



Dating in Motion: Online Dating Through the Lives of Different Generations of Men Who Have Sex with Men

Alexander Dhoest¹

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Abstract

From the early years of the internet, its key importance was recognized as a site for sexual minorities to explore and express their identity and sexuality. Gay men were quick to connect online, first in chat rooms and subsequently on an ever-expanding array of sites and apps, culminating in geolocation apps such as Grindr. Although a lot of research has investigated the uses of these services, the focus is mostly on younger users, disregarding the experiences of older people. Moreover, the life stage of users is not sufficiently addressed, nor are their evolving uses throughout the life course. The current paper aims to contribute to this knowledge by reporting on a study involving four generations of Belgian men who have sex with men (MSM), combining insights gained in an exploratory survey (N = 684) with in-depth interviews (N = 80). The results show how men from different generations got access to dating sites and apps at different times in their lives, in a shifting balance with offline dating practices. Moreover, at the time of the research, participants were in different stages of their lives, which led to a variety of online dating practices. The end picture is one of dating “in motion”, both shifting between generations and changing with the life course of individuals. This paper contributes to the literature on MSM online dating by adding a non-Anglophone perspective, studying a broad age range including older users, disclosing clear intergenerational differences, and transcending a static view of online dating among a single age cohort.

Keywords Online dating · MSM · Generations · Life course · Survey · Interviews

✉ Alexander Dhoest
alexander.dhoest@uantwerpen.be

¹ Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

Introduction

In a review of fifteen years of research on the internet's impact on sexuality, Döring (2009) noted the great importance of the internet as a source of empowerment for sexual minorities and subcultures. She stated that, beside offering a “place of refuge”, the internet also offered unprecedented opportunities for sexual contacts, both online “cybersex” and connecting to partners for offline sex, which was particularly popular among gay men. Since then, the opportunities to date and “hook up” online have only expanded.

The current paper first gives an overview of research on online dating and hookup practices among MSM,¹ identifying recurring themes as well as lacunae. One main shortcoming in existing research is the lack of a chronological dimension, i.e., the evolution of dating and hookup sites and apps in relation to the life course of different generations of MSM. To address this issue, the paper subsequently reports on a mixed-method study into the use of dating and hookup sites and apps (further summarized as “online dating”) among different generations of Belgian MSM, from the time of first contact with such services to the time of research. This study aims to explore the heuristic value of a generational perspective to better capture the diversity and evolution of online dating among MSM. In doing so, it offers a more “mobile” view of online dating, aiming to do justice to changes across subsequent cohorts of MSM as well as within the life course of individuals.

Key Themes in Research on Online Dating Among MSM

The literature on online dating among MSM is rich and ever-growing, so this overview is limited to three recurring themes which are also of relevance to the current research. A first theme concerns the *negotiation of multiple sites and apps*. Reviewing 30 years of “queer male online spaces”, Miles (2018) argues that queer online dating builds on older traditions of “cruising” in urban spaces as well as “lonely hearts” advertisements, first in the form of IRC chat, then on profile sites like Gaydar and PlanetRomeo which were primarily used in the domestic context, and most recently on mobile apps such as Grindr and Tinder which can also be used in public settings. As the options multiplied, users had to negotiate which sites and apps to use and how to use them. Gudelunas (2012a, 2012b) found that gay men maintain profiles on different social network sites and dating apps, managing different identities online and using these apps for different purposes, as each app has its specific affordances and concomitant uses. Licoppe et al. (2016) elaborated the latter point by studying interactional practices on Grindr, where users follow a sexual script to hook up, leading to a specific process of selection and a “checklist” type

¹ Men who have Sex with Men, but who may not identify as gay. Research literature uses a variety of terms to refer to similar groups, including “gay men” or “queer men”. Unless an author's use of a specific term is referenced, the term “MSM” is used in this paper for the sake of consistency and to include men who identify in other ways, such as bisexual.

of conversation. MacKee (2016) studied Tinder as an alternative to hookup apps, which is seen as less hyper-sexualized and more oriented to “finding romance”, for instance by being less anonymous and featuring less nudity. While many men use both Tinder and Grindr, they “curate” different identities on both apps, in accordance with their respective norms of proper behavior (MacKee, 2016).

A second recurring theme in the literature on dating and hookup sites and apps for MSM concerns their *varied uses and consequences*. While a lot of research focuses on the sexual uses of dating apps, Wu and Ward (2020) found that these apps are also used for casual conversation, partly to screen potential romantic partners. Similarly, studying the uses and gratifications of Grindr, Van De Wiele and Tong (2014) found that sexual gratification is indeed an important use, but that socializing (talking to strangers and meeting new friends) was even more important, particularly for those residing in smaller urban settings. Byron et al. (2021) further explored the relationship between dating apps and friendship, confirming that dating apps are not only used to make new friends and adding that friends can also help to negotiate app use.

