

**The establishment and upholding of heteronormative masculinity within queer communities  
through self-presentation practices of Grindr users located in The Netherlands**

A focus on textual and visual presentations in user-profiles

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Master's Thesis  
*June 2021*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Within queer communities, online media have been found to provide an important space for identity practice and development. From early emergences of digital media, queer individuals have moved towards the digital realm to find what otherwise might not be presented to them in predominantly heteronormative societies. With this significant role of digital media in queer life, this research aims to understand how specifically an online dating platform, namely Grindr, plays a role in shaping or understanding of certain identity. With a focus on heteronormative masculinity, in which masculinity takes the top place in social hierarchy, heterosexuality is assumed to be the preferred sexual orientation and where gender non-conformity is resisted, this research aims to explore how this understanding of masculinity is found within self-presentations of users on the Grindr platform, specifically focused on the Dutch context. Through visual and textual content analysis, user-profiles were examined by making use of thematic analysis. It was found that heteronormative masculinity finds its way through differing levels of the self-presentation practices of users. Traditional masculine presentations of the body and overall behavior was most commonly presented and wished for in partners. Resistance of gender non-conformity was found to be less obviously presented, yet found its ways through more implicit manners of self-presentation. Similar statements can be made regarding the preference for heterosexuality, which was found to be interwoven with sexual practices common to the Grindr platform. In general, users arguably adapt their identity practices and self-presentations to the affordances they are presented with on the platform, while also taking into consideration the dominant norm that is presented throughout the online space, with possible aim to adapt to the presented masculine norm. However, an interesting countermovement was found, that signifies possible resistance of heteronormative masculine norms and aims to diversify the presence of identities on the Grindr platform through more inclusive understandings of others and presentations of the self. This might signify how users within the Dutch context aim to make their online space more fitting to their perceptions of queerness, in contrast to the dominant force of heteronormativity that still has its effect on the lives of queer individuals in this country.

**KEYWORDS:** *heteronormative masculinity, self-presentation, Grindr, queer, identity*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell, 2005, p. 836).*

The quote mentioned above illustrates the focus of this research, which is put on the overall aspect of masculinity, specifically focused on the presentations of masculinity within a setting inhabited by queer men. In academic literature, significant attention has been given to the notion of masculinity prior to this research. An influential author in this field of study is the abovementioned Connell. Taking their approach to masculinity allows for this research to look into the ways in which masculinities might be presented and configured in the specific context of study.

When looking at communities of queer men, it has been found that masculinity is seen as the ideal way to present the self (Miller, 2015). Starting from a young age, it is common for men to be encouraged to act in stereotypical masculine ways like acting tough or being emotionally unavailable, since behavior outside of these constructs is related to being feminine in most Western societies and is therefore policed. This relation to the feminine identity is seen as negative since it falls outside of the normative perception of gender that is essential to heteronormativity (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016). Frequently, when a man has been linked to this aspect of femininity, he is labeled as female or gay, with a negative connotation (Miller, 2015). This link between femininity and homosexuality is traditionally present and when looking back at history, queer men are treated as “men who failed at gender” (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016, p. 177). It has been found that, to resist or counteract this forced gender subversion, queer men deploy tactics to present themselves in ways that are in line with heteronormative expectations of masculinity (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Thepsourinthone, Dune, Liamputtong, & Arora, 2020).

These pro-masculine and heteronormative self-presentation practices are common within male queer communities (Taywaditep, 2002) and they do not limit themselves to being present solely in face-to-face circumstances. It is interesting here to consider the role of digital media in this phenomenon. It has been established that digital media are a space for queer individuals through which they are given access to tools to explore, engage with, find information about, or simply practice behavior within queer communities (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Ralston, 2016). More specifically, focus has been put on the use of dating apps within the queer community. The use of dating platforms has been a tool used for seeking interaction between men who have sex with men from early emergences of digital media (Wu & Ward, 2018). It has been found that self-presentation plays an important role here, since, for example, homosexuality is not the norm in society and gay men can choose to hide their sexuality actively, online dating apps can facilitate gay men in identifying each other. Furthermore, interest in dating men is something that men choose to disclose to their

surroundings, it is not assumed. For this reason, self-presentation can be seen as a tool that can be used to avert unsolicited attention or stigma (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). Self-presentation therefore arguably plays an important role in the lives of queer individuals that are trying to navigate their identity journey.

A common digital media platform that is used within queer communities is Grindr, which describes itself as “the world’s largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people” (Grindr., 2020). Previously, Grindr was aimed exclusively at men that have sex with men. Now the platform is more inclusive of other gender identities, although the primary userbase is still that of cisgender gay males. Despite labeling itself as a social networking platform, it is widely understood as a platform that is used for finding sexual encounters or relationships (Wu & Ward, 2018). The widely adopted use of this platform within queer communities allows for an interesting platform to focus this research on. Specifically when considering the previously discussed importance of digital media in identity development of queers.

Taking into consideration importance of digital media in the identity processes of queer individuals, this research aims to explore how a digital space like dating app Grindr might play a role in establishing and/or supporting the understanding of heteronormative masculinity that is present within queer communities, with specific emphasis on the Dutch context. The research question that will be answered to grasp a more accurate understanding of this phenomenon then is: *How is heteronormative masculinity represented in self-presentations found in Grindr user-profiles in The Netherlands?*

Previous research has focused on the presence of masculine narratives in online queer dating platforms. It has been established that there is a prominence of white, muscular and stereotypical performances of masculinity (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016), limiting diversity that is essential to queer communities. Research has focused on masculine presentations on dating platforms in The United States of America (Reynolds, 2015), Spain (García-Gómez, 2020), Italy (Comunello, Parisi & Ieracitano, 2020), Brazil (Saraiva, Santos, & Pereira, 2020) or without specific attention to country (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). However, no previous attention has been given to these presentations of masculinity, specifically heteronormative masculinity, within The Netherlands. The Netherlands provides an interesting context of study, since it is generally regarded as an openminded and tolerant country that paved the way in tolerance specifically aimed at queer communities, with The Netherlands being the first country globally to allow civil marriages between same-sex couples (Utrecht University, 2018). However, according to ILGA Europe's Rainbow Europe project that focuses on equality and social climate for queer people per country, The Netherlands ranks twelfth place in their annual ranking (ILGA-Europe, 2021), insinuating that the leading role of the country in queer tolerance and acceptance is not so current anymore. For this reason, it is interesting to consider the Dutch context in this study, to establish how queer identities, specifically in this context, take shape. By doing so, possibly argue how the presupposed tolerance of a Western European country has

different contextual effects compared to previous work on other regions. This approach makes sure that scientific relevance to the field is added, since focus is put specifically on heteronormative masculinity in self-presentations of Grindr users that live in The Netherlands. By applying this approach, new insights were gained to advance the current body of literature. No previous research was done within this context and that applied the combination of self-presentation, heteronormative masculinity and the digital realm. This research therefore brings a new perspective to the realm of media studies, specifically with a queer approach.

Social relevance was added by focusing the research on topics that highlight marginalized identities, specifically those within queer communities. By analyzing how the previously addressed notion of heteronormative masculinity takes shape within the digital realm of study, further understandings of the potential marginalizing practices of heteronormativity within society were given. Through highlighting the ways in which digital dating platforms play a role in this, insights could be given on how these platforms contribute to this marginalizing and therefore potential issues in the workings of these platforms were exposed. This research could therefore potentially be used to gain insights in how to circumvent these issues to prevent further marginalization of the individuals that are part of queer communities. Furthermore, with the specific attention that is given to the Dutch context in this study, new insights were gained on the ways in which a presumed tolerant Western country behaves when it comes to topics surrounding queer inclusion and acceptance. It was therefore important to focus research on this context, to create better understanding of the socially constructed circumstances that queer individuals find themselves in, specifically focusing on the media realm.

This research is presented through first establishing the theoretical framework in chapter 2, where notions regarding heteronormative masculinity, self-presentation in online spaces and the platform Grindr will be discussed. In chapter 3, an explanation is given of the research method that was used to answer the proposed question. The method of choice was qualitative content analysis of visual and textual data, that was analyzed through thematic analysis. Chapter 4 is focused on presenting the results of the analysis process, where emphasis is put on connecting the results to previously studied theory and overall interpretation of the data at hand. Finally, in chapter 5, an answer to the research question is given, with focus on implications of the research, while also addressing limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter, a discussion of previous theory surrounding the current topic of study will be provided. In doing so, a thorough understanding of the relevant academic literature is given and therefore the research is placed in a fitting framework for executing further theoretical explorations.

The chapter starts by giving an introduction to the notions of queerness and heteronormativity, to provide the reader with an understanding of these concepts that serve as umbrella terms within the research. Secondly, an explanation is given of the presence of masculinity within the queer context, with an eventual establishment of the concept of heteronormative masculinity. Thirdly, focus is put on the ways in which self-presentation takes shape within digital spaces and how masculinity finds its way into these self-presentations. Lastly, the platform of study, namely Grindr, will be explained and it will be explored how the platform could be of influence on masculine self-presentation practices.

It is important to note that differing terms are used to address the subjects of study throughout this theoretical framework. This study takes a queer approach and therefore refers to the subjects of study as queer men, to understand the concept in a more inclusive manner. However, in discussed research that was done previously, subjects were often referred to as gay men or men that have sex with men. The original ways of referring to the subjects have been copied in this study, to ensure accurate representation of literature. Nevertheless, the gathered knowledge surrounding those subjects will be applied within the queer approach in this study and therefore the subjects will be understood as members of the queer community in general.

### **2.1 QUEERNESS VERSUS HETERONORMATIVITY**

This research places itself within the realm of queer theory and touches upon the dichotomy between the fluid essence of queerness and the rigid structures of heteronormativity. Queer theory, as conceptualized by Blasius (1998), “rather than focusing on interiority, sets its sights on the discursive field within which authorship or agency (of texts, of sexual action, and so on) is produced” (Blasius, 1998, p. 669). By applying this approach, this queerness “allows for the destabilization of identity categories and erotic desire and a recognition of the contingency of context” (Blasius, 1998, p. 669). In other words, by acknowledging the influence of context on identity, this queer approach awards the individual the possibility of not abiding to an enforced, consistent and singular identity but leaves space for a more malleable and fluid perspective to the understanding of the self (Blasius, 1998). More specifically, “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). And then, through “resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3).

On the contrary, heteronormativity is characterized by a more rigid structurization, hence



Green (2002) emphasizes to be “mindful of the insidious force of heteronormativity as a fundamental organizing principle throughout the social order” (Green, 2002, p. 521). Heteronormativity puts an emphasis on the “norm”, which can be defined as “something that regulates and seeks to make equal” (Saraiva et al., 2020, p. 117), it focuses on a sense of normalcy and naturality, where the individual is expected to abide to this norm (Saraiva et al., 2020). Furthermore, heteronormativity is linked to gender studies, since an emphasis on the masculine/feminine divide is a prominent feature (Saraiva et al., 2020). Here heteronormativity is understood as an “organizer of culture, and that in articulation with sexuality, shapes the way how men and women should behave, how their bodies should be represented and how their interpersonal relations can be composed, in these fields” (Saraiva et al., 2020, p. 117). This organizing occurs through a set of rules that are (re)constructed through “discourse, practices, beliefs and customs” (Saraiva et al., 2020, p.117). Additionally, with the assumption of there being two sexes, which are believed to complement each other, it is assumed and expected that sexuality unfolds itself in the heterosexual way (Butler, 1993).

Rosenfeld (2009) argues that this heteronormative force has influence on the ways in which individuals shape their identities. By reflecting on what is perceived in these heteronormative surroundings, individuals strategically craft their self-concepts and the image they portray to the public. Furthermore, while establishing an identity, the individual “not only uses this normative content, it also variously elaborates, reproduces and alters it and the structures it supports” (Rosenfeld, 2009, p. 618). In this way, heteronormativity is not just seen a discourse or a set of norms, but as a coordinated practice itself.

Following this approach, this research aims to grasp an understanding of this heteronormative practice within the previously discussed notion of queerness. The two seemingly opposite understandings of identity practices provide with an interesting field of study to investigate how they might intersect. Within this research, the heteronormative is mainly understood with specific emphasis on the concepts of gender and sex, specifically the masculine/feminine divide, and how this divide might influence perceptions of masculinity within the queer community.

## **2.2 THE MASCULINE QUEER**

In this paragraph, an explanation is given of the presence of masculinity within the queer context. This is done through discussions of hegemonic masculinity, femmephobia and homonegativity, while eventually establishing the main focus of study, namely heteronormative masculinity.

