

**DOSSIER: DIGITAL PATHS: BODIES, DESIRES, VISIBILITIES**

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“Discreet and out of the gay scene” –  
notes on contemporary sexual visibility\*

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**Abstract**

Based on an ethnography with men that use digital media in search of same sex partners in São Paulo, Brazil, this paper discusses what motivates their use of technological platforms. It also employs sociological and historical elements to reflect upon the social aspects of desire that fuel this search and the new visibility regime in which these men live. Finally, it analyses the moral, symbolic and material restrictions that mold an economy of desire demanding their discretion and secrecy.

**Key Words:** Digital Media, Market, Gay Dating Apps, Economy of Desire, Visibility Regimes

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Not long ago, in the midst of an ocean of similar profiles on apps that allows the search for same sex partners, I found one that asserted the following: “Are you discreet, not effeminate and out of the gay scene? Well guy, here’s a tip for you... go look for a woman! You got the ideal profile for that!” An unusual manifestation of sarcasm in this technological medium in which it is exactly this type of self-description (and its apparent desirability) that abounds thus served as point of departure for the reflections in this article. Why is the online search for a partner guided by a demand for discretion and masculinity and the refusal of that which is openly gay? What are the continuities and, most importantly, the changes that the terms of this type of search represent, if we seek to understand the social and historical context in which these users are situated?

In order to answer these questions, we must listen and try to understand those who explain their search in such terms:

I use all these applications [laughter] I started with Grindr, and then went on to Scruff and Hornet. More recently, Tinder. [...] It’s easier than going out, starting conversation, checking out the vibes and then going for the encounter.

This is the way Lucas puts it,<sup>1</sup> as a white, professional 29 year old from São Paulo, who works in marketing, is self-defined as gay and uses search applications for mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets to find same sex partners.

Applications are programs that are available through online stores in free and paying versions – the latter, of course, are the most complete. To begin to use them, a person has to download them into his device, create a profile with a photo and begin to visualize other users according to how far away they are. Thanks to the GPS, applications are able to show just how close one is to

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym. Over the course of my research, I interviewed a large number of people and accompanied some of their daily lives more closely. I introduced myself from the start as researcher and honored my ethical commitment to preserving their anonymity.

potential partners. The first page of an application usually shows a series of photos of different users. By simply touching someone's photo, one gets access to a profile that provides data such as age, height, weight, self-description and what kind of person he is looking for. There is also a way to send private messages to other users or make a date, when both parties so desire.

The first application of this type was Grindr, created in 2009 by Joel Simkhai, a 38 year old businessman born in Israel and based in Los Angeles, a city famous for its lack of a downtown, that is, for urban sprawl and lack of reference points for daily social intercourse in public space. In an interview that he gave, Simkhai explained that the application was developed in response to the frequent query, "where can I find other gay guys?". Grindr was his technological answer to a problem that, for other men in other contexts, was to serve different ends and undergo re-appropriations.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers Rice *et alli* (2012), looking into how Grindr was being used in Los Angeles, produced a quantitative summary of the main reasons given for its use. Most cited was the fact that it allows its users to manipulate and reveal sexual identity in personalized ways (22,23%); the second was security and convenience (21%). Both were points that appeared, in qualitative terms, among my interlocutors in São Paulo and not solely in relation to the application cited. Lucas, for example, concluded that he prefers to use Tinder because :

people show their faces, you can see if you have Facebook friends in common and that way avoid hooking up with someone who knows other people [you know] who might say something to them... It's not that I'm trying to hide, but

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<sup>2</sup> I undertook ethnographic research in San Francisco with resources provided by a FAPESP Grant for Research Abroad, from January to August 2013. The preliminary results gave origin to the article, "San Francisco e a Nova Economia do Desejo [San Francisco and the New Economy of Desire]" (Miskolci, 2014b), a text that provides sociological and historical analysis of some of the determinants behind the creation and use of digital media by North American gay men.

I’m not totally out either. I don’t go around waving a banner and so forth. I mind my own business. That’s how I’ve chosen to live. I don’t want to always be exposing myself. So the least number of people I have in common with someone, the safer I feel about a date.

