Abstract

Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) have made use of social networking sites for romantic and sexual encounters for over 15 years (Campbell 2007). Predating Facebook.com (2012a) by five years, sites like Gaydar.co.uk\(^1\) (2012b)\(^2\) gave MSM not only an online space, but a virtual presence. While Gaydar quickly became a worldwide brand and recognised as an innovative, successful business model, it also became a ubiquitous feature in how MSM sought and found other MSM socially. Alongside the tens-of-thousands of personal profiles there are thousands of Commercial profiles for men selling sex to men (M$M) as escorts, masseurs or in other occupations. This chapter looks at how the Commercial profiles co-exist alongside Personal profiles and how M$M ads have queered the social network landscape which has, in turn, queered the construct of what it means to sell sex. MSM ads have thus disrupted not only dominant discourses of ‘sex work’ and ‘massage’ – but have also queered modern ‘gay’ identity/-ies by challenging prescribed authenticity in ‘sex’ and ‘work’. This chapter further asks whether this disruption challenges modern hetero- and homonormativity, or whether it cements century-old stereotypes. Based on data collected from Gaydar profiles and combining a ‘reflexive queer ethnography’ with semiotic analysis of both visual and verbal texts, the chapter details how MSM and M$M use their profiles to make an iterative and dialogic construction of their own sexualised embodiment.

\(^1\) [http://www.gaydar.co.uk/](http://www.gaydar.co.uk/) is ‘an internet dating/social networking site for gay men’ (Light et al., 2008b)

\(^2\) During revisions of this chapter, the URL used to access Gaydar changed to .net from localised addresses such as .co.uk or .com.au.
**Introduction: Queer Images Queer Consumers**

*MSM*® Commercial profile: A muscular, young man with a smooth chest and a nipple piercing holds an Adidas rugby ball. He is wearing a whistle around his neck. He has one thumb tucked into the back of sheer, white trunks that accentuate the size and shape of his erection. The photograph is cropped so his seated body is only seen from the neck down. The red backdrop, the folding stool and the lighting make the photo look like it has been professionally staged. This is one of five similar images on the profile.

*MSM*® Member profile: A young man is reflected in the mirror of a gym locker room. He is bare chested and wearing gym shorts. In one hand he holds a sports drink and in the other his smart-phone is aimed to take the picture in the mirror. The photo crops the top half of his face and the lower half of his legs out of the frame. His mouth is tight, perhaps an expression of concentration. The image is accompanied with two other topless photos taken while playing sport, a professional head shot in a button down shirt and group photo with the faces of the other subjects concealed with a blurred effect.

These are examples of photos that appear on Gaydar, the well-known social networking site that was launched in the UK in 1999 (Strudwick 2009). Gaydar users create a profile with fields for standardised descriptions (for example, age, ‘race’, colouring, height, body type), open text fields to describe themselves, what they are ‘Looking for’ and their location, and fields to enter photographs, like the ones described above (Mowlabocus 2010). Whilst the site and its profiles are predominantly marketed for personal, non-work use, there are large and growing numbers of ‘Commercial’ profiles that offer a variety of services, predominantly related to escorting, modelling, various types of massage, photography and personal training.

This chapter looks at how the Commercial and personal profiles are co-constructive/-ed and how the profiles for men selling sex to men (MSM) have queered the social network
landscape and how that in turn has queered the construct of what it means to sell sex.

Building on literature on sex work (particularly male Internet escorting) and social network sites used by men who desire sex with men (MSM), I use queer theory to explore the structure of the site and its profiles, and the mutuality and comparability of the exchanges that are negotiated there. My aim is to queer dominant binaries and ideological boundaries that are constructed at the intersections of sex and money.