Beside these varied uses, several authors also discuss the wide array of consequences of online dating. Thus, Nodin et al. (2014) found that the use of the internet did not only lead to more (potential) partners and sexual experiences, but also influenced the participants’ sexual self-confidence and acceptance. Race (2015) studied the emergence of “party and play” practices (“play” referring to recreational drugs), arguing that online hookup devices act as “infrastructures of sexual encounter”, leading to the formation of new sexual cultures. Adopting a Uses and Gratifications approach, Miller (2015) identified seven gratifications sought in the use of social networks for MSM: safety, control, easiness, accessibility, mobility, connectivity and versatility. Despite his focus on positive outcomes, Miller also observed negative feelings related to the use of these apps, such as vulnerability, anxiousness, boredom, sexual indignity, loneliness, and frustration.

Third, many authors discuss the *close relationship between online dating and offline contexts and practices*. IRC chatrooms were one of the first online services, and they were eagerly used by MSM to connect socially, romantically, and sexually. While early writing tended to describe the internet as a separate, disembodied realm, based on his ethnographic research on gay chat rooms Campbell (2004) stated that bodies are very much part of virtual experiences, thus questioning the strict division between online and offline spaces. Increasingly, the early communal and anonymous text-based chat rooms were replaced by more visually oriented and more openly sexualized sites (Harrison, 2010). Writing on Gaydar and similar profile sites, Mowlabocus (2016, orig. 2010) again stressed the close relationship between digital communication and physical practices, also highlighting the user profile as a new form of identification and queer visibility. Indeed, self-presentation is an important aspect of online dating by MSM, who must decide how to present themselves and what they do (not) wish to disclose about their identity and sexuality. This became particularly prominent after the introduction of mobile geolocation apps such as Grindr, which inform users on the proximity of other users, thus further eroding the distinction between online and offline realms. According to Roth (2014), the use of such apps is embodied, constructing hybrid online/offline bodies: “Users are at once

constructed as data and physically engaged in social and sexual interactions.” (Roth, 2014, p. 2128) Moreover, these apps overlay physical space: “Any space, in practice, becomes a potential site for gay sociability when that sociability is enacted through a mobile application.” (Roth, 2014, p. 2127) To Miles (2021), this partly explains why former “gay neighborhoods” lost much of their appeal, as any space can now become a queer space. Similarly, Blackwell et al. (2015) describe Grindr as a “co-situation technology”, which layers virtual over physical spaces, thus creating visibility and prompting users to think about the ways they present themselves in their profile photo and description, balancing identifiability against attractiveness. The latter is often defined in terms of hegemonic masculinity on dating and hookup apps which, like any other (online) gay space, are the site of normativity and exclusion based on body type, age, race, etc. (Miller, 2018).

Research Lacunae

While the literature on online dating among MSM is expansive, it is skewed in several ways. To start, most of the research cited above studied *Anglophone countries*. However, over the past years MSM dating practices in other national and cultural contexts have also been researched. For instance, Wu and Trottier (2021) studied Chinese gay men’s dating practices, observing a similar process of differentiation between apps. In the Chinese context, user anonymity and establishing relationships seem to be more important (Chan, 2016), which points at the cultural specificity of dating app use. This, in turn, is connected societal attitudes towards gay sex, as also evidenced by research on India (Birnholtz et al., 2020) and Turkey (Phua, 2020) highlighting the importance of anonymity to avoid harassment and abuse. Anonymity may equally be more important for MSM who are part of a conservative community in a migration context, as found by Dhoest and Szulc (2016) in Belgium.

Beside national and cultural differences, other forms of diversity are also under-explored. While racism is widely observed in online dating among MSM (Conner, 2019; Miller, 2018; Shield, 2017), *racial differences* in online dating have not been researched consistently, nor have *class differences*. Similarly, *age differences* have hardly been explicitly addressed to date. A lot of research deliberately focuses on younger users (aged 14 to 25), highlighting the importance of the internet in sexual identity development (e.g., Albury & Byron, 2016; Castañeda, 2015; Harper et al., 2009; Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Mustanski et al. (2011) confirmed the key importance of online dating to young MSM, but also found ambivalence at the use of online tools to find sexual partners due to the “brazen and sometimes explicit nature of the websites dedicated to this pursuit” (Mustanski et al., 2011, p. 299). Other research does not deliberately focus on younger users but draws on young samples, be it in terms of the participants’ age range (e.g., 20–31 in Wu & Ward, 2020) or average age (e.g., 24.26 in Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014).