Just like Lucas, most of the interviewees I have spoken to in São Paulo since the end of 2007 claim longtime use of digital media in their quest for same-sex love and sex partners, for reasons that reveal similar negotiation of the visibility of their same-sex desire. Almost all began using online chat rooms for gay and/or bisexual publics during the 1990s, associating this habit to partner searches in the decade that followed and, to differing degrees, taking up the use of applications from the moment that they became more popular in Brazil (as of 2010). Some of my interlocutors, those who were over 45 years of age, stretched this line of digital media use backwards, reminiscing about the use of IRC and MIRC programs, telephone services which work like the Brazilian “*Disque Amizade*” [Dial Friendship] or even classified ads published in magazines and newspapers.

Tiago, a 33 year old musician from Rio de Janeiro who has been living in São Paulo for the past four years, believes people use applications out of neediness, because it is “so difficult and complicated to flirt with other men; we are always around heteros, in straight environments.” Yet at the same time, when asked if he believes that these technologies serve only as facilitating factors, he added

Well, in addition to their practicality, using applications is safer than going out on the prowl, where everyone is interested in someone else. And you don’t have to expose yourself the way you would if you went to some gay hangout. I hate the gay scene!

From the testimonies above, we can identify a number of different ways in which people living in São Paulo, a city with a commercial circuit dedicated to homosexuals, relate to these

applications. There are men such as Lucas who combine their use with physical presence on the gay scene, while others, like Tiago, use them as an alternative to the latter. Notwithstanding different ways of using these applications and the need to treat categorical affirmations about them and those who use them with caution, I seek to bring historical and social elements together to explain the use of these technological tools as well as factors that structure the interaction they permit.

My research focuses on the experiences of men who use these applications to look for same-sex partners, whether or not users actually consider themselves to be homosexual. The major question that I attempt to answer is why they came to prioritize digitally-mediated contact. I use two articulated discussions to explain my findings. The first one has to do with the emergence of a new regime of sexual visibility in which sexualities are distributed along a spectrum of recognition that goes from the most socially acceptable (heterosexual, and in particular, monogamous couples with kids), to those who have begun to negotiate their visibility (such as socioeconomically privileged gays and lesbians) to those who have been kept within or relegated to abjection. The second discussion has to do with how this new regime of sexual visibility is intrinsically related to the centrality of work and security, shaped by what I refer to as a new economy of desire which encourages the search for sex without commitment with “discreet” partners. Through these discussions, I seek to deconstruct the hegemonic representations and social practices that engender subjects within a specific socio-technical context. Finally, I present some theoretical and political reflections on how hegemonic heterosexual masculinity has presided over the context within which these historical changes have been negotiated.

### **Regimes of visibility**

The progressive separation of sexuality from reproduction that began during the second half of the twentieth century brought with it political demands such as the feminist assertion that the

personal is political. The different movements that sprung up around homosexuality introduced demands that enable us to recognize today forms of inequality that were once ignored: the unequal distribution of love, affection and sex. Although feminisms, homosexual movements and gender dissidence have gained greater social visibility since the sixties, it is in the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution and of the sexual panic triggered by AIDS that their demands have achieved wider dissemination in Western societies.

With specific regard to same-sex relations, there are historical and sociological elements that enable us to recognize that as of the second half of the 1990s, media representations of gays and lesbians begin to define models for their social recognition. It is as if homosexuals came to be recognized as a particular life style related to market interests, new forms of communication and political demands for the erasure of differences in relation to heterosexualities. This becomes evident in the emergence of what has been coined *Pink Money*, and marked in Brazil by the popularization of GLS (“gay, lesbian and sympathizers”) business. A segmented commercial circuit comes about, meant to serve a socioeconomically privileged homosexual public with integrationist aspirations, that is, that seeks services that enable them to socialize with heterosexuals, thus galvanizing a process of “un-differentiation” of sexual desire.