Queer | sex work | advertising

Throughout the chapter, I use ‘queer’ as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, synecdoche and metonym, enjoying rather than limiting the multiplicity and fluidity of the word itself. Queer theory has paid particular attention to ‘subjects positioned outside the privileged sites of heterosexuality and heteronormativity’ (Leckey & Brooks 2010, 5) and their attendant positions with hegemonic masculinities and a mythologised ‘charmed circle’ (Rubin 1993). I employ its multiple genealogies: social constructionism, trans-gendering, ‘outing’ politics (Halley and Parker 2011), which not only lend themselves to, but are indispensable in, exploring advertised sex work. Here, queer is collectivity and otherness, disruption and blending, deconstruction and re-imagining (Muñoz 2009). Queer, for my reading, tames (or frees?) the oxymoron of the Collective/Other. Queer performs as a relational description of the collective of persons whose gender/ sexual actions/ constitutions/ actions are other/’Other’ to the current, culturally recognised dominant categories and hierarchies. Queer is used, here, without specific and specious boundaries, (beyond) those constructed through gender and sexuality, noting that sexuality and gender are mutually constructing and interrelated with other identity categories such as race, class, age, embodiment, and so on (Hall 2003; Weeks 2011).

Whilst ‘queer’ is often critiqued when used as a metonym for men who have sex with men (Caudwell 2006), and there is growing literature on male sex work (Smith & Laing 2012), it
is true that men are still an understudied group of people working in the sex industry (Walby 2012). Historical examples of compensated male with male exchanges have explored stories of young male soldiers, working class labourers and cross-dressing men in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Weeks 1991). Male prostitution from the middle of the twentieth century placed an emphasis on street prostitution and ‘hustlers’ (Scott 2003). Later research looks at MSM from psychological, social and sexual health (Mariño et al. 2000; Parsons et al. 2004 2005; Uy et al. 2004), and legal perspectives (Whowell 2010). More recent work has focused on (or included) sociologies of men selling sex to men (Dorais 2005; Walby 2012) and builds a perspective of a new ‘petite bourgeoisie’ who use sex to earn extra or alternate income outside of more mainstream enterprises, eschewing lower pay, longer hours or other stresses (Bernstein 2007a 2007b; Walby 2012). Some of the most up to date work explores newer forms of client contact and negotiation, specifically men who advertise escort services in magazines (Cameron et al. 1999) and on the Internet (Koken et al. 2010; Phua & Caras 2008; Phua et al. 2009; Walby 2010 2012). The focus or site of the Internet advertising research is online classified advertisements (Koken et al. 2010) and websites dedicated to escort advertising (Logan 2010; Phua & Caras 2008; Phua et al. 2009), usually in America. Of course there are other spaces for online advertising of sex work, including private websites, blogs and social networks. This chapter focuses specifically on Gaydar because it is constructive of and constructed by dominant repertoires at the intersection of commercialised social and sexual spaces: Gaydar is a hugely successful business model where men may seek dates, long term relationships, friendships, or casual sex.

Queer advertising

Judith Williamson’s seminal work on advertising explores how advertising ‘creates structures of meaning’ (Williamson 2002, p12). In queer theory, a vast range of ‘texts’ including –
amongst others – film, sculpture, speeches and parliamentary debates are ‘scrutinized as
potentially regulatory and productive texts [through] their gaps, insinuations, and excesses of
meaning’ (Leckey & Brooks 2010, 4) in their relationship to heteronormativity. Using (sub-)
cultural, non-canonical texts allows reflexive thought about the extent to which spaces and
sites co-construct with their users/subjects normative and potentially regulatory codes and
treatments (Leckey & Brooks 2010).

The exploration of Gaydar profiles as cultural texts provokes reflection on the extent to which
commercial social-sexual representations are co-constructive/ed with their subjects in
normative and potentially regulatory ways. If ‘queer’ has indeed ‘been conscripted into
service as a sexier, more marketable label for lesbian and gay identities’ (Leckey & Brooks
2010: 2) then a deconstruction of sex/y market/able culture is a useful endeavour to explore
not the ‘inevitable’ absorptions but the intersectionalities of ‘political dissent’, ‘late
capitalism’ and ‘consumer culture’ pointing to queer as futurity and potentiality (Muñoz
2009).

In line with the aims of this book, I pose three arguments. First, the spaces where
contact and relationships are negotiated are constructed (to look) the same for MSM and
MSM, both by the interface designers and the user-members. The diversity in the form,
practice and embodiment of sex work is that it looks and is executed just like other Gaydar
exchanges. Second, the commercial and personal exchanges/relationships themselves have
similar qualities; thus, dominant discourses about sex work being Other to legitimate
relationships are troubled when seemingly ordinary Gaydar ‘relationships’ are themselves
bounded, immediate and ultimately (if seemingly indirectly) commercialised. Therefore,
third, that all sex/relationships/exchanges on Gaydar (or any pay-to-use site) can be
considered commercialised, and even brokered, sex/relationships/exchanges. Not only do
they visually/representationally look the same, and are enacted (performed) similarly, but
both take place in a commercialised, brokered setting.