### ***2.2.1. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY***

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) specify the concept of hegemonic masculinity in their work. This concept is defined as the form of masculinity that holds power over other forms in a

specific context. Masculinity is seen as having the dominant social position that subordinates femininity. This does not limit itself to the dominant position of men themselves, but also takes into account the male gender practice in general. The author implies that within this framework of hegemonic masculinity, femininity is looked at from the dominant male perspective and is therefore restricting the agency of the feminine subject. This form of hegemony does not exist merely between men and women, since it also plays a pivotal role in hierarchies of gender among men. Here the homosexual men are placed at the bottom of this gender hierarchy, since homosexuality is not in line with the patriarchal order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

However, within hegemonic masculinity, the power relations are not only determined by those in dominant positions. Even the subordinated groups of men take part in sustaining the power relations that are present. A differentiation is made between external and internal hegemony in the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Here the external refers to the superiority of men over women, while the internal refers to the power of dominant masculinities over other subordinate masculinities (Burke, 2016). In Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) work, internal hegemony is often described as the dominant position that heterosexual men have over homosexual men, as mentioned previously. However, Rodriguez, Huemmer and Blumell (2016) introduce the perspective that social domination is also present between gay men themselves. The authors argue that there is a pressure within gay men to present their masculinity in ways that compensate for their sexuality, which is linked to femininity. By establishing masculine ideals, there is an attempt to regain status and power in the social hierarchy. A divide exists between gay men that abide to these presentations of high levels of masculinity and those who do not. In this way, internal hegemony signifies the policing of men by other men based on their differing levels of masculinity.

### ***2.2.2. FEMMEPHOBIA & HOMONEGATIVITY***

To provide a better understanding of these power relations between men, a more specific look into these differing levels of masculinity is given. As mentioned previously, perceptions of homosexuality in society are often linked to the notion of femininity. According to Burke (2016) this has roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when medical professionals claimed that homosexuality was caused by men having a wrong emotional or mental identification with their sex. It was deemed that homosexual men identified with the female sex and therefore felt attraction to masculine partners. For this reason, the identity of homosexuality became stigmatized, since the masculinity of homosexual men was at danger. To avoid this stigmatization, homosexual men rejected behaviors or desires that were seen as effeminate, which resulted in the devaluation of femininity within gay communities.

The concept of femmephobia nicely encapsulates the abovementioned feelings towards femininity. García-Gómez (2020) highlights this concept in their study, with focus on gay communities. The author defines femmephobia as “the containment strategies that function to

maintain the proper boundaries of patriarchal femininity and, in turn, gender norms” (García-Gómez, 2020, p. 393). Here it is important that femininity is seen as a trait that only belongs to those who have the female sex. Existence of femininity in others is seen as misuse and those others’ social behavior that is related to femininity is therefore sanctioned.

In their research, Thepsourinthone, Dune, Liamputtong and Arora (2020) tie the abovementioned masculine behavior and rejection of femininity to the development of negative feelings towards one’s own sexuality within gay men. They conceptualize this as internalized homonegativity. The authors focus on this concept as being rooted in heteronormativity in society, with one of the pillars of this heteronormativity being the distinct divide in society between sexes when it comes to norms and expectations. This shapes a society where, for example, “women are expected to be passive, sentimental, and emotive whilst men are expected to be aggressive, stoic, and brave” (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020, p. 2). When looking at gay communities, this distinct divide of sex is challenged because of the negatively connotated attribution of femininity to gay men, like mentioned previously. Therefore, this common perception of the gay man as being effeminate might result in the separation of the concepts of masculinity and homosexuality in the general people’s understanding of society. In this instance, the homosexual and the masculine are two labels that cannot be applied to the same person since that would interfere with the upholding of the binary sex system. This struggle between the masculine and feminine is one of the main triggers for the emergence of previously mentioned internalized homonegativity. Because of the assumptions and labels that are put on gay men through society, the identification with homosexuality becomes problematic for the individual in question. Being associated with the stereotype of the effeminate gay man endangers their position as a man in the hegemonic order and therefore rejection of the own sexuality takes place (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020)

### ***2.2.3. HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINITY***

Besides rejection of effeminacy, gay men go to the extent of counteraction to avoid stigmatization within the heteronormative structure. By doing so, these gay men display obvious acts of masculine behavior that are referred to as straight-acting (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020), in order to counteract the attribution of femininity that is put upon them through previously mentioned stigmatization. This display of masculinity copies the ways in which heterosexual men present themselves, hence the term straight-acting is applied. The straight-acting masculine presentation is interwoven with femmephobia and internalized homonegativity and presentations of this masculinity are glorified within gay communities (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). The label of straight-acting is used as a gender identification by those who feel their identity matches that of the heterosexual male, which has a higher level in social hierarchy. To support this identification, these men enact hypermasculine behavior and manners that are in line with existing standards of hegemonic masculinity (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016).

These standards can be observed physically as well, since these hegemonic masculinities “still rely heavily on traditional signifiers such as muscle and hair that have been stable signifiers of masculinity since the classical Greek representations” (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017, p. 117). Gay men adapt these bodily presentations of hegemonic masculinity to enforce their position in the social hierarchy. By doing so, they contest the traditional heteronormative perspective of the gay man who is subverting gender by practicing homosexuality. Through presenting their bodies in traditionally (hyper)masculine ways, these men aim to reject their negative associations with femininity – femmephobia. Essentially, the body here serves as a protection to judgement from heteronormative society by presenting in a way that emulates a straight male (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017). This straight presentation then is positioned in contrary to those gay men that show effeminate characteristics. They get labeled as, for example, “sissy” or “fem” by the men that identify as straight-acting males. In this way, the hegemonic masculine ideal gets reinforced and a hierarchy is created and maintained based on the masculine/feminine divide (Rodriguez, Huemmer, & Blumell, 2016). In their research, Reynolds (2015) focuses on these straight-acting men. The author summarizes this phenomenon accurately as being “a social-sexual identity characterized by homophobia, success and status, toughness and independence, aggressiveness and dominance, and by an absence of femininity and homosexuality” (Reynolds, 2015, p. 216).

The presentation of masculinity in such a heterosexual manner again ties in to the notion of heteronormativity that is ever present within discussions focused on conceptions of masculinity. It is argued that the actions these gay men take to avoid stigmatization eventually result in identifications that align more with the heteronormative order and are therefore presenting a heteronormative masculinity (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). In this way, this heteronormativity – in which masculinity takes the top place in social hierarchy, heterosexuality is assumed to be the preferred sexual orientation and where gender non-conformity is resisted – finds its way into gay communities and arguably establishes effects on how these communities are shaped and maintained and how the community members establish themselves. It has been found that these heteronormative principles can “motivate men’s maladaptive behaviors, negative mental health outcomes, feelings of inferiority, overcompensation, and contribute to men’s fear of femininity and concerns around anti-effeminacy, success, power, and competition, restrictive emotionality, and risk-taking” (Thepsourinthone, Dune, Liamputtong, & Arora, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, forcing oneself to abide by the norms of heteronormativity while inherently feeling misplaced has been argued to result in negative outcomes for queer individuals, like body shame and anxiety. Whilst engaging with communities that operate outside of the heteronormative order results in positive outcomes for those individuals, like lessening struggles in terms of gender identity (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020).

Overall, it could be argued that the application of heteronormative masculinity to a community within the queer spectrum such as that of gay men, is in stark contrast to the otherwise inherently

diverse and non-heteronormative nature of the queer community in general. Therefore it was deemed interesting to explore how this notion might take shape throughout the queer context.

## **2.3 PRESENTING THE SELF**

In this paragraph, focus is put on the self-presentations practices that take place within the digital realm. More specifically, an elaboration is given on the ways in which masculinity is found throughout these self-presentations, with the aim of understanding how these self-presentations might relate to the existence of heteronormative masculinity.

### ***2.3.1. SELF-PRESENTATION IN A DIGITAL ERA***

With the focus of this research being put on the presentation of masculinity through dating profiles, it is relevant to consider theory surrounding the self-presentation of individuals. The concept of self-presentation can be described as “the packaging and editing of the self during social interactions to create a desired impression in the audience” (Miller, 2018, p. 311). Self-presentation takes into account the social environment in which the presentation takes place, as well as the audience to whom the presentation is directed. The individual considers which information should be disclosed and which information should be kept from being presented. This certain sense of strategy is important when working towards establishing the desired impression. Here the values of the audience that is presented to are essential in determining which impression should be given off (Miller, 2018). An influential author in the field of self presentation is Goffman (1959), who makes a distinction between two types of cues that shape impressions. These cues are “given” by the individual (i.e. what the person says) or “given off” by the behavior of the individual (i.e. what the person does). How these cues are interpreted is affected by differing contextual factors, such as the way in which the individual presents their demeanor or appearance.

When applying this notion of self-presentation to a dating app, the social environment becomes an online space with its own opportunities and limitations. It is argued that through online spaces, people have more control over their self presentation and can therefore establish impressions that are more strategically managed (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Individuals can interact asynchronously and therefore have more time to consider their self presentation strategy before engaging with others. Furthermore, in online environments the linguistic and verbal cues are more prominent while the non-verbal cues are less visible when compared to real-life interaction. For this reason, online interaction awards more control and censoring of the self when compared to the same interaction in a face-to-face setting (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). When applying Goffman’s (1959) words, this means that in online spaces the self is expressed more through “given” cues instead of those cues that are “given off”. In an online dating environment, this control and censoring of the self has influence on the way an individual presents themselves to potential partners. Therefore individuals

“may easily present themselves in what they perceive to be their best light (or embellish their positive attributes) while emphasizing those characteristics they see as most desirable to a potential partner” (Miller, 2018, p. 312). However, there is a constraint to this embellishing since a possible future face-to-face meeting might occur. The image that is presented online should not differ significantly from the real life person, to prevent deceiving the potential dating partner (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014). This means that individuals can control their self-presentation online more precisely when compared to face-to-face interactions, although the online dating environment does present some limitations to this level of control, since, arguably, potential judgement from dating partners might interfere.

When looking specifically at queer dating apps, this means that this potential judgement from dating partners comes from within the same community, namely that of predominantly queer men. Therefore, the assumptions about, and understandings of, the preferred ways of presenting the self that are established within the community might have an effect on one’s self-presentation in the dating profile. Following this reasoning, Miller (2018) argues that individuals present themselves selectively. They present certain aspects of themselves in their dating profile, while leaving out other elements. By doing so, they craft a preferred self that fits within the expectations of the audience and they essentially create a selective self-presentation. Because of the previously discussed existence of heteronormative masculinity within gay communities and the overall preference for masculinity in gay men, it can be argued that this selective self-presentation of gay men could lead to obvious presentations of masculinity, in contrast to more feminine presentations of the self. Besides this, it has been found that queer men can use selective self-presentation to award themselves more options in terms of creating anonymity and, in doing so, hiding parts of themselves that they might not want to share with other users on the platform in fear of being identified. This fear is fueled by expected stigmatization that is still present in society, directed towards those that identify outside of the heteronormative order (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016).

Additionally, when focusing on these self-presentations of gay men on dating apps, Miller (2018) argues that the overall narrative that is present on these gay dating platforms also influences the self-presentation of the users. Essentially saying that “the fact that many gay personal advertisements feature anti-effeminacy attitudes in such a candid manner suggests that perhaps many gay men perceive these negative attitudes to be common and acceptable, or even desirable” (Miller, 2018, p. 311). Thus, by behaving oneself within these dating platforms that house these pro-masculine and anti-feminine narratives, users might possibly take away those observable perspectives on masculinity and apply them in their own lives. Arguably not only in their online self-presentation, but potentially in the understanding of their community and society at large. Here the online perception of masculinity within the gay community and the offline perception that was already present within society then support and reinforce each other. Due to this repeated exposure to, and confirmation of, these

perceptions of masculinity, they could get further established within these queer communities (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

### **2.3.2. PRO-MASCULINE PRESENTATION**

When looking more specifically into these self-presentations focused on masculinity, it has been found that anti-effeminacy language plays an important role (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), linking back to the previously discussed femmephobia. In their research, García-Gómez (2020), focuses on these representations of femmephobia in dating profiles of Spanish heterosexual and queer men. The author describes that in the queer men's profiles there was obvious rejection of feminine aspects that are traditionally attributed to queer men, for example actively denying an interest in shopping, placing oneself outside of the gay scene, rejecting effeminate behavior or appearance, emphasizing they are real men that are only dating real men and criticizing promiscuous sexual behavior, which is usually linked to gay men by society. In these examples, it can be seen that these men aim to establish a powerful position through their masculinity. They place themselves in a superior rank by following the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity where these heteronormative masculine practices are placed above all other forms of masculinity. Traces of homonegativity can be found as well, through rejection of identification with societal expectations of homosexuality. Essentially, García-Gómez (2020) emphasizes that “the inspection of queer men's profiles has revealed the tension between the internalized and externalized negative associated with occupying the feminine position” (García-Gómez, 2020, p. 406). Burke (2016) adds to this by bringing to the light that “In gay dating advertisements, ‘muscular’ and ‘straight appearing’ or ‘straight acting’ are the most common descriptors of desirable qualities in a partner and for oneself” (Burke, 2016, p. 240).

