

## **How does the desire for anonymous intimacy threaten users' data privacy on Grindr?**

In the fifteen years since its launch, Grindr has grown into the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people.<sup>1</sup> The app is primarily used by gay and bisexual men who are seeking relations with other men and has approximately 12.15 million active users.<sup>2</sup> Grindr differs from other apps of its type in the manner in which its users begin communication. On dating apps like Tinder or Hinge users partake in a swiping culture - if two users both swipe 'yes' on each other, they match and subsequently open the channels of communication. However Grindr does not function like this, Grindr uses your device's GPS to locate users nearby and displays their profile pictures in a grid, organised by their distance from you. This then allows users to access all profiles in proximity to them and message them freely. When first launched, the app was positioned as a queer alternative to the traditional dating apps that had predominantly been used by heterosexual users - however it has since become an app that is seedy in its nature, and its primary function is seeking usually immediate sexual partners. Grindr champions itself with creating a safe space where users can 'discover and navigate the queer world around you'.<sup>3</sup> This essay will dissect Grindr's unique position in the online world, the impact of anonymity, the app's complicated data issues and just how safe a space it has actually created for its users.

---

<sup>1</sup> N/A. [n.d.]. 'About Grindr', *Www.grindr.com* <<https://www.grindr.com/about>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Statista Research Department. 2024. 'Topic: Grindr', *Statista* <<https://www.statista.com/topics/11467/grindr/#topicOverview>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>3</sup> N/A, About Grindr.

It could be easy for those unfamiliar with the social context of Grindr to write it off as simply another dating app, however this platform is completely disparate to its app store counterparts. One of the key distinctions is the sense of anonymity users receive when communicating on the app, allowing users to experiment with discretion. A profile picture is not a necessity, those accounts without profile pictures or 'blank profiles', are common signs of a more discreet user, the sense of secrecy is an allure for a lot of users. Because an active Grindr profile is enough to identify any user as a man interested in other men, Grindr also in effect eases pressures to adhere to fashions or trends that would homonormativity make one recognizable as gay.<sup>4</sup> It is notable that a large portion of the so-called anonymous users are older - those who stem from a generation in which the idea of homosexuality was much more shameful. Therefore the act of seeking sexual encounters with other men is something that would naturally be anonymous, a secret that should not be discussed or acted on publicly.

By extension this sense of anonymity that comes from these more discreet users then shapes the general communication model within the app. It curates a sense of security while messaging users - the absence of identifiable personal information attached to an account makes the person at the other end of the screen seem less palpable, they exist as a profile rather than a person.

There is a lack of identifiable humanity attached to these profiles. And for the profiles that do choose to share their face or name, the comfort of anonymity that exists within the app still lingers - inviting users to share intimate information that they might not usually be inclined to to strangers on the internet.

---

<sup>4</sup> Woo, Jaime. 2015. 'Grindr: Part of a Complete Breakfast', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2.1, <<https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.1.0061>>, pg.66.

Grindr, however, encourages its users to share this personal data. The app engages in a categorisation of users by asking a series of extremely particular, though not mandatory, questions when creating an account. These answers are then displayed on your profile for any user close enough to you to view. Information such as age, height, weight, ethnicity, religious beliefs, drug usage, gender identity, vaccination status, sexual orientation, sexual position, sexual preferences, are all common statistics to be listed in a person's bio on Grindr. The justification for this information being displayed is essentially to simplify the process of finding a suitable sexual partner. Rather than the usual process of conversing and asking a person questions to try and gauge a connection - one can simply glance at a person's bio stats, if they fit the criteria you pursue, if not you swipe to the next user.

In December 2023, Grindr released their own version of a wrapped, a common user activity summary that many social media platforms release yearly, popularised by Spotify. The data presented in this 'Grindr Unwrapped', encapsulates the type of information gathered from its users. The summary described by Grindr as 'anonymous aggregated data from our global user base', listed countries ranked by highest percentage in a number of categories.<sup>5</sup> Some of these categories include the highest percentage of; bottoms, tops, pit lovers, feet lovers, leather lovers, hung bottoms, femme tops, daddies, twinks, open relationships, amongst other various sexually revealing groupings.