While the focus on younger users is valid as this is indeed a key age group and life stage in relation to sexual exploration and dating, we lack insights on the dating practices of (older) adult MSM. Only rarely does research deliberately focus on older users, such as the study by Marciano and Nimrod (2021) on older Israeli gay

men (aged 66–73), which disclosed the frequent use of online dating, particularly in conditions where homosexuality is illegitimate. Some researchers also deliberately focus on different generations, such as Miao and Chan (2021) who studied the domestication of the dating app Blued among Chinese users of different age groups (20–30, 30–50, and over 50). They found that gay men born from the 1980s onwards were more likely to embrace their sexuality because of the decriminalization and depathologization of homosexuality in China at the turn of the twenty-first century. Baams et al. (2011), while not focusing specifically on dating apps, did study internet use for social support among “same sex attracted individuals” of different ages, arguing that access to the internet at the time of sexual identity formation makes a huge difference. They found that Dutch people who did have access to the internet at that time (aged 16–24 in the study) used the internet more for social interaction, while older people (25–59) used it more with sexual contact motives.

Theoretical Framework: Queer Media Generations

Most research on MSM online dating provides a “snapshot” of the online media use of particularly groups of people at a particular place and time. As stated by Wu and Ward (2018), we miss a historical genealogy of dating devices and their evolution along with user practices. A generational perspective offers a way to address this lacuna and to consider the formative experiences of subsequent cohorts of MSM in an ever-evolving social and technological context. Based on Mannheim’s (1952) theoretical writing about generations as age cohorts sharing a similar location in history, we can distinguish different generations of MSM, coming of age in different social contexts in relation to same-sex sexuality. For instance, Hammack et al. (2018) distinguish between four periods and concomitant generations in U.S. history: the sickness era, prior to the late 1960s; the liberation era (approx. 1969–1981); the AIDS era (1981–early 2000s); and the equality era (2003–present). Following Marshall et al. (2019) in this paper the term *queer generations* is used to reflect the tension between “generation” as a generalization and “queer” as a term questioning such generalizations, recognizing individual differences.

In terms of access to digital platforms, *media generations* can be conceptualized as age cohorts encountering similar media landscapes (in terms of technologies and representations) at similar times in life (Bolin, 2017). Particularly for younger generations, the relationship to digital media is crucial as it creates a generational “semantic”, a particular way of interpreting reality (Aroldi & Colombo, 2013). Following Meyen et al. (2010), we can also interpret this in the Bourdieusian sense as habitus, different (groups of) internet users having certain predispositions and behaviours in relation to their life experiences and social position, in which age plays a crucial role as it relates to internet socialisation (growing up with or without internet) and life stage.

Combined, both perspectives on generations lead to a concept of *queer media generations*, subsequent cohorts of MSM encountering the possibilities of (digital) media at different times in life. While moving through different life stages, particularly in relation to sexual identity formation, subsequent generations of MSM

are confronted with evolving legal and social contexts in relation to the acceptance of same-sex sexuality as well as an ever-changing array of online tools. This was hinted at by Gross (2007), who noted on the enormous difference for young gay people growing up with internet access. Gudelunas (2012a) developed this perspective, exploring the differences between cohorts growing up with or without internet access, noting on the importance of online culture in relation to sexuality. Most recently, Robards et al., (2018, 2019) systematically explored generational differences between four younger cohorts (between 16 and 35), noting on the ever shifting significance of digital media use. In terms of dating and hookup apps, younger participants preferred more recent and more flexible apps such as Tinder while older cohorts preferred older and more targeted apps like Grindr. Again, however, we do not know how this relates to the online dating experiences of users over 35.

While building on generational theory and studying subsequent “queer media generations”, the current paper does not aim to reify generations as fixed entities with clear borders. Rather, the notion of generations is used as a heuristic to more systematically study patterns in media uses, and to add a layer of diversity to existing insights which are mostly based on single groups of (younger) users in a particular life stage (adolescence and young adulthood). To support this exploratory process, the research does draw on widely used generational categories and labels, as described in the methodological section, which may lead to the impression of clear generational entities and boundaries, but the qualitative findings do question such neat divisions, as also discussed in the conclusion.

Further complicating this picture, the current paper also considers the *life course* of MSM belonging to these different generations. As explained by Lee Harrington and Bielby (2010), life course research studies social and historical changes that impact a particular generation at a certain point in time, including changing media technologies. Wheatley and Buglass (2019) apply this perspective to online media uses, pleading to also study older users and to consider both chronological age as well as events and transitions which influence decisions and experiences in relation to media use.

Method

Based on the literature and theoretical framework discussed above, this paper aims to answer the question: *How did online dating practices evolve across subsequent generations of MSM?* To do so, the current study investigates dating and hookup site and app uses and experiences among four generations of MSM through a *mixed-method approach*, drawing on a quantitative exploratory survey to measure the perceived importance of online dating and on in-depth interviews to get a deeper inside view on user experiences. Geographically, the research is set in *Flanders*, the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium, a country with a good track record in relation to sexual minority rights, being one of the first to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003 (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2010) and ranking second in ILGA Europe’s “Rainbow map” measuring LGBTI equality (ILGA, 2021). Historically, however, homosexuality was less accepted, the LGBTQ movement as well as social and

media visibility only emerging hesitantly from the 1960s and rapidly growing from the 1990s (Borghs, 2017; Eeckhout, 2017).