This pro-masculine and heteronormative presentation can take shape outside of solely the textual presentation of these men as well, namely through visual presentations of the physical body. As addressed previously, the masculine physique plays a role in gay men's identification with hegemonic masculinity, through presenting traditional masculine signifiers (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017). Focusing on the gay male body and self-presentation, Miller (2015) supported that gay men have a high desire for attaining muscularity, more than the heterosexual male. It was found that, for example, these gay men prefer a low waist-to-chest ratio, which suggests the idealization of having an upper-body that is high in muscularity. A way in which this masculine bodily display can take shape is through high levels of shirtless photos and other forms of nudity. Here Miller (2015) draws an interesting connection to self-objectification, which was first introduced by Campbell (2004). This self-objectification is argued to be rooted in the existence of a gay ideal, which Campbell (2004) refers to as the gay male beauty myth, which entails the gay man feeling the need to match the gay ideal of being physically attractive, fit and youthful. These are sets of hierarchies that “are imposed on gay men in their understandings of their own bodies and the bodies they should desire” (Campbell, 2004, p. 156). This exemplifies how the preferences for (hyper)masculine bodies in these gay

communities might potentially develop into established and enforced beauty structures that result in community members feeling the need to conform to these standards in order to belong and be of value.

Miller (2015) continues by stating that in gay men's dating profiles there is overall a significant focus on physical attributes. The aesthetic that is presented in a dating profile has more importance when compared to internal characteristics for these gay men. Therefore, it could be argued that the previously discussed prominent role of heteronormative masculinity in the gay community also finds its way through bodily presentations and therefore takes an important place within the visual self-presentation on dating platforms.

## **2.4 GRINDR AS IDENTITY ARENA**

In this paragraph, work is highlighted that focuses on the establishment of identity, with specific reference to the online context. Furthermore, more precise understandings of the platform of Grindr are given and focus is put on how such a platform might interfere with identity processes.

### ***2.4.1. IDENTITY WORK***

The work of Butler (1990; 1991; 1993; 1997) on identity is taken as a starting point for understanding shaping of identity through Grindr. Butler argues that identity is a process of becoming that is ongoing, not merely a state of being. The identity is constituted through the series of acts and behaviors of an individual. Essentially arguing that identity is performative (Butler, 1990). Eventually, through repetition of these acts and behaviors, the perception of a core identity within the individual is assumed to be present (Butler, 1993). The constitution of the self through behavior relies heavily on the use of language and discourse (Butler, 1993). Furthermore, by engaging with different discourses, the self can be reconstituted or reshaped as well, depending on the discourse that is being engaged with (Butler, 1991). In her later work, Butler (1997) emphasized how individuals feel the urge to present the self as a coherent whole, for the sake of being part of the overall structure within society. Essentially resulting in the forced molding of oneself into one coherent individual while trying to balance all different categories of identity that are present.

Cover (2014) focuses on Butler's theories of identity performance in relation to social networking. It is interesting to consider this connection when looking at a dating app like Grindr, since it is advertised as a social networking platform (Grindr., 2020). The author emphasizes how the performative identity and the establishment of the coherent self is constituted through the interactive environment of digital media. The discourses that are offered within digital media can give individuals the tools to constitute their identity in similar ways as discourses do in real life, or possibly expand beyond these. This results in enlargement of the framework in which identities can be developed. Furthermore, the online social networking tools offer individuals ways to perform their identity in similar ways that acts in real life do. The author points to examples like profile building, status



updating or friending, while drawing connections between these online acts and their everyday offline counterparts. Essentially arguing that, in connection to Butler's previously mentioned theories, online behavior can therefore be explored as "more than an expression of different ways of doing identity, and instead, as a set of acts and behaviors that constitute those very identities" (Cover, 2014, p. 58).

Here it becomes apparent that the previously discussed self-presentation of individuals on these dating platforms might have more lasting impact on their identity processes as well. One is not simply presenting the self for the impression of others, but this presentation might also be of influence of the ultimate understanding of the own self. Thus, eventually, the previously discussed tactics that are applied when self-presenting in heteronormatively masculine ways might potentially leave their mark on the identities of members of the queer communities that are partaking in these presentations.

### ***2.4.2. THE INTERFACE***

After establishing the previously addressed existence of heteronormative masculinity within gay communities and how this translates itself in self-presentations in general and on dating platforms, it is now time to zoom in on the environment in which these self-presentations take place, namely Grindr. Grindr describes itself as "the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people" (Grindr., 2020). Grindr can be labeled as a location-based-real-time-dating application (LBRTD app). These apps are known to prominently features images of users while offering more restrictive options in terms of textual representation of the self. Since the environment is physically constrained by the size of a mobile device, users are forced to present themselves relatively concisely (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014). Users are offered a range of options when starting their profile-building process. This profile-building sections consists of two content sections, the display name section (of less than 15 characters) and the about me section (of less than 255 characters). Following that, users get presented with a number of predetermined categories in which they can choose their most preferred option. This section is referred to as 'Stats', where users can present their age, height, weight, body type (Do Not Show, Toned, Average, Large, Muscular, Slim, Stocky), sexual position (Do Not Show, Top, Vers Top, Versatile, Vers Bottom, Bottom), ethnicity (Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, White, South Asian, Other), relationship status (Do Not Show, Committed, Dating, Engaged, Exclusive, Married, Open Relationship, Partnered, Single) and their tribes (Bear, Clean-Cut, Daddy, Discreet, Geek, Jock, Leather, Otter, Poz, Rugged, Trans, Twink, Sober). These tribes represent subcultures or specific identities within the gay community one can label themselves with (Gardner, 2016) and the user is allowed to select a maximum of three tribes in total. The profile-building section continues with a section called 'Expectations', where users can make choices in: I'm looking for (Chat, Dates, Friends, Networking, Relationship, Right Now), meet at (My Place, Your Place, Bar, Coffee Shop, Restaurant), accept NSFW pics (Do Not Show, Never, Not At First, Yes Please). Here the NSFW stands for Not Safe For Work, which relates to the sending of nudes or other sexual content. The next section that

gets offered to users is the section called 'Identity'. Here users can select their gender (Man, Cis Man, Trans Man, Woman, Cis Woman, Trans Woman, Non-Binary, Non-Conforming, Queer, Crossdresser, Custom). The custom option awards the user the possibility to manually type their own preferred identity if it was not listed. Lastly, the users can specify their sexual health, where they are presented the choice of HIV status (Do Not Show, Negative, Negative, on PrEP, Positive, Positive Undetectable) and they get offered a field in which they can specify the last time they were tested for sexually transmittable diseases. At the bottom of the profile-building section the user can link their other social media platforms, like Instagram, Spotify, Twitter or Facebook. Furthermore, the user can enter profile pictures (5 in total) of which one is chosen as the main profile picture that other users see in the general grid.

This general grid is the main screen of the app where users can scroll through the available profiles. The profiles are ordered based on proximity, from closest to furthest away in meters. In the top of the screen users get presented with so-called 'Fresh faces' where users that recently joined the platform get a primary spot in the lay-out. Furthermore, the main screen contains a button that brings the user to the section of the app for private chatting and another button that brings the user to the screen where profiles are stored that the user chose to favorite. In this way, the user can separately store profiles that are of their interest. Additionally, when users click on a profile, they are brought to a screen that displays the other user's photos on full screen and with a swipe-up motion the textual descriptions can be viewed. Lastly, the user is offered a set of filters with which the presented profiles can be narrowed down. These filters are based on the previously mentioned categories that are present within the app. By using this filtering system, users can, for example, filter out other users based on age or body type.

### ***2.4.3. TO CHOOSE, OR NOT TO CHOOSE***

The abovementioned interface and choice options that are presented to users of Grindr might show a lot of possible variabilities for users to navigate through, which can be recognized as a positive effort to promote diverse representation. However, users are encouraged to choose from preselected identifiers which, for example when considering the choice options for body type, expects the users to determine the differences between what they call a muscular or average body. It has been argued that, through these different types of preselected lists of options, the queer person can get excluded (Shield, 2018). Since the queer individual inherently identifies based on fluidity and lacks the willingness to adhere to predetermined systems such as the binary system of gender or sex. Thus these presented identity characteristics can present users with ideas of separation and puts emphasis on possible differences between individuals within the same community (Shield, 2018). The space that offers more freedom to the user in terms of self-presentation and expression is the section where users can type their own text – the 'about me' section. Although this space has a limitation on wordcount, which makes that the free space on these LBRTD apps still results in a form of limitation that is forced on

users, since “Grindr users run into hard limits on their self-expression, driving them to be brief, direct, and evocative” (Aunspach, 2020, p. 52). These limits can therefore interfere with the self-presentation practices of users and could arguably have influence on the previously discussed presentations of masculinity.

Furthermore, when looking at the physical presentation of users in their profiles, the app interface offers them the ability to strategically choose which parts to present and which parts to hide. Since the user is not forced to fill in the predetermined categories of the profile-building section, users can select the features they wish to highlight. When drawing on the previously addressed work of Goffman (1959), these aspects “become “given” aspects of impression in the decision to share them online, rather than “given off” in an in-person meeting” (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 2). Here it is interesting to consider how the preference for masculinity might interfere with these selective presentations of physicality. It could be argued that, with the previously established preference for (hyper)masculine bodies within gay communities (Campbell, 2004), this influences the visibility of a certain type of bodies within the Grindr grid.

As Ellison et al. (2006) accurately put in their research on self-presentation processes in online dating environments: “individuals will adapt their behaviors to the cues that are available to convey information to one another” (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006, p. 431). For this reason it is valuable to take into account the possible influence of the discussed characteristics of the app itself on the self-presentation practices of the users. Specifically when looking at the overall theme of this research, which focuses on the presence of heteronormative masculinities in such a digital space.

## **2.5 CONCLUSION**

The theoretical framework has provided an overview of the relevant literature that is needed to further execute the proposed research. With understanding the theoretical concepts at hand, focus can be put on exploring the ways in which heteronormative masculinity is emerging throughout self-presentations of users on the Grindr platform. Here it is important to consider the main notions of heteronormative masculinity, which are the top position of masculinity in social hierarchy, the preference of heterosexuality and the resistance of gender non-conformity. The self-presentation of users is significant in this process since it was established that users might take away understandings of preferred ways to behave from other users’ self-presentation practices. Which could essentially have influence on overall perspectives of preferred ways of being in the queer community, specifically when considering the prominent existence of previously discussed femmephobia, homonegativity and hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, the platform itself has been argued to influence the ways in which users present themselves. Therefore it is important to consider the effects of this platform on the abovementioned self-presentation practices in relation to heteronormative masculinity.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter the research method will be described to give an insight in the reasoning behind the choice of method, the way in which the method was executed and how this contributed to the finding of the data needed in order to answer the proposed research question. The chapter is divided into paragraphs that direct the reader through the process that was taken by the researcher to ensure that the most suitable methodology was formed. First, the choice of method is described and the focus on qualitative analysis will be supported. Second, the sampling strategy will be explained to give insights into how the data was gathered, while also emphasizing the process of data collection. Third, a description will be given of the process of operationalization, to establish the process of analysis more in detail. Lastly, attention is given to the position of the researcher in this process and the ethical concerns that are part of a research focusing on the topic at hand.

#### **3.1 THEMATIC ANALYSIS APPROACH**

As addressed previously, this research aims to understand how self-presentation practices of queer men takes shape through a digital platform like Grindr. To understand these practices and to analyze how these practices establish themselves in user-profiles, a qualitative approach to research has been taken. By doing so, an in-depth understanding of the data at hand was gathered, which allowed for thorough analysis of the individuals of study. This qualitative approach allows for a more inductive and flexible approach to the overall analysis process, since the aim of qualitative research is to understand and interpret the possible relationships within data that are carrying meaning (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Furthermore, qualitative analysis allows for a thorough understanding of the texts that are studied, which helps in identifying the construction of social reality through these texts (Brennen, 2017).