---

<sup>5</sup>N/A. 2023. 'Grindr Unwrapped', *Www.unwrapped.grindr.com* <<https://www.unwrapped.grindr.com/>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

Where the problem with Grindr lies is that the sense of security felt while sharing data within the app does not necessarily translate to how the app handles that data. Grindr has been faced with a series of fines and lawsuits in regards to its data practices. In 2021, they received a €10 million fine from the Norwegian Data Protection Authority due to Grindr sharing user data to a number of third parties without legal basis. The data shared included GPS location, user profile data, and notably the fact that the user in question is on Grindr. The fact that a user is on Grindr speaks to their sexual orientation, and therefore this constitutes special category data that merit particular protection.<sup>6</sup> Grindr's privacy policy is relatively standard in comparison to other social media apps, however as raised by the Norwegian National Data Protection Authority: Grindr is not standard in comparison to other social media networks therefore its privacy policy should reflect that.

What differentiates Grindr from other social networking apps, is the personal nature of the data stored within the app, a large number of users will have sexually explicit images and information saved and shared within the app. Users of the app are forced to accept the privacy policy in its entirety to use the app, however it is not made specifically clear that the user is subsequently consenting to the sharing of their data with third parties.<sup>7</sup> Which when considering the nature of the information that would be shared by Grindr, is an especially egregious violation of privacy. In 2023 a privacy nonprofit raised these issues to the American Federal Trade Commission, calling on them to investigate Grindr's data practices. Finding that not only was

---

<sup>6</sup>N/A. 2021. 'Norwegian DPA: Intention to Issue € 10 Million Fine to Grindr LLC | European Data Protection Board', *Www.edpb.europa.eu* <[https://www.edpb.europa.eu/news/national-news/2021/norwegian-dpa-intention-issue-eu-10-million-fine-grindr-llc\\_en](https://www.edpb.europa.eu/news/national-news/2021/norwegian-dpa-intention-issue-eu-10-million-fine-grindr-llc_en)> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>7</sup>———. [n.d.-b]. 'Privacy Policy | Grindr', *Www.grindr.com* <<https://www.grindr.com/privacy-policy>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

Grindr illegally selling users data - but the app was also storing and disclosing user's photos and messages after account deletion. Despite the app's privacy policy stating that user's personal data will be deleted 28 days after account deletion, the company was accused of storing this data after the 28 day period.<sup>8</sup> This amongst a number of other accusations stemmed from former chief privacy officer, Ronald De Jesus, who sued the company for wrongful termination in 2023.<sup>9</sup>

In 2022, news broke that Grindr had been collecting and selling user locations since 2017.<sup>10</sup> One of the most high profile victims of this was Monsignor Jeffrey Burrill. Burrill was the top administrator for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Burrill was forced to resign after a Catholic newsletter accessed data from Grindr that revealed he was a frequent user of the app and repeatedly visited gay bars. This information came to light after a Colorado non-profit spent \$4 million to buy data and track various priests who used Grindr - Jeffrey Burrill being the highest profile of the exposed.<sup>11</sup> Up until this point Burrill had been vocal in his support of chastity and ban's on same-sex relationships. Mike Lewis, founder of Catholic news site 'Where Peter Is', stated that he was torn over the issue. He alleged that though Burrill did violate the

---

<sup>8</sup>Davisson, John, and Caroline Kraczon. 2023. *Complaint and Request for Investigation, Injunction, Penalties and Other Relief*

<sup>9</sup>Smalley, Suzanne. 2023. 'Privacy Nonprofit Calls on FTC to Investigate Grindr's Data Practices', *Therecord.media* <<https://therecord.media/privacy-complaint-calls-on-ftc-to-investigate-grindr>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>10</sup>Tau, Byron, and Georgia Wells. 2022. 'WSJ News Exclusive | Grindr User Data Was Sold through Ad Networks', *Wall Street Journal*, section Tech <[https://www.wsj.com/articles/grindr-user-data-has-been-for-sale-for-years-11651492800?st=bc2b1sh63rcfhvr&reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/articles/grindr-user-data-has-been-for-sale-for-years-11651492800?st=bc2b1sh63rcfhvr&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink)> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>11</sup>Beahm, Anna. 2023. 'A Catholic Organization Is Spending Millions to Track Gay Priests on Dating Apps', *Reckon* <<https://www.reckon.news/news/2023/03/a-catholic-organization-is-spending-millions-to-track-gay-priests-on-dating-apps.html>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

promises he made as a priest, Lewis was uncomfortable with the digital surveillance used to uncover the claims.<sup>12</sup>

