"You Can't Just Walk Down the Street and Meet Someone": The Intersection of Social–Sexual Networking Technology, Stigma, and Health Among Gay and Bisexual Men in the Small City

Jaclyn M. White Hughto, MPH[1], John E. Pachankis, PhD[1],
Adam I. Eldahan, MPH[1], and Danya E. Keene, PhD[1]

Abstract

Social–sexual networking technologies have been reported to yield both psychosocial benefits and sexual risks for gay and bisexual men, yet little research has explored how technology interacts with the social–geographical environment to shape the health of gay and bisexual men in the relatively understudied environment of small cities. This article draws on 29 semistructured interviews examining the use of social–sexual networking technologies among racially diverse gay and bisexual men in two small cities. Questions probed participants' use of technology to meet sexual partners, engagement in the gay community, and the role of virtual and nonvirtual spaces in relation to health. Findings suggest that social networking technologies can help men navigate the challenges of small cities, including small and insular gay communities, lack of dedicated gay spaces, and sexual minority stigma. However, participants also describe declines in gay community visibility and cohesion, which they attribute to technology use. The article concludes by discussing the intersections of virtual and physical space in small cities as sites for the production of health and illness.

Introduction

The 21st century has launched the use of social–sexual networking technologies (e.g., websites such as Manhunt, mobile apps such as Grindr, and phone chat lines such as Hardline) to facilitate personal connections. These technologies have particularly revolutionized the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men (Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermeister, 2014). About half of U.S. gay and bisexual men use social–sexual networking technologies, with a large proportion meeting sex partners via these platforms (Grov et al., 2014; Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014). Gay and bisexual men also use these technologies to expand their social networks (Dodge, 2014; Ramallo et al., 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). As these technologies become increasingly integrated into gay and bisexual men's lives (Bolding,

Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007; Zablotska, Holt, & Prestage, 2012), research is needed to understand how gay and bisexual men use new technologies across diverse social geographies and the health implications of technology use in these contexts.

Although some studies have described men's technology use as a function of location (e.g., to facilitate anonymous sex in large cities or to connect rural, isolated men; Gray, 2009; Halkitis, Parsons, & Wilton, 2003; Williams,

[1]Yale School of Public Health, New Haven, CT, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jaclyn M. White Hughto, Department of Chronic Disease Epidemiology, Yale School of Public Health, 60 College Street, New Haven, CT 06510, USA.
Email: jaclyn.white@yale.edu

Bowen, & Horvath, 2005), a dearth of research has explored how social–sexual networking technologies interact with features of the surrounding environment. This article conceptualizes technologies as social tools and as a form of space, contending that virtual spaces created through technology are shaped by, and, in turn, influence life in nonvirtual spaces. To understand how gay and bisexual men use, benefit from, and are potentially harmed by technology, requires an understanding of the relationship between the virtual and nonvirtual spaces that gay and bisexual men access to connect with one another.

Prior research into gay and bisexual men's use of social–sexual networking technologies has largely been conducted with men living in major cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston (Halkitis et al., 2003; Holloway, Pulsipher, Gibbs, Barman-Adhikari, & Rice, 2015; Landovitz et al., 2013; Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011; White, Mimiaga, Reisner, & Mayer, 2012), although some studies have explored social–sexual networking technology use among men in rural areas as well (Horvath, Bowen, & Williams, 2006; Rosenberger, Schick, Schnarrs, Novak, & Reece, 2014; Williams et al., 2005). Little attention, however, has been paid to the experiences of men in small cities (e.g., less than 250,000 people). Small cities represent unique and important environments in which to study social–sexual networking technologies among gay and bisexual men, given that small cities contain gay spaces and communities that may attract men from smaller towns, yet lack the plethora of brick-and-mortar spaces present in larger gay enclaves. Small cities also represent unique environments in terms of sexual minority stigma (Herrera & Scott, 2005; Keene, Eldahan, White Hughto, & Pachankis, 2017), given their placement at the crossroads between often socially conservative rural communities and generally more liberal urban areas (Knight, Tilcsik, & Anteby, 2016; McVeigh & Maria-Elena, 2009). Technology use in small cities may be shaped by these geographic variations in sexual minority stigma (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010). For example, technology may be one tool men use to safely meet one another in areas where being gay or bisexual carries the threat of discrimination, violence, and other forms of stigma (Williams et al., 2005); it might also be used to connect men who travel to gay epicenters to escape high-stigma environments (Bianchi et al., 2007; Herrera & Scott, 2005; Keene et al., 2016).