With regard to emergent political agendas, the year 1995 marked a profound change in homosexual activism. It was also the year in which federal representative Marta Suplicy presented her proposal for a legal amendment recognizing civil partnerships for same-sex couples. The centrality of this political demand, a battle partially won through Federal Supreme Court recognition of same sex partnerships in May of 2011, is one of the cornerstones of a new visibility strategy that seeks rights and citizenship through adherence to traditional relationship models (Beleli, 2009; Miskolci, 2007). At the same time that the social movement and its political agenda began to follow this course, more news columns and publications geared toward a homosexual audience started to

appear, creating a new media image – one that was more positive and more commercially integrated. Important landmarks such as the commercial dissemination of internet in Brazil, the first Gay Pride March in São Paulo and free distribution of the anti-retroviral cocktail for HIV virus carriers are all associated with this historical moment.<sup>3</sup>

The worldwide computer network that is so much a part of our daily lives today enabled this new anonymous and relatively safe form of socialization for people that feared social retaliation. It allowed them to a chance to overcome loneliness and permitted effective and modulated contact with potential partners and friends. In turn, the Gay Pride March consolidated a new type of activism and visibility for those who gradually came to be known as “LGBT subjects”. Public distribution of anti-retroviral drugs worked to slowly change previous public perception that being HIV positive was a fatal condition, now considered a kind of chronic illness that can be effectively treated with readily available medication. These transformations, whose effects were gradual and more consolidated in the 21st century, changed social understandings of homosexualities and the characteristics that they were associated with. In sociological terms, a new regime of visibility emerged, one which re-negotiated the levels of social acceptance of homosexuality in our country. As I have observed elsewhere (2014a:62):

Within the realm of sexuality, “visibility regime” is a notion that seeks to produce a synthesis of the way societies confer recognition and make certain love arrangements visible while other forms of relationship are controlled through moral vigilance, public constraint and, in short, efforts to maintain those forms of love and sex relationships in a situation of relative discretion or invisibility. A visibility regime translates into sophisticated forms of power

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<sup>3</sup> Simone Ávila (2014) notes that it was also in 1997 that the Brazilian Council of Medicine (*Conselho Federal de Medicina*) wrote up its first medical protocol on sex-change surgery.

relations, since it is not based on direct prohibition; rather, on indirect yet highly efficient forms of management of what is visible and acceptable in everyday life.

Thus, when I speak of a new visibility regime, I am not speaking of something that should necessarily be seen in a positive light, nor of the general public display of homosexuality in everyday life. Quite the contrary, this regime has involved the construction of a “correct” form of visibility, related to the circulation of media images and to the internal division of homosexualities in which some forms become visible and recognized – even taken as models to be followed – while others are considered reprehensible even when not always or necessarily kept invisible.

Within a regime of visibility, hypervisibility – rather than covering – can actually become a major pitfall. Homosexuality continues to be seen negatively in feminine men and gender benders and associated in mechanical and dubious ways with transsexuals and crossdressers. This reveals continuity in relation to the social rejection of a homosexuality that is understood as a form of gender dislocation, particularly when it is manifested publicly, and is corroborated by the evident valorization of socially recognized “masculine” types on the social platforms that I have studied.

The majority of my interlocutors reproduce naturalized perspectives of gender. I have also seen that many – with varying degrees of consciousness – are fans of (masculinizing) gender technologies. Following Teresa de Lauretis (1987), we are able to understand how certain social practices, and even basic exposure to socially hegemonic representations, become what she refers to as gender technologies. Among the latter, I give salience to the use of digital media and how they expose users to regulatory models on how to be, whom to desire and what to do. It is evident that the use of applications in the search for partners, highly centered on the use of image, encourage and associate bodily practices such as weight lifting or the bodily construction of erotic types that the porno industry has construed as “bears”.



A considerable portion of the profiles that we find on these platforms contain images of well-defined bodies or well-muscled shoulders, backs and biceps or strong, flat abdomens. In my interviews, I frequently found “masculine” men referred to as the most desirable, especially insofar as they were construed as “discreet”, “passing for straight” or “acting straight”. From my interviewees’ words, I was able to infer that the eroticizing of bodies seen as “more masculine” coalesces with the desire to relate to other men without having to risk the public exposure of their desire. This is certainly understandable in a society which has welcomed homosexuals within public spaces, as long as they are not recognizable as such.