More specifically, thematic analysis was applied to make sense of the data. This approach was chosen because it allows for understanding patterns or themes that are common, which is useful in understanding the self-presentation of users in Grindr profiles. By applying thematic analysis to the data, recurring themes can be understood of a solid amount of profiles, which can help in identifying prominent narratives and presentation across the platform. By understanding the patterns, it can be understood what the general narrative or preferred ways of being are in this environment. This allows for finding an answer to the research question and therefore allows for understanding the masculine self-presentation practices of queer individuals using Grindr.

With thematic analysis, a distinction is made between the deductive and the inductive process. With deductive thematic analysis, emphasis is put on the finding of preconceived themes that the researcher has in mind. With inductive thematic analysis, the researcher focuses on allowing the data to determine these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research, primarily an inductive approach to thematic analysis was chosen. This was done to ensure that the masculine self-presentation practices

within the specific context of study, namely those within The Netherlands, were analyzed thoroughly. In this instance, it was essential to leave room for newly emerging themes that were not predetermined in previous research. By following this logic, themes specific to the Dutch context, or themes that were not previously determined in theory could be found and this resulted in the possibility of answering the research question. However, it is important to note that this inductive process was done with a strong foundation of preconceived knowledge surrounding masculine self-presentation practices in online dating environments, as was elaborated on in the previous chapter, the theoretical framework. By gathering this knowledge and keeping it in mind during the analysis procedure, it was possible to put focus on relevant theoretical concepts guiding the analysis process and therefore extracting as much relevant information as possible to ensure encompassing all elements of masculine self-presentation that were considered in this study.

The procedure of thematic analysis was followed as is explained by Braun & Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis process follows numerous stages through which, eventually, themes were established that help in answering the research question. The initial stage of thematic analysis was the immersion in the data. This immersion entailed the reading and re-reading of the data that was gathered. By doing so, the information that seemed relevant on first sight could be captured and this initial information could be used to establish preliminary ideas about further coding. The second stage of the thematic analysis process was the actual coding of the data. Focusing on the semantic and visual content of the data, it was labeled with a code that indicates the represented imagery or text. During the coding procedure, since an inductive approach to thematic analysis was taken, the data was leading in establishing relevant codes. However, the theoretical framework served as guiding principle to ensure focusing the research on the predetermined research question. Codes were created based on the operationalization addressed in paragraph 3.3. After this second stage, the initial codes were established and the overall dataset was covered. The following stage focused on finding similarities between codes, which resulted in the advancement of the codes in order to ensure accurate representation of the data. By continuing this process of searching for similarities and developing and advancing the codes, first themes were found. Eventually, by numerous rounds of evaluating the established codes, the themes that covered all relevant data were formed. With the relevant established themes in mind, a final evaluation of the data was done to ensure no relevant findings were missed. The themes were then refined in order to clearly make the themes represent an identifiable aspect of the findings, in relation to the proposed research question. Finally, the established themes were used to give an answer to this question and therefore find a conclusion to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic map with an overview of the established themes, and the codes that were used, can be found in appendix I.

Because of the inductive nature of the analysis, themes were found that were not relevant for answering the research question that was proposed. Due to limited timeframe and the scope of this research, those themes have been separated and have not been addressed throughout further research.

However, they do provide with interesting insights that could be used for future research, as addressed in paragraph 5.3. The codes that emerged through analysis but did not fit into the established themes were filed under a miscellaneous category and were not taken into further consideration for the current research. These have been attached to the separated themes addressed in paragraph 5.3, to ensure transparency of the coding process.

### **3.2 SAMPLING STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

Within this research, focus is put on the analysis of visual as well as textual data. The data under study, namely Grindr user-profiles, consist of different sections, as addressed in the theoretical framework, paragraph 2.3.1.. By focusing on a combination of this visual and textual data, an accurate picture of the overall self-presentation in the user-profile could be established, since pro-masculine self-presentations can take shape through textual presentations of, for example, the individual's preferences regarding other users (García-Gómez, 2020), or through visual presentations of, for example, the physical body (Miller, 2015). Focusing on both the textual and visual self-presentation is therefore essential in finding an answer to the proposed research question.

The sampling strategy that was used to gather the data in this research was the purposive sampling strategy. This non-probability sampling strategy allows the researcher to determine which data is most suitable and representative for the research at hand (Babbie, 2014). Since the research took place in a limited timespan, not all data that adhered to the suitability criteria of the researcher were taken into consideration. Analysis was conducted until data saturation was reached and therefore an accurate and representative answer to the research question could be given.

Data was collected based on a number of selection criteria, which gave the researcher a way to focus on the most useful data. Firstly, user-profiles were selected based on presence of text and/or visuals in the profile. The textual data should be present in either the 'About me' section, the sections with predetermined categories to choose from or in both the sections. The visual data should be visible in the profile picture sections. User-profiles that had no textual nor visual presentation were not considered, since this would have resulted in lack of data to perform analysis on. User-profiles that had textual representation but no visual representation were analyzed, since the lack of visual representation can be due of the stigma that is placed on these queer communities and their usage of online platforms (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016) and is therefore relevant in assessing possible effects of masculinity in self-presentation. User-profiles that had visual data without having textual data were analyzed, since the visual aspect takes an important role in overall masculinity practices (Campbell, 2004; Miller, 2015; Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017).

A second selection criteria was that of location, since the research aims at self-presentations of queer men located in The Netherlands. Grindr is a location based dating application, which shows its user-profiles based on proximity, therefore profiles that were nearby were selected. The research was

executed within The Netherlands, which ensured selection of profiles within the country. No specific attention was given to the exact location of user-profiles, since the research question focuses on the Dutch context in general. Furthermore, profiles were selected based on which users were online on the app at that moment in time. Users that are offline disappear from the general grid that is displayed.

Other than the two previously mentioned selection criteria, no criteria were used for selecting and gathering data. No specific emphasis was put on any of the aspects of the interface of the application, as addressed in paragraph 2.3.1. For example, there was no specific emphasis on certain predetermined identity categories or a specific kind of profile picture. All profiles found, that fell within the previously mentioned selection criteria, were analyzed. This to ensure an accurate representation of the overall user-profiles that get presented on this application. A total of 151 profiles were selected and used for further analysis, which allowed for substantial material to perform the visual and textual analysis on and therefore resulted in data saturation.

Data was collected by taking screenshots of the user-profiles. This means that two screenshots were taken to encompass one user-profile, since the visual and textual part of the profile are presented on separate screens, as addressed in paragraph 2.3.1. When a user chose to present more than one photo in their profile, only the first photo was collected for analysis. This was done since this profile photo is displayed to other users in the general grid and with the user choosing this picture as their first, it arguably signifies importance in their own perception of how they wish to present themselves. Finally, the gathered data was imported in Atlas.ti software to help in structuring and streamlining the analysis process.

### **3.3 OPERATIONALIZATION**

With the research focusing on masculinities, in particular self-presentations of heteronormative masculinities, it was ensured that during analysis the previously discussed theory and concepts in the theoretical framework were operationalized to help in attaining accurate and sufficient analysis of the data. As addressed previously, the analysis was done in an inductive manner and consisted of a textual and a visual element. In this paragraph, the operationalization will be discussed based on these two approaches. Throughout analysis, the previously established notion of heteronormative masculinity was used as guiding principle, while leaving room for newly emerging information to take shape. With the emphasis on these representations of heteronormative masculinity within the user-profiles, it was essential to highlight and consider the main notions of this concept. These notions being: the top position of masculinity in social hierarchy, the preference of heterosexuality and the resistance of gender non-conformity, as was established in the theoretical framework.

### **3.3.1. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

When looking at the textual component of the analysis, the notions regarding heteronormative masculinity were assessed based on the writings of the Grindr users themselves. These writings were addressed as mentions and made into codes that were improved in further analysis. For example, mentions focused on the user's body were addressed based on self-identifications with body size, hairiness, muscularity, fitness or general masculinity levels. Because users describe their own perception and identification of their bodies in their profiles, these descriptions could be used to understand presentations on the platform. Similar approaches were taken when it comes to mentions of non-bodily self-identifications, mentions of partner preferences and mentions of the own and other's behavior within the platform and within the overall queer community. Furthermore, the predetermined categories that are present within the interface of Grindr, as addressed in paragraph 2.3.1, helped in operationalization of data through the self-identification of users with specific identity categories that could be understood in terms of pro-masculine or physically focused narratives. These predetermined categories were coded verbatim and eventually also used to be able to count the number of mentions of specific predetermined categories in profiles to support findings that were done through further thematic analysis.

Since the research is focused on the Dutch context, profiles were found that contained Dutch language, although most profiles featured English language. The Dutch language was translated by the researcher, since I am a Dutch native speaker. Furthermore, profiles contained language which is sometimes specific to queer contexts and might be using references or slang that is not established in academic literature. These mentions were understood based on the personal knowledge of the researcher, since I am part of the queer community and have been taking part in these online communities myself for several years. Therefore, I had the knowledge and experience to provide proper definitions of these terms in further analysis.

### **3.3.2. VISUAL ANALYSIS**

When looking at the visual component, similar theoretical foundations were used to operationalize the concept of heteronormative masculinity, however, here the analysis was mainly based on physical presentations of this masculinity. Here the user's profile pictures were used to assess these operationalized aspects.

Firstly, the analysis was focused on presentations of the body in user's profile pictures. Here the focus was on the visual presentations of the body, instead of the previously mentioned textual self-identifications with a specific body type. To analyze the visual presentations of the body, a specific emphasis was put on the highlighting of traditional masculine signifiers like hair and muscularity, that was found to be an important part of presentations of masculinity (Enguix & Gómez-Narváez, 2017).



When looking at body hair, it was important to consider opposites when it comes to visibility of hair, since body hair is looked at in opposite perspectives when considering masculinity versus femininity. The masculine subject has prevalent presentations of body hair, while the feminine subject has limited presentations of body hair (Synnott, 1987). More specifically, focus was put on facial hair, which was identified as the presence of visible hair on the face in the regions of the neck, cheeks and upper lip, thus the mustache and/or beard. Additionally, focus was put on body hair, with emphasis on presence of hair on the torso, since presence of hair on the torso is generally considered to be tied to ideas of masculinity, as those body parts are biologically more prone to develop hair in those of the male sex when compared to those of the female sex (Synnott, 1987). Head hair was considered based on length of the hair, since here there is an opposite understanding of desired hair length when looking at masculine versus feminine subjects as well. The masculine subject is preferred to have short hair, while the feminine subject is preferred to have long hair, in general understandings in society (Synnott, 1987). Distinguishment was made in bald head, short hair, and long hair, where bald was understood as a head without head hair, short hair was hair that did not pass the ear in length and long hair was hair that passed the ear in length.

When considering the presence of muscularity in visual presentations on the platform, emphasis was put on visibility of muscle definition, since a high muscularity is understood to be fitting for the masculine body, while the opposite is understood for the female body (McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005). Muscle definition was understood in terms of visible muscle-lines or through visible shadows due to flexed or bulging muscles. No differing levels of muscularity were considered, since the focus was solely on there being a presence of muscularity or not. Furthermore, presence of bodily fat was considered since it was established that within the community of study an understanding of the gay ideal is prominent (Campbell, 2004), which focuses on fit bodies. In general societal understandings, fit bodies are those bodies that do not show high levels of fat (Monaghan, 2007). Through visual analysis it is impossible to measure fat percentages, hence the analysis focused on presentations of fat through rounded and more malleable looking shapes of the body, in contrary to the previously discussed muscularity.

With regards to clothing found in profile pictures, firstly differentiations were made on there being clothing or not. Bodies that showed predominantly bare skin were considered as nude bodies, while bodies that predominantly showed covered skin were considered as clothed bodies. Clothing was understood in terms of purpose for wearing, where distinctions were made between underwear, casual clothing or clothing for sports. These were separated based on general understandings in terms of branding, fabric and size and shape of the clothing item. The distinction between masculine and feminine clothing was made based on the general societal understanding and stereotyping that feminine clothing has a more fitted style that shows the curves of the body, for example through wearing skirts and that feminine subjects more prominently enhance their looks through accessorizing and wearing of make-up (Kodžoman, 2019).

Emotive expression were considered since in previously discussed theory it was established that these differ between masculine and feminine subjects (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). Emotive expressions were based off interpretations of the positioning of facial features, predominantly the mouth and eyes. Users were identified to be either smiling or not smiling, based on visibility of teeth and upwards curving of the mouth. Expressions of the eyes were considered in terms of frowning. These emotions were registered and not interpreted, since the aim was simply to record presence of emotive expression.