Existing research documents both health benefits and risks associated with social–sexual networking technologies. Social–sexual networking technologies have been reported to help youth learn about the gay and bisexual community, establish connections with other gay and bisexual people, and find acceptance (Gray, 2009; Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009). Research suggests that

the Internet's relative anonymity may also provide a judgment-free environment for men to communicate safer sex intentions, disclose their HIV status, or reveal their sexual orientation prior to meeting other men in person, with potential positive implications for their mental and physical health (Carballo-Diéguez, Miner, Dolezal, Rosser, & Jacoby, 2006; Grov et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2011; Ramallo et al., 2015; White Hughto, Hidalgo, Bazzi, Reisner, & Mimiaga, 2016). The health risks associated with meeting partners through social networking technologies have also been documented among gay and bisexual men, including condomless anal sex, multiple sex partners, sex-work, and poor mental health and suicidality related to online victimization (Bien et al., 2015; Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2016; Downing, 2012; Landovitz et al., 2013; White et al., 2012; Wiederhold, 2014; Winetrobe, Rice, Bauermeister, Petering, & Holloway, 2014; Young, Szekeres, & Coates, 2013).

The health effects of social networking technology may be determined in part by whether gay and bisexual men have access to nonvirtual gay and bisexual communities, the norms dictating health behaviors in those communities, and the ways that virtual technologies interact with their nonvirtual backdrop to support health or exacerbate risk (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013; Grov et al., 2014; Pingel, Bauermeister, Johns, Eisenberg, & Leslie-Santana, 2013; White, Dunham, Rowley, Reisner, & Mimiaga, 2015). Consequently, understanding the social–geographical context of gay and bisexual men's lives in small cities may help elucidate the ways in which virtual technologies shape the health and well-being of gay and bisexual men in these communities.

This article draws on interviews with gay and bisexual men residing in two small cities to understand the role of technology in small city gay and bisexual life and its interaction with men's social and geographical environments. Specifically, this article explores how men in small cities use social–sexual networking technologies to facilitate connections with other men and build community. This article also explores sexual minority stigma and its relationship to gay and bisexual men's technology use. Finally, the article considers the implications of these technologies on men's social interactions and access to nonvirtual gay spaces. Throughout this analysis, the present study seeks to better understand the ways in which technology inextricably intersects with the surrounding environment in relation to gay and bisexual men's health and well-being.

Method

Setting

The study was conducted in New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, the second (population~130,000) and third

(population~125,000) largest cities in the state, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In terms of age, education, and race/ethnicity, the population of New Haven and Hartford rank first and third among the U.S. cities that most closely resemble the U.S. population (Kolko, 2016). These cities are racially diverse as 57.4% of residents in New Haven and 70.2% of residents in Hartford are racial/ethnic minorities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a, 2010b). New Haven and Hartford serve as local hubs for gay-specific resources and spaces as they contain more AIDS service organizations (e.g., AIDS Project New Haven, AIDS Connecticut); lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community event and resource centers (e.g., New Haven Pride Center, the Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collective); and gay bars and clubs than nearby towns. However, as small cities, the number and scope of LGB resources and safe spaces to socialize are limited relative to large cities. For example, at present, Hartford has one gay bar, while New Haven has two; both cities have a few venues that cater to the LGB community on specific nights of the week. Preliminary interviews with key informants (e.g., AIDS service organization and LGB community organization administrators) suggest that while some LGB social venues have been open for several decades, the majority come and go.

Sample

Participants were recruited in New Haven and Hartford using a multipronged recruitment strategy that included online advertisements, flyers, direct recruitment, and snowball sampling. Flyers were posted on the bulletin boards of organizations serving the gay and bisexual community. Direct recruitment at gay bars and clubs was also conducted by handing out recruitment cards to patrons of these locales. To reach men who may not frequent LGB venues, recruitment materials were also posted online (e.g., Craigslist, Facebook). The recruitment materials invited men to contact the study team if they were interested in participating in a study about the lives of men in Connecticut. The recruitment language was intentionally broad in order to be inclusive of a wide range of sexual identities, although the flyers specified that the sampling frame was limited to "a man who has had sex with other men." Eligible participants were as follows: (a) cisgender men, (b) 18 years of age and older, (c) identified as gay or bisexual and/or reported having sex with men in the past year, (d) living in one of the target cities, and (e) fluent English speakers.