It is no coincidence that in digital media in general, and in a way that becomes even more evident in the applications studied here, the prevailing perception of homosexuality sees it an individual trait whose visibility should be managed in everyday life by those who fall into that category. This expectation is translated into common online expressions calling for discretion and confidentiality. In these media, being discreet or maintaining secret relationships is not the same as hiding homosexuality, as denoted by the old expression, “to be in the closet”; rather to negotiate, within each context, the degree of visibility in such a way as to maximize one’s safety and avoid moral and material retaliation.<sup>4</sup>

Not showing one’s face, as is the case for most of the profiles, together with the display of bodies or body parts, becomes a way of making oneself visible in which a later “revelation” of the part that identifies the person becomes a type of reward given to those whom the user is also interested in. This suggests that, notwithstanding recent political gains, we continue to live under a representation regime based on heterosexual hegemony.<sup>5</sup> Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical discussion of the persistence of the notion of the closet and why it is insufficient for understanding how men negotiate their desires for same-sex partners today, see Miskolci (2014 a).

<sup>5</sup> I thank Felipe André Padilha for having pointed out the relationship between visibility regime and that which Stuart Hall refers to as regimes of representation. I would like to add that Hall developed the concept of regime of representation in

despite the existence of sites and applications devoted to non-heterosexual subjects, their use still revolves around image and behavior that remain faithful to heterosexual standards.

This is the cultural context within which recent communication technologies ally themselves with technologies of the body, producing subjects subjectively and physically. Rather than constraints or oppression, what is at hand is a subtler form of subjugation that those who are subjected to willingly incorporate. Digital media induce users who are looking for sexual or love partners to imagine that the success of their efforts is partially or completely contingent on building a body through masculinizing techniques, meant to guarantee desirability in a competitive arena.

The use of digital media to obtain sex and love contacts does not merely signify adapting a technological tool to a pre-existing end. Platform users are, from the moment they get on line, induced to operate according to existing patterns of competition. Their search tends to be shaped by these technological means, which, in turn, are guided by market logics. Yet this should not lead us to idealize off-line search as if it were free of filters, interests and forms of regulation. Rather, we should think about how online uses magnify historical tendencies such as those sociologist Eva Illouz (2012) has identified in her discussion of structures of search and choice of sexual and romantic partners.

I see the use of different platforms of mediated communication as a strategy to circumvent the continued restrictions on free, public expression of same-sex desire. Through the use of applications, men who maintain discreet forms of behavior and self-presentation within work, family and educational environments are able to express their desire without exposing themselves to possible social retaliation, moral reprimand and even violence. This use of technology can thus be understood as a

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order to deal with culture analytically, substituting or refining the Foucaultian concept of regimes of truth, which sprung primarily from his analysis of the discourse of experts - doctors, jurists and clergy.

means for dealing with the existing lack in security and recognition for public expression of same-sex desire.<sup>6</sup>

Seven years of research have enabled me to collect enough empirical evidence to assert that, at least amongst my middle and upper-class interlocutors, lives are plagued more by a lack of security than by the threat of pure violence. It is the risk of losing a job, moral reproach or ruptured family ties that impels them to search for partners through means that allow them to negotiate the visibility of their desires safely.

Although new communication technologies provide greater and perhaps – for some – better opportunities for contacts and socialization than the ones that would be available offline, they also train their users in forms of self-presentation, behavior and relating that serve to reinforce the present hostile socio-political context. Induced, regulated and even controlled by the collective demand not to publicize their desire and not to allow it to become recognizable, the latter becomes the condition for its tolerance. It must be kept within the confines of standards imposed by the political and cultural hegemony of heterosexuality.

In other words, users subscribe to the regime of visibility I have outlined here not voluntarily but as the result of a range of different institutional constraints that regulate their lives through one of its most central and sensible elements: desire, the ability to love and be loved, that is, to be recognized – by oneself and by society – as a subject. In the end, these subjects continue to face unequal conditions of access to love and affection, on and off-line – in short, to elements that have become increasingly valued in our culture as a means of social and personal recognition.