Lastly, the presence and absence of certain parts of the user's body or face in the visual part of their profiles was considered. It was considered whether users decide to show their face, body, or both and how these presentations take shape. Presence of face was divided into either no face present, a unrecognizable face or a recognizable face. Similar approach was taken for the body, to determine of which parts of the body were shown. This was done to establish if users selective present themselves, in relation to previously discussed theory (Miller, 2018). The way in which the picture was taken was considered in terms of selfie, mirror picture or other. Where a selfie was a picture of the face from up close, a mirror picture showed visible reflection of the person in a reflective surface and all other pictures fell in category other.

### **3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Since the study focuses on a dating platform, specifically one used within the queer community, it is important to consider the ethical implications of this research. Although the platform is publicly accessible for everyone that downloads the application, it is still important to consider privacy of the users. The application is used by members of the queer community that might reluctant to be open about their sexuality or preferences, because of possible stigmatization. Therefore, user-profiles that showed a recognizable face or name have been blurred when used in this research. Furthermore, gathered data has been securely processed and not been used for any other purposes outside of the analysis procedure. This way, it is ensured that anonymity of the users is guaranteed.

## 4. RESULTS

In this chapter, an overview of the performed analysis and gathered results will be given to provide an in-depth understanding of the data that was used in this research. The chapter is presented by following the order of the thematic map, which can be found in appendix A. The themes and subthemes will be addressed individually to ensure accurate covering of the entire findings and by doing so, providing the reader with the necessary information. Per theme, an interpretation of the findings will be provided to connect the findings to the research question and previously discussed theory.

### **4.1 PRO-MASCULINITY**

This first theme addresses the findings that were grouped based on presence of pro-masculine language or pro-masculine visual presentations. The theme has been divided into four subthemes that address the various ways in which these pro-masculine narratives were present in the data.

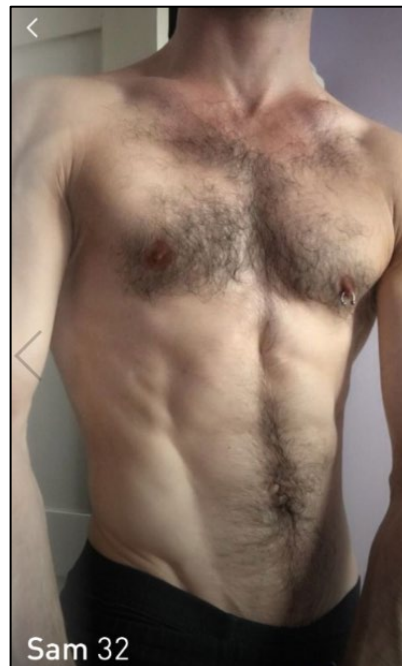
#### ***4.1.1. THE MASCULINE BODY***

During analysis attention was given to visual presentations of users in their profile pictures. Within these visual presentation, a variety of traditional masculine signifiers were found. These signifiers are presented through bodily presentations of muscularity, through presence of body- and facial hair and through lack of visible emotion in the face. The muscularity was mostly found through exposure of defined muscles, like chest, bicep or abdominals. In some instances, the users chose to put focus on these defined muscles through flexing of said muscles in their profile picture. The facial hair was found through presentations of beards, mustaches, goatees and stubble. When looking at body hair, most prominently the presence of chest hair was found, while body hair like armpit hair was less obviously present, which might be due to lack of raised arms in photos. Less physically focused, but still visually masculine, was the finding of lack of emotive expression in the face. In 68 out of 151 analyzed profiles a face was found without having an identifiable smile. It has to be noted that there could be differing motives for a lack of smile in profile pictures, but the large number of profiles that were identified with this finding make it relevant to consider.

Overall the presence of masculine signifiers took place within a large portion of the analyzed profiles. An interesting finding where a majority of these signifiers came together within one combined presentation was the finding of profiles that displayed just a torso. This means that these profiles merely had a visible torso that adhered to the abovementioned masculine signifiers, without showing a lower body nor a head. With these pictures showing just a torso, emphasis was put on the low waist to chest ratio of these men, which highlighted their muscularity. These presentations of just a torso were found in 18 out of 150 analyzed profiles. An example of such a profile presentation can be found in image 1 and image 2 below.



*Image 1: profile 31 – masculine signifiers*



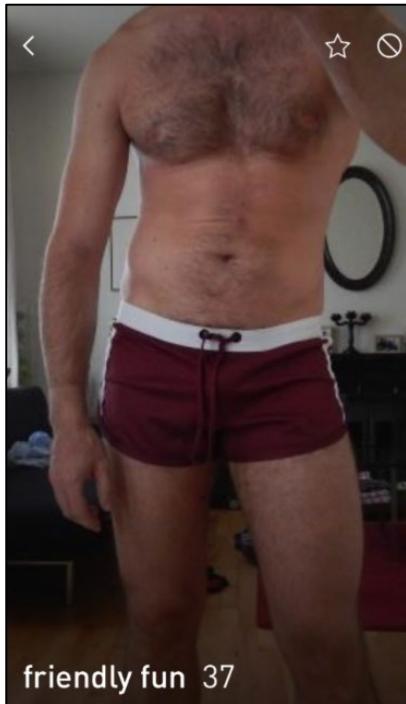
*Image 2: profile 41 – masculine signifiers*

Furthermore, analysis showed that users express expectations towards potential dating partners when it comes to masculine bodily ideals as well. Mentions were found of users expressing a preference for fit men, a rejection of older men and an aversion to skinny men. These mentions in terms of body signify the importance of the male body in these environments. Preferences for fit, youthful and well-build bodies were therefore commonly found. An interesting example of this was found in profile 47, where the user mentioned the following: “Also PT, yoga and stretching, if you need help with your body”. Here the user emphasizes his abilities as a personal trainer and offers other users or potential dating partners the option improve their body, assuming they might need help with this. This shows how the bodily ideal that is present within this platform get promoted actively.

#### **4.1.2. OVERT NUDITY**

Another finding that took up a prominent spot in the analysis process, was the excess of overtly nude masculine bodies. These nude bodies were found through presentations of shirtless bodies, bodies with a lifted-up clothing article showing nudity underneath, bodies only wearing swimwear, bodies with visible underwear, bodies in only underwear and fully nude bodies with covered genitals. There are some obvious links to be found with the previously discussed masculine signifiers that were found in user-profiles, since these nude presentations allow users to clearly display their masculine bodies to other users of the platform. It has to be noted that Grindr enforces guidelines on the platform that restrict users from displaying full nudity and the platform affords itself the

possibility of removing or blocking users that do not abide to these guidelines (Grindr, 2021). This arguably results in users restricting themselves in further displays of nudity. In the images 3 and 4 below, two examples are given of the presence of users partaking in these practices of nudity. Altogether, these findings show how users emphasize their masculine bodily signifiers by foregrounding them through overt nudity.



*Image 3: profile 14 – only swimwear*



*Image 4: profile 23 – lifted shirt*

#### **4.1.3. MASCULINE SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

Besides the abovementioned visual presentations of masculine signifiers, there was also obvious presentations of masculinity through text. More specifically, users textually self-identified with masculinity or masculine signifiers. This was done through general self-identification with the masculine identity or through self-identifications with links to muscularity, body size or hairiness. This means that the visual signifiers that were mentioned in the previous paragraph, were also found in textual mentions of users in their profiles. These findings were done both in the display name section as well as the about me section. In the section of predetermined categories, users highlighted their bodily characteristics as well, with mentions of the user's height in 129 profiles and the user's weight in 99 profiles.

An example of a textual masculine self-identification is given by a user in profile 29, where the user identifies themselves as “a masc dude”. Here the abbreviation of ‘masc’ is used to signify masculine. Another example was found in profile 143, that simply states “manly”. No literal mentions were done regarding the notion of straight-acting.

When looking at the more bodily focused textual self-identifications of masculinity an interesting example was found in profile 16, that used the display name “musclebeef”. Similar examples were found when it comes to self-identifications with hairiness and body size.

#### ***4.1.4. LOOKING FOR MASCULINITY***

Pro-masculine language on the platform was found outside of specific bodily mentions as well, when users used pro-masculine language when referring to potential partners. It was found that users emphasize a preference for masculinity in their dating partners. Users emphasize this by textually mentioning this preference in straight-forward ways. An example of this was found in profile 13, that states: “Be a man and let’s have fun”. Furthermore, in profile 29 the user emphasizes that they are interested in “any masculine hot man”. The findings therefore show that the presence of masculinity is expected or wished for when considering dating partners and can take shape in more general ways that are not primarily focused on the body.

#### ***4.1.5. SPORTY LIFESTYLE***

Outside of the masculine bodily signifiers and the general identifications with, and wishes for, masculinity, there was a prominent representation of a more specific kind of masculinity found. This masculinity took shape through presentations of sports and fitness, visually as well as textually.

Visually the representations of sports and fitness were found through users employing profile pictures that featured them partaking in sports or them wearing sports clothing. Users wearing sports clothing were found in 21 profiles, whereas users partaking in sports, while wearing sports clothing, were found in 9 profiles. Examples of these representations of sports in profiles can be found in images 3 and 4 below.



*Image 5: profile 66 – partaking in sports*



*Image 6: profile 146 – sports clothing*

Besides visual representations of sports, numerous prominent textual representations and expectations surrounding sports were found. Here the emphasis on sports was found through mentions of user's own activities regarding sports or their expectations of potential partners and their sports-related lifestyles. Profile 45 showed an example of the user's own activities regarding sports, when the user mentions: "Like to stay active. Go for a run, squash, badminton, gym, swim". The expectations that are directed towards potential partners when it comes to sports and an active lifestyle are exemplified in profile 46, where the users sums up numerous expectations of their preferred partner, with one of those being: "active". It can be argued that this emphasis on sports combines the previously found focus on the body and the gay ideal, as well as having connection to general performances of masculinity through acting tough and being active.

#### **4.1.6. DISCUSSION**

The findings of the abovementioned pro-masculine presentations and expectations provide with interesting insights in the presence of masculinity in this online platform. The found masculine signifiers in user-profiles are in line with the previously discussed theory and therefore with previous research surrounding this topic. These findings show that displaying traditional masculine signifiers such as muscularity and body hair, as previously determined by Enguix and Gómez-Narváez (2017), are prominent features in this queer online space. With a significant emphasis on the traditionally understood masculine body, the users emphasize their masculinity through these presentations. They make use of the features that are presented to them through the application as well, with prominent

emphasis on physical features in profile descriptions. This ties in to previous work by Ellison et al. (2016), where it was emphasized that users of such platforms might adapt their behavior to the cues that are presented to them. It could therefore be argued that the predetermined categories offered in the platform, motivate users to present their physical attributes to other users.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that masculine presentations take place with a large emphasis on nudity. This is in line with previous findings by Miller (2015), who previously established similar findings. Furthermore, the lack of emotional expression, in this instance through lack of smiling, supports previous statements of Thepsourinthone et al. (2020), that placed the stoic masculine in contrast to the emotive feminine. Similarly, when looking at the substantial focus on sports in the analyzed user-profiles, it could be argued that this is in line with statements of Thepsourinthone et al. (2020) relating to masculine aggressiveness and bravery, in contrary to the feminine passiveness. However, no further theory surrounding sports and masculinity was addressed, therefore this connection can only be assumed. Yet it does provide an example of the many ways in which these masculine presentations might take shape in the context of study.

Additionally, the findings indicated that expectations of potential dating partners were grounded in preferences for bodies that abide to traditional masculine signifiers as well. This ties in to previously discussed literature by Campbell (2004), which highlighted the existence of a gay ideal. The current findings are in line with this gay ideal of the physically attractive, fit and youthful man. It can be argued that this gay ideal gets enforced through these mentions of users' expectations of potential partners and it therefore makes the gay ideal a prominent aspect of self-presentation practices within the platform.

Lastly, the findings showed that users partake in self-identification with masculinity through language. However, it could be argued that with these textual presentations the user themselves is more actively identifying with the presented form of masculinity, whereas in the visual presentations this could be seen as less obvious or less deliberate. When looking back at the theoretical framework, this ties into the work of Goffman (1959) on self-presentation. It could be argued that here the "given" cues are textual presentations of pro-masculine language and the "given off" cues are the visual ones in profile pictures. These cues have impact on the impression that is left, specifically in an online environment, as Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) stated that online environments award more censoring of the self, when compared to an interaction in a face-to-face setting. Therefore these presentations of pro-masculine language signify an important part of supporting masculinity in these online spaces, since users chose to present in these ways specifically. The same was found when looking at expectations of potential dating partners, where an emphasis was put on a preference for masculinity. This was through masculinity outside of solely bodily presentation and in a more general way as well.