In order to ensure diverse perspectives of gay and bisexual life in small cities, the sample was purposively constructed with respect to race, age, and HIV status. Interviews were conducted until no new themes emerged from successive interviews—that is, until thematic saturation was achieved ($n = 29$). Of the 29 participants, 13 (44.8%) self-identified as White, 10 (34.5%) Black, 4 (13.8%) Latino, and 2 (6.9%) identified as more than one race/ethnicity. The average age of participants was 38.1 years (range: 19-67 years; $SD = 15.3$) and 19 (65.5%) were HIV-positive and 10 (34.5%) were HIV-negative. All participants reported having sex with men in the past 12 months, with 23 (79.3%) identifying as gay and 6 (20.7%) as bisexual. Additionally, 23 (79.3%) participants resided in New Haven and 6 (20.7%) resided in Hartford. Six (20.7%) participants were not "out" or were only out to close friends and family members.

Study Procedures

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 29 gay and bisexual men from New Haven and Hartford between May 2014 and February 2015. Interviews explored the social–geographic environments and behaviors of gay and bisexual men in small cities, including their use of technology to meet men, perception of and engagement with the gay community, and the role of virtual and nonvirtual spaces in shaping their health. The one-on-one, audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were professionally transcribed. To protect anonymity, participant names were changed. Participants provided written informed consent and received $50 for volunteering their time. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee of Yale University.

Data Analysis

The aim of the present analysis was to describe the use of social and sexual networking technologies among gay and bisexual men in two small cities. The semistructured interviews were coded and analyzed using an inductive approach to theme development, relying on techniques borrowed from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). An inductive approach is ideal for summarizing raw data via the creation of categories that convey key themes and processes underlying participant experiences (Thomas, 2006). The analysis began with broad questions about the use of social media and life in small cities and identified emergent themes through an iterative and multistage process of coding and analysis (Thomas, 2006). Transcripts were first open-coded by the study team for broad analytic themes and categories. All authors worked collaboratively to organize open-coded data into a fixed code structure. This code structure was iteratively refined in a series of team meetings. Two authors then coded five transcripts using ATLAS.ti. 7.5.7. Coded transcripts were compared with ensure consistency of code application; modifications were made to improve clarity and reduce redundancies. On finalizing the codebook, two authors

coded the remaining interviews. The authors met frequently throughout the coding process to discuss coding questions, reconcile coding discrepancies, and ensure consistent application of codes. On completion of the coding process, the first author extracted and reviewed excerpts and created additional subcodes that were relevant to the use of social networking technologies. The first author then organized themes into broader categories that included the following: expanding connections, navigating local challenges, and technology's threat to community visibility.

Results

Expanding Connections Through Technology: Opportunities and Obstacles

Social–sexual networking technologies were well integrated into the lives of gay and bisexual men in the sample as all participants described using some combination of mobile applications (e.g., Grindr, Scruff), websites (e.g., Manhunt, Craigslist), and/or phone chat lines (e.g., Hardline) to search for and connect with other men. Whether used to facilitate anonymous sexual encounters, meet new friends, or form romantic relationships, social networking technologies were a part of participants' lives. Sean, a 25-year-old White man who lives in Hartford and works in New Haven, described social–sexual networking apps as a cornerstone of gay culture:

> It's really gay culture. I feel like really based on these apps, that's how guys meet each other. I don't know very many people who say when I ask them, "Where did you meet your boyfriend?" Oh, we met at a bar, or, I was playing tennis one day. No, it's like Grindr, Grindr, Grindr, Grindr.

Participants frequently described their use of technologies in the context of limited opportunities for gay life in small towns and cities. When asked about why men use social networking technologies, Patrick, a 41-year-old White man, who grew up in a suburb of New Haven, said,

> To just meet people—even in Connecticut, there's towns and cities that are far from gay life. So they may use [websites or apps] to try to get in touch with people of the same kind of mind and make friends that way. And maybe build a relationship or maybe they don't want a relationship. Maybe they just want to meet people to feel like they belong.