This paper draws on the most widely used *generational classification* also used (albeit with other names) by Bitterman and Hess (2021), adopting the age brackets identified by Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019): Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980; Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996; and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. This classification was adopted in view of the varied generational classifications used in LGBTQ research to date, which moreover are mostly based on American samples and social contexts.

First, an anonymous *online survey* was used to explore intergenerational differences in dating site and app use among MSM. The respondents were recruited through e-mail and social media, in particular calls for participation on the social media of LGBTQ organizations as well as sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram. The survey was open to Dutch-speaking MSM (gay, bisexual, or other identifications) living in Flanders. The survey ran in October 2020, at a time when social contact was severely restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the questions explicitly focused on online dating before the pandemic. Beside socio-demographic questions and a range of questions on other media, the respondents were asked about the importance of three dating services (PlanetRomeo, Grindr and Tinder) to connect with friends, romantic or sexual partners in the past and at the time of research. Data were analyzed using SPSS v 27.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY).

From mid October 2020, in-depth *semi-structured interviews* were conducted to further explore these issues. The interviews spanned the participants' entire lives, chronologically discussing which dating sites and apps they had access to at what time in their lives, and how they used them. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, from October 2020 to January 2021, by the author who is a cisgender gay man belonging to Generation X, a position that was openly acknowledged and occasionally discussed in the interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded analysed using NVivo (version 1.4, QSR International). Drawing on inductive coding, a thematic framework was set up to organize recurring themes, concepts and categories emerging from the interviews (Ritchie et al., 2003). In a second round of analysis, all interview segments related to a similar topic were compiled and analysed by generation, to identify generational patterns. All quotes included in this paper are literal translations from Dutch by the author; participant names were replaced by aliases of their own choice.

Quantitative Findings

The survey sample consisted of 684 respondents, ranging in age between 18 and 77 years old (mean age 34.29 years old, $SD=13.41$). Based on their year of birth, the respondents were divided in four generations: Baby Boomers, born until 1964 ($n=71$; 10.5%); Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980 ($n=125$; 18.4%); Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 ($n=315$; 46.4%); and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (i.e., 2002 as only respondents over 18 years old were able

Table 1 Importance of dating and hookup sites and apps for contact when exploring sexuality

	Baby Boomers <i>n</i> (%)	Generation X <i>n</i> (%)	Millennials <i>n</i> (%)	Generation Z <i>n</i> (%)
<i>PlanetRomeo</i>				
(Very) important	3 (4.3%)	10 (8.1%)	76 (24.5%)	21 (12.7%)
Neutral	2 (2.9%)	4 (3.2%)	17 (5.5%)	12 (7.3%)
(Very) unimportant	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.2%)	92 (29.7%)	122 (73.9%)
Did not exist at the time	65 (92.9%)	106 (85.5%)	125 (40.3%)	10 (6.1%)
<i>Grindr</i>				
(Very) important	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.6%)	93 (29.8%)	71 (42.8%)
Neutral	1 (1.5%)	1 (0.8%)	18 (5.8%)	16 (9.6%)
(Very) unimportant	1 (1.5%)	4 (3.3%)	51 (16.3%)	71 (42.8%)
Did not exist at the time	66 (97.1%)	115 (94.3%)	150 (48.1%)	8 (4.8%)
<i>Tinder</i>				
(Very) important	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.8%)	73 (23.5%)	89 (53.6%)
Neutral	1 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (3.5%)	7 (4.2%)
(Very) unimportant	1 (1.4%)	3 (2.4%)	52 (16.7%)	59 (35.5%)
Did not exist at the time	67 (97.1%)	120 (96.8%)	175 (56.3%)	11 (6.6%)

to participate) ($n = 168$; 24.7%). Most respondents were born in Belgium and both of their parents had the Belgian nationality at the time of their birth ($n = 587$, 85.8%). Most of the respondents were highly educated, with 80.4% ($n = 550$) reporting their highest education level as a bachelor's degree or higher, 18.6% ($n = 127$) a high school degree and 0.9% ($n = 6$) an elementary school degree. The respondents were asked to indicate their sexual orientation(s), choosing one or more options from a list, or describing how they identified in their own words. 80.8% identified only as gay, the others preferring a wide range of (often multiple) identity labels, most frequently including gay, bisexual and queer. Particularly Generation Z participants identified more often with other sexual orientations besides gay (see Dhoest, 2022 for a further discussion of these findings).