## **4.2 FOCUS ON AESTHETICS**

In this second theme, focus is put on the findings that fall within the focus on aesthetics that was found within the analyzed user-profiles. The theme is divided into two sub-themes, which highlight the different ways in which this focus on aesthetics takes center stage throughout the Grindr platform.

### ***4.2.1. NO PIC, NO CHAT***

The analysis showed a substantial number of mentions focusing on the request of pictures in user-profiles. These requests were found in two ways that had a slightly different level of weight. In 20 analyzed profiles, mentions were found of users asking other users to have a picture available. On top of that, in 16 analyzed profile pictures, users put more emphasis on the requirement of other users having a picture available by stressing that they would not interact with users who do not provide them with clear pictures of themselves. An example of this was found in profile 72, which states: “No picture? Don’t even bother!”. This finding shows how users put significant emphasis on other user’s appearance, to the level of not wanting to interact without having seen them first.

### ***4.2.2. CENTERING THE SELF***

The focus on aesthetics was found in more implicit ways within the platform as well. During analysis, it was found that the user-profiles show a substantial number of pictures taken in a mirror. More specifically, 31 profiles contained this type of picture where the individual photographs themselves in a mirror, showing the reflection of their partial or full body. Furthermore, in 33 analyzed user-profiles the picture that was used was identified as a selfie. It could be argued that the users center themselves and their bodies in their visual presentations through these types of photographs.

### ***4.2.3. DISCUSSION***

The findings regarding aesthetics partially support earlier literature which stated that it is common in queer men’s dating profiles to have a significant focus on physical attributes (Miller, 2015). The aesthetic in this instance has more meaning than the person behind those aesthetics. The strong emphasis on requesting users to have pictures available clearly signifies this. It could be argued then, that because of the previously discussed bodily masculine presentations, masculine self-identifications and masculine expectations, the users of the platforms establish altered perceptions of the self and others, specifically with such a prominent focus on aesthetics within the platform.

The centering of the self through selfies and pictures in mirrors was not previously discussed in considered theory. It could be argued that this centering of the self and the body signifies another way in which these users put focus on their aesthetics and bodies. This ties in to previously discussed findings regarding the foregrounding of the masculine body. The link between masculinity and

centering of the self here is not supported by literature, yet it does provide with a possible format through which these masculine bodily presentations most commonly take place in the context of study.

### **4.3 OPPOSING GENDER NON-CONFORMITY**

This third theme highlights the findings that were grouped based on anti-feminine mentions in the ‘about me’-section of user-profiles, as well as in the customizable sections of the profile-building sections of the dating platform. The theme is made up out of two subthemes, which focus on these anti-feminine mentions.

#### ***4.3.1. ANTI-FEMININITY***

The analysis provided an overview of the mentions of anti-feminine language within the user-profiles. These presentations of anti-femininity were found in differing ways. First, there were users that specifically mentioned having an aversion to femininity in their profiles. An example of this was found in profile 53, where the user mentions: “there is no place for something female in my house”. Another user, in profile 138, mentioned: “not into those that carry a purse”. Here the link to femininity is more implicit and is signified through the assumption of feminine men being into female clothing. Besides these two mentions of anti-feminine language, there were no obvious presentations of these anti-feminine narratives in users’ written profiles.

#### ***4.3.2. MAKING FUN OF INCLUSIVITY***

As elaborated on previously, Grindr affords its users the possibility to select numerous predetermined categories to identify with. Two of these categories are the gender- and the pronoun category. Within these categories, users can opt for a customizing-feature, which allows them to create their own gender or pronoun. Throughout the analyzed profiles, mentions were found of users customizing these gender identities and pronouns in joking manners. Examples of this are “papi chulo” in profile 16, “your highness” in profile 43 or “sarcastic” in profile 75. These examples show how users arguably make fun of the initiative that is offered by Grindr to allow users to make their gender- and pronoun sections more inclusive to diverse identities.

#### ***4.3.3. DISCUSSION***

Previous literature that was used for this research focused on anti-femininity through notions of femmephobia, as discussed by García-Gómez (2020). It was determined that existence of femininity in those who do not have the female sex would be sanctioned, specifically within communities with large numbers of queer men. During analysis, narratives were found that could be aligned with femmephobia, although these narratives were not spread throughout a substantial part of the gathered data. It could therefore be argued that queer men’s gender non-conformity within the current context

of study is less obviously resisted than expected based on previous literature. However, the findings related to gender non-conformity were present on a more implicit level, through jokingly customizing the application's features. In previous literature, it was found that the predetermined categories in profile-building sections of dating applications could limit expression of queer individuals and therefore limit their diverse identities (Shield, 2018), yet the current findings show that even when these categories become customizable to personal preference, there is still a possible threat of gender non-conforming individuals getting mocked. Therefore, it could be argued that the opposition of gender non-conformity within this context of study is not exceedingly obvious, although it does find its way through less apparent presentations.

#### **4.4 RESISTING HOMOSEXUALITY**

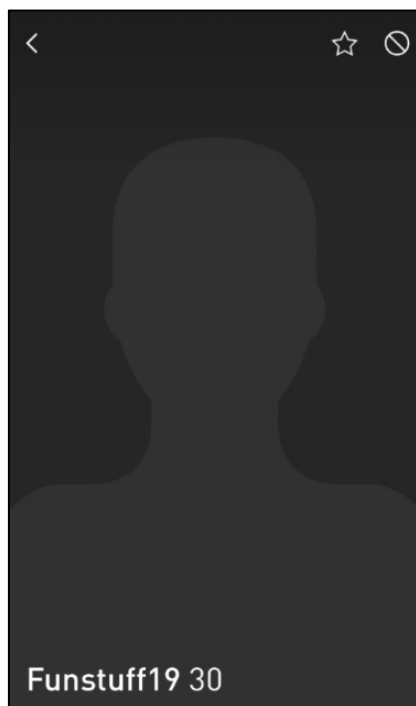
In this fourth theme, focus is put on the resistance of homosexuality that was found within user-profiles. This theme has been divided into two subthemes that were grouped based on findings that signified possible shame of the own sexuality through presentations of discreetness and on findings that signified judgement of the own community.

##### ***4.4.1. DISCREETNESS***

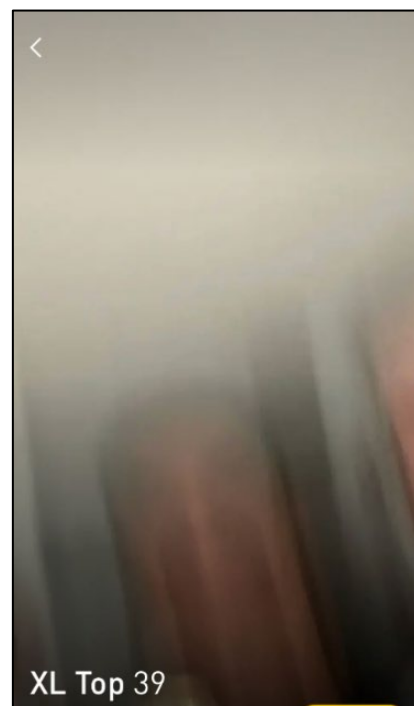
During analysis, mentions of discreetness were found in differing formats and phrasings. Emphasis was put on textual as well as visual components of user-profiles. The textual presentations of discreetness were found through users labeling themselves with the discreet tribe from the predetermined categories, through literal mentions of users self-identifying as being not out of the closet (being open about their sexuality to others around them), through users self-identifying as being discreet and there were users requesting discreetness or anonymity from potential dating partners. An example was found in profile 20, that states: "Looking for a guy that can host as discreetly and anonymously as possible". Furthermore, interesting findings were done when it comes to the display names users gave themselves. It was common for users to not have a display name at all, which signifies possible lack of willingness to be identifiable. The same reasoning can be applied to the profiles that were found having a nickname as display name or those with a display name of only one letter, possibly the first letter of their actual name, although this is impossible to be certain about. Only 18 analyzed user-profiles showed a display name that was identified as the person's possible actual name. These findings indicate how the presence of identifiable names of users are very scarce within the Grindr platform and therefore could contribute to the level of discreetness and anonymity.

When focusing on the visual aspects of the user-profiles, there were interesting findings regarding discreetness to be found as well. There were 13 user-profiles that had no profile picture, 39 user-profiles that had a profile picture that had no presentation of a face and 12 user-profiles had a face that was wearing sunglasses. In image 5 and 6 found below, an example of these unidentifiable

profiles is given. This shows how common a presentation without recognizable facial pictures is within this online space, which signifies the level of discreetness that users provide themselves with. It was common for users to propose the sending of pictures through private chats, which might award them the option to choose who they make themselves identifiable to. Some users went to the extent of emphasizing that they only shared pictures of themselves after having seen pictures of the other. An example of this was found in profile 101, that simply states: “pic on reply”. It could be argued that users partaking in these discreetness practices feel shame of their sexuality and therefore choose not to openly express it, since they do not wish to be identified.



*Image 7: profile 22 – no profile picture*



*Image 8: profile 38 – unidentifiable picture*

#### **4.4.2. JUDGEMENT OF OWN COMMUNITY**

Within the user-profiles, findings were done that could be interpreted as containing a judgement of the own community. This community being the queer community which the user-base of Grindr is made up out of. The findings show that users make judgements of others through textual mentions and requests. Through requesting decency, emphasizing of not being into sexdates, mentioning of not wanting to receive unsolicited nudes, emphasizing of not being into chems (the use of drugs during sex) and specifying of not being into dating with partnered couples, the user-profiles showed various ways in which these judgements came forward. These mentions signify the assumption that these users make about their fellow users of the dating platform. By distancing themselves from these acts, they arguably want to imply that they themselves do not partake in such activities, since they find them undesirable. This distancing could be seen as having roots in negative feelings towards the own community.

#### **4.4.3. DISCUSSION**

In previously discussed theory, emphasis was put on the notion of internalized homonegativity. It was established that internalized homonegativity is defined as having negative feelings towards one's own sexuality. These negative feelings have roots in feeling the need to conform to the masculine/feminine binary and resist what falls outside of that, to avoid being labeled as gay, which has negative connections to femininity in general perspectives in society (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). The previously discussed findings regarding pro-masculinity and anti-femininity can be interpreted as a basis for the presence of internalized homonegativity in this context of study. However, the findings now show other, more explicit ways in which internalized homonegativity might be present on the dating platform. The notion of discreteness plays an important role in this presence, since it was a common finding within the analyzed profiles. It could be argued that users feel negatively about their own sexuality and therefore do not wish to be identified as a homosexual. By doing so, avoiding others from finding out about their activities that they themselves might see as shameful. Essentially making sure that stigmatization from society is averted. However, other reasons might play a role in levels of discreteness that could not be identified through current analysis.

Similar conclusions can be drawn in regards to the judgement of behaviors within the community. Findings show that users criticize others' behavior through distancing themselves from these behaviors in their profiles. In previous literature, García-Gómez (2020) established that internalized homonegativity takes shape through rejection of identification with societal expectations of homosexuality. One of the examples that was provided by the author was the criticizing of promiscuous behavior. The current findings are in line with that statement, since they heavily focus on behavior in relation to sex. Those that do not identify with these behaviors actively place themselves opposite of these societal expectations by identifying as decent men, implying that those who do partake in promiscuous behaviors are considered indecent. It can therefore be argued that these men do not want to be related to the community that they are a part of, potentially due to feelings of shame.

### **4.5 HETEROSEXUAL POWER DYNAMICS**

The fifth theme is focused on the presentations and narratives that fall within an understanding of gender roles and preference that arguably support heterosexual dynamics of power. This theme was divided into two subthemes that focus on these different aspects of the emergence of heterosexuality in a queer space.