Patrick's quote illustrates that for gay men in small cities, social networking technologies can assist men in connecting with one another and also foster a sense of belonging. However, many men also noted the ways in which the benefits of technology were limited by the small size of their city. For example, virtual technologies frequently highlighted the insular nature of small city gay communities, where men often knew one another. In this context, Jordan, a 31-year-old White man, who grew up near New Haven, described mobile apps as consistently featuring the same people: "When you log on once, it's the same people. They might change their picture, but it's the same frickin' people." Fredrick, a 22-year-old White man, echoed this sentiment about app use in New Haven, stating "I deleted that [app], 'cause it was the same guys, it was a small town, and it wasn't like new people were constantly coming in and out." Likewise, Patrick said, "I used to get really frustrated because it was like the same people every day."

While some men described technologies as limited in their ability to help create new social connections within small cities, participants also noted that these technologies could be used to expand the boundaries of their small gay communities. For example, Aaron, a Black, 27-year-old man and lifelong resident of Hartford, described connecting virtually with men traveling to or through Hartford: "Most people who hit me up are usually further out, some come from New Haven, some come from Mass, I've had Boston come down, just because they were driving through." Some participants also reported using technology to connect with other men while traveling outside of their small cities. Kevin, a 28-year-old Black man from Hartford, explained his use of a chat line to meet someone prior to traveling outside of Hartford:

> I was talking to a very cool guy from Seattle and I told him I'd be up around that way in a couple of weeks. We exchanged numbers. Like, "When you get to Seattle, give me a call. We could get together, hang out." And there was one day when we finished work and I was sitting in my hotel room and I gave him a call. He came over, hung out, and it went from there.

Despite the benefit of meeting men through various technologies, several participants cited concerns about their sexual and physical safety with anonymous or transient partners met online. Kyle, a mixed-race 22-year-old man, noted his sexual safety concerns with anonymous partners met online:

> I've used apps like Tinder or Grindr to hook up with other men, but . . . I've never felt safe going back with a stranger . . . like I felt unsafe both in the health perspective and the physical safety perspective.

As a result of these concerns, some participants preferred to meet men in person, rather than online. For example, Rafael, a 29-year-old Latino man, who grew up in a small city south of New Haven, perceived men he knew from the nonvirtual community to be safer in terms of risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than

men he might meet online. He noted, "Instead of going online and finding any Tom, Dick, and Harry and doing Tom, Dick, and Harry [I prefer someone who] I know is clean and safe, and I'd rather trust this person than anybody else."

Navigating Local Challenges Through Technology

In the context of the relatively small gay communities that existed in these small cities, participants described having limited access to designated gay spaces such as bars, bookstores, and public gathering spaces; this posed challenges to their ability to connect with other men and find environments offering protection from stigma. For example, Marvin, a 67-year-old Black man and lifetime resident of New Haven, and Frederick, who had lived in New Haven for just under 2 years, noted the limited number of gay bars in the city. Marvin explained "New Haven is not that big of a town, either. You don't have a whole lot of options of different gay bars to go to." Frederick echoed "I feel like the places that I know where I can meet guys that I know they're gonna be gay, besides just randomly out and about, I feel like the options are kind of limited."

Men often cited the opportunity to create a community of similar others in virtual spaces, particularly in small cities where such communities may not exist. For example, several men enjoyed the comfort of accessing virtual communities where they could disclose their preference for sexual behaviors that their peers might consider taboo (e.g., condomless anal sex), while others enjoyed the security of being able to disclose other stigmatized traits such as their HIV-positive status. For example, Derek, a Black 39-year-old man, who met his partner online, described finding welcoming communities for HIV-positive people in virtual spaces, stating, "Even on Scruff or Grindr, like there's sort of a poz community where people who are HIV-positive [can find each other]."