The potential risks of Grindr use do not just apply to users' data. There is an undercurrent of Grindr users that seek to harm other users fiscally and physically. Due to the frequency of anonymous users - it is not difficult to conceal your identity and trick users. Extortion scams are common within the apps - a scammer will pose as a potential partner, send fake explicit photos, and ask for similar photos in return. Upon receiving these photos the blackmail begins: threats to share these photos publicly unless payment is received. These extortion scams became so frequent that in 2021 the Federal Trade Commission released an alert warning of their existence.<sup>13</sup>

Despite championing themselves as a safe haven for queer individuals, Grindr has been the host for the organisation of violence rooted in homophobia all over the world. In 2019, a man in his 50's was attacked by a group of four young men in Dublin after being lured to the cinema thinking he was meeting another man for a date.<sup>14</sup> And in 2020, Jeffrey Dahmer copycat Chance Seneca described Grindr as a 'hunting ground', after being arrested for the kidnapping and

---

<sup>12</sup>Iati, Marisa, and Michelle Boorstein. 2021. 'Case of High-Ranking Cleric Allegedly Tracked on Grindr App Poses Rorschach Test for Catholics', *Washington Post* <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/21/catholic-official-grindr-reaction/>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

<sup>13</sup>Lazarus, Ari. 2021. 'How to Spot Extortion Scams on LGBTQ+ Dating Apps', *Consumer Advice* <<https://consumer.ftc.gov/consumer-alerts/2021/09/how-spot-extortion-scams-lgbtq-dating-apps>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

<sup>14</sup>Reynolds, Paul. 2019. 'Man Lured to Attack through Gay Dating Site', *www.rte.ie* <<https://www.rte.ie/news/crime/2019/1016/1083827-dublin-attack/>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

attempted murder of a man he met through the app.<sup>15</sup> There have even been several instances of Middle Eastern and North African governments using the app to lure and arrest queer individuals. The Human Rights Watch upon research found at least 45 cases where LGBT people had been targeted and arbitrarily arrested in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia, countries with strict anti-gay laws.<sup>16</sup> The normalcy of anonymity on Grindr makes these types of attacks simple to plan for the perpetrator, and easy to fall for for the victim.

While there are a number of privacy and safety concerns for Grindr users, the app does provide some minor protection for its users. In an attempt to stop users from their private images being captured, Grindr has implemented a screenshot blocker. When users share their ‘albums’, which is usually a collection of sexually explicit images, if another user attempts to screenshot any of the pictures, the image will not be visible. You can also further protect your identity within the app with the ability to not reveal your exact distance from other users. For those with privacy concerns, Grindr also allows users to change how the apps icon appears on home screens, allowing users to change the icon to something more discreet.<sup>17</sup>

To conclude, Grindr as a platform, exists in a unique position in the online world. The app has similar privacy policies to other social networking sites, despite the obvious difference in the

---

<sup>15</sup> Albeck-Ripka, Livia. 2023. ‘Man Who Lured Victim on Grindr Gets 45 Years in Prison for Kidnapping’, *The New York Times*, section U.S. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/26/us/louisiana-man-grindr-kidnapping.html>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

<sup>16</sup>Younes, Rasha. 2023. “‘All This Terror because of a Photo’”, *Human Rights Watch* <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

<sup>17</sup> ———. 2023b. ‘Is Grindr Safe and How to Protect Yourself? | VeePN Blog’, *Veepn.com* <<https://veepn.com/blog/is-grindr-safe/>> [accessed 10 March 2024]

type of data shared on the app. The platform conjures illusions of privacy, control, and anonymity while simultaneously violating that perceived privacy with the insidious practices of data mining and personalised advertising. As Tom Roach describes the app, '*it substitutes algorithms for pheromones. It instrumentalises intimacy and mechanises the wily ways of desire.*'<sup>18</sup> There is a counter argument to be made that if a user is sharing such intimate content, is there not a responsibility on them to be aware of the privacy details on the platform they share it on? While of course this is a valid point, it should be considered that Grindr has become a queer hub of sorts, a space that invites and encourages users to partake in the usual practices of the app, and that Grindr itself promotes itself as a 'safe space'. Grindr's advertising is usually sexual in its nature, therefore the app itself acknowledges its primary use. In a 2022 tweet, Grindr even referred to itself as an app for people who are '*horny all the time*'.<sup>19</sup> Therefore if the app is able to take advantage of its explicitly sexual nature for advertising practices, it only seems logical that this should also be considered and reflected in their data privacy policies.

