Article

From individuals to emotional drones: Technology-driven change in the collective conditioning of intimacy

Thomas Wimark [iD]
and Daniel Hedlund

Uppsala University, Sweden; Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract

Spatial media has received impetus in recent studies, arguing that its function as a mediator of meaning and enabler of intimacy are critical in late modernity. We suggest that spatial media not only liquefies key institutions of modernity but also replaces them. We conducted interviews with men who use spatial media to realize intimacy. In our analysis, we reference the fictional Star Trek universe to illustrate how spatial media may function as an institution. In the figure of the Borg, human-tech borders are eliminated, control is exerted through collective decisions, and bodies are assimilated into an expanding beehive-like community. Similarly, spatial media enables the liquefaction of human-tech borders, the creation of new sets of rules and hierarchies, and the assimilation of intimacy practices. We thereby conclude that digital media not only drive a process of liquefaction but also the forging of new institutional structures that condition the realization of intimacy.

Keywords

Dating, individualization, intimacy, spatial media, technology

> Resistance is over. Your life as it has been is over. From this time forward you will service us. (Locutus of Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 3, episode 26, *The Best of Both Worlds*)

Corresponding author:

Thomas Wimark, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Box 513, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden.
Email: thomas.wimark@kultgeog.uu.se

Currently, location-based dating media (LBDM) seems to be the key modus for queer people establishing contacts for realizing intimacy. Based on interviews with men who desire men[1] about intimacy in this new landscape, we use the figure of the Borg in the TV series Star Trek to illustrate the complexity of intimacy formation in the 21st century. Building on previous work that uses the Star Trek series as a starting point for analyzing contemporary culture (see, for example, Bernardi, 1998; Consalvo, 2004; Cranny-Francis, 2000; Jackson and Nexon, 2003; Relke, 2006), we use the Borg drone, who is a member of a "hive" collective society repressing individuality, as a relevant metaphor to analyze the formation of queer intimacies, hierarchies, stereotypes, and identities. In the science fiction universe, the Borg collective poses a threat to the Starship Enterprise community, a community representing an individualized society of which a future Earth is a member. We thereby contrast the Borg drone collective to the Enterprise and its relatively individualistic community.

In the fictional series, the community to which the Enterprise belongs seems to have overcome capitalism, and only hierarchies relating to chains of commands exist. The Enterprise crew is primarily composed of individuals free from materialism, or in Daniel Leonard Bernardis words: "a utopian future, where human no longer engage in racism, sexism, capitalism, and many other 'ism', is a main reason for their loyalty" (Bernardi, 1998: 6). This enables individuals to develop emotionally, socially, psychologically, and professionally along a multitude of trajectories in whatever direction they wish. Institutions of modernity structuring intimacy, such as the nuclear family with clearly predetermined roles that potentially restrain individual development, have seemingly been overcome or at least been aligned with the mission of exploring the universe.

The potential for individual development of intimacies in the Enterprise community resembles the outcome of the process of individualization in late modernity that key theorists such as Beck and Beck–Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2000) have put forward. They suggest that individuals are no longer bound by the traditions and institutions of modernity. Instead, these institutions are proposed to have been "liquefied" in favor of individual happiness and fulfillment. Much recent inquiries into processes of individualization have highlighted that technology functions as a mediator of intimate relationships (Attwood et al., 2017; Cockayne et al., 2017; McGlotten, 2013) or an even further enhancer of the liquidation of bonds and commitments by enabling quick and commitment-free relations (Hobbs et al., 2017).

It is important to note, as Berlant and Warner (1998) have pointed out, that queer relationships have never had the same dependence on the discursive practices or material structures that influence the institutional trajectories of heteronormative intimacy (dating scripts, marriage, family reproduction, etc.). However, Levine and Kimmel (1998) described the "gay clone," that is, a pumped, mustached, and hypersexual man dominating the image of the urban US queer community before the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which could be understood as an alternative configuration. Moreover, John D'Emilio's (1993) insight that capitalism, on the one hand, made individualist queer identities possible, while its centrifugal force, on the other hand, created and reshaped unequal relationships that further conformed to uncertainty. Queer people, oftentimes expelled from nuclear families and excluded from state institutions such as marriage, adoption, and couple pensions enabling family formation, have realized intimacy in alternative (public and

private) ways. While queer friends and "gay villages" with bars, cafes, and clubs may have been key mediums for a realization of a modernist variant of queer intimacy in the 20th century, the Internet and social media have totally reshaped the intimacy landscape (Collins and Drinkwater, 2017; Miles, 2018; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012).