Participants also described the ways in which technologies helped them navigate sexual minority stigma that was perceived as more prevalent in smaller cities relative to larger ones. For example, Steven, a White 29-year-old man, who only discloses his sexual orientation to potential partners, noted that in New Haven, showing visible signs of being gay in public could result in mistreatment, stating "People are very cruel. And if they see that you're gay, you show signs of being gay, they might start making fun of you and it hurts." Herbert, a 22-year-old Latino man, who grew up in a small city near New Haven, discussed the stress that results from the threat of violence in small cities, noting,

> It's a fear and kind of a stress too, you know what I'm saying? I'm not stressing every day about it, but I do stress when I'm

walking in the middle of the night in New Haven [due to general violence and being gay]—but majority to being gay.

Concerns about being verbally or physically assaulted due to being gay or bisexual were heightened in nonvirtual pick-up situations, and many men spoke about the local challenges of identifying potential sex partners in such settings. For example, Carlos, a 46-year-old Latino man, described the possible consequences of trying to determine if a man is gay in public spaces in the city:

> You get into arguments, fights, you know, people who if you're looking at them and you're not really sure [if they are gay], they could take it the wrong way, like, "What you looking at? Why you looking at me, faggot?"

As a result of the stigma and relative lack of anonymity in small cities, many participants felt pressured to conceal their sexual orientation. This was described by Marcus, a 19-year-old Black man from New Haven, who noted, "Being gay in New Haven is really tough regardless of where you grew up or where you're from. A lot of people try to hide it, because they think they know it's not going to be accepted." In the context of stigma, social–sexual networking technologies provided an opportunity for men to disclose their sexual orientation only to those who were also gay or bisexual, thus avoiding being outed or verbally or physically victimized. Charles, a 25-year-old White man and New Haven resident, originally from the South, described the comparative safety and convenience of online dating: "Online dating is much more convenient just because you get a good idea of someone and you don't have the luxury of [knowing if] every guy is gay, so you can't just walk down the street and meet someone."

These technologies also seemed to be particularly useful to discreet men who expressed concerns about being outed in a small city where there was limited anonymity. To lessen these concerns, closeted men reported using sites like Craigslist or chat lines, where sharing a photo or disclosing one's identity was not a de facto requirement. Still, the lack of face-to-face contact in virtual environments led some men to have concerns about the true identity of the individuals with whom they interacted in these settings. As a result of these anonymity concerns, some men were cautious about meeting virtual connections in person. For example, Desmond, a 49-year-old man who identified his race-ethnicity as "other", noted, "But meeting people, nah. No, because like, that could be anybody on the line and the next thing you know, it could be some of my family members I'm meeting." This sentiment was echoed by a discreet Latino man, Steven:

> It's harder because like I said, I'm more discreet. So for me I have to kind of make sure that if I meet somebody—let's say—on a phone chat thing or an online chat thing that it's

not somebody that I know really well, you know? So it's kind of harder for me to meet guys because I don't want it getting spread around afterwards.

While technology use could not entirely mitigate concerns about being outed, it still provided both out and discreet participants with the opportunity to connect with other men and socialize in the safety of a virtual setting where their identity could be managed.

Technology's Threat to Community Visibility

While many men appreciated technology for its ability to connect them to other men and create virtual communities, quite a few spoke about the loss of physical gay spaces and community visibility in their small cities as a result of increasing technology use. The technology-induced decline may be particularly relevant to small cities where the number of physical gay spaces is already limited and potentially more fragile than larger gay enclaves. Indeed, several men spoke to the tenuous nature of gay spaces in small cities, noting the closing of gay bars and bookstores, and the discontinuation of gay events. For example, Darren, a 29-year-old White man from New Haven, explained, "I used to go to a club that my friend bartended at, before it closed down and stopped doing the Gay Night." Similarly, Derek said, "The gay bars specifically [have closed]. The other bars—the straight bars—are up-and-running but there's nothing for our community." George, a 59-year-old White closeted man from Hartford, discussed the closure of a gay adult bookstore and specifically credits the shop's closure to the Internet, stating, "But many of the shops [gay bookstores] around here have closed. Well, I think too the Internet has played a big role."

In addition to describing the closure of gay spaces, many men reported that the remaining venues were sparsely frequented, contributing to less community cohesion. Michael, a White 58-year-old, who lived outside of Hartford for 25 years, explained,

> When I first moved here of course there was a very visible gay community because the only way that you could be in the community was to go to the bars. Well now you don't have to do that. You can hook up with people online. So when I have been into the bars . . . it's not anywhere what it used to be like. It used to be packed. There was, I won't say thousands of people, but lots of people there. Now you can walk in on Friday night and it might be half the size of a crowd.