Eva Illouz (2012:241) observed that, as of the decade of 1960, there has been a gradual shift in what she denominates “a new ecology and architecture of choice” in love:

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Raewyn Connell who suggested I pay closer attention to this aspect of my field research.

For reasons that are normative (the sexual revolution), social (the weakening of class, racial, ethnic endogamy), and technological (the emergence of Internet technology and dating sites), the search for and choice of a partner have profoundly changed.

It is this context that what she refers to as sexual fields emerge: “social arenas in which sexuality becomes an autonomous dimension of pairing, an area of social life that is intensely commodified, and an autonomous criterion of evaluation” (Eva Illouz, 2012:242)

### The new economy of desire

From a perspective that is attentive to the role of differences in the regulation of social life, and especially in the case of differences in the terrain of gender and sexuality, it is necessary to recognize that a regime of visibility is not imposed on previously constituted subjects; rather, it creates or recreates them through the cultural and material malleability of desire itself. In the previous section, I emphasized symbolic elements, and in particular those that involve the insecurity prevailing in the case of those who live under daily moral scrutiny. I will now associate further elements to that discussion – precisely a consideration of material elements that can be distinguished from other bibliography and research on the supposed emergence of “recreational sex” (Laumann *et alli*, 1994; Illouz, 2012) or regarding the protagonism of the market in people’s lives, disconnecting the latter from their rootedness in the material, and in work in particular. Following the tradition of critical and Marxist theories, I emphasize the relationship between material and moral elements within the contemporary scene, analyzed through what in another text (2014b:273), I refer to as the “new economy of desire”<sup>7</sup>: “the way in which the relationship

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<sup>7</sup> I give particular salience to Wilhelm Reich as precursor for our reflections on the existence of an economy of desire. This Austro-Hungarian sociologist proposed, in his 1929 essay on “Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis”, a

between affect, sex and love come together within a new economic configuration of work and consumption, in which social relations are digitally mediated.”

In general terms, I refer to the way in which sex and love lives, and desire itself, comes to be expressed in the contemporary world, a post-industrial society centered around services, consumption, media segmentation and “flexible” forms of work. Economy here refers both to the sphere of production and consumption and to forms of regulating desire, yet it emphasizes the symbolic exchanges in which sex and gender intelligibility become means to acquire, for example, social recognition. Taking clues from Eva Illouz (1997), I give salience to the relationship between capitalism and desire, while considering the ways in which an economy of desire brings elements of moral and symbolic orders together, varying in virtue of which types of desire are at stake, that is, whether “opposite” or same-sex.

I see desire as a social and historical form, which can therefore be regulated according to collective interests that bring together moral, political and economic aspects. On this matter, I subscribe to Judith Butler’s (2014:259-260) argument that

One can certainly concede that desire is radically conditioned without claiming that it is radically determined, and one can acknowledge that there are structures that make desire possible without claiming that those structures are timeless and racalcitrant, impervious to a reiterative replay and displacement.

Most of the interlocutors who were part of my São Paulo research were liberal professionals struggling to acquire financial independence, which they relate to familial recognition, a minimal degree of material well-being and the minimal security that they need in order to be able to live out their relationships with other men. Work is a key element in their lives; not coincidentally, it is

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sociology of the sexual economy bringing Marx and Freud, and therefore sociology and psychoanalysis together (2013).

referred to as something which enables them to preserve confidentiality and discretion in their relationships or even to maintain a guise of heterosexuality. Those who are also involved with women make ample mention of girlfriend, fiancée or wife when they are on the job.

As middle and upper class professionals, they all have access to the equipment they need in for internet connection, which for many is in fact a part of their basic work routines. Thus, a tool that they use for work also grants them access to sites and applications for their search for love/sex partners, erasing boundaries between public and private. With most of their time taken up by work, or perhaps study, as well as social and family relations in which the demands of heterosexuality prevail, digital media enter their lives as an element that extends daily heterosexist pressures and allows modulated contact with other men.