#### **4.5.1. TOP VERSUS BOTTOM**

During analysis, a prominent presence of mentions of sexual position was found. Within the predetermined profile-building categories, Grindr allows users to select a sexual position. It was found

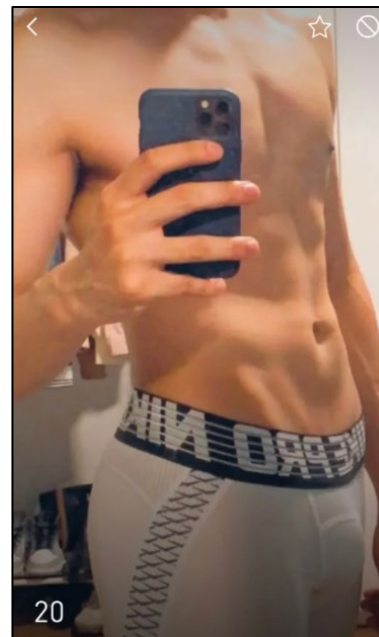
that in 83 analyzed user-profiles, users decided to specify their sexual position in their profile. Of those 83 user-profiles, there were 19 that decided to textually mention their sexual position in the free spaces for textual input as well. These findings signify the importance of the sexual position within this online space of study. More specifically, a clear distinction between the sexual positions of top (sexually giving partner) and bottom (sexually receiving partner) was present. Mentions were found of users identifying themselves as dominant tops or 100% top, while on the contrary users identified themselves as weak bottom, or as faggot (a derogatory gay slur that was reclaimed by gay men for identifying with the submissive position). Furthermore, users make mentions of specific preferences for partners with sexual positions that are on both opposites of the spectrum, with users, for example, mentioning they are not interested in tops or mentioning that they do not want to engage with those who identify as total bottoms. An example of this binary division of sexual position was found in profile 135, where a couple refers to themselves as: “tall (1,95m) dom top with big dick and small weak bottom with fat ass”.

#### **4.5.2. PHALLIC POWER**

The previously discussed focus on sexual position had another prominent mention that was often closely attached to it. The analyzed user-profiles often referred to penis size, either referring to the own penis or to the desired penis size of a potential partner. These mentions were found through text, where users request partners with a large penis or users refer to themselves as having a large penis. One user, in profile 149, went to the extent of using the customizable pronoun section to address to himself as “hung”. Visually, the focus on the male genitals was found as well, through prominent focus on the crotch in profiles pictures or through clearly visible bulges of men in their profile pictures. This being within the limits of previously discussed guidelines of Grindr, which restricts users to use profile picture with full frontal nudity. An example of the visual focus on the penis is given in image 9 and 10 below.



*Image 9: profile 85 – crotch centered*



*Image 10: profile 8 – visible bulge*

#### **4.5.3. DISCUSSION**

These findings in this theme regarding the identifications with the discussed binary divide of sexual positions can arguably be linked to more heterosexual understandings of the divide of sexual roles. It signifies an imbalance in power which could be linked to sexual performances of heterosexual individuals, where there is usually a sexually giving male partner and a sexually receiving female partner (Blanc, 2001). Specifically when considering the importance of dominance and submission that was found in the user-profiles. With the substantial prominence of these top and bottom roles, it can therefore be argued that heterosexual understandings of sex might be present in the context of study. Here those identifying as tops might label themselves as the more masculine partner, where those identifying as bottoms might be identified as the more feminine partner. This supports previous research discussed by authors Rodriguez, Huemmer and Blumell (2016), that focused on queer men identifying themselves as straight through reinforcing hierarchies based on the masculine/feminine divide. It was determined that dominance and the absence of femininity and homosexuality play an important role in this (Reynolds, 2015). Those identifying as tops assert the dominant position and resist the identification with homosexuality through femininity. Those identifying as bottoms get placed in the subordinate position, similar to the place of femininity in a society build on hegemonic masculine ideals. The discussed prominence of phallic power supports these findings, since it highlights the importance of the dominant and aggressive male that asserts the top position in social hierarchy through presentations of bodily masculinity, in this instance with emphasis on the penis.

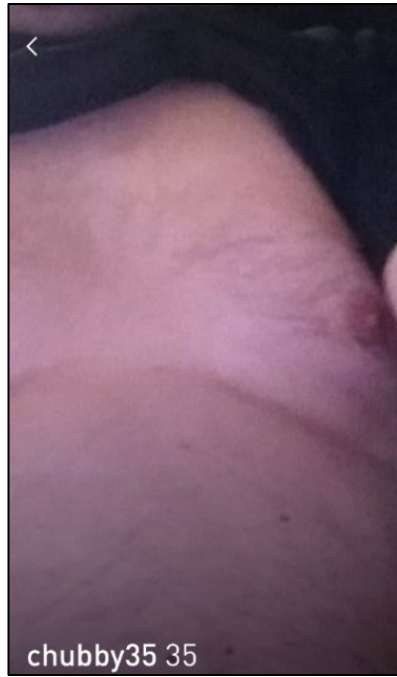
## **4.6 RESISTING THE NORM**

In this sixth theme, the findings are presented that signified resistance to the dominant narratives that were found in the online dating platform Grindr. These findings suggest emerging presentations of counteraction that show how users find their ways in presenting ways of doing identity that are not in line with previously discussed notions of masculinity from the theoretical framework. The theme is divided into six subthemes, which all indicate their own specific countermovement or resistance to the dominant masculine presentations that have been determined in previous findings.

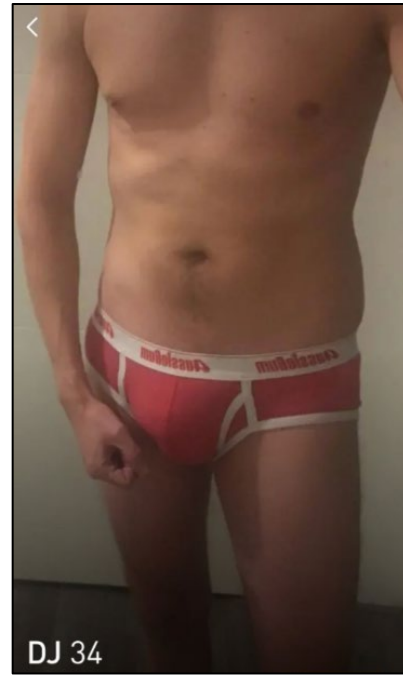
### ***4.6.1. THE NON-IDEAL BODY***

In contrast to the dominant presence of the traditional masculine body, as discussed previously, there were findings that directed towards more diverse presentations of bodies on the platform. Some users slightly differed from the traditional masculine norm in their presentations while others were more radically resisting the norm. Firstly, users displayed bodily presentations that did not align with traditional masculine signifiers relating to hair, for example bodies without body hair or clean shaven faces. These users still predominantly identified themselves as male and no other significant differences with the masculine norm were found. Secondly, users were found that presented in bodily ways that differed substantially from the muscularity norm. These users showed different body sizes, either through higher presence of fat or through lesser levels of muscle. Similar findings that signified differing from the gay ideal were done through mentions of self-identification of users, which were focused on being chubby, being mature or being not perfect. Lastly, findings showed that these non-ideal bodies were also preferred in potential partners by some users, although these findings were more limited. Users expressed, for example, a preference for skinny men or a preference for men who do not have a beard. Examples of presentations of non-ideal bodies are found in image 11 and 12 below.





*Image 11: profile 122 – self-identified chubby*



*Image 12: profile 58 – lesser muscle*

#### **4.6.2. TRANSPARENCY OF THE SELF**

Throughout analysis, findings were done that highlighted users being transparent about themselves. This in contrary to findings discussed previously, that focused on notions of discreteness and shame. In 18 user-profiles a possible mention of the user's own name was found, which indicates a more open attitude to being recognizable and identifiable on the platform, even though the number is relatively small. Furthermore, these users made mentions of their personal characteristics and personal interests, for example mentioning where they live and work or which hobby's they have, to provide potential partners with a better understanding of who they are as a person. An example of this was found in profile 103, where the user states: "Writer, photographer and jack of all trades. Lover of books, theatre, craft beers, writing and Christmas music. Who are you?". Lastly, users were found that link their personal social media accounts, which allows other users to find them online and get a look into their lives. It can be argued that these findings indicate a transparency in users that is not the predominant way of presenting the self on the platform

#### **4.6.3. INCLUSIVE SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

The findings showed individuals identifying themselves with labels other than the previously discussed identifications of masculinity. Findings were done that showed users identifying as non-binary (those who do not identify with the binary sex and gender divide of male versus female; Richards, Bouman, Seal, Barker, Nieder, & T'Sjoen, 2016) and as trans woman. Users made use of the predetermined identity categories within the application and the free text space to mention these

identifications, as well as mentioning their preferred pronouns as having preference or as being she/her/hers.

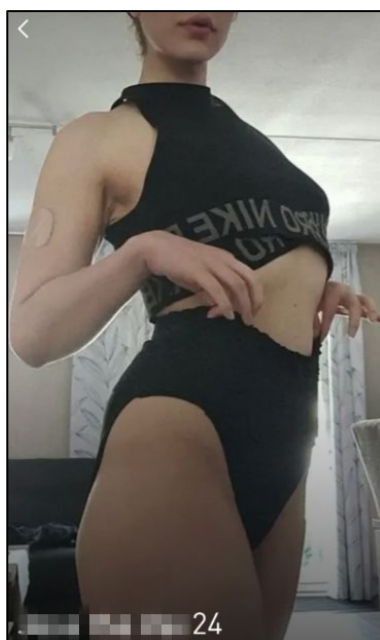
Interestingly, it was found that some users identified with the predetermined category of ‘cis man’, while most commonly, users identified with the category of ‘man’. This distinction signifies a possible difference in understandings of the gender spectrum between users. The term cis man is used to describe those men who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth (Richards et al., 2016), which is a more inclusive understanding of gender identification that takes into consideration that one can identify differently than was assigned at birth. Those who identified as ‘man’ might not be aware of the existence of this concept or might not have an understanding of the concept.

#### ***4.6.4. PROMOTION OF INCLUSIVITY***

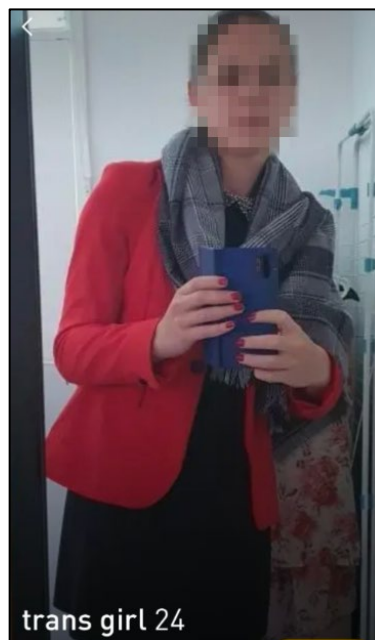
The abovementioned presentations of inclusivity were found through more prominent expressions in user-profiles as well. It was found that users specifically emphasized their focus on inclusivity in their profiles through mentions of open-mindedness, anti-discrimination, anti-masculinity, promotion of diversity emphasis of defining femininity as being powerful. User-profile 41 held an example of that, since the user stated: “Not into misogynous masculinism or any other form of discrimination”. These findings suggest that users might feel the need to openly share their ideals regarding inclusivity with potential partners to ensure visibility of these causes throughout the platform.

#### ***4.6.5. PRESENTING FEMININITY***

The previously mentioned non-normative gender expressions were also found through visual presentations on the platform, focused on femininity. Users presented these in varying levels of non-normativity, with some users presenting femininity in implicit ways and other users fully adapting characteristics that could generally be understood as traditionally feminine. On the implicit level, it was found that users show their smile in profile picture. This in contrast to earlier findings of users lacking emotive expression in the face, which was tied to traditional understandings of masculinity. Furthermore, users were found that showed signifiers that are understood as more feminine. These ranged from wearing of make-up, having long hair, wearing feminine clothing and presenting an hourglass shape. Examples of feminine presentations in user-profiles can be found in images 13 and 14 below.



*Image 13: profile 123 – hourglass shape*



*Image 14: profile 132 – feminine clothing*

#### **4.6.6. SEXUALIZING FEMININITY**

An interesting addition to the abovementioned presence of femininity on the platform was the finding that emerged regarding the sexualization of femininity. It was found that specific sexual requests with links to femininity were present in 11 analyzed profiles. This might not be an incredibly substantial number of profiles, but it does indicate that this very specific sexual preference has found its way through presentations on the platform. These sexual requests took shape through, for example, requests for crossdressers, femboys or shemales. This shows how differing terms were used, yet all mentions were addressing sexual desires that were focused on feminine partners or those who fall somewhere in between the masculine/feminine binary. It can be argued that this signifies an interest that is contrary to dominant sexual preferences on the platform, which could imply a more inclusive approach to non-masculine identities. However, it has to be noted that these findings were merely focused on sexual activities, while no mentions were found that showed specific interest for feminine partners on a non-sexual level.

#### **4.6.7. DISCUSSION**

These findings discussed in this theme signify a possible countermovement that is present within a platform that is usually predominantly highlighting masculine bodies and identities. Results show how the previously discussed gay ideal body is resisted and how the presence of more feminine bodies finds its way through the platform as well. This might indicate how not all members of the community of study feel like they can relate themselves to the dominant and maintained bodily standards. However, this resistance of the bodily norm does come with a possible risk of being sexualized, specifically when looking at those presenting in feminine ways. This sexualization could be seen as problematic, since it limits the acknowledgement of these bodies to merely sexual levels.