Like Michael, many men attributed the decline of gay spaces and cohesion to the fact that men no longer need to connect in person given online alternatives. The declining significance of meeting men at bars was most often cited by older men, like Ronald, a 63-year-old Black man and long-time resident of New Haven, who noted,

> I think the computer generation, the computer has changed a lot because, I don't wanna sound like an old fogey, but back in my day the only place you met people were basically in a gay bar, and if you met somebody outside of a gay bar, it was a miracle. But now with all the social networks on the computers, people are meeting more that way than they are in a gay bar.

Marvin, a 63-year-old Black man, and another long-time New Haven resident, described the changing visibility and cohesion of the gay community as most evident among younger gay men in small cities.

> The younger people do not socialize anymore because of the Internet. They're not out there. I mean they come out to the bar on Friday and Saturday to get drunk and all that stuff and hang out with their friends, but, otherwise, they are home on the Internet. Now, the older people, 40, 45 and up, they're still socializing out in the bars, and things like that, or going over a friend's house, but it's not like it used to be 30, 35 years ago where because the community was so small, everybody went over to everybody else's house. We used to have once-a-month get-togethers where it was potluck. They don't do that anymore.

Participants described this decline in gay spaces as affecting men's ability to socialize in safe and accepting nonvirtual places. While primarily noted by older men, even some of the younger men were nostalgic for the once vibrant gay nightlife in New Haven. For example, Herbert, a 22-year-old Latino man, who grew up in a small city near New Haven, noted,

> The crowd was amazing. Good energy vibe. People were really alive. Kind of like if you go back to Studio 54. People there were just wearing their makeup. They're just free. Wearing clothes like Lady Gaga. Doing their thing. It was that moment. It was alive. Gotham back then was the same way. And so those are the moments that really I cherish a lot, but now that they're closed, like, you know. You move on.

Men also highlighted the importance of the social support provided by community members in brick-and-mortar gay spaces. Here, Ronald described his preference for meeting men in gay bars (rather than the Internet) where gay mentors (e.g., bartenders) could assist with screening potential partners for sexual safety, stating "I'd rather meet somebody in a bar and have a bartender tell me, 'Yeah, that guy's okay' or 'That guy is not okay.'" This was echoed by Marvin, who described a bartender who supported him when he was younger, noting that today's younger generation lacks access to such support:

He was the bartender in New Haven, and [he] raised everybody. . . . You went to Mick, and Mick would take you under his wing and any questions you had, he would answer or he would advise you against, "Oh, don't go with that person," or "Don't do this, or don't go there." The kids don't have that anymore.

The importance of physical gay spaces took on added significance in the context of sexual minority stigma. Carlos, a 46-year-old, openly gay man, and Steven, a 29-year-old, bisexual man who is not out, both described the challenges of having to navigate settings where gay and straight people mix.

'Cause there you have a mixture of everybody. You have gay people, straight people, all the other bars are closed, so they have the one after, say like Gotham. And so you really don't know what pool you're swimming in. "Is this the safe pool or is this the dangerous pool?"

It's harder to go to a regular bar where you're surrounded by all people who aren't gay or aren't bi because then you don't know who is and who's not. It makes it harder. So it just seems like to put it in one place makes it easier because it makes you being there more comfortable I should say. You know, 'cause you don't feel all—you know the straight guy over here is going to bash me.

Men also noted the importance of the visibility of gay life in small cities in terms of helping them locate safe spaces to socialize, free from homophobia. Carlos explained, "The [gay bars] have their little flag up front, their emblem where you know, okay, this is a safe zone." In addition to facilitating the identification of safe spaces, the visibility of gay life in mainstream culture may also serve to foster acceptance among heterosexual residents of small cities. For example, Desmond, a 49-year-old resident of New Haven, described how macro-level exposure to issues, such as gay marriage, had conditioned the heterosexual community to be more accepting of a visible gay community, noting,

The neighborhood knows about [a public gathering space for gay men], but they are not really loud and vicious, you know? Because people are really more open minded now. . . . [They] get conditioned to what's been going on with the culture, like with same sex marriages. [They] see about it and hear about it all the time, so it's nothing new.

Discussion

This study examined the role of technology in the lives of gay and bisexual men in two small cities in Connecticut. Consistent with previous studies conducted across diverse geographies (Grov et al., 2014; Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014), the small city gay and bisexual men interviewed here

regularly used social–sexual networking technologies to connect with other men. Virtual technologies offered men safe and affirming spaces for forming and expanding connections and navigating challenges in two small cities where men reported having access to few gay-specific physical spaces, widespread sexual minority stigma, and challenges obtaining anonymity in a community where men tended to know one another. However, technology was not always viewed favorably as some participants described its increased use to meet sexual partners as occurring at the expense of social cohesion, physical gay spaces, and community visibility. Participants' accounts of small city gay life highlight the role of technology in reinforcing, reconfiguring, and destabilizing virtual and nonvirtual communities of gay and bisexual men in small cities. These findings also emphasize the importance of understanding the local contexts that may ultimately shape technology use and the behavior and health of gay and bisexual men in small cities such as Hartford and New Haven.

Consistent with prior research among men in larger cities (e.g., Halkitis et al., 2003; Mustanski et al., 2011), social–sexual networking technologies made the world feel smaller for many gay and bisexual men in the sample, helping them easily find one another. However, unlike research conducted in large cities, some participants found the virtual technologies to be limiting as these platforms highlighted the small size of the gay community in their city by consistently featuring the same people. To overcome these local challenges, men reported using apps to identify transient partners who were passing through their small cities or while traveling. Participants' motivation for seeking partners from outside of their local community (i.e., not being able to readily identify new partners in their small city) is often shared by sexual minorities from rural areas (Gray, 2009; Williams et al., 2005), while the ability to connect with men who are passing through one's city has been more commonly discussed in relation to living in a large urban hub (Clift, Luongo, & Callister, 2002; Luongo, 2000). Furthermore, while many participants found the ability to access potential partners outside their small city, locally or while traveling, to be a benefit of technology, having sex with a person from outside one's social–sexual network was largely viewed by participants to be sexually risky. Men's fears regarding sex with anonymous partners met online may be valid, as prior research conducted among gay and bisexual men from diverse geographies report a link between HIV and other STIs and anonymous partners met online and offline (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999, 2015; Taylor et al., 2004).

Prior research has described the gay community as being composed of subcommunities often defined by demographics (e.g., race, class), sexual preferences (e.g.,

bareback/unprotected sex), or physical features (e.g., bears, twinks, jock; Hughes, 1997; Manley, Levitt, & Mosher, 2007; Rubin, 2002). Many participants used technology to create or locate these virtual subcommunities of like others, thereby shielding them from the mental health threat of peer-based rejection—a finding supported by prior research (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2006; Grov et al., 2014; Ramallo et al., 2015). Men also feared the mental and physical health consequences of stigma from outside the gay community, leading several men to conceal their sexual orientation as a form of stigma management (Knight et al., 2016). In fact, 6 out of the 29 men in the current sample were not out about their sexual orientation. Consistent with research conducted with sexual minorities from nonurban areas (Gray, 2009; Knight et al., 2016), navigating the physical world of their small city was anxiety provoking for closeted men in the sample as it offered few places where they felt safe to approach other men for sexual or romantic purposes. For some discreet participants, virtual communities provided the necessary anonymity to safely disclose their identity and build trust before meeting men face-to-face. These findings extend prior research on the benefits of social–sexual networking technologies for gay and bisexual men from diverse geographies (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2006; Grov et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2011; Ramallo et al., 2015; White Hughto et al., 2016) by documenting the protective role of these technologies in helping men manage the mental health (e.g., stress, anxiety; Meyer, 2003, 2010) and physical health (e.g., assault) effects of stigma in small cities where stigma and a lack of anonymity may be more common and concerning than for men in larger cities.