**Method of investigation**

The data for this chapter comes from multiple sources: semi-structured interviews with 18
men who have sold sex to men through advertising, 796 small ads in gay scene magazines,
publicly available content from ‘Commercial’ profiles on Gaydar, and my own field notes
from observations and interactions with men in London’s gay scene, including both physical
and virtual spaces (Mowlabocus 2007). I used the online social-sexual-networking site,
Gaydar, as a source of advertising data, as an ethnographic site of research (Mowlabocus
2010a; Sanders 2005) to observe, to advertise for participants and to contact potential
participants. Using Gaydar further empowered participants and potential participants by
giving them additional information about me as a researcher and my own subject-position in
the gay scene, thus breaking down more traditional researcher-respondent roles, whilst
maintaining ethical and professional boundaries (Walby 2010).

The participants in my interviews queered my attempts at purposive sampling of sexual
identifications and occupational identifications. For example, many men who sell sex
describe themselves as bisexual; however, some of the men I spoke to described themselves
in their profiles as bisexual, whether or not they had ever had sex with a woman, reinforcing
queer queries about the temporal limitations and performative expectations of social-sexual
labels, again disrupting and blending significations of actions, identities, potentialities and the
spaces between (Muñoz 2009). Importantly, the various definitions of ‘massage’ and the
mixed messages that are evident in the profiles are reiterated by men who advertise as ‘not an
escort service’ and regularly offer ‘happy endings’.
To analyse such polytextual data (Reavey 2011), I employ a semiotic toolkit adapted from the work of Judith Williamson (2002) Gillian Rose (2007) and Ros Gill (2011) to deconstruct advertising to the multiple signs and structures that have reproduced ‘Commercially Sited Sex’ within the online social-sexual network.

Gaydar and ‘Commercially Sited Sex’

Sexual relationships have been theorised with binary models of authenticity or instrumentality, such as ‘pure’ romantic love or attention attracted by gift giving (Weeks 1991). Such binaries do not reflect the materiality of lived relationships. Controversial comparisons between dowries, engagement rings and alimony problematize such divisions. Boundaries become blurred further in commercially organised spaces like Gaydar.net (and the more mainstream – and arguably heteronormative – Match.com), where people pay fees to meet dates, lovers and partners. With an understanding that sex can be sited in a commercial context, queer theory eschews these binaries for (a more queer?) understanding that incorporates authenticity and instrumentality, commercialism and sex. I propose that discourses of Commercially Sited Sex (CSS) can acknowledge the different ways that sexual activity is promoted and exchanged commercially, whether or not the activity has been defined by participants as ‘sex’ or ‘work’ and to examine where the shifting boundaries lay between the authentic and the instrumental (Padilla 2008; Weeks 1991). Commercially Sited Sex recognises the sexualisation of commercial and social spaces (Attwood 2006; Mowlabocus 2007; Paasonen et al. 2007) and the commodification and commercialisation of sex (Chaline 2010; Chatterjee 2012; Light et al. 2008).

Social networking sites, like Gaydar, are constructive of CSS in several ways: the social networking site is an inherently commercialised space. It is run as a for-profit business, seeks and attracts commercial and corporate advertising, and charges members monthly or annual
fees for expanded use of the interface. Through reading social-sexual networking spaces like Gaydar where MSM and MSM profiles are placed in the same spaces and given the same structures, selling sex has developed an indexical\(^3\) relationship with MSM (gay, bisexual) online profiles. That is to say, there is an inherent relationship which is culturally specific and socially created (Chandler 2007).

\textbf{‘One way or another, everybody pays’}

‘Guest’ access is available with limited features for free to people who set up a profile with a handle and confidential email address. Extra search and access features are available with paid membership, for personal use (Member) and for commercial use (Commercial). The personal use Member profiles are explicitly forbidden for use promoting commercial services, although Members have the same access to chat rooms named for ‘Escorts and Clients’ or ‘Masseurs and Clients’. Commercial profiles are used for a variety of paid services, including photography, personal training and massage; however, the majority are from men (or organisations) offering Escort or erotic massage services.