---

<sup>18</sup>Roach, Tom. 2015. 'Becoming Fungible', *Qui Parle*, 23.2: 55–87 <<https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.23.2.0055>>

<sup>19</sup> Grindr, 'there's an app for that', (<https://twitter.com/Grindr/status/1578150945300443136>), [accessed 16 April 2024]



# Bibliography

- Albeck-Ripka, Livia. 2023. 'Man Who Lured Victim on Grindr Gets 45 Years in Prison for Kidnapping', *The New York Times*, section U.S.  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/26/us/louisiana-man-grindr-kidnapping.html>>  
[accessed 10 March 2024]
- Beahm, Anna. 2023. 'A Catholic Organization Is Spending Millions to Track Gay Priests on Dating Apps', *Reckon*  
<<https://www.reckon.news/news/2023/03/a-catholic-organization-is-spending-millions-to-track-gay-priests-on-dating-apps.html>> [accessed 10 March 2024]
- Davisson, John, and Caroline Kraczon. 2023. *Complaint and Request for Investigation, Injunction, Penalties and Other Relief*
- Grindr, 'there's an app for that', (<https://twitter.com/Grindr/status/1578150945300443136>),  
[accessed 16 April 2024]
- Iati, Marisa, and Michelle Boorstein. 2021. 'Case of High-Ranking Cleric Allegedly Tracked on Grindr App Poses Rorschach Test for Catholics', *Washington Post*  
<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/21/catholic-official-grindr-reaction/>>  
[accessed 10 March 2024]
- Lazarus, Ari. 2021. 'How to Spot Extortion Scams on LGBTQ+ Dating Apps', *Consumer Advice*  
<<https://consumer.ftc.gov/consumer-alerts/2021/09/how-spot-extortion-scams-lgbtq-dating-apps>> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- N/A. 2021. 'Norwegian DPA: Intention to Issue € 10 Million Fine to Grindr LLC | European Data Protection Board', *Www.edpb.europa.eu*  
<[https://www.edpb.europa.eu/news/national-news/2021/norwegian-dpa-intention-issue-eu-10-million-fine-grindr-llc\\_en](https://www.edpb.europa.eu/news/national-news/2021/norwegian-dpa-intention-issue-eu-10-million-fine-grindr-llc_en)> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- . 2023a. 'Grindr Unwrapped', *Www.unwrapped.grindr.com*  
<<https://www.unwrapped.grindr.com/>> [accessed 9 March 2024]

- . 2023b. ‘Is Grindr Safe and How to Protect Yourself? | VeePN Blog’, *Veepn.com*  
<<https://veepn.com/blog/is-grindr-safe/>> [accessed 10 March 2024]
- . [n.d.-a]. ‘About Grindr’, *Www.grindr.com* <<https://www.grindr.com/about>> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- . [n.d.-b]. ‘Privacy Policy | Grindr’, *Www.grindr.com*  
<<https://www.grindr.com/privacy-policy>> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- Reynolds, Paul. 2019. ‘Man Lured to Attack through Gay Dating Site’, *Www.rte.ie*  
<<https://www.rte.ie/news/crime/2019/1016/1083827-dublin-attack/>> [accessed 10 March 2024]
- Roach, Tom. 2015. ‘Becoming Fungible’, *Qui Parle*, 23.2: 55–87  
<<https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.23.2.0055>>
- Smalley, Suzanne. 2023. ‘Privacy Nonprofit Calls on FTC to Investigate Grindr’s Data Practices’, *Therecord.media*  
<<https://therecord.media/privacy-complaint-calls-on-ftc-to-investigate-grindr>> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- Statista Research Department. 2024. ‘Topic: Grindr’, *Statista*  
<<https://www.statista.com/topics/11467/grindr/#topicOverview>> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- Tau, Byron, and Georgia Wells. 2022. ‘WSJ News Exclusive | Grindr User Data Was Sold through Ad Networks’, *Wall Street Journal*, section Tech  
<[https://www.wsj.com/articles/grindr-user-data-has-been-for-sale-for-years-11651492800?st=bc2b1sh63rcfhvr&reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/articles/grindr-user-data-has-been-for-sale-for-years-11651492800?st=bc2b1sh63rcfhvr&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink)> [accessed 9 March 2024]
- Woo, Jaime. 2015. ‘Grindr: Part of a Complete Breakfast’, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2.1: 61–72 <<https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.1.0061>>

Younes, Rasha. 2023. “All This Terror because of a Photo”, *Human Rights Watch*

<<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt>> [accessed 10 March 2024]