Participants also noted that the rise of social–sexual networking technologies had influenced the availability of physical gay spaces in small cities. Prior research conducted among key informants from 17 large international cities in 2008 reported that Web-based technologies have disrupted the gay community in these cities, leading to fewer gay businesses (Rosser, West, & Weinmeyer, 2008). Another qualitative study highlighted the changing nature of gay neighborhoods in Chicago, with some participants noting that gay bars are less frequented since the rise of the Internet (Ghaziani, 2014). This article extends prior research by highlighting the seemingly rapid destabilization of gay life in two small U.S. cities due to men's use of social–sexual networking technologies. Given that small cities have fewer brick-and-mortar gay spaces and numerically smaller gay communities than gay enclaves, technology may have a unique impact on gay life in small cities. Specifically, gay spaces and communities in small cities may be less able to sustain themselves in the face of new technologies and, thus, may be subject to a more rapid decline than gay communities

in large cities. Future research is needed to examine the potential causal role of social and sexual networking technologies in the decline of gay community spaces and visibility across diverse U.S. and global geographies.

Finally, the men in this study noted that with the closing of gay bars and the rise of the Internet came a decline in gay community cohesion and access to gay mentors (e.g., local bartenders)—community resources with documented psychosocial benefits (e.g., identity development, community integration, coping with gay-related stressors; Sheran & Arnold, 2012). These concerns were most frequently cited by older men who had lived through a generation in which an active LGB community struggled to gain acceptance and visibility (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). As noted by participants, intergroup contact or exposure can reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, in the case of concealable minority statuses, such as sexual orientation, the identity of stigmatized groups must be made known or visible to majority group members in order for the benefits of intergroup contact to be achieved (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Thus, it is possible that the increased integration of gay and bisexual men into heterosexual spaces (e.g., "straight" bars or clubs) could serve to normalize gay and bisexual life within the larger community (Adams, Braun, & McCreanor, 2014; Ghaziani, 2014). However, should the presence of gay and bisexual people in shared spaces be unknown to the heterosexual majority, then the decreased community visibility described by participants in small cities could push gay and bisexual men back into the periphery, decreasing public awareness and ultimately acceptance (Chauncey, 1994). Less acceptance by way of decreased visibility could pose a threat to the health of gay and bisexual men in small cities as national studies have reported that LGB people living in U.S. regions with greater sexual minority stigma have worse mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, alcohol use disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder) than those living in more supportive locales (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). Stigma may also interact with community visibility to influence attractions and behavior as a recent study of gay and bisexual men in Europe reported that men living in sparsely populated locales within high-structural stigma countries were the most likely to report bisexual or heterosexual behaviors and attractions, relative to men in other areas (Pachankis et al., 2016). Additional research is needed to examine the relative visibility of the gay community in small cities in the United States and globally, as well as the potential social and health-related correlates of gay community visibility for both heterosexuals and sexual minority community members as well.

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, all of the participants were drawn from small cities in Connecticut, a U.S. state with particular cultural contexts and resources for LGB people; therefore, these findings may not transfer to other settings. Additionally, though the study used multiple recruitment strategies to obtain a diversity of perspectives, it is possible that the range of experiences and attitudes toward social–sexual networking technologies described here is not fully comprehensive. Furthermore, this study analyzed qualitative data from a cross-section of gay and bisexual men in two small cities; thus, the potential causal role of technology use in the decline of gay community visibility and cohesion cannot be established. The findings presented here serve as a starting point for future exploration of the role of technology in shaping the lives of gay and bisexual men in small cities using quantitative and longitudinal designs with more representative sampling.

In sum, this study suggests that social networking technologies interact with access to physical spaces and may influence gay and bisexual men's physical and mental health in small cities. Indeed, participants reported that technology use offered the potential for protection against HIV/STI risk by offering a platform for disclosing one's HIV status, but also carried the risk for HIV/STI acquisition through facilitating sex with anonymous partners. Similarly, social–sexual networking technologies offered men the potential for improved mental health by locating or creating communities that are affirming of one's sexual orientation and other potentially stigmatized statuses, but also conferred risks to poor mental health by way of decreased social cohesion among gay and bisexual men in nonvirtual settings in the small cities studied. In this way, social–sexual technologies not only served to reconfigure and reinforce but also destabilize communities of gay and bisexual men in small cities. Finally, the small city residents in this study highlighted the importance of gay community visibility and dedicated spaces. Given the tireless advocacy required to make gay life currently visible (Clendinen & Nagourney, 2001; Jacobs, 1993), public health practitioners, community members, business owners, and other stakeholders should join forces to ensure that technology and valued nonvirtual community venues continue to coexist so that the benefits of both spaces can be harnessed to advance the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men in small cities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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