Member profiles and Commercial profiles are all charged and paid for. Fees for Commercial profiles are more than \textit{six times} the fee for Members. After pausing to question the reason for (and significance of) the imposed price structures, the point to note is that all Members ‘pay’, and if paying for membership constructs sex as ‘commercialised’, then Gaydar is like other commercial spaces in the gay scene that charge entry fees for access to social-sexual networking spaces. As such, social networking sites, like clubs and saunas, queer the binary of Commercial and non-commercial sex (Campbell 2004; McLelland 2002).

Men also report that the types of encounters and exchanges they experience in compensated exchanges are similar to the recreational encounters that they hear about and/ or experience:

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\(^3\) Pierce divided signs as iconic, indexical and symbolic. Indexical signs have an inherent relationship which is culturally specific and socially created (Chandler, 2007).
often immediate, sometimes anonymised, and usually bounded. ‘My friends went out at the
to saunas, met people, did it for nothing. I thought, “Fuck it, I’ll get paid for
it.”’ (George, 42). This construction of casual sex and commercial sex as being the same type
of experience except for the negotiation of a direct payment reinforces the complementarity
of Rubin’s (1984) charmed circle. At the same time, it challenges divisions that are simply
demarcated by the presence or absence of a cash payment preceding a sexual encounter.

Explorations of the authenticity and boundedness of sexual relationships intersect with the
theoretical and legal considerations of whether, or to what extent, payment is made – and to
whom – in soliciting and procuring the sexual act.

**Homonymity in MSM and M$M profiles**

All Gaydar profiles, for MSM and M$M, have commercial elements such as banner ads
displayed on each page and Guests and Members receive direct marketing as Instant
Messages through the Gaydar network. The content of the banner ads relates to information
collected from the user’s recent Internet browsing history which further creates an indexical
relationship between Gaydar, mainstream commercial advertising and social/sexual
interactions. So even the man who creates a personal profile with the homonormative hopes
of meeting Mr. Right (or Mr. Right-Now) is also creating a space where others will view his
profile under the banners of additional products or services from any number of commercial
sectors, from car hire to credit cards.

The indexical signification between profiles and (corporate) advertisements, and between
personal (MSM) profiles and Commercial (M$M) profiles, reinforces the constructive and
representative intersectionality between MSM and M$M. All Gaydar profiles, for MSM and
M$M, share almost identical structures, use the same interfaces and use adjacent spaces.

Social-sexual networking sites like Gaydar that include MSM and M$M profiles are unlike
online spaces such as Rentboy.com that are reputedly specific to sex work – or iconically
The inclusion of profiles for MSM and M$M makes Gaydar more like commercialised, social, ‘gay’ spaces like gay bars where both personal and paid encounters are sometimes negotiated (Campbell 2004; Hall 2007). This co-existence of MSM and M$M subject-agents, possibilities and exchanges in a commercial space disrupts the tidy, moralised) boundaries and hierarchies that are reinforced as the politics of LGBT equalities are argued and (in many ways, in some places) advanced (Weeks 2007; Muñoz 2009).

Like in the bars, pubs and clubs, paying users can access the same services, whether as MSM or M$M. Non-paying Guests use limited services for free in a marketing model that recognises a critical mass of users as providing the essential content of the site (Campbell 2007; Ghose & Han 2011). As such, even the business model of Gaydar is structured as tangible example of the social-constructionism that QueerTheory advocates.

This mix of MSM profiles with M$M specific spaces discursively constructs an intersectionality between gay space and selling sex. Selling sex is (more) visible. Men who would not otherwise visit (outdoor) spaces known for ‘male prostitution’ rub virtual shoulders with men advertising as escorts, although this proximity of gay and sex work spaces is neither new, nor unusual, which urban histories and geographies demonstrate (Atkins & Laing 2012; Weeks 1991; Hubbard & Prior 2013). Following a relational position (Emirbayer 1997) and ‘against antirelationality’ where it is essential to understand ‘queerness as collectivity’ (Muñoz 2009), this recognition further queers theoretical or political boundaries around types of sex work (erotic photography, dance, live or recorded performance) and how sex work is defined.