A first question asked about the importance of different three dating and hookup sites and apps to connect with others at the time when respondents were first exploring their sexuality (see Table 1). This was generally in adolescence, ranging between the average age of 16.86 for Baby Boomers and 14.41 for Generation Z, but with large individual variations. PlanetRomeo (previously called GayRomeo) is the oldest one, which originated as a dating site for gay, bi and trans people in 2002 and since evolved to also offer a mobile app including geolocation (<https://romeo.com/en/about>). Grindr was launched as a mobile app in 2009, immediately featuring geolocation, presenting itself as a “social networking app” for gay, bi, trans and queer people but particularly suited for hookups as it allowed to directly identify and address people nearby (<https://grindr.com/about>). Tinder is most recent app, launched as a mobile app in 2012, not specifically targeting LGBTQ people but also becoming popular for this group as a “safer” app

Table 2 Importance of dating and hookup sites and apps for contact in the past year

	Baby Boomers <i>n</i> (%)	Generation X <i>n</i> (%)	Millennials <i>n</i> (%)	Generation Z <i>n</i> (%)
<i>PlanetRomeo</i>				
(Very) important	24 (33.8%)	55 (44.4%)	75 (24.0%)	15 (9.0%)
Neutral	7 (9.9%)	9 (7.3%)	19 (6.1%)	9 (5.4%)
(Very) unimportant	40 (56.3%)	60 (48.4%)	219 (70.0%)	142 (85.5%)
<i>Grindr</i>				
(Very) important	13 (18.6%)	50 (40.7%)	151 (48.1%)	76 (45.5%)
Neutral	8 (11.4%)	6 (4.9%)	29 (9.2%)	17 (10.2%)
(Very) unimportant	49 (70.0%)	67 (54.5%)	134 (42.7%)	74 (44.3%)
<i>Tinder</i>				
(Very) important	1 (1.4%)	13 (10.5%)	104 (33.2%)	89 (53.6%)
Neutral	5 (7.0%)	6 (4.8%)	21 (6.7%)	16 (9.6%)
(Very) unimportant	65 (91.6%)	105 (84.7%)	188 (60.1%)	61 (36.7%)

which allows users to self-select potential matches (<https://tinder.com/en-GB/about-tinder>).

This timeline is reflected in the perceived importance of these sites and apps throughout generations. Most Baby Boomers and Generation X respondents did not have access to these services, unless they started exploring their sexuality later in life, in which case PlanetRomeo was (very) important for most. Millennials were the first generation where the majority (59.7%) had access to PlanetRomeo, which was (very) important for 41.1% of those who had access. About half (51.9%) had access to Grindr, which was (very) important to 57.4% of them, making it the most important app for this generation. 43.7% had access to Tinder, which was (very) important to 53.7%. Clearly, for Millennials with access to dating and hookup sites and apps, these played an important role in connecting to others. Access further rose for Generation Z respondents, a large majority of which (about 95% for each) had access to these services when exploring their sexuality, and for whom the more recent and less targeted apps were most popular, in line with the findings of Robards et al., (2018, 2019): Tinder 57.4%, Grindr 44.9% and PlanetRomeo 13.5%.

Moving to the present, respondents were also asked about the importance of different dating and hookup sites and apps to connect with friends, sexual or romantic partners in the past year (see Table 2). Their answers show that Baby Boomers have embraced dating services, with a clear predilection for the older PlanetRomeo which 33.8% deemed (very) important, followed by Grindr (18.6%) and Tinder (1.4%). For Generation X respondents, these sites and apps have become even more important, again with a preference for the older and more specialized PlanetRomeo (44.4%) and Grindr (40.7%) as opposed to the more recent and less targeted Tinder (10.5%). For Millennials, Grindr (48.1%) and Tinder (33.2%) are the most important apps, while PlanetRomeo (24%) is losing its appeal in this generation. This is even more strongly the case for Generation Z respondents, only 9% of whom deem PlanetRomeo (very) important, as opposed to Grindr (45.5%) and Tinder (53.6%).

Overall, dating and hookup apps and sites seem to have been particularly important at the time of sexual exploration, if available. Because of the large number of missing values ('Did not exist at the time') in the first table, it is impossible to statistically compare the figures for both periods, but it is clear that online dating has become (very) important for all generations and that each generation has its preferred sites and apps: PlanetRomeo for Baby Boomers and Generation X; Grindr for Millennials; and Tinder for Generation Z.

