how he felt like what could be considered as hegemonic in Washington was very different from Los Angeles:

“In Washington, the ideal . . . the most swiped on profile is going to be a white guy wearing flannel out in the woods with his dogs, drinking coffee in the snow doing Outdoors stuff. Whereas in Los Angeles. It's going to be like more like shirt off, possibly a person of color, more fashionable, like dark clothes and tanner.

Jacob explained how not only were the activities of the “ideal, or hegemonic” profile different based on location, but so too were racial representation and clothing style. Russell, who had grown up in the Bay Area, spoke similarly about how the Southern California hegemonic profile was more based around presentations of the body and a “fratty” aesthetic:

“. . . when I think of hegemonically masculine guys in Los Angeles, the way I was kind of explaining earlier is kind of a "frat bro" dressed in either their letters or a jersey or a Hawaiian shirt but these guys in the Bay Area dressing . . . I don't know maybe tighter jeans and overall just cleaner, kind of a “hot nerd” kind of a look, I guess you could say?”

Both of these respondents explained how what could be understood as the “hegemonic” standard, and furthermore how “mascing” behavior was structured around differences in cultural geography rather than universal customs. Many participants expressed that Los Angeles cultivated particularly hyper-masculine displays online. Andre explained that when he came to Los Angeles, he noticed this change, saying “I feel like in a sense masculinity in the gay

community, there's like a general consensus of like what it is to be masculine, but I feel like that's like heightened in LA. And I feel like that comes the you can see it in like the profiles here.” Andre pointed to the online expressions of men in Los Angeles as particularly hyper-masculine, supporting the claims of many other participants. While a number of participants agreed with Andre in feeling like Los Angeles had a higher proportion of hypermasculine gay men, many other participants noted Los Angeles also has very large population of openly femme-gay men who flout typical masculine standards. One participant Sam felt that the emergence of hyper masculine men in Los Angeles was in some way a reaction to the increasingly large population of openly queer men:

“There used to be more of a kind of androgynous expression in the middle . . . but now there’s like the very masculine people and the more very feminine people, with less androgynous men. . . I feel like the increase in hyper masculine men is almost in response to the visibility of feminine gay and queer men . . .”

Sam felt that especially this kind of gendered polarization was especially true in LA, and has been in part fueled by the popularity of drag queens and makeup artists who have grown in recent years to become some of the most famous gay celebrities and actors in Hollywood. RuPaul Andre Charles, Jonathan Van Ness, and James Charles were all frequently cited by participants as examples of successful and popular feminine gay men who were pushing the boundaries of masculinity in Los Angeles. In addition to these bigger Hollywood names, there has been an explosion of less popular gay influencers who use their platforms to sell skincare, makeup, clothing, and other products traditionally associated with femininity. The ability to generate profit on the beauty and fashion industry has created an avenue for many gay and queer men to make a living based on more feminine presentations of self.

DISCUSSION

These research participants whom I interviewed overwhelmingly recognized mascing behavior in the online spaces which they frequented. Every single one of the participants in this study had their own unique attitudes and strategies to navigate the intense pressure to perform a hyper-masculine self online. Some men conformed to mascing behavior and inflated their own masculine presentation, if only for a time. Others seemed unaffected and did not find it hard to present an “authentic” self online. Some participants like Sam, proudly and openly presented themselves as their most feminine self online, in spite of intense online pressures. Regardless of whether or not participants inflated their masculinity online, they were all conscious of what kind of a presentation they did put forth. This behavior supports the argument that Goffman’s theory of social “masks” can be extended to the online. (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). Whether or not participants felt that they were authentic in their presentation, they were aware of the “mask” that they wore. Unfortunately, the range of masks participants could wear was limited by their racial identity, and in some cases, their location. White, urban young gay men in Los Angeles seemingly had the most range in expression based on the responses of participants, while non-white men were marginalized in their range of presentations.

Many of the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature on in-group discrimination. While there has been a number of content analysis studies identifying mascing behavior and the pressure to perform a hyper-masculinity online, there have been very few studies which engage gay men and ask them about their attitudes and experiences in these discriminatory online spaces. Many of my participants believed that the in-group discrimination within the gay community, specifically discrimination towards more feminine gay men, comes from a place of internalized homophobia. Others thought this was contributed to by media or

other sources. Some participants like Andre argued that discriminating against other gay men comes as an effort to distance oneself from his minority status and marginalized position within society. Both of these explanations align with existing understandings of why in-group discrimination can manifest within marginalized groups and reveals that even as the LGBTQ population attains more rights and recognitions there is still bigotry and exclusion amongst queer and trans communities.

This study contributes much needed context to the limited literature on “mascing” as a phenomenon. While most studies on mascing study the behavior from a distance through content analysis studies, my interviews with young gay men in 2019 revealed that while every online space does seem to be dominated by mascing behavior to some extent, gay men experience these spaces in a variety of ways based on their race and location. Participants expressed that while white men may feel pressure to perform a hyper masculine self, they can still be welcomed in queer spaces online if they present themselves as more feminine, in some cases gaining more social and erotic capital if passing as a “twink.” Men of color, on the other hand, face more serious consequences if they do not conform to the expectations of mascing culture online. Black men who present themselves authentically as more feminine are not taken as seriously, just as Asian men who present themselves as more masculine. The racial stereotypes which constrain the gendered presentations of these men limit the range of authentic presentations for these men. Platforms like Grindr, which allow men to filter out entire racial groups from their feed with the swipe of a finger contribute to the erasure of the non-stereotypical masculinity of men of color online. If these men want to participate to the same extent as white men online, they often have to endure, and sometimes act in accordance with, racial stereotypes and expectations about their sexual preferences and sexual lives.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis and his idea of the stage can be used perfectly to analyze and understand queer online spaces, especially dating apps. Many participants agreed that dating profiles and social media performances were "performances" and that their own presence online could be understood as their "brand," all of which reinforced the connection between social media and commodification and theater. While Goffman himself did not see telephone calls or online spaces as being able to be analyzed through his dramaturgical analysis, the results of this research project supports the idea that people use social media and online platforms as a location to stage their own "front stage" performance. The participant Russell acknowledged that part of why he stopped participating in mascing behavior is because he felt that he could not necessarily keep up his "bro-ey" front stage performance once he engaged with someone in the "real world" so he decided to pursue more authentic presentations of self.

CONCLUSION

While this study is only a snapshot of one small segment of the queer population in 2019, it does paint a very clear picture of what it is like to perform a hyper-masculine self-online and suppress one's feminine traits out of fear of discrimination. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that the dynamics and politics of masculinity online were moving incredibly fast, and in a positive direction. Many interviewees cited the number of recent Facebook posts they have seen from their old high school friends who are younger than them featuring same sex couples going to prom, younger gay boys wearing makeup, and other openly queer expressions which they thought were impossible only a handful of years ago. While queer online spaces have a long way to go before they become accessible, equitable spaces for all, one can hope that increased visibility in the media and more protective legislation will contribute to a more inclusive and

united LGBTQ community.

This study had a number of limitations which provide opportunities for further study. Notably, the sample population was very young, with most participants having lived exclusively in urban and sub-urban settings. Additionally, the snowballing method which was used to identify participants could explain cohesion in the answers of the participants. The sample population was also overwhelmingly educated, white, and cisgender, which can be in part explained by the demographics of colleges in the Los Angeles area. Further studies would benefit by examining how masking is navigated by older men or by men in more rural areas. These further studies would likely generate very different perspectives which would be very useful in providing context and contrast to the findings of this study.

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All arguments and conclusions are those of the author.

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1) – All participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

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