

“We are Her” and other fallacies: Investigating hook-up apps’ multi-sided markets and lucrative cultural discourses

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Working paper presented as part of the panel “Queering community, commodification and safety” during the 70th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, May 20-26, 2020, virtual conference.

This paper considers how the role of hook-up apps in platform ecosystems and app economies contributes to the commodification of queer cultural spaces, practices, and self-expression. It does so through an analysis of HER, an app for “queer womxn” and an international LGBTQ+ events company. This involves the walkthrough method, an approach for analyzing an app’s infrastructure and embedded cultural references, in combination with textual and visual analysis of Her’s Facebook event pages and associated linkages throughout its platform ecosystem. This analysis pays close attention to the app’s political economy, building on scholarship identifying hook-up apps’ expansive branding as “lifestyle services.” Findings show how the app’s multi-sided business model and cultural discourses market idealized queer lifestyles through events, ambassador promotion, brand partnerships, merchandise, and premium app subscriptions. While this approach lends economic stability in a market rife with failed apps for women seeking women, the lifestyles it constructs perpetuate a generic, commodified vision of queer sociality based in Silicon Valley ideals. As other apps follow suit, expanding ambassador networks and event programming, these findings raise questions about how apps can instead support the aims and values of the local queer communities fuelling their bottom line.

Keywords: queer women, dating apps, walkthrough method, LGBTQ+ social organizing, multi-sided markets

Introduction

Hook-up apps have risen in popularity throughout the 2010s, signalling a shift in digitally mediated dating from the use of static websites to bounded software on mobile phones for geographically proximate partner-seeking (Quiroz, 2013). While generally free to download from app stores, these apps must align with cultural representations recognizable to a market niche in order to generate uptake. This is evident in the range of identity associations that hook-up apps target, from Scruff’s framing as the “top rated gay app” for finding “guys in your neighbourhood,” to the wider heterosexual markets that Tinder and Bumble target through publicity materials showcasing heterosexual couples. Beyond user participation, hook-up apps must also generate revenue in order to remain sustainable. Like many apps within a broader

¹ I would like to acknowledge the contributions of research assistants at the Digital Intimacy, Gender, and Sexuality (DIGS) Lab for their work collecting, organizing, and co-analyzing materials for this project. Thank you to Élise Ross-Nadié and Jacqueline Matskiv specifically for their work on the Her walkthrough. You can read more about the DIGS team here: <https://www.digslab.net/people-team>

ecosystem of digital media and platforms, hook-up apps may develop multi-sided markets that interface with multiple actors, from advertisers to end-users (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Among the limited studies of hook-up apps' political economy, scholars observe their subscription-based operating models, data generation, and advertising schemes as the means by which these apps remain financially viable (Wilken, Burgess, & Albury, 2019).

This working paper presents preliminary findings and analysis from a study of Her, a hook-up app marketed to "queer womxn." The study examines trade press, app-generated materials, ancillary media and the app's design to identify how its modes of revenue generation relate to its discourses of queer inclusion. Findings highlight three main modes of profit-making that stand in tension with these discourses: premium subscriptions work to render diverse gender and sexual identity categories invisible behind a paywall; advertising and product promotion variably ignores queer identities and the app's intimate framing or emphasizes products conducive to homonormative lifestyles; and Her events are shaped by brand sponsors while creating gathering spaces with minimal contribution to the financial sustainability of app ambassadors or local queer venues, performers, and organizations. These findings indicate that app developers with commitments to queer community-building must consider how certain modes of revenue generation can undermine their efforts at inclusion.

How hook-up apps make money

Many hook-up apps function on the premise of a 'freemium' model wherein some features are free to use while others require payment, often in the form of an ongoing subscription. Sometimes payment makes in-app navigation easier, such as by removing advertisements that are easy to accidentally select or that slow down interaction with the app if, for example, a user must watch a video before messaging a match. Many subscription plans also remove limitations placed directly upon partner-seeking activities, such as how paying for Grindr XTRA allows users to see "up to 6x more profiles" and provides more functionality for filtering users. Users often find work arounds to overcome these constraints. Cassidy (2018) notes that with Gaydar's limit of eight messages per day, users often transitioned conversations to other messaging apps, like MSN and later Facebook, in order to continue their interactions. Even so, freemium models place substantial friction on users' activity, aiming for a balance where users experience just enough benefits from the app to incentivize its further and less constrained (*freer*, in a way) use through a premium subscription.

Albury et al. (2017) assert that hook-up apps are intensive sites of data generation, especially the generation of intimate data concerning personal desires and social connections.

Akin to Goffman's (1959) observations that performances of the self are both given, as intentional expressions, and given off, as expressions that are not under our direct control, hook-up apps collect data that is both given and given off. In order to sort and organize partners, matchmaking services have long collected information from individuals, soliciting physical details (e.g., height, weight) as well as intimate desires and preferences (e.g., sexual orientation, relationship preferences). This data collection occurs through multiple formats across dating apps, from fillable profile fields to seamless integration with one's existing social media accounts. Users also *give off* data through automated indicators and algorithmic measures that are applied to their activity, such as geolocation data as they move through space and match criteria as they swipe through profiles. Many hook-up apps adjust to user behaviour, with algorithms determining preferences through partner selection processes. For example, Tinder notes that it cannot disclose all the factors contributing to the algorithm that determines which profiles users see, likening it to a "secret sauce," but it does advise users that one thing can improve their matching potential: "using the app" (Tinder, 2019). This indicates the app's responsiveness to user behaviour, adjusting in ways designed to sustain user engagement and, in turn, produce more data. Since the data commercial hook-up apps gather is proprietary, it is challenging to know how exactly it is being used in relation to revenue generation (Wilken et al., 2019). It likely informs in-app advertising, similar to how many of the ads we see across social media and websites are targeted and personalized based on our data traces. Data may be shared across integrated apps and platforms, such as through logins that rely upon Facebook or Instagram, as part of data-sharing agreements that benefit multiple entities within a broader app ecosystem. Data may also inform the app experience, enabling designers and developers to tailor functionality to attract a greater volume of users who will expend substantial time on the app.

More broadly, aggregated data about an app's niche market can inform its publicity and marketing, helping it to strategically target groups through indications of shared identity. Such strategies are enacted by apps like Grindr, branding themselves as "lifestyle services" (Wilken et al., 2019) that cater not only to partner-seeking but become essential social networks for meeting other queer people, gaining queer cultural knowledge, and settling into a new place (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Shield, 2016). However, there has always been a tension between the commodification of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) online community spaces and individuals' ability to see themselves represented in these spaces (Campbell, 2005). When events, media, artifacts, and political movements become commercialized and commodified, in a process often termed "pinkwashing," they develop a propensity for becoming

de-politicized, homogenized, and void of grassroots community connection (Ng, 2013; Sender, 2003; Squires, 2019). This is reflected in critiques of homonormativity that identify how acceptance of gay and lesbian identities within popular culture often fails to recognize enduring political struggles (Cohen, 2005; Warner, 1999), especially the struggles of those outside of these dominant identity categories.

Interrogating Her's political economy

This paper follows in the footsteps of Wilken, Burgess, and Albury (2019) in their application of the political economy of communication to hook-up app studies. They cite Johnathan Hardy's (2014) explanation that critical political economy reveals how "different ways of organizing and financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content, and the ways in which this is consumed and used" (p. 7). Within hook-up app studies, a critical political economy approach helps to identify revenue models, key stakeholders, and conduits of value (e.g. data) that give rise to hook-up apps' markets and economic logic (Wilken et al., 2019). In turn, these arrangements have an impact on the social and cultural milieu in which an app is used, affecting how users see themselves and connect with others as well as how an app influences collective notions of community or identity-based cultures.

A mixed methods approach is applied to trace the overlapping, multiple, and often obscured strands of revenue-generation in relation to the Her app, described in the following section. Following Wilken, Burgess, and Albury (2019) this study pays attention to the available trade press and ancillary media that provide indications about the app's operating model, data generation, and avenues of profit. It also draws more broadly on materials collected through an ongoing walkthrough analysis of Her. The full walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) consists of two main phases: first, an app's environment of expected use is established through examination of its vision, operating model, and governance structures. Then a technical walkthrough of the app's interface is conducted, stepping through multiple screens, features, and functionality to understand how the app guides individuals and embeds symbols that carry cultural significance for its users. This study mobilized a partial app walkthrough, analysing app-generated materials (e.g. website content, blog posts, etc.) and popular media coverage (e.g. interviews, press releases) for indications of Her's operating model and examining in-app structures that support this model. Since event hosting constitutes a portion of Her's mandate, this analysis also encompasses consideration of event pages and related information. The technical walkthrough was first conducted in March 2019, supplemented with subsequent walkthroughs to consider updates over time.

In early 2020, Her and other hook-up apps responded to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Governments and health organizations advised citizens to practice physical distancing by only leaving home when essential, remaining two metres apart from others when in public, and avoiding contact with those outside of one's home unit (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, 2020). Many hook-up apps took steps in support of these guidelines (Myles, Dietzel, Duguay, in progress), such as by sending users messages advising them not to meet in-person with matches, providing links to health information, and introducing new video or audio features. As Her also took action, this paper includes preliminary analysis of app-produced materials during this time, including in-app messaging, emails, Instagram posts, and blog posts. These were collected from mid-March 2020, following the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration that COVID-19 constituted a global pandemic (Reuters, 2020), until April 30, 2020 with the situation still developing. Analysis of these materials provides indications of how the app's priorities in relation to its political economy may be shifting during this crisis situation.

Her, for queer womxn

Her was launched in 2013 as the London-based start-up Dattch (Lomas, 2013). It drew attention as an app specifically for lesbian women, with bisexual and bi-curious women also sometimes mentioned in coverage, which vetted users' gender identity through their Facebook profile and sometimes resorted to phone calls with users lacking Facebook accounts. Sarah Murray and Megan Sappan Ankerson (2016) conducted a case study of Dattch from its launch until its rebranding as Her, identifying the tensions between Silicon Valley start-up culture and the intentions of Robyn Exton, the app's founder, to represent identities that are often left out of the dating app scene. Murray and Ankerson (2016) underscore how the app's iterative design development reduced these multiple identities to an "aesthetic of white femininity" (p. 55) undergirding a narrow market logic of what an app for women seeking women must look like. The app's 2015 rebranding sought to broaden its user base with a new name and logo. While the Dattch logo was merely a teal instantiation of the app's name, the first Her logo embedded in the 'e' the outline of a feminine figure wearing a bikini bottom if viewed sideways. Despite this, in an interview with Murray and Ankerson (2016), Exton notes that the app name *Her* is meant to be interpreted as "a collective noun as opposed to the gender identity" (p. 66), working to broaden the notion of who the app is for. A subsequent re-design in 2018 settled on a red background for the logo, moving away from visually defining anticipated users as normatively feminine and instead including a four-pronged 'e' intended to represent identity fluidity, as Exton

explained (Brabaw, 2018). The rebranding was accompanied by changes within the app, including a proliferation of identity-related categories and broadening of the terms used to address the app's user base. The company increasingly mentioned trans and queer users in their marketing materials, eventually settling on a catch-all of "queer womxn" to refer to the app's entire user base, a term which remains undefined on the app's website but is often paired with the tagline "We are Her" as an indicator of inclusivity.

Dattch originally garnered funding through the Wayra London start-up incubator, receiving investment from both the incubator and angel investors (Lomas, 2013). The 2015 rebranding to Her coincided with another round of funding, attracting \$1 million (USD) from investors including Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian and seed funding firm Y Combinator (Crook, 2015). Although Extton has promoted Her as an app "for queer women by queer women" (Strehlke, 2015), the majority of the app's investors shown on websites like AngelList and Crunchbase are men or male-founded firms. According to AngelList (n.d.), Her has garnered \$2.4 million (USD) in start-up funding since 2013. As the app reports uptake across several countries by 4 million women worldwide (Apple Inc., 2020), this raises the question as to how Her might generate the necessary revenue to be sustainable let alone provide a return on investment for these funders. Further, with Her's pivot toward more inclusive language and branding, how might these modes of revenue generation uphold or conflict with the app's construction of a broad community of queer womxn? Analysis of walkthrough materials, trade press, and ancillary media identified three key avenues of potential profit-making and their cultural implications for Her's constructions of queer identity.

1. App subscriptions

Purchased in-app, Her Premium subscriptions start at \$14.99 USD per month or \$59.99 USD for six months and \$89.99 USD for twelve months. Aside from Premium subscriptions, users can also pay a one-time fee of \$5.99 USD to have their profile appear at "the top of the meet section for one hour," meaning that it will be served first to users when they enter the profile swipe screen. While many Premium settings and features are common to hook-up app subscriptions, some constraints placed on free users conflict with Her's broader mandate. Despite the rebranded app's community rhetoric, interactions among non-paying users are limited to nearby proximity and lack features that lubricate conversation, such as read receipts. Most importantly, the only free filters for sorting potential partners that available to all users are those of age and distance whereas Premium filters allow for sorting by a range of qualities, including gender identity and sexual identity.

Locking filters for connecting with individuals based on a diversity of gender and sexual identity expression behind a paywall seems counter to Robyn Exton's claim that the 2018 redesign aimed to emphasize community and acknowledge that "sexuality and gender are found on a spectrum" (Hatmaker, 2018). As the discrimination of transgender people on Tinder has shown (Riotta, 2019), the exclusion of gender categories from an app or adding them as an afterthought can frame these identities as abnormal within the app's context, making its infrastructure complicit in the othering and harassment of non-binary and transgender users. Given that Her's marketing materials often still present images of white femininity and reference lesbian identity, the invisibilization of these other categories reinforces white, feminine lesbians as the app's ideal users. Further, making these Premium filters precludes the broader non-paying user base from finding each other based on important aspects of shared identity or other elements of desire, preference, or values, such as whether one is looking for monogamous or polyamorous relationships.

Her's iterative design development and brand evolution have included the addition of Community Forums that users can join and view in their Feed. Preconfigured communities defined by the app designers include an overarching "Her Community" in which admins post broad discussion prompts (e.g. "What's the hottest thing someone could do?"). Additionally, there are communities defined by collective sexual and gender identifications, such as "Lesbian," "Bisexual" "Trans Womxn" and "Trans Men," as well as the intersecting identification of "Queer Womxn of Color." Users can also "Suggest a community" but it is not clear how often these suggestions lead to the creation of new community categories. On one hand, Her's free-to-access Community Forums provide a way for users to meet each other based on different elements of identity, from hobbies to sexual and gender identities. On the other hand, this is the only mode of agentic searching along lines of identification that non-paying users can access. Further, given that the app brings users first to the swipe screen and actions are organized around one-on-one matching activity, like most swipe-based apps, searching to connect with others through the forums narrows a user's pool to those who have the time and motivation to contribute to these pre-formulated discussions.

2. Product promotion and advertising

Her serves in-app advertisements that appear among posts from community forums as users scroll their feeds. Her's privacy policy distinguishes between different kinds of information it gleans: "Personal Information" constituting one's name, email address, and phone number, which Her terms "voluntary information" provided directly by the user; and "Anonymous

information” that is not linked to “Personal Information” but gathered through Her’s servers, log files, cookies, and analytics partner services to be used for targeted ads and to track consumer behaviour. The policy lists several advertisers that Her works with, such as MoPub, a Twitter company, FAN – Facebook’s Audience Network, and AdMob, which is connected to Google’s advertising apparatus. With user data consolidated and shared across these massive social platforms and their advertising networks, ads can be scrupulously targeted through this broader pool of user information. Consequently, the ads I have been served have little to do with my participation on a queer app and feel oddly out of place while browsing to connect with other queer women. My ads have included services for enhancing my online presence, products related to teaching, and more recently, ads promoting Facebook’s Live feature in its rivalry with other video chat and livestreaming platforms (during the COVID-19 pandemic).

In contrast to the app’s personalized but not queer-specific ads, Her also promotes, sells, and facilitates the marketing of LGBTQ-related products and businesses. Her’s online store features apparel with the app’s red logo subtly placed alongside a range of slogans, from “Big dyke energy” to “Queer as fuck” and “Have a nice gay!” There is also a Pride line with the word “Proud” repeated in rainbow colours. The “Identities” t-shirt showcases the app’s logo couched in a block of text with different labels for sexual and gender identities. Her’s promotion of queer products and businesses occurs through the app’s online communication and some elements of physical promotion (e.g. stalls at Pride festivals). Her’s email newsletter and blog often involve stories that feature product promotion. For example, a December 2019 email newsletter showcased the story, “Which sex toy should you use based on your zodiac sign?” alongside a coupon code for a sex toy store. This story was featured above another blog post with advice about coping with anxiety, which could arguably be understood as more pertinent but less lucrative for Her if the company accrues commission from user click-throughs. Her’s blog also spotlights LGBTQ-specific brands, such as Willie Norris Workshop’s clothing for queer bodies and Pyramid Seven’s gender-fluid underwear. These appear alongside broader partnerships, such as those with alcohol brands, engagement ring dealers, and a fertility clinic. Promotions and partnerships with companies tied to popular culture reinforce the app’s roots in a homonormative white femininity that equates queer female identity to interest in celebrity culture, shopping, and nightlife. Further, products and services relating to weddings and pregnancy reinforce homonormative pressures toward accessing heterosexual rites of passage and re-creating the nuclear family.

These forms of advertising remain in tension with Her’s endeavours to diversify its user base. These endeavours are realized, in part, through blog posts by Shana Summers, Her’s Head

of Community, who writes from her perspective as “a queer womxn of color” as well as a series by Jace Every, who identifies as “Female to Male (FTM) Transgender and QTPOC (Queer Trans person of color)” (Every, 2019). Therefore, Her’s product promotion and advertising straddles two sides of the complexity of commercializing queer identities: the targeted advertising fails to speak to queer identities within the app’s intimate context while the company’s merchandise and featured products reinforce homonormative ideals that are often incongruent with other lived experiences for which Her’s rebranding is trying to make space.

3. Event hosting

On Facebook pages for Her events, the company’s self-description explains that not only is its app “the world’s largest dating and social networking app for LGBTQ+ women and queer people” but additionally, “Her is also the largest LGBTQ+ events company for women and queer people globally” (Her App, 2018). This redefinition of Her as an “events company” identifies a side of business that is visible within the app as an “Events” section, which displays both Her-hosted and user-submitted events that are geographically proximate to a user. Her event pages on the app often link to the company’s Facebook presence, where much event promotion takes place.

Her’s event hosting follows the company’s reliance on urban centres providing a critical mass of queer women in order to ensure participation. With the app originally launched in London and introduced in select cities before becoming available elsewhere, Her events similarly take place in urban centres. They are facilitated by an Ambassador Network with key individuals in each city who coordinate and promote events. A 2015 call for Lead Ambassadors listed responsibilities as “hosting 1 killer Her event per quarter,” editing the app event feed, interacting with “your local community,” and pitching ideas for new events (Her Team, 2015). While the call indicated a difference from Lead Ambassadors and volunteer Helper Ambassadors, it is not clear how much Lead Ambassadors were paid at this time. A 2015 call for College Ambassadors to hold Her campus events does not mention payment but promises the chance to “win awesome prizes” and possibly be selected for a summer internship at the Her Headquarters in San Francisco (Robyn, 2016). A 2019 job posting for Her City Leads (likely the new title for Lead Ambassador) in Toronto, Atlanta and other areas listed the salary ranging between \$15,000 - \$50,000 USD (Her App, 2019). Clicking to the application form, it becomes clear that this variable remuneration rests upon the events’ success, promising Leads “50% of the profits from the night.” Her also mentions the possibility of funding events to “achieve your wildest party dreams” while also enabling the lead to “strengthen the lesbian community.”

Across all postings for applicants, the company makes recourse to the importance of community-building as a factor that should bolster intrinsic motivation to do this work.

In a project focused on comparing Montreal-based Her events to another local LGBTQ community event series (Krishnan & Duguay, 2019), it became clear that Her events were heavily saturated with the company's branding. Her's logo and brand aesthetics framed online promotion while event photos showed the prevalence of Her logos throughout venues, achieved through signage and the distribution of branded swag. Other hook-up apps, such as Tinder, Bumble and Scruff, have been known to hold similar events. Through ambassador networks, these events require little investment and few resources from the app companies while promoting the app to new users. This is achieved through in-person outreach and the permeation of digital devices within physical spaces to provide a concentrated mass of potential partners within the app. Events aim to gather a wide range of participants by constructing a notion of community comprised of those who currently use the app or may use it into the future.

Holding LGBTQ-specific events, especially events for queer people who are often left out of the mainstream and gay nightlife scenes, can be seen as indeed fostering community, especially with the closure of many venues for queer women across urban centres in past decades (Podmore, 2006). However, Her events based in Montreal were often sporadic and rotated venues, providing an outlet for queer DJs and performers when they happened but lacking any promise of stable income. While events sometimes involved partnership with party promoters or mainstream brands, they did not appear to coordinate with local non-profit LGBTQ organizations. It seems that even the employment these events provide for City Leads is precarious in that one's salary depends on the event's success. By working for Her, those coordinating events receive funding to cover costs and may benefit from Her's recognizable branding. However, LGBTQ organizations that find a way to front overhead costs without such an arrangement retain 100% of the proceeds. Overall, it seems that event hosting is a low-risk, high profit endeavour for Her, since it allows the company to rely on the Ambassador Network for coordination, provides added promotion for the app, and generates profits without dedicated or ongoing investment in local LGBTQ communities.

Community in crisis

While advising users not to meet in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic, Her has encouraged users to continue making connections and contributing to the "Her community." An in-app message sent in mid-March 2020 suggested that users supplement their Her interactions with Facetime or other video call apps. Posts to the Her Instagram account invoke a sense of

community by sharing memes and showcasing queer individual's quarantine stories from a documentary photo series called "Queerantime." Several in-app notifications have offered users free trials of Her Premium, perhaps to dissuade individuals from discontinuing use during the pandemic.

Most prominent among Her's responses to the situation has been the proliferation of online events. Since in-person gatherings can no longer take place, Her has hosted numerous events over Zoom, which range from location-based (e.g. "UK Cocktail Class & Happy Hour") to hobby-related, such as cooking classes or movie nights, and as extensions of the community forums, such as the "Trans Womxn Community Meet-Up." Unlike in-person events that often require a ticket purchase, the Zoom events are free to attend. Some are still held in partnership with brand sponsors, such as a recent workshop sponsored by Durex about "Masturbation and Self Love" featuring a question and answer session with a "queer sex coach." A blog post published after the event featuring the "top requested questions" and responses was laden with Durex branding along with links for purchasing the brand's condoms and lube (Her Team, 2020). The content also included a sizable discussion of how condoms can feature in masturbation. From this preliminary analysis of Her's activities during the pandemic, it is clear that the company is emphasizing community and making online gathering spaces available to a wide range of its users but brand sponsors continue to shape the emphasis of some of these events.

Conclusion

This work-in-progress analysis of Her's company materials, app design, trade press, and ancillary media has indicated that some aspects of the app's operating model are in conflict with the inclusive discourses it promotes and its aim to attract a wider user base. Her's claims to include users with diverse gender and sexual identities are contradicted by a lack of consistency. Often, terms used within the app and in its promotional materials, as well as imagery representing users, tend to still reference white, feminine lesbian identities. This dominant representation of the app's anticipated user is reinforced by filters for sorting users by more diverse identity categories being locked behind a paywall. Although Her's promotion of queer brands aligns with the app's appeals to community, these are often overshadowed by marketing and partnerships for mainstream brands and products that reinforce homonormative lifestyles. Such commercial partnerships shape the queer spaces that Her coordinates, whether through in-person Ambassador Networks or online with its more recent Zoom events. Overall,

these events do not appear to invest in long-term, sustainable queer talent, venues, or businesses in ways that foster local communities or build on existing LGBTQ initiatives.

Many hook-up apps generate revenue through the same modes as Her: premium subscriptions, advertising, product promotion, and event hosting. However, not all apps make such strong recourse to community or voice dedication to broadening the inclusion of a diversity of people who are often overlooked in the design of technologies. If the intentions of Her – and apps with similar commitments – are sincere, then they must identify where revenue models are in tension with such aims and explore other routes for financial sustainability.

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