Online searches thus become part of the context in which, from the initial expansion of commercial internet until today, there has been a prevailing separation of platforms set up to search for heterosexual love partners (mainly on the part of women) and online environments associating male homosexual desire with the quest for sex. This persisting binary division between love/heterosexuality and sex/homosexuality is neither neutral nor has it emerged within a cultural vacuum. Rather, it purifies heterosexual sex by associating it with love and the reproduction or constituting of families, while updating longstanding conceptions that associate male homosexuality with unfettered sexual desire – thereby reproducing a historic association of masculinity with desire and male homosexuality with sexual desire alone.

The centrality of the search for sex without commitment becomes an *a priori* that leads users into using these tools in accordance with the above-described premises, sometimes even unconsciously. One of the most evident elements lies in the way the platforms and tools geared toward a male homosexual public are designed, valuing image over written text. Although written text may not be the major attraction of these platforms, they nonetheless provide a number of forms for self-identification and

search that incorporate categories created by the porn industry. This is an understandable commercial strategy, given the fact that sites and applications are lucrative businesses whose advertisers include companies that provide pornography, erotic products, nightclubs, saunas and other services geared toward homosexuals. Furthermore, as Sharif Mowlabocus (2010:102) has argued, gay porno has been one of the few existing sources of positive, eroticized images of non-heterosexuals within a society in which disqualifying stereotypes that associate homosexuals with myriad forms of the undesirable prevail.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, regardless of user's initial intentions, once online he is easily induced to creating a self-commodifying profile that enables him to enter a kind of sex market. Piscitelli, Assis e Olivar (2011:10) believe that "The term market evokes different meanings: the abstract terrain in which goods are exchanged, the organization of social relations that constitute the sphere of production as well as that of consumption". Although my field of research is not that of commercial sex, it is intersected by the market through the material and symbolic exchanges that take place within it.

It is possible to use digital media in the search for love and sex partners without paying for use of sites and apps, yet in addition to the restrictions that this imposes, users continue to be exposed to the advertising of related services. One way or another, all users' activities fall within the realm of the market and, insofar as they search for love, they are expected to present themselves as desirable and to commoditize themselves according to the most valued patterns of a sphere characterized by open competition. I use the term commodification because it refers to a sort of metamorphosis that produces a saleable commodity within a market guided by criteria of desirability for love/sex. This requires

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<sup>8</sup> Larissa Pelúcio (2009) and Tiago Duque (2011) have observed that, among travestis, something similar goes on, and the "floor" [*pista*, in Portuguese, an emic term for places of prostitution] becomes the major site in which they can be recognized as admirable, beautiful, desirable.

the use of photos in which the user embodies the standards that prevail within advertising that targets the male homosexual public.

The centrality of the body in this commodification process is easily recognizable. Within apps, the typical profile of the successful person is also one which renders the user sexually attractive, done through the use of photos in which muscles, facial hair and well-defined stomachs can be seen. These photos evoke not only gay porn, but also the kind of image that is attached to sex work. The blurred distinction between sex workers and ordinary users in application programs is so evident that it has become increasingly common for profiles to appear with the message of alert “I am not a sex worker”. Despite concerns regarding uncertain boundaries between commercial and non-commercial sex, many ordinary users adopt search criteria that remind us of those that characterize the sex market.

Although profiles are varied, searches tend to be distributed between those who are seeking casual sex, those looking for something between immediate sexual gratification and relationships, and those who reject sex without commitment (“hookup” in the U.S. and “fast foda” in Brazil). According to authors such as Michael Kimmel (2008), the hookup became popular in university environments and among middle class youth wanting to postpone commitment during a stage of life devoted to studies, looking for a job and seeking professional stability.

In Brazil, and specifically in my São Paulo research, “fast foda” (fast fuck) is a derogatory way of referring to casual sex, interpreted as a sign of promiscuity. Among men seeking male partners, this way of seeking partners and relating sexually may represent a new form of the old “gay cruising”, known in Brazil as “pegação” – interaction taking place in public places such as parks, bathrooms and parking lots. My research enables me to question this perception, recognizing that the current form of search tends to be described as safe, practical and objective. Furthermore, the relationships sought through it are marked by selectiveness and filters – in other words, different forms of a hygienization of sex in



which potential partners are subjected to a kind of scrutiny that was rare or impossible in the older “cruising” or “pegação”.