Qualitative Findings

The interviews allow to situate these quantitative patterns in the context of the evolving everyday lives of individuals belonging to different generations. Participants were recruited through the online survey, and 187 survey respondents volunteered to be interviewed. Interview candidates were randomly contacted by age, to ascertain a good spread across the four generations. The final sample consists of 80 participants: 16 Baby Boomer, 18 Generation X, 24 Millennial, 22 Generation Z (the youngest born in 2001). This section presents a narrative, chronological account of the online dating experiences for each generation separately, offering a dynamic view of online dating practices "in motion" throughout the participants' life course. For each generation, first the social context in which they came of age is sketched, after which their dating experiences are discussed from past to present. The overarching patterns and themes across generations will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Baby Boomers

These participants were born before 1965, so they came of age in a period when same-sex sexuality was invisible and taboo, and many took a long time to come out, a process that varied greatly within this generation. They started to explore their sexuality in a separate sphere, particularly the emerging gay bars and associations which were often situated in larger cities such as Antwerp. Tim (born in 1957): "I was in Antwerp almost every night, and gay life at that time was concentrated in Rue de Vaseline² and gay saunas. I went to gay saunas an awful lot, and I had a lot of fun." All dating took place offline, either in gay venues or through contact advertisements: "I had international contacts quite young, through the *Koopjeskrant*,³ that was the Facebook of the time. It had free adverts, also international ones, and it was available in all newspaper stands." (Paul, b. 1958).

Online dating only became available at a later age for these participants, but many were quick to go online once internet access became more widely available from the mid 1990s, so when they were in their thirties or older. Starting on chat sites, they

² "Vaseline alley", the popular nickname of the Van Schoonhovenstraat where most gay bars were concentrated (see Eeckhout et al., 2020).

³ Newspaper mostly containing classified ads.

explored an evolving range of sites such as MSN, Gaydar, Bullchat and Badoo. For instance, Jozef (b. 1954) says he tried out all kinds of services and mostly used Gaydar, but that these became less important now that he is older and is experiencing ageism online. Talking about Bullchat, he says: "I got to know someone and was chatting with him. He asked my age, he was much younger, and when I said my age, I never lie about that, he said: You old bastard, go and hang yourself!" Others have stopped using these sites and apps because they have a partner or feel alienated from current dating culture. Tim (b. 1957): "It was fantastic, you had quick contacts if you wanted. But today it's a bit over-evolved, with Grindr and GayRomeo and such. Then it was more personal, now it's so elaborate you almost have no overview." Tim also complained about the lack of real contact through these apps, where it is all about sex: "They even don't ask your name, it's only about: how long is your dick, can I see pictures of your dick, and can we meet up. Mostly there's no actual conversation." Many become nostalgic when remembering the early gay chatrooms where they regularly had extensive conversations with the same people, such as Paul (b. 1958): "It was dating, but it was also social contact. Back then, Facebook did not exist yet, so people also mostly used it for social contact." Overall, for men of this generation, dating sites and apps have been important at a certain stage of their life, but have lost some of their importance at the time of the interview, partly because of a sense of alienation and ageism, as also found by Marciano and Nimrod (2021) and in line with Miller's (2018) comments on normativity and exclusion in online dating.

Generation X

Participants of this generation were born between 1965 and 1980, so most of them came of age in a society where same-sex sexuality was still rather invisible and without (easy) internet access. Like the Baby Boomers, most waited to come out until they left the parental home. They initially connected to other MSM offline, particularly in the gay scene which boomed and became more mainstream from the 1990s, as well as LGBTQ associations which emerged across Flanders and often also organized parties. Frans (born in 1965): "Dating, for me that was going to a party once a month and hoping that I would hook up with someone and he would become the love of my life." For some, this remained the preferred way of connecting. For instance, when asked about dating apps, Robin (b. 1979) answered: "I never use those, never. I don't think that's for me. I'm more like: I jump in my car, I drive to a bar, and we'll see who we meet. That's how I always met people."

Most, however, did eagerly take up online dating once it became available, which was generally after their first dating experiences. Frans (b. 1965) remembers this vividly: "It was after a break-up that I started to search on the internet when I was about 35. Then I first discovered chatrooms and gay dating sites." Many commented on how online dating expanded the "pool" of men to date with and how the threshold to date became much lower, also overcoming geographical boundaries and the necessity to visit a gay venue. At the same time, many also discussed how they had

to “learn” to use such sites and apps, for instance to identify catfishing. Generation X participants often expressed mixed feelings about dating and hookup sites and apps, quite a few commenting on the lack of personal contact and the one-sided focus on sex.

Online dating was particularly important for younger Generation X participants. For instance, Bert (b. 1976) had internet access from the age of 21 when he moved in with two roommates, which allowed him to freely explore his sexuality and start dating using IRC, later moving to PlanetRomeo and Grindr. He continued to use these sites and apps at the time of the interview, even though he was in a relationship—as were many of the other participants, who had also found their partner through these same sites and apps. Confirming the quantitative findings, many participants used multiple dating and hookup sites and apps at the time of the interview. Nevertheless, quite a few expressed a preference for offline dating, which was often their first dating experience: “Perhaps because of your first experiences at parties, that you have a better sense when you meet someone in real life. There are so many non-verbal details you don’t get on Grindr.” (Arthur, b. 1979).

Millennials

Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996, growing up in a more open society which facilitated coming out, which most did in their late teens or early twenties. They constituted the first generation with access to online sites when first exploring their sexuality. Gay venues and parties remained important for this generation, although many mentioned that they often first got in touch with other MSM in everyday, mixed settings such as leisure activities rather than in separate, dedicated gay venues. Quite a few also mentioned they first got in touch with other MSM online, often also “learning” to date online. Lex (b. 1985): “The internet had just started and dating sites too. Thinking back, it was all very basic: five pictures, some text, and a button to send a message. So it was a process of discovery at that time.” He continued: “As a 17-year-old you get on such a site, and suddenly you’re addressed by people in their forties or fifties: ‘You look good, do you want to get together?’ And in all your innocence, you say: ‘Get together to get a beer?’. It has been a learning experience.”

Echoing the literature referenced above, online dating remained closely connected to offline settings. For instance, going on a date became easier once participants moved out of the parental home, often to a bigger city. Nelson (b. 1984): “I quickly lived on my own, when I was 22, right after graduating. I moved to Antwerp and of course the world opened up. I still visited chat sites, but I also went on dates.” The adoption and use of apps was a process of trial and error, related to their affordances and popularity, and continuously changed. For instance, Joachim (b. 1987) said he dislikes Tinder as it’s hard to really connect, so he prefers Grindr but switches to Instagram get to know people better. “I also have Scruff but that’s not the same anymore and I actually don’t use it. The same for GayRomeo, which I did use in the past but now it’s really...” Throughout the interview, Joachim mentioned twelve different online dating and hookup sites and apps he has used over the years.

At the time of the interview, and in line with the survey findings, Grindr and Tinder were the most popular apps among the Millennials, who generally distinguished between Grindr as an app for hookups and Tinder for relationships, as also found by MacKee (2016). George (b. 1990): “In my head one is to get sex and the other to get a relationship, although that sometimes overlaps.” However, echoing the findings of Van De Wiele and Tong (2014), many commented how they also met friends on Grindr. Many expressed mixed feelings about these apps, particularly Grindr. Dieter (b. 1986): “I have a love/hate relationship with Grindr. More hate, actually. I think it’s a very sneaky platform. I think they have really thought deep about human interactions, and they exploit weaknesses and addictive behavior, I don’t like that.” Particularly the one-sided focus on sex annoys many participants. Lex (b. 1985): “OK, they’re dating apps so a lot of it is focused on sex. Perhaps I’ll sound old-fashioned now, but connection isn’t important there.” Willem (b. 1996) started to explore his sexuality through Grindr around the age of 18: “That quickly gives you a cold shower, in terms of how people act and how the dating scene is working.” He calls it a “meat inspection”, adding: “You are quickly and superficially rejected by many people. (...) You are quickly confronted with the fact that gay culture is focused on certain types, and on how you look.” Again, this confirms the normativity and exclusion discussed by Miller (2018).

Generation Z

The Generation Z participants were born between 1997 and 2001. Compared to older generations, they grew up at a time when same-sex sexuality was most widely accepted in society and visible in media, so they had more non-heterosexual peers and possibilities to explore and disclose their sexuality in everyday life, most coming out as teenagers. Consequently, the offline gay scene was less important for them, and some even mentioned that this was for “older people”. All had mixed groups of friends and did not feel as connected to “gay culture” as older participants.

Contrary to earlier generations, Generation Z participants grew up with mobile access to social media and apps, so using dating and hookup apps came naturally to them. Like the Millennials, but at an even younger age, they were able to explore their sexuality using dating and hookup apps, often circumventing age restrictions. Participants of this generation were often still exploring their sexuality at the time of the interview, for instance by dating both men and women, which is also why Tinder was a popular app among this generation. While Grindr was also widely used, particularly for hookups, several participants noted that Grindr was “too much” for them, particularly as a first contact with dating. Bastien (born in 2001) said it was “like walking through a scary neighborhood”, and Matthias (b. 1997) said: “I think I had Grindr for half an hour and then it was too much. Everybody starts talking to you and I immediately got... In dating I’m always... I think that’s still difficult. So I suddenly got a dick pick and then I thought: No, I’m not going to find anyone here.”

Like the Millennials, the Generation Z participants talked about a learning process, of trying out different apps and exploring their affordances (for instance how to start a conversation, or block certain users), often using certain apps intensely in

certain periods (for instance Grindr in a period of sexual experimentation) and then switching to others. Even these young participants talked about using certain apps “in the past”, comparing several apps they tried out and which one is most suitable for which use. At the same time, these young participants also expressed the mixed feelings heard among older generations, often being frustrated and sometimes disgusted by the online dating culture while expressing a longing to meet people “in real life”.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore the heuristic value of a generational perspective to better capture the diversity and evolution of online dating among MSM, answering the question: *How did online dating practices evolve across subsequent generations of MSM?* The findings did confirm the usefulness of this approach, disclosing clear differences in the online dating practices and experiences of different generations. The survey results showed that in the past, the use of dating and hookup sites and apps while exploring their sexuality hugely differed in terms of accessibility, echoing Gudelunas (2012a). In the present, all generations eagerly use dating and hookup sites and apps, but their uses differ in terms of preferences for more targeted gay-only sites and apps such as PlanetRomeo (Baby Boomers and Generation X) versus more recent apps such as Grindr (particularly popular among Millennials) and more open apps such as Tinder (among Generation Z). This confirms the findings of Robards et al., (2018, 2019) and also reflects the more varied and fluid sexual and gender identifications among younger generations as found in this and other research (Persson et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2009). Overall, these quantitative findings indicate a first kind of motion: *the changing uses and experiences of online dating across different generations.*

The interviews allowed to qualify and interpret these patterns. Thus, it became clear that online dating was very much part of the “generational semantic” (Aroldi & Colombo, 2013) or “habitus” (Meyen et al., 2010) for the two youngest generations who grew up with digital media, while some of the Baby Boomers experienced a sense of alienation, echoing the findings of Marciano and Nimrod (2021). However, this may partly be an age effect, related to the life stage of the participants at the time of the interview, which confirms the value of a life course approach (Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010; Wheatley & Buglass, 2019). While Baams et al. (2011) argued that people who did not have internet access during sexual identity formation use it more for sexual contact than for social interaction, our findings suggest that this is partly related to the needs of participants at the time of the research. Participants of the Baby Boomer generation had already developed their sexual identity when getting access to dating sites, and they used these eagerly to hook up in the past but now they are in a life stage where sexual relations become less important and/or more difficult. At the time of the research, Generation X and particularly Millennials were in the middle of their sexual careers, for which online dating apps were indispensable. Generation Z participants were still exploring their sexual identity, and although they did use dating apps to hook up, social connections were particularly important

at this stage. Overall, the qualitative results disclosed a second layer of motion: *the changing uses and experiences of online dating within the life course of individuals belonging to different generations, which many interviewees describe as a “learning process”*.

Beside these differences, which confirm the usefulness of a generational approach, we can also observe similarities across generations which signal the limitations of a generational approach. These similarities will be discussed in relation to the three themes discussed in the literature review. First, in relation to the *negotiation of multiple sites and apps*, MSM across different generations explored and used a wide range of dating and hookup sites and apps, reflecting the shifting offer. The end picture, then, is less one of four clearly distinct generations with separate online dating experiences, but rather one of continuous motion: a flow of MSM going through different life stages at varying ages and in an evolving social context, encountering an ever-changing range of sites and apps with evolving affordances. Men of different generations have similar needs (for connection, for sex) in similar life stages, fulfilling them with the sites and apps available at the time. Second, in relation to the *varied uses and consequences* of dating and hookup sites and apps, one cross-generational finding concerns their diverse uses, certainly not limited to hookups and sex. Quite to the opposite, MSM across different generation expressed a similar ambivalence towards dating and hookup sites and apps, which they did use and find important, but which also frustrated and sometimes disgusted them, echoing the negative feelings related to online dating identified among others by Miller (2015) and Mustanski et al. (2011). Third, the interviews also confirmed the *close relationship between online dating and offline practices* across generations, in line with the literature discussed above (Mowlabocus, 2016; Roth, 2014). As society changed and homosexuality became more visible and accepted in Flanders, opportunities grew to explore sexuality and relations in real life, first in dedicated gay venues and later in mixed settings, offline settings which were increasingly layered with online connections.

These intergenerational similarities indicate the limitations of a generational approach, which does add a layer of diversity to research on online dating among MSM, but which should not lead to a simplistic division in homogeneous age-based cohorts. Such an approach is further complicated by important differences in the individual life course, which were summarily hinted at in relation to the varied ages at which participants started to explore their sexuality, but which also incorporates the different times at which they came out, their relationship status, etc. Other social characteristics further complicate the generational picture, for instance the variation of sexual and gender identifications within each age group, all elements that could not be integrated into the account above. Moreover, the sample for this research was self-selected and is rather homogeneous in terms of level of education and ethnic background, beside being limited to a very specific regional context. Further research is warranted to study the intersection of generational belonging with other social categorizations, aiming for a more diverse sample in a variety of cultural contexts, leading to an ever more detailed picture of online dating practices. Moreover, the current research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, explicitly focusing

on the period before the pandemic, but undoubtedly online dating has changed during the pandemic, potentially with longer term effects.

Despite these limitations, the generational and life course approach which was explored in this study does make a valuable contribution to the literature on MSM online dating, as it adds a non-Anglophone perspective, studies a broad age range including older users, discloses clear intergenerational differences, and allows to transcend a static view of online dating among a single age cohort, instead offering a more dynamic view across different cohorts at different ages and life stages.

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Declarations

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Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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