Furthermore, these findings show how a smaller group of users resist the notions of discreetness and anonymity that were previously found and find ways to be more open about who they are and what they stand for. It gives the impression that these users have surpassed the feelings of shame and do not hesitate to be identifiable on the platform and therefore arguably do not shy away from identifications with homosexuality. Users show self-identifications and presentations that signify a more inclusive understanding of gender identifications, where some obviously present their non-normative gender identifications through the application's interface and where others might not be fully aware of the potential options they get presented or might not be willing to abide by them. Although it could be argued that the promotions of inclusivity and diversity that were found, which are in contrast to more dominant normative presentations of masculinity previously established, could be presented with the aim of establishing change in levels of knowledge surrounding these topics among the platform's users.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a final conclusion will be given to the proposed research question, based on the previously discussed results of the analysis. Furthermore, the limitations of the executed research will be discussed, while also emphasizing suggestions for possible future research to extend on the current body of work. Finally, the position of the researcher is considered, to ensure reflexive considerations of the research approach.

### **5.1 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study has explored the differing ways in which the concept of heteronormative masculinity and its three main pillars are represented through self-presentations on dating platform Grindr. It was found that masculinity is quite generally the preferred way of presenting the self in the context of study, with users focusing on bodily presentations of masculinity through body size, muscularity, body hair, nudity and sports. They identify their own bodies as masculine through the apps interface, which affords them limited choice options (Shield, 2018), and therefore help in promoting the masculine ideal. These masculine preferences are directed at potential partners as well, with focus on the body and overall behavior related to masculine ideals. These preferred ways of presenting masculinity were largely in line with previously discussed theory and therefore it can be claimed that the Dutch context provides similar ways of presenting masculinity in queer dating platforms, as presentations that have been found in other geographical contexts before (Miller, 2015; Miller, 2018; García-Gómez, 2020). The notion of selective self-presentation (Miller, 2018) played a role in the process by allowing users to highlight certain masculine aspects of their body or persona through the affordances of the Grindr platform.

Furthermore, gender non-conformity is resisted within the context of study, albeit in ways that are more implicit than found previously (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; García-Gómez, 2020). The expected femmephobic language was present in minor ways, which might indicate that the Dutch context is more openminded towards those defining gender outside of the masculine norm or it could signify how the resistance to gender non-conformity is more subtly interwoven in the online practices of study. It was suggested that the users of the platform manipulate the interface through customization practices and, in doing so, arguably present opposing views towards gender non-conformity.

A specific focus on heterosexuality was not found through literal mentions of straight-acting or preferences for those who emulate heterosexual men, like expected from previous research (Burke, 2016). However the study has shown that the presence of heterosexuality in this queer space might take shape through other means. Most prominently, resistance of homosexuality plays a role in this process, since it could be argued that the resistance of homosexuality, through notions of discreetness and the judgement of the own community, insinuates a possible preference for being part of the other,

heterosexual, community. Similar statements could be made regarding the findings focusing on heterosexual power dynamics in mentions of preferred sexual practices within the platform. The copying of gender hierarchies from heterosexual understandings of sex takes place, which might indicate existence or preference of heterosexual perceptions towards the dividing of gender roles in (sexual) relationships.

Overall, it could therefore be argued that heteronormative masculinity prominently finds its ways through the online dating platform Grindr, within the Dutch context of study, specifically in terms of user's self-presentations. The notions of heteronormative masculinity are interwoven on differing levels within these self-presentations and take up a notable presence, which could be impactful for users engaging with this platform. By being exposed to these presentations of heteronormative masculinity, they might feel like these practices are normalized within the queer community they are part of and therefore adapt their own behavior to what is being presented to them. Ultimately, with taking into account the notion of performativity of identity (Butler, 1990; 1993) and with the understanding that online behavior can be understood as more than just the expressing of identity, but also contributing to identity constitution (Cover, 2014), these overt presentations of heteronormative masculinity on the Grindr platform could arguably result in the de-queering of identity presentations or identity perceptions of the users of the platform within The Netherlands, or, when considering the lack of physical or geographical borders in the digital realm, possibly across national borders as well.

On the contrary, the research highlighted an interesting emergence of resistance throughout the platform that signals a possible change in the present norm when considering the notions of heteronormative masculinity. This countermovement focused on presentations of bodies and identities that fall outside of the notions of heteronormative masculinity and have a more prominent focus on inclusivity and diversity, which can be better gathered under the overall umbrella of queerness. Users show how they present themselves in feminine ways, how they do not resist their homosexuality and how they do not abide to the dominant masculine (bodily) identifications within the platform. It can be argued that this signifies a changing environment for queer individuals moving themselves across the Dutch online context. This could be linked to general assumptions of Western open-mindedness towards queer identities, even though these resistant narratives were only making up a relatively minor part of the overall network of users among the Grindr platform. Specifically when considering decreasing sense of inclusivity for queer individuals within The Netherlands (ILGA-Europe, 2021), this minor representation of resistance towards heteronormative perceptions of identity could be seen as a call to action to improve possibilities for more inclusive representation online.

## **5.2 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

With the qualitative approach of the study, it was possible to gather thorough understandings of the self-presentation practices of the subjects of study. However, because of this qualitative approach, findings are not generalizable to the overall population of The Netherlands. The aim of the research was not to generalize findings, since it was aimed to create an understanding of the ways in which these heteronormative masculine ideals were spread throughout the context of study. Furthermore, because of the explorative nature of the research, it was possible to gather significant findings across a relatively large scope of study. However, this has resulted in the lack of possibility to further analyze specific and more small-scale aspects or social characteristics within the timeframe of study. This means that the current research primarily focused on aspects of gender, while it would also be interesting to consider notions of race or social class within the addressed theoretical framework. Additionally, with the focus of this study being on self-presentation practices, findings that were done are based on how the users decide to present themselves. Conclusions were drawn based on these presentations and it was assumed that these presentations could be representing the users' perceptions on the topic of study. However, it has to be noted that self-presentations of users online could possibly be different from the ways in which an individual might present, behave or voice themselves in other contexts. Therefore, when seeking to create a deeper understanding of perceptions of heteronormative masculinity within the queer community, other research methods outside of content analysis, for example in-depth interviewing, could provide with valuable findings in regards to this topic.

Besides this, other recommendations for future research were found during the analysis process. Since an inductive approach to thematic analysis was taken, the coding process foregrounded varying interesting ways in which heteronormative masculinity could be present in self-presentation practices of Grindr users. Firstly, a very prominent general emphasis on sex was found in the user-profiles that were analyzed. Previous research has focused on the combination of notions of masculinity and sex on Grindr, where it was established that Grindr can be viewed as an hypersexualized space (Bonner-Thompson, 2017), where masculine users self-present in pornographic manners (Phillips, 2015). It is interesting to further investigate this prominence of sex, specifically in relation to notions of masculinity, such as heteronormative masculinity. Therefore, an additional thematic map is provided in appendix B, which shows the themes regarding sex that were found in the current work. These could be used for further establishing the relationship between (heteronormative) masculinity and sex, outside of the current scope of research.

## **5.3 POSITION OF THE RESEARCHER**

My position as a researcher might have impacted the way in which I have gone through the different stages of the presented study. It is therefore relevant to be reflexive about this position, to be aware of possible influences this might have had on research outcomes and to improve transparency of the research process. Therefore, it is relevant to mention that I am a white, Western European gay

male that has a significant background in studies related to gender diversity, with specific interest in gender non-conformity. My Western European perspective could have resulted in differing interpretations of identities or overall self-presentations, when compared to researchers from other social, ethnic or cultural backgrounds. I have moved myself throughout predominantly Dutch queer communities offline and online throughout the past decade, which might have impacted my perceptions on the topic of study. My familiarity with the queer community and experience with the Grindr platform has given me the tools to thoroughly understand and interpret the context of study.



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## APPENDIX A: THEMATIC MAP

<i>THEME</i>	<i>SUBTHEMES</i>	<i>CODES</i>
<b>PRO-MASCULINITY</b>	<i>The masculine body</i>	facial hair body hair low waist/chest ratio flexed muscle defined muscle defined muscle through shirt emphasis on jawline frowned eyes no smile bald short hair just torso preferring fit guys not into skinny not into older request of age consideration offering help with getting fit mention of being in shape
	<i>Overt nudity</i>	shirtless photo shirt lifted up visible underwear only underwear nude body
	<i>Masculine self-identification</i>	filled in height filled in weight filled in body type self-identified masculine self-identified muscle guy mention large body size mention of very hairy mention of being in shape mention of muscle
	<i>Looking for masculinity</i>	mention masc4masc request of manliness
	<i>Sporty lifestyle</i>	mention of sports mention of active lifestyle partaking in sports: pic wearing sports clothing mention of outdoor activities
<b>FOCUS ON AESTHETICS</b>	<i>No pic, no chat</i>	no pic, no chat request of pic
	<i>Centering the self</i>	selfie mirror picture
<b>OPPOSING GENDER NON-CONFORMITY</b>	<i>Anti-femininity</i>	no place for 'something female' mention 'no purse types'
	<i>Making fun of inclusivity</i>	gender: customized; joke pronouns: customized; joke
<b>RESISTING HOMOSEXUALITY</b>	<i>Discreetness</i>	mention of being not out mention of being discreet requesting discreetness requesting anonymity

		nickname as title one letter title no profile picture no recognizable face sunglasses pic on reply pics in chat tribes: discreet
	<i>Judging own community</i>	request for decency request of no unsolicited nudes not into sexdates no chems not into partnered preferring single
<b>HETEROSEXUAL POWER DYNAMICS</b>	<i>Top vs bottom</i>	identifying as dominant top identifying as 100% top looking for bottom looking for dominant partner identifying as small weak bottom identifying as faggot not into total bottoms not into btm or vers loving slim twink bottoms mention of sexual position
	<i>Phallic power</i>	pronouns: customized; hung mention of big penis size requesting big penis crotch centered visible bulge
<b>RESISTING THE NORM</b>	<i>The non-ideal body</i>	filled in body type: stocky filled in body type: average filled in body type: slim no body hair clean shaven belly love handle slim body self-identifying as chubby self-identifying as not perfect self-identifying as mature into twinks not into beards preference for not too tall into skinny guys
	<i>Transparency of the self</i>	mention of own name mention of personal characteristics mention of personal interests referring to Instagram for pics link to socials
	<i>Inclusive self-identification</i>	gender: cis man gender: non-binary gender: trans woman pronoun: customized; no preference pronouns: she/her/hers self-identifying as transgender girl

	<i>Promoting inclusivity</i>	identifying as openminded mention of anti-discrimination mention of anti-masculinity mention 'feminine=powerful' promotion of diversity promotion of inclusivity
	<i>Presenting femininity</i>	earrings long hair nail polish semi-long hair smile feminine underwear feminine clothing hourglass shape
	<i>Sexualizing femininity</i>	specific sex request: trans specific sex request: T-girls specific sex request: feminine clothing specific sex request: crossdresser specific sex request: femboy specific sex request: shemale specific sex request: TG specific sex request: TV specific sex request: feminine

## APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL THEMES

THEME	SUBTHEME	CODE
HYPERSEXUAL GRINDR	<i>Looking for sex</i>	mention of NSA nickname: sex-related looking for sex looking for more experience mention looking for FWB mention of looking for parties mention of looking for sex asking who is horny in bio
	<i>Implicit sexual references</i>	profile pic in bed open legs pose mention of being curious mention of being experienced swimming shorts visible inguinal crease pouted lips open mouth unbuttoned pants visible pubic hair mention of being inexperienced sexual innuendo in bio winking mention of open to anything requesting straight to the point like cuddling mention of preferring good kissers
	<i>Fetishization</i>	specific sex request: armpits specific sex request: assplay specific sex request: BBC specific sex request: BJ specific sex request: chems specific sex request: DT specific sex request: f&ck hard and long specific sex request: FF specific sex request: jerking off specific sex request: kinkyplay specific sex request: piss specific sex request: sensitive nipples specific sex request: sportswear specific sex request: soft bdsm specific sex request: slutty specific sex request: porn specific sex request: location specific sex request: black partner specific sex request: kink clothing
	<i>Miscellaneous: tattoo; glasses; scenery profile picture; pet in profile picture; costume; requesting following through with plans; mention of not wanting drama; invite to send a message; self-identifying as weird; mention of 420; mention of relationship status; looking for connection; mention of lost conversations; quote in bio; emphasis on friendliness; mention blocking easily; casual clothing; mention of reply when interested; mention of photo not doing justice; OnlyFans link in bio</i>	