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4 Despite its suggestive name and explicit marketing, Rentboy.com includes a disclaimer on its homepage stating that it is not to be used for commercial sex exchange.
When is an advertisement not an advertisement?

Originally constructed as a platform where men could seek and meet other men for relationships (Strudwick 2009), the Gaydar site employs/ imposes a uniform structure on all profiles. Profile content further queers a binary between sex work, massage, and personal profiles. Commercial profiles have comparable graphic and photographic content to Member and Guest ads. There is little to differentiate many of the pictures advertising sex work from those advertising various types of massage. The men in the photographs work to perform the male body, through body-shaping workouts, grooming, (un-)dressing, staging, posing and photographing. Further, the written text in Commercial profiles both anchor and disrupt the messages portrayed in profiles for escort and massage services.

Using Goldman’s (1992) concept of mortise, or framing, allows a reading of the queer/queering of social-sexual networks through sex work advertising and the reciprocal queering of sex work by the social-sexual network. By being framed identically to ordinary online meetings and negotiations, sex work takes a form divergent from more dominant ideologies. Advertisements that are intended not to look like advertisements (Goldman 1992) have been reincarnated through commercial advertising in social-sexual network profiles. Text fields, font size and photo size all reproduce a comfortable recognition that this man is like me.

The standardised structure of the profiles contributes to shifting their reading away from iconic likeness to (quite literally) an index – even a catalogue – of signs from which the consumer might browse and ultimately select or decline. The format constructs the advertisers as indexed, catalogued profiles to be browsed, called upon, or silently rejected. As one Gaydar Member says:

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*Conceptualising online social-sexual networks like Gaydar necessitates inclusion of the infrastructure and the user-members, since either is something different without the other.*
The other thing I was thinking about is the whole “Gaydar” sort of thing, because that reduces sexual attraction to the most kind of transactional basis, because you've got pictures. You know, you're looking at Gaydar, and you're thinking “Is that person attractive?” by a single picture whether they’ve had it done by a professional photographer or whether they’ve, you know, aimed it down their torso. But, it encourages, you, you know, to flick through 100 photos in 10 minutes thinking “No, no, no, no, no, no. Possible. Yes.” Based on a very, you know, it’s the ultimate kind of, forwardisation, you know, manufacturing production lines based on what is attractive and I think it encourages people to appraise each other in those ways. It’s a bit dodgy.

(Michael, 32, Gaydar Member)

Conclusion

Williamson’s semiotic approach to analysing advertisements is useful to deconstruct the queer in Gaydar profiles of M$M. And yet, the self-produced profiles of men selling sex to men trouble and disrupt theories of advertising.

[Advertising has no “subject”. Obviously people invent and produce advertisements, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak from them, it is not their speech. Thus there is a particular space, a gap where the speaker should be; and one of the peculiar features of advertising is that we are drawn in to fill that gap, so that we become both listener and speaker, subject and object (Williamson 2002, p13-14).

Self-produced, self-posted profiles queer the very subject/object relationship. The person in the profile is both subject (photographer) and object (model). He is present as both subject (salesman, producer and service provider) and, arguably, object (erotic or romantic fantasy, body, or phallus).

To what extent, then, is the subject/object binary still relevant? On the one hand, men are self-photographed becoming both spectator and participant, object and subject. We reclaim our subject position through agency but surrender our agency as our self-produced content is profiled and consumed. The self-posted self-portrait (SPSP) is a form of both agency and structure. Self-posting subjects are structurally objectified as their SPSP becomes content to
be used by the hosting page or site. The image, now content, generates the traffic which
generates the advertising which generates the income which pays the salaries and dividends
to the formal stakeholders.

Through a series of ordered, semiological relationships (Barthes 1993; Hodge and Kress 1988) the commercial, social-sexual network and the MSM profile queer commercialised sex, sexualise queer commerce and commercialise the sexual queer.
Politics and policies that only focus on heteronormative discourses of power, sex and work must be aware of burgeoning dialogs and commonalities between paid and unpaid sexual encounters (Scoular 2004) and non-heteronormative subjectivities of work.
Bibliography


