

1 **M\$M@Gaydar: Queering the Social Network**

2 **Abstract**

3 Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) have made use of social
4 networking sites for romantic and sexual encounters for over 15 years (Campbell 2007).
5 Predating Facebook.com (2012a) by five years, sites like Gaydar.co.uk¹ (2012b)² gave MSM
6 not only an online space, but a virtual presence. While Gaydar quickly became a worldwide
7 brand and recognised as an innovative, successful business model, it also became a
8 ubiquitous feature in how MSM sought and found other MSM socially. Alongside the tens-of-
9 thousands of personal profiles there are thousands of Commercial profiles for men selling sex
10 to men (M\$M) as escorts, masseurs or in other occupations. This chapter looks at how the
11 Commercial profiles co-exist alongside Personal profiles and how M\$M ads have queered the
12 social network landscape which has, in turn, queered the construct of what it means to sell
13 sex. MSM ads have thus disrupted not only dominant discourses of ‘sex work’ and ‘massage’
14 – but have also queered modern ‘gay’ identity/-ies by challenging prescribed authenticity in
15 ‘sex’ and ‘work’. This chapter further asks whether this disruption challenges modern hetero-
16 and homonormativity, or whether it cements century-old stereotypes. Based on data collected
17 from Gaydar profiles and combining a ‘reflexive queer ethnography’ with semiotic analysis
18 of both visual and verbal texts, the chapter details how MSM and M\$M use their profiles to
19 make an iterative and dialogic construction of their own sexualised embodiment.

20

¹ <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.

21 **Introduction: Queer Images Queer Consumers**

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

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

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

44 This chapter looks at how the Commercial and personal profiles are co-constructive/-
45 ed and how the profiles for men selling sex to men (M\$M) have queered the social network

46 landscape and how that in turn has queered the construct of what it means to sell sex.
47 Building on literature on sex work (particularly male Internet escorting) and social network
48 sites used by men who desire sex with men (MSM), I use queer theory to explore the
49 structure of the site and its profiles, and the mutuality and comparability of the exchanges that
50 are negotiated there. My aim is to queer dominant binaries and ideological boundaries that
51 are constructed at the intersections of sex and money.

52 **Queer | sex work | advertising**

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

69 Whilst ‘queer’ is often critiqued when used as a metonym for men who have sex with men
70 (Caudwell 2006), and there is growing literature on male sex work (Smith & Laing 2012), it

71 is true that men are still an understudied group of people working in the sex industry (Walby
72 2012). Historical examples of compensated male with male exchanges have explored stories
73 of young male soldiers, working class labourers and cross-dressing men in London in the late
74 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Weeks 1991). Male prostitution from the middle of
75 the twentieth century placed an emphasis on street prostitution and ‘hustlers’ (Scott 2003).
76 Later research looks at M\$M from psychological, social and sexual health (Mariño et al.
77 2000; Parsons et al. 2004 2005; Uy et al. 2004), and legal perspectives (Whowell 2010).
78 More recent work has focused on (or included) sociologies of men selling sex to men (Dorais
79 2005; Walby 2012) and builds a perspective of a new ‘petite bourgeoisie’ who use sex to earn
80 extra or alternate income outside of more mainstream enterprises, eschewing lower pay,
81 longer hours or other stresses (Bernstein 2007a 2007b; Walby 2012). Some of the most up to
82 date work explores newer forms of client contact and negotiation, specifically men who
83 advertise escort services in magazines (Cameron et al. 1999) and on the Internet (Koken et al.
84 2010; Phua & Caras 2008; Phua et al. 2009; Walby 2010 2012). The focus or site of the
85 Internet advertising research is online classified advertisements (Koken et al. 2010) and
86 websites dedicated to escort advertising (Logan 2010; Phua & Caras 2008; Phua et al. 2009),
87 usually in America. Of course there are other spaces for online advertising of sex work,
88 including private websites, blogs and social networks. This chapter focuses specifically on
89 Gaydar because it is constructive of and constructed by dominant repertoires at the
90 intersection of commercialised social and sexual spaces: Gaydar is a hugely successful
91 business model where men may seek dates, long term relationships, friendships, or casual
92 sex.

93 **Queer advertising**

94 Judith Williamson’s seminal work on advertising explores how advertising ‘creates structures
95 of meaning’ (Williamson 2002, p12). In queer theory, a vast range of ‘texts’ including –

96 amongst others – film, sculpture, speeches and parliamentary debates are ‘scrutinized as
97 potentially regulatory and productive texts [through] their gaps, insinuations, and excesses of
98 meaning’ (Leckey & Brooks 2010, 4) in their relationship to heteronormativity. Using (sub-)
99 cultural, non-canonical texts allows reflexive thought about the extent to which spaces and
100 sites co-construct with their users/ subjects normative and potentially regulatory codes and
101 treatments (Leckey & Brooks 2010).

102 The exploration of Gaydar profiles as cultural texts provokes reflection on the extent to which
103 commercial social-sexual representations are co-construct-ive/-ed with their subjects in
104 normative and potentially regulatory ways. If ‘queer’ has indeed ‘been conscripted into
105 service as a sexier, more marketable label for lesbian and gay identities’ (Leckey & Brooks
106 2010: 2) then a deconstruction of sex/y market/able culture is a useful endeavour to explore
107 not the ‘inevitable’ absorptions but the intersectionalities of ‘political dissent’, ‘late
108 capitalism’ and ‘consumer culture’ pointing to queer as futurity and potentiality (Muñoz
109 2009).

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

120 they visually/representationally look the same, and are enacted (performed) similarly, but
121 both take place in a commercialised, brokered setting.

122 **Method of investigation**

123 The data for this chapter comes from multiple sources: semi-structured interviews with 18
124 men who have sold sex to men through advertising, 796 small ads in gay scene magazines,
125 publicly available content from 'Commercial' profiles on Gaydar, and my own field notes
126 from observations and interactions with men in London's gay scene, including both physical
127 and virtual spaces (Mowlabocus 2007). I used the online social-sexual-networking site,
128 Gaydar, as a source of advertising data, as an ethnographic site of research (Mowlabocus
129 2010a; Sanders 2005) to observe, to advertise for participants and to contact potential
130 participants. Using Gaydar further empowered participants and potential participants by
131 giving them additional information about me as a researcher and my own subject-position in
132 the gay scene, thus breaking down more traditional researcher-respondent roles, whilst
133 maintaining ethical and professional boundaries (Walby 2010).

134 The participants in my interviews queered my attempts at purposive sampling of sexual
135 identifications and occupational identifications. For example, many men who sell sex
136 describe themselves as bisexual; however, some of the men I spoke to described themselves
137 in their profiles as bisexual, whether or not they had ever had sex with a woman, reinforcing
138 queer queries about the temporal limitations and performative expectations of social-sexual
139 labels, again disrupting and blending significations of actions, identities, potentialities and the
140 spaces between (Muñoz 2009). Importantly, the various definitions of 'massage' and the
141 mixed messages that are evident in the profiles are reiterated by men who advertise as 'not an
142 escort service' and regularly offer 'happy endings'.

143 To analyse such polytextual data (Reavey 2011), I employ a semiotic toolkit adapted
144 from the work of Judith Williamson (2002) Gillian Rose (2007) and Ros Gill (2011) to
145 deconstruct advertising to the multiple signs and structures that have reproduced
146 ‘Commercially Sited Sex’ within the online social-sexual network.

147 **Gaydar and ‘Commercially Sited Sex’**

148 Sexual relationships have been theorised with binary models of authenticity or
149 instrumentality, such as ‘pure’ romantic love *or* attention attracted by gift giving (Weeks
150 1991). Such binaries do not reflect the materiality of lived relationships. Controversial
151 comparisons between dowries, engagement rings and alimony problematize such divisions.
152 Boundaries become blurred further in commercially organised spaces like Gaydar.net (and
153 the more mainstream – and arguably heteronormative – Match.com), where people pay fees
154 to meet dates, lovers and partners. With an understanding that sex can be sited in a
155 commercial context, queer theory eschews these binaries for (a more queer?) understanding
156 that incorporates authenticity *and* instrumentality, commercialism *and* sex. I propose that
157 discourses of Commercially Sited Sex (CSS) can acknowledge the different ways that sexual
158 activity is promoted and exchanged commercially, whether or not the activity has been
159 defined by participants as ‘sex’ or ‘work’ and to examine where the shifting boundaries lay
160 between the authentic and the instrumental (Padilla 2008; Weeks 1991). Commercially Sited
161 Sex recognises the sexualisation of commercial and social spaces (Attwood 2006;
162 Mowlabocus 2007; Paasonen et al. 2007) *and* the commodification and commercialisation of
163 sex (Chaline 2010; Chatterjee 2012; Light et al. 2008).

164 Social networking sites, like Gaydar, are constructive of CSS in several ways: the social
165 networking site is an inherently commercialised space. It is run as a for-profit business, seeks
166 and attracts commercial and corporate advertising, and charges members monthly or annual

167 fees for expanded use of the interface. Through reading social-sexual networking spaces like
168 Gaydar where M\$M and MSM profiles are placed in the same spaces and given the same
169 structures, selling sex has developed an indexical³ relationship with MSM (gay, bisexual)
170 online profiles. That is to say, there is an inherent relationship which is culturally specific and
171 socially created (Chandler 2007).

172 **‘One way or another, everybody pays’**

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

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

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

³ Pierce divided signs as iconic, indexical and symbolic. Indexical signs have an inherent relationship which is culturally specific and socially created (Chandler, 2007).

190 often immediate, sometimes anonymised, and usually bounded. ‘My friends went out at the
191 weekend, went to saunas, met people, did it for nothing. I thought, “Fuck it, I’ll get paid for
192 it.”’ (George, 42). This construction of casual sex and commercial sex as being the same type
193 of experience except for the negotiation of a direct payment reinforces the complementarity
194 of Rubin’s (1984) charmed circle. At the same time, it challenges divisions that are simply
195 demarcated by the presence or absence of a cash payment preceding a sexual encounter.
196 Explorations of the authenticity and boundedness of sexual *relationships* intersect with the
197 theoretical and legal considerations of whether, or to what extent, payment is made – and to
198 whom – in soliciting and procuring the sexual act.

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

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

209 The indexical signification between profiles and (corporate) advertisements, and between
210 personal (MSM) profiles and Commercial (M\$M) profiles, reinforces the constructive and
211 representative intersectionality between MSM and M\$M. All Gaydar profiles, for MSM and
212 M\$M, share almost identical structures, use the same interfaces and use adjacent spaces.
213 Social-sexual networking sites like Gaydar that include MSM and M\$M profiles are unlike
214 online spaces such as Rentboy.com that are reputedly specific to sex work – or iconically

215 significant thereof.⁴ The inclusion of profiles for MSM and M\$M makes Gaydar more like
216 commercialised, social, ‘gay’ spaces like gay bars where both personal and paid encounters
217 are sometimes negotiated (Campbell 2004; Hall 2007). This co-existence of MSM and M\$M
218 subject-agents, possibilities and exchanges in a commercial space disrupts the tidy, moral(-
219 ised) boundaries and hierarchies that are reinforced as the politics of LGBT equalities are
220 argued and (in many ways, in some places) advanced (Weeks 2007; Muñoz 2009).

221 Like in the bars, pubs and clubs, paying users can access the same services, whether as MSM
222 or M\$M. Non-paying Guests use limited services for free in a marketing model that
223 recognises a critical mass of users as providing the essential content of the site (Campbell
224 2007; Ghose & Han 2011). As such, even the business model of Gaydar is structured as
225 tangible example of the social-constructionism that QueerTheory advocates.

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

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.

236 **When is an advertisement not an advertisement?**

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

246 Using Goldman's (1992) concept of mortise, or framing, allows a reading of the queer/
247 queering of social-sexual networks *through* sex work advertising and the reciprocal queering
248 of sex work by the social-sexual network⁵. By being framed identically to ordinary online
249 meetings and negotiations, sex work takes a form divergent from more dominant ideologies.
250 Advertisements that are intended not to look like advertisements (Goldman 1992) have been
251 reincarnated through commercial advertising in social-sexual network profiles. Text fields,
252 font size and photo size all reproduce a comfortable recognition that *this man is like me*.

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

⁵ Conceptualising online social-sexual networks like Gaydar necessitates inclusion of the infrastructure and the user-members, since either is something different without the other.

258 The other thing I was thinking about is the whole “Gaydar” sort of thing,
 259 because that reduces sexual attraction to the most kind of transactional
 260 basis, because you’ve got pictures. You know, you’re looking at Gaydar,
 261 and you’re thinking “Is that person attractive?” by a single picture
 262 whether they’ve had it done by a professional photographer or whether
 263 they’ve, you know, aimed it down their torso. But, it encourages, you, you
 264 know, to flick through 100 photos in 10 minutes thinking “No, no, no, no,
 265 no, no, no. Possible. Yes.” Based on a very, you know, it’s the ultimate
 266 kind of, forwardisation, you know, manufacturing production lines based
 267 on what is attractive and I think it encourages people to appraise each
 268 other in those ways. It’s a bit dodgy.

269

 (Michael, 32, Gaydar Member)

270 Conclusion

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

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

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

284 To what extent, then, is the subject/object binary still relevant? On the one hand, men are
 285 self-photographed becoming both spectator and participant, object and subject. We reclaim
 286 our subject position through agency but surrender our agency as our self-produced content is
 287 profiled and consumed. The self-posted self-portrait (SPSP) is a form of both agency and
 288 structure. Self-posting *subjects* are structurally objectified as their SPSP becomes *content* to

289 be used by the hosting page or site. The image, now content, generates the traffic which
290 generates the advertising which generates the income which pays the salaries and dividends
291 to the formal stakeholders.

292 **Through a series of ordered, semiological relationships (Barthes 1993; Hodge and Kress**
293 **1988) the commercial, social-sexual network and the M\$M profile queer**
294 **commercialised sex, sexualise queer commerce and commercialise the sexual queer.**
295 **Politics and policies that only focus on heteronormative discourses of power, sex and**
296 **work must be aware of burgeoning dialogs and commonalities between paid and unpaid**
297 **sexual encounters (Scoular 2004) and non-heteronormative subjectivities of work.**

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