In interviews conducted with users who were over 50, there were repeated references to different ways of searching for a partner, emphasizing that *cruising* demanded more time and immersion, requiring a person to hang out in public places until he found a potential partner and demanding more engagement and energy than today’s use of digital media. Furthermore, it involved greater risks of exposure, of being seen by people belonging to one’s network of friends, family and acquaintances, of being extorted by a “partner” or even becoming the victim of violence. According to these older interlocutors, new media enable people to engage in searches from their home or workplace and also allow for greater objectivity and effectiveness in face to face encounters. One of my interlocutors, a 55 year old with a post-graduate degree and an intellectual-type profile, went as far as associating current digital platforms with neoliberalism, the demand that people devote themselves more to their work and the search for partners whom he labeled as “bourgeois”.

The tools these platforms provide afford the possibility of visualizing partners with particular physical characteristics, as well as obtaining personal information that also provides clues as to their socio-economic position. In the interviews that I conducted from the end of 2007, there was a common valorization of these tools even though – among my middle and upper class interlocutors – I heard frequent complaints alleging a lack of “interesting” candidates. The term “interesting” is a reference to user profiles with socially and economically valued characteristics such as a university education, financial independence and physical appearance denoting participation in a sophisticated consumer market.

In short, for most of my interlocutors- university-educated white males over age 30 engaged in liberal professions that they describe as “conservative” –, work can be recognized as the center of gravity of their lives. It provides a financial basis for their existence and is their prime source of symbolic recognition,

sustaining their relative independence, their quest to negotiate desire and avoid breaking with their families or suffering social retaliation. Within such negotiations, digital media supply a fundamental opportunity to have access to male partners without putting their heterosexual public image at risk, even when the latter is merely a taken for granted assumption. Most importantly, from their point of view, to simply be presumed to be heterosexual may be much safer than to be suspected to be or – worse yet – identified as homosexual, a condition which can interfere with their recognition at work and their opportunities to develop, maintain or move up in it. The use of digital media and of applications in particular involves allocating the desire for other men to a space and time that does not interfere with their presumably heterosexual lives.

Within this economy of desire, love/sex relations are molded by the market, yet have characteristics that are often hardly “recreational”. Over thirty years ago, in his now classic “*Capitalism and Gay Identity*” (1982), John D’Emilio defended the thesis that homosexualities as we know them emerged out of the development of an individualized labor market, giving people the opportunity to engage in same sex relationships within a context of relative independence from their families. At present, there is empirical evidence indicating that the high level of turnover and flexibility in the sex and love lives of my interlocutors is directly related to the heterosexism that prevails within their occupations and, concretely, on the job. Variations on casual sex respond to the material and moral restrictions that surround it. Men who sought independence from their families in order to free themselves from moral scrutiny soon find themselves having to face similar demands within the realm of work. Thus, what some of them referred to as “feeling as if they were being watched” or actually being under surveillance is related to a similar, more impersonal but no less efficient form of scrutiny. It sheds light on the how mediated technologies are used to negotiate the visibility of their desire for other men which in turn are related to body techniques that enable them to present themselves within the terms

of current standards that erase the socially recognizable signs of homosexuality.

*“Fora do meio e sarado”* [Fit and out of the scene]: hegemonic representations and body technologies

The first thing one notices upon entrance into the world of chatrooms, sites and cellphone apps for the search for same-sex partners is the way the “gay scene” – which includes the platforms that have been set up for it – is held in contempt. There is constant repetition, within profiles, of phrases like “I’m out of the scene and looking for someone who also is”, as well as negative descriptions of users to be avoided: “effeminate”, “futile”, “drug users” or “bottom”. The plethora of self-presentations or texts within profiles that painstakingly insist on what is not wanted and, above all, whom one should keep away from, sheds light on a context of socialization marked by a type of symbolic violence that reproduces the prejudices about homosexuals that run rampant in daily life in Brazil. The apparent paradox behind the fact that these men who in searching for other men disqualify not only the platforms themselves but also most other users can be understood in another light when we take into consideration that, as men socialized within the hegemonic culture, they tend to share dominant ways of imagining homosexuals. In general terms, prevailing representations continue to associate homosexuality with “deviant behavior” or “deviant character traits” such as effeminacy.