In contrast to life onboard the Enterprise, the Borg collective's use of technology seems to have abolished individuality to achieve the common goal of striving for perfection through assimilating people(s), cultures, and technology. As assimilated individuals, they become so-called "drones" by adding technological parts to the organic body, through which they cease to be sentient beings and instead become part of the shared rational voice of the collective making decisions on actions.[2] The Borg collective, therefore, seems to be a representation of an "ultramodernity," as it is striving for rationality and a structured Borg collective.

In this article, we aim to highlight that technological advancements have indeed changed the process of individualization and put forth that certain communities rather resemble a Borg collective than an individualized Enterprise community, which can have implications on intimacy practices for queer people in the shape of a new institution that echo modernist conformity. In the following, we discuss the process of liquefying institutions before turning to work in digitally mediated intimacies to show how technology is an essential catalyst. We then outline the foundational basis of this article: interviews with 26 men who desire men using LBDM. Having outlined the data, we then show how these men fare in a society where the LBDM seems to have eradicated other ways of building intimacies.

Technology and the individualization of intimacy

A vast number of studies have referenced the processes of individualization and liquefaction as formulated by key theorists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2000). The main argument in their work is that the responsibilities and obligations of modernity are no longer applicable in late modernity, as fixed structures have been challenged. In modern industrial society, collective projects and duties regulated individuals to specific positions in society that came with a prewritten set of possibilities, obligations, and privileges. In late modernity, bonds that were created through the institutions of modernity have been torn down, or "liquefied" as Bauman (2000) puts it. Marriage and the nuclear family, for example, are no longer a (main) definer and regulator of proper intimacy, and intimate freedom has been enabled through the introduction of birth control (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

In relation to intimacy, Giddens (1992) has offered the concept of the "pure relationship" (p. 27), where commitment, mutual disclosure, and intimacy are actively negotiated and continued as long as the partners perceive that they are satisfied and receive sufficient benefits; conversely, the relationship can be easily dissolved if discontent arises. A concept parallel to the "pure relationship" is what Giddens (1992) has referred to as "plastic sexuality." Under plastic sexuality, gender roles are made more creative, and the equality of sexual desire possible between men and women is increasing, thereby also expanding the acceptance of same-sex relationships and other expressions of sexuality. Thus, in late modernity, intimacy has become commodified insomuch that it at least

seemingly consists of equals entering into agreements of mutual benefit and pleasure. In other words, choosing a (temporary) partner is based on a consumer relationship where all bodies represent commodities for trade (Bauman, 2003).

Much of the work on intimacy in late modernity discusses these changes in light of digitally mediated intimacies (Attwood et al., 2017). As Rainie and Wellman (2012) suggest, individuals are not only becoming disentangled from traditional bonds but also reattached to new diverse networks of social relations relying on digital technologies. They argue that this self-realization project can be conceptualized as networked individualism. Key here is the digital mediating this process. Illouz (2007) points out that intimacy has become a consumer commodity in online spaces where the "authentic self" is being represented (or marketed) through text and pictures. The online self becomes subject to the market, where choice and competition are at the heart of the realization of intimacy. Some studies argue that the expansion of technological devices, solutions, and software means that technology has become a key medium in the creation of meaning. In particular, spatial information technologies that use locational information, often referred to as spatial media, are now among the main mediators of how meaning is created, spread, and sustained (Leszczynski, 2015). This does not necessarily mean that all intimate bonds become weaker; for example, friendship and other bonds can intensify (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Thulin et al., 2020), coming to resemble the same in-depth commitments as a partner relationship. In addition, the dominating ideals of "classic" intimacy may remain unliquefied in the background of everyday practices (Hobbs et al., 2017). In this sense, intimacy should be understood in a wider sense than mere sexual practices to how it relates to "the normative practices, fantasies, institutions, and ideologies that organize people's worlds" (Berlant, 1998: 282).

Recently, it has been argued that neoliberalism has intensified these practices due to austerity policies (Hakim, 2019). Hakim (2019) argues that digitally mediated practices have proliferated among men as a direct consequence of the financial crises of 2007/2008. In this process, the loss of ways to sustain a living has lured men to digitally sexualize their bodies as a way to deal with precarity. The proliferation of digitally mediated intimacies has been reported to have adverse effects. It has, for example, been widely reported that for some groups, such as sexual minorities, social media spaces have had draining effects. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBTQ) communities, as concrete institutions consisting of non-governmental organizations, entertainment venues, print media, and so on, are being drained by the abundance of technology solutions (Collins and Drinkwater, 2017; Miles, 2018). This article speaks to the latter argument.

Methods

The analysis in this article is based on 26 semistructured interviews with men who desire men and use online spaces to meet their intimacy needs. The interview guide covered how the men had dated over the years, as well as questions about why, when, where, and how they used LBDM. Dating applications catering to men who desire men, such as Grindr, Hornet, Scruff, and Growlr, use the current location of members and show the nearest application users. The location of other users is thus constantly in focus. The

authors conducted the interviews simultaneously in three major cities in Sweden from the end of 2016 until the beginning of 2017. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes long. They were all conducted in Swedish and thereafter transcribed verbatim and translated by the authors. The participants were recruited through a social media dating application catering to men who desire men called Grindr (22), the Swedish online dating webpage Qruiser.com (1) or snowball sampling (3). Their mean age was 35 years, and they ranged in age from 18 to 63 years. Most were Sweden-born, but some had roots in Latin America (3), Southern Africa (2), Western Asia (1), and Eastern Europe (1).

The demography of the group thereby to some extent reflected the backgrounds of the authors at the level of averages. Both authors were in their mid-30s at the time of the interviews and had their backgrounds in Sweden, although the first author is White and the second author has Latin American roots. The transcribed interview material did not show evident differences between the participants in terms of how issues of racism and rejection were raised as a result of which author had conducted the interviews, but it is certainly possible that the appearance and style of the interviewer influenced the co-construction of the situation.

The interview material was analyzed using qualitative methods. First, the main author coded the material and developed themes from the inductive codes based on patterns. These were then compared with the results of the coding performed independently by the second author and discussed. The themes are presented as the three subsections in the follwing section and connected to the current literature and concept of the Borg collective to further illustrate the findings.

The research was approved by the Swedish Regional Ethical Review Board (Dnr: 2016/1960-31/5). Personal data and references to places, cities, and professions that could lead to the identification of the participants were removed to protect the participants and ensure their anonymity. In addition, as presented in the application for ethical vetting, the recruitment of participants via LBDM was conducted in a transparent manner, which means that it was clear to the participants that they would be initiating a chat with a researcher interested in interviewing them for research purposes. The purpose of the research was repeated orally before the interview started, and the participant was encouraged to read through the written consent agreement where the aims of the research project, contact information to the authors, and information about psychological support if needed after the interview were presented.

Tech and the reconceptualization of intimacy

In the following, we present the themes that represent our findings. The interviews with men who desire men provided rich, textured accounts of the emotional, spatial, and historical experiences of the participants as they sought to fulfill their needs for intimacy. To place their experience in the context of human-tech boundaries, we draw on the fictional Star Trek universe. As illustrated below, reflections on real versus online realities are key to understanding the participants' relationships to LBDM and their own bodily experiences. Each theme is therefore introduced with a Star Trek quote and thereafter connected to analyses and excerpts grounded in the interview material.

Human drones and the liquefaction of human-tech borders

[Borg nanoprobes] take over the blood cell function, like a virus. (The Doctor in *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 3, episode 26, *Scorpion*)

In some discussions of human-tech relations, it is argued that the way new spatial media is constructed enables users to see a new world, or at least to experience the world through technology (Leszczynski, 2015) and that this creates a specific way of doing intimacy (Licoppe et al., 2016). The LBDM was commonly discussed in the interviews in terms of the new view of the world it enabled:

Previously, I didn't have experience using location-based media in this way and it was a little bit scary; one could see [queer] people who were nearby and it could become a little bit too near when it was someone just 100 meters away or something. [. . .] But I remember that it was fascinating to discover what other [queer] people there were in my town. (Mattias)

Thus, LBDM provides Mattias with a new "eye" through which he can view another world unlike the heterosexual everyday world that he lives and maneuvers in—it discloses (homo)sexual desires and identities present in his immediate surroundings. Through LBDM, he is able to see something that is considered private and that other (heterosexual) people cannot see. The way that the LBDM is conceptualized conflates the ideas of public and private (cf. Berlant and Warner, 1998). On LBDM, private, personal data about individuals indeed become public as they create and upload a profile, but private conversations between users occur simultaneously and provide users with the impression that it is a personal space (Ahlm, 2017; Miles, 2017). Beyond simply reflecting on this new view of the world, studies exploring intimacy among men who desire men and the use of social media have equated the development of the LBDM with a collapse of the division between online spaces and real-world spaces (see, for example, Miles, 2017) in which the real and online spaces become hybridized. Not surprisingly, the interviewees in this study also discussed this at length. David discussed this change through the metaphor of a prison becoming a shackle:

[Before] I saw it as a prison to sit by a computer to hunt or to try to pick someone up [. . .] but now it is more of a shackle, with the apps in the phone, because you always have them with you [. . .] Before you had to sit by the computer but otherwise you could live your life and go around and travel around and then I didn't have to feel that "oh, I think I will log in here and see if someone has written me anything." Now they are always with you in the mobile. [. . .] It is a constant part of your everyday. (David)

Even if David expresses that the online world is still distinct from the body with his metaphor about the presence of the shackle, a permanent ("always" as he says), digital extension to his physical self has been established. The online world and physical world might therefore appear hybridized to David even when the border between his body and the outside world remains intact. In contrast, in the figure of the Borg in *Star Trek: Voyager*, this boundary is violated as nanobots penetrate the body like a virus, creating physical changes. This is in fact how another interviewee, Alexandr, referred to dating applications as viruses penetrating the body:

> I mean, Grindr is like a virus. It eats you up. You have to take breaks from it just because it devours you. I mean, I have only had the app for a few months. [. . .] And I have never had any issues with getting to know people. But I thought that I should try something new. By now, there are like 17000 dating apps you know, so I thought I'd just try it. [. . .] But with Grindr you have issues because it is like a virus. (Alexandr)

The significance of Alexandr's statement lies in his use of the metaphor of the virus, something that penetrates the body and then transforms it—or "eats you," as he puts it. This indicates that he perceives not only that the LBDM has eliminated the human-tech border but also that it transforms the body. Miller (2015) suggested that the use of the LBDM may yield gratification (see also Smith and Snider, 2019; Ward, 2017). This can easily become an addiction, keeping users online indefinitely. In a similar way, Borg drones want to be connected to the collective and seem to experience distress and disorientation when disconnected from it. Interviewees mentioned countless times that they felt that they constantly *had to* be on LBDM and frequently described how their bodies reacted to the sense of gratification it gave them. The excerpt by Magnus illustrates this view:

> It is like instant gratification; you check—did I get something on Grindr? Then, you answer them. Then, you move over to Scruff and answer them. Then, you move over to Gayromeo and then you go back to Grindr again. [. . .] It feels great when you hear the sound "dirrititt." (Magnus)

In the example above, gratification is the key incentive to be present in LBDM spaces, which has been noted in other studies (Licoppe et al., 2016). While this was a common response among the interviewees, others also felt they were forced out on the apps as the only form of community building among men who desire men. They feared that leaving the LBDM would leave them in loneliness, and, as has been argued before, a common way to find a relief for loneliness is to turn to digital media (McGlotten, 2013). Although Brubaker et al. (2016) have given account of experiences leaving LBDM having less impact on loneliness than expected, key in their experiences is the fear of being alone and not the actual effect of leaving. The feeling of forced presence due to anticipated loneliness aligns with an episode of the Star Trek in which a Borg unit is disconnected from the collective. During this potential transition period back to individuality, one of the drones panics at the thought of being "alone without even the sound of another drone to comfort me" (Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 6, episode 2, *Survival Instinct*). She feels that there is no alternative but to go back to the community of the collective, and in the process, forces the others to do so as well. This speaks to a notion of (in)voluntary presence in which individuals exercise agency, but gratification and feelings of loneliness drive them to copresence:

> Unfortunately, I spend a lot of time on them [LBDM]. I think that is sad because one could do so many other things, but it is the way it has developed. I am alone, I live alone in my apartment, and it has become part of everyday life to check and chat. (Christian)

In this section, we have built further on previous mediated intimacy work that has used technology as the starting point for reconceptualizing the relationship between

technology and body (see, for example, Attwood et al., 2017; McGlotten, 2013). We have shown how the LBDM combined with technological devices drives the liquefaction of human-tech borders. First, we argued that the LBDM enables users to perceive and engage with the world in new ways. These new ways seem to dissolve borders sustaining divisions such as public/private and online/real. Second, we argued that the LBDM also penetrates the border between the body and technology and how this is discernable through bodily reactions and emotions. Liquefaction of the human-tech border through the LBDM may, consequently, create a sense of forced presence, as gratification becomes key to the experience of intimacy.

The gay collective and control of space-time intimacies

> On the Borg ship, we live with the thoughts of the others in our minds. Thousands of voices with us always. (Hugh of Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 23, *I, Borg*)

The interphase parable can be likened to what is referred to as spatial media by scholars. This line of research argues that spatial media mediates our understanding of the world (Leszczynski, 2015). This suggests that the LBDM functions as a structure through which meaning is created, spread, and maintained. The way the code is created ultimately shapes the possibilities for men who desire men to see each other and to communicate in a certain way. For example, the code on Grindr allows users to upload pictures, to provide a brief text of 255 characters or less and to choose predefined categories, for example, age, height, weight, sexual intercourse practice, and ethnicity, which enables the visual assessment of other individuals online:

> I think looks are very indicative. That is what you go for. Then, it is what they like, what sex they like [referring to sex roles]. How big, small they are, how short, tall they are. Height, weight and what their interests are, is what you look for. And where they are from—European, Asian, American, well, you know. (Bo)

Although the code structures certain forms of understanding through the interphase, the LBDM creates an abundance of possibilities in terms of others to connect with. As previous work has shown, the use of filters among users is essential to deal with such an abundance of connections (Chan, 2018). This abundance and restrictions in code reduce intimacy connections to specific modes of interaction, as was apparent from the interview material of individuals' subsequent collective behavior:

> I want to be able to write long messages. And I mean, it is possible on Grindr to do that, so why don't we? But you get notifications. And I think that, based on the jargon [on the app]—the situations that you associate [with the app], the colors, chat messages are supposed to be a bit spicier. That's the association you get. And I think that, at least in my case, it is difficult to talk seriously to someone in that atmosphere. You're constantly interrupted by others. (Yaser)

In this quote, Yaser highlights the limits of LBDM in the way that it is designed toward quick sexual encounters (Licoppe et al., 2016), but he also touches upon how the voices of others restrict the ways in which he can act. In the Star Trek series, it is never

fully explained how the Borg hive governs drones, but there are hints throughout the series. It seems that although control of the material body is given over to the collective, individuality is never fully erased. "Billions of voices speaking as one" (Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 5, episode 2, *Drone*) functions as a mantra (virtually) impossible to disregard. If the voices are disregarded, there are two forms of punishment for drones: disconnection or deactivation. While the latter equals death, the former seems to function as a strong inducement to comply: throughout the series, when drones are disconnected, they feel a sense of loss and will go to great lengths to be reconnected to the hive again. While research has discussed the LBDM as a form of belonging (Miles, 2018) and the ease of disconnecting individuals from belonging on the LBDM through blocking profiles (Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz, 2018), the Borg hive is oftentimes conceptualized as a form of addiction. Some users in the interview material discussed the LBDM in terms of belonging, but as shown in the previous section, they more often discussed it as an addiction to gratification and appreciation. The process of awarding this affirmation, however, was based on the collective voices on the LBDM platform:

> I make a 2.0 version of myself. I choose the pictures that I look really good in. [. . .] I've tried to remove the pictures of me with a bare torso. Then it is like [making a downward sound]. And it is like that, I'm not joking. Unfortunately. And I mean, I know myself that if I see a profile with only serious pictures of the person, then I become like this [making a bored sigh sound]. (Mehmet)

In the quote above, Mehmet explains how other users have taught him how to achieve gratification. Reducing his persona to the image of a half-naked, sexualized body yields more gratification, while expressing his persona visually in other ways yields less gratification. He has also become aware that he is one of the voices that devalues other aspects that could be visualized through the code. This suggests that spatial media structures the way that he perceives the world but that he is an active part of this perception. Rose (2017) discusses this in terms of a posthuman structure where the online self is regulated simultaneously through both technology and the users present (Rose, 2017). This means that Mehmet co-constitutes the valuation process through which gratification and dissatisfaction are awarded. Dissatisfaction is not only a matter of the absence of gratification; it also takes other oppositional forms:

> I am not a person who would hurt someone intentionally and be cruel and say "you're ugly" or "you're disgusting" or something like that. That is not me. So I would not; that would never happen. Kind and nice. But that is very unusual [on LBDM]. Verrrry unusual; people are more aloof and mean, I think, and I can't understand it. (Elias)

Bonner-Thompson argues that coproduced ideals online have a long history of being reproduced in the queer community. In his example, hypermasculinity is brought online from the real world. As a consequence, users not adhering to such ideals experience frustration and loneliness (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Analyzing the Borg community, Mia Consalvo argues that in essence, it reasserts a society based on masculinity given that it is based on "intelligence, boldness, rationality" (Consalvo, 2004: 198–199). Although there is no doubt that ageism, ableism, racism, transphobia, and masculinism

are reproduced by and within code (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Gieseking, 2017), spatial media adds further ideals. One of the most common ideals discussed in the interviews was the speed of interaction:

> [When LBDM came] it became a different kind of language. Much faster. It became much faster. You decide quite quickly if you wish to meet or not. You chat in a different way with dating apps. You reach a conclusion fast. Do you want to meet or not, a bit like that. [. . .] Swoosh, swoosh, and you write like only short phrases and it is fast. (Bo)

To achieve and maximize gratification, many conversations must be kept active at the same time. Thus, speed becomes a necessity to reduce the constraints to achieving gratification. In the literature, this is sometimes highlighted as an issue of rhythm and synchronization and entails the need to be online constantly to reduce constraints. Copresence online, for example, reduces stress and the need to catch up with friends (Thulin et al., 2020). The same research suggests that spatial copresence is essential. Central to spatial media is that it is location based. Although users are connected to each other globally, they are directed to interact with the closest users, reducing space to distance. The excerpt by Johan expresses this point:

> It's all about convenience. For certain it is, I would say. Let's say that I am chatting with two guys in the same evening and both can imagine meeting up, then of course I try to get it going with the one that is closest, because it is easier to go there. It's about, it's about comfort. In that way, the location function is great. (Johan)

Previous research suggests that technology has reduced intimacy to competition in a process of commodification (Hakim, 2019; Illouz, 2007). In this section, we have used the figure of the Borg hive collective to simulate how a community can be established without the traditional institutions of modernity. While stable, monogamous long-term relationships, sometimes referred to as homonormative relationships (Duggan, 2002), potentially offer stability and belonging, spatial media offers instant gratification and sexual encounters, which potentially heightens the gratification ladder. As the interviewees suggested, this means that intimacy can be realized without creating any form of lasting relationship, potentially even making such obsolete. In this way, intimacy is both realized and reduced to quick online and offline encounters through spatial media services (cf. Licoppe et al., 2016).

Assimilation of intimacy practices

> We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. (Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 3 finale, *The Best of Two Worlds*)

Being unattached to place can be seen as a key feature of individualization; however, in the case of the Borg, the detachment from place is replaced with a growing collective. Beck (2002) has offered that community and tradition are tied to place, and when these ties are liquefied, individuals are disentangled from place. Moreover, traveling and

exploring new places has itself become part of individual self-realization. In the interviews, there were several examples of how spatial media released individuals from place-based intimacies and enabled self-realization within a new collective, without ties to specific origins:

> I wanted to see Berlin, and I went there alone because I hadn't been there, and now [that I have LBDM] I can go alone. So, I started chatting, zoomed in, like two-three weeks before, on Berlin and its surroundings and started chatting with a guy from Romania that lived in Germany, not Berlin but close to Hamburg. And then we met up in Berlin. (Christian)

In this excerpt, spatial media releases Christian from place-based intimate ties, as he can find companions on spatial media anywhere (the collective). Simultaneously, however, Christian also plans to consummate intimacy, and spatial media enables "meeting up" in real time with individuals close by. This means that spatial media enables self-realization in the sense of traveling to both consume and consummate intimacy (see Duguay, 2019; Lean and Condie, 2017). The lure of this combination was well acknowledged in the material:

> When you go abroad, it is like Christmas Eve because everyone is new. So then, of course, you really turn on the app as fast as you can. Then, it is really fun because then you will most likely meet someone; that's how you do it. (Christian)

While consummating intimacy is crucial to self-realization, Christian likens traveling abroad to Christmas Eve in his quote. Supposedly, the bodies abroad are Christmas gifts he can open and consume as he pleases. However, back at home, he expects them to be more earnest and willing to move over to "more serious apps like Facebook". In this way, he reduces those he meets while traveling to bodies available to be conquered, but those he meets in his home town are elevated to equal individuals, an inequality acknowledged by others (see, for example, James et al., 2019). This unequal relationship is strikingly similar to the process of assimilation in which the Borg drones add bodies and cultures to service their culture but do not change their own. The assimilation process is not only unequal; it is also involuntary. Moreover, Bauman (1998) highlights how involuntary individualization arises by discussing tourists and vagabonds. Tourists from the Global North are well off and able to move freely in the world, while vagabonds in the Global South are "stuck" in place and thereby become reduced to place-bound tourist guides to service travelers, as also suggested in the interviews:

> What really strikes me, when I am traveling, is that gays often are very knowledgeable, language-wise I mean. I don't have to look for a tourist agency. I can just ask "What is there to do here?" "What happens here?" "Where is that?" And then you get responses, and everyone is so helpful and accommodating, informative, and most know English; it is incredible. My impression is that through Grindr, gays have gained a certain cultural competence through the more global apps. (Liban)

In the quote, Liban highlights the process whereby he is free to move and get the service he needs. Crucial in the quote above is his analysis of how men who desire men

in other places have gained, or been taught, the cultural competence of helping and being accommodating toward gay tourists. As Thompson (2019) has argued, the unequal interactions enabled by spatial media also mean that the tourist, or nomad, in her terminology, is distanced from the local culture. Spatial media diminishes the need to interact in place-based spaces where (traditional) local same-sex cultures are more prominent. For example, while achieving intimacy, pre-spatial media would have included visiting places presumed to be meeting places for men who desire men; spatial media erases this need:

> I was in Berlin, for example; I was there with my friends from [city] and then they just sat and texted on the apps the whole time. I was like: hang on, we're going out to eat and then to that damn gay bar and that damn gay bar, I don't remember what they were called, so why do you have to sit here texting on the apps? You will meet guys at the bar, I said. Drink five beers, get drunk and talk to people. (Oskar)

Gieseking (2017) reminds us that code originates somewhere, foremost in the Global North. The origin of code together with tourism practices constitutes a colonizing tendency of diminishing local cultures. This means that multiple understandings of intimacy become reduced to understandings originating in the Global North, as has been suggested by Oswin (2006). However, even within the Global North, the plurality of queer intimacies changes:

> I wish that it would be like it was before—"I invite you to a dance," meeting one person. Because I think it was a whole different thing, I think that you could bind yourself to that person in a whole different way if you met like that. I think that you get a whole different set of associations, how that person moves, how he smells, what pheromones he sends out, a lot of stuff that you don't get with a black, orange, blue background with a picture where it says what tribes [uses English term] you like, if you take or give. That you want to get to later, that you want to discover. "Are you top or bottom?" [uses English terms]. (Yaser)

In the quote, Yaser refers to the older Swedish practice of realizing intimacy by inviting someone for a couple or cheek-to-cheek "pardans". A request for a *pardans* only obliged close and intimate contact between two dancers. LBDM, however, enables users to choose only predefined categories where sexual practice is key and reduced to a number of preferred positions during anal intercourse. As Illouz (2007) acknowledged, in code, intimacy must be reduced to easily transferable categories for the code to be understandable across time and space. Thus, reduction is part of the code itself. Coding, however, is not the means by which spatial media reduces the ways in which intimacy can be realized. As was widely discussed in the interviews and as has been argued elsewhere, queer bars and clubs are closing down due to the wider use of the LBDM (Collins and Drinkwater, 2017; Miles, 2018):

> I've never been the kind of guy that has needed public toilets or such [to consummate intimacy], but [. . .] it has almost disappeared. And it is the same here in [city] [. . .]. If you are at [club] or [bar], you check your damn phone instead of "excuse me, I'm right here next to you so you should be able to pinch me in the ass" [. . .] If you're not on [LBDM], you do not exist. (Magnus)

In the quote above, Magnus refers to the erosion of physical meeting places due to the allure of the LBDM, while only some queers are at the bar, all queers are on the LBDM. The mass of queer bodies on the LBDM is also in stark contrast to the diversity of online spaces that also allow for local variations by geography or language. Before spatial media, a multitude of online spaces created by and for local queer communities existed in countries across the globe. However, these cannot compete with the simplicity and allure of the mass of bodies on the LBDM:

> There is no other way [to meet]; I only have Grindr. I erased my Qruiser [local online space] profile because it felt outdated in some way. It is all extraneous to have it now. It is part of a different time, that is gone, to have a profile there. [. . .] I think that Qruiser has lost its attractiveness, so I have left that forum completely. (Oliver)

In this last theme, we have taken the process of assimilation in the Star Trek series as the starting point to discuss how spatial media function geographically. Bernardi (1998) argues that although the Star Trek community stands for individualism and plurality, it is mainly represented by White people. Crises related to the Borg assimilation project always need to be solved by White male authority, as Cranny-Francis (2000) adds. Crucial in the Borg assimilation process is the addition of bodies but the erasure of cultures to service the superior multiraced Borg culture and hive communication. Previous research has highlighted that the LBDM erases local queer meeting places (Ahlm, 2017), and we identified a similar pattern. LBDM appears to be an interphase in which intimacy is reduced to simple categories and pictures embody an appealing way to overcome complex (local) cultures and practices, making it easier for ever more bodies to join. The promise of adding an endless number of multiraced bodies to consummate intimacies through the LBDM spurs a process in which local spaces, places, and cultures are at best ignored or at worst erased and forgotten. Although this addition of bodies enables a multiraced community, it makes sense only if queers can travel in space to consummate intimacies.

Conclusion

The everyday intimate relationships of the men we interviewed are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the traditional modernist version of the nuclear family establishment. It is tempting to quickly acknowledge the evolution to a *liquid* or late modern society where individuals have been liberated from the chains of modernist institutional structures and predetermined roles of gender and sexuality. To realize intimacy, we no longer need to bind ourselves in lasting relationships of commitment and duty. Technology and spatial media function as mediators that enable us to find suitable partners or objects with whom to consummate intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017; McGlotten, 2013; Race, 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012).

In this article, however, we have argued that technology in general, and spatial media in particular, resembles an *institution* of intimacy rather than a mere mediator or infrastructure. In line with previous work highlighting the mediating, or structural, aspects of spatial media (Attwood et al., 2017; McGlotten, 2013), we argue that spatial media creates a system that not only allocates resources in the form of gratification and intimacy but also

establishes a hierarchy of desirable bodily aesthetics. The roles played in this system, such as predetermined ways to have sexual intercourse, are standardized and prewritten through code. As noted by Licoppe et al. (2016), this creates a very specific way of practicing intimacies. Obligations to serve others are implicit, and privilege is assigned to those who are well off and can move freely across states and borders. These practices are closely intertwined with neoliberal consumption practices and mean that individuals need to engage in complex relation work to consummate intimacies (Chan, 2018; Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz, 2018). In essence, we propose that spatial media is a new institution of intimacy; furthermore, it is an institution with coercive features, as it appears to be an interphase that also limits individuality when a multitude of voices speak as one.

This produces a paradox. On the one hand, the process of individualization drives the creation of technology that collapses institutions regulating intimacy to enable self-realization and freedom (cf. Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Simultaneously, neoliberal austerity policies drive the commodification of intimacies on digital media (Hakim, 2019). On the other hand, the creation of technology creates a new set of rules, obligations, and privileges that limit self-realization. We used the figure of the Borg collective from the Star Trek TV series to explain how this can be deemed acceptable for individuals seeking self-realization. At first glance, the Borg drone seems to be the antithesis of self-realization, but we explain how the two can actually be compatible. First, the Borg drone has collapsed, or liquefied, the borders between the body and technology. Using excerpts from men who desire men's intimacy practices on spatial media, we showed their perceptions of how spatial media has eliminated the technology/body and public/private divides. Second, collapsing these borders makes men easily susceptible to emotional responses to gratification and rejection. This state forms the basis of how the Borg drone can be so easily regulated and controlled by the voices of others, as exemplified by the quotes from men who desire men. Third, the promise of a never-ending addition of multiraced bodies (to consume) enables the Borg drone to reach perfection within the system and the men who desire men to achieve sexual self-realization.

As has been widely proposed by many studying digitally mediated intimacies, individuals are not passive end-receivers of codes imposed from "above"; rather, they are part of the many voices of the hive and thus also coproducers of this structure via their agency (Giddens, 1993). Some individuals still realize intimacies nondigitally, yet others live out all of their intimacy practices within the interphase of the spatial media hive community, while pioneers of the hive who exercise a remnant of individuality travel to assimilate new men into the shared knowledge structure. In sum, the process of individualization entails not only a process of liquefaction but also a forging of new institutional structures that condition the realization of intimacy. The stark spotlighting of technology as a radical facilitator of liquidity is itself a part of this new structure and suggests a dialectical process in which men who desire men might be the first to use their new (drone) eyes to view the coming stage of mainstream intimacy in contemporary late modernity. For individuals marginalized in the modernist version of intimacy, this entails great potential to grow and develop intimacies outside of the previously prescribed ways, for example, outside of hetero- and homonormative relationships. Certainly, it is also possible to deem Borg intimacies "cruel optimism," that is, the desired intimacies are conceptualized in a way that are actually "an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011: 1), if what is at stake is primarily thought to only occur within the modernist version of intimacy entailing lasting relationships of commitment and duty.

ORCID iD

Thomas Wimark (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7272-1729

Notes

1. We suggest the use the of term men who desire men as a contrast to the term men who have sex with men (MSM), as some interview participants described a lack of actual sexual practice because their desires remained at a distance via location-based dating media (LBDM). To capture this, the term men who desire men is used in this article to focus on aspects of emotional and social orientation rather than sexual practices.
2. The science fiction universe of Star Trek began with the 1960s TV series *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–1969) and continues today, with more than nine TV series and 13 movies. The Borg first appears and is an important antagonist in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) but frequently appears in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001). The depiction of the Borg changes through the series, which makes a comprehensive, coherent description of the Borg impossible (see, for example, Jackson and Nexon, 2003). For example, the idea of the Borg collective is initially introduced as free of hierarchies and chains of command. This changes in the movie *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) when a Borg queen is introduced. First, the Borg queen refers to herself as a mere material expression of the entire hive collective mind and not a controller. Later in *Star Trek: Voyager*, however, the Borg queen figures as a controller of the hive mind. Likewise, in the first encounter with the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, drones only receive implants, but in the subsequent *Star Trek: Voyager*, the idea of nano robots ("nanobots") that invade the circulatory system is introduced. In this article, we refer to the first encounters unless stated otherwise.

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Author biographies

Thomas Wimark is an Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University. In his research, he explores the juxtaposition between sexuality and geographical processes and how these are inherently connected. His scholarly interests include migration, urban/rural governance, and marginalized groups.

Daniel Hedlund is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Law, Uppsala University. His research interests include migration law and policy, guardianship institutions, and marginalized groups.