In addition to what has been pointed out above, rejection of the gay milieu in general, and of many of the homosexuals whose profiles are available on online platforms, is also related to the underlying logics on which access and interactions are based. In the first place, the choice of platforms may be – as in Tiago’s case – an option or alternative to the face-to-face offline sociability involving personal exposure within a wider spectrum of homosexual persons. In other words, use of these platforms may in itself be indicative of person’s predisposition to refuse such

instances and contacts, resorting to these technologies as a means of more individualized interaction.

Furthermore, using these platforms implies exposing oneself to an unknown online public,<sup>9</sup> one which, in my research, tends to be imagined in ways that conform to dominant cultural references about what homosexualities are like. Given the fact that the majority of these references are negative, it is not hard to understand why users would refer to – and even carefully enumerate – the characteristics that they scorn and do not want to be associated with. These platforms then become a context in which the user, in Tiago’s terms, “relates defensively” – and, as he adds, “in the expectation that they are able to provide a more secure ambiance for searching for a partner”. Security is gained through controlled exposure, since the public, although made up of strangers, shares the same basic goal of putting together a network to find same-sex partners.

Whether my interlocutors had had previous experiences in spaces set up for a homosexual public or not, most of them claim to use these platforms because they permit them to search for other men who also avoid the gay scene. Rejection of the gay milieu dates back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the height of the AIDS panic when choosing a partner “out of the scene” – that is, outside the circuit of gay clubs and bars – meant searching from a pool of men less likely to be HIV positive (Miskolci, 2013:55). It is worth reminding ourselves that was a time in which there were no effective treatments available, and AIDS was considered a fatal illness. To be diagnosed as HIV positive was like receiving a death sentence. Thus, it comes as no surprise that when commercial

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<sup>9</sup> *Invisible public* is the term used in the English language literature on social medias. Vide Light, 2013. I have preferred to adapt the term to the context of my own research, in which it would not be accurate to refer to the public as invisible. More pertinent is the consideration that it is made up of people who are unknown to the users in their daily circle of relations, demanding caution in personal exposure and requiring the use of filters and sorting procedures in dealing with possible contacts.

internet became available in the mid-1990s, homosexuals began to use it as a way of finding partners “out of the gay scene”.

The emergence of a hegemonic body standard – that of the well-built, muscular man (“sarado”, a Brazilian Portuguese term that evokes the idea of a body strengthened through workouts, healthy and probably not HIV infected) – also dates back to this moment. Researches done in different national contexts have similarly pointed out that this valuing of muscular bodies was a result of the AIDS epidemic. In fact, before drug therapies became readily available, doctors prescribed steroids and recommended work outs at the gym to avoid weight loss and motivate HIV patients to keep up a healthy life style (Peterson e Anderson, 2012; Masseno, 2011). This makes it easier to understand the disqualification and refusal of the gay milieu – and even of the platforms linked to it, which can be considered an online extension of the former. Furthermore, today, now that AIDS is no longer considered a fatal illness and the HIV virus is controlled through drug therapies, the cult that has sprung up around muscular bodies has been increasingly associated with “discretion”, rather than public recognition of a homosexual identity.

During the two years I devoted to this research, I struggled with the enigma of how, within online platforms, my interlocutors could claim to be seeking discreet, masculine types that could pass as straight, and yet when I asked them to describe or show me images of men like these, what I saw were men whom, at least within metropolitan contexts, could be recognized as gay. They displayed images like those created by advertising and publicity targeting homosexuals, men who have come to represent a model of the successful and therefore “attractive”. Bodily discipline confers moral qualities on these subjects, while simultaneously eroticizing them and making them socially respectable through their recognition as “well-adjusted”.

In spite of what direct online assertions might lead us to believe, the search for discreet men that materialized in the quest for a muscular body may be less related to the fact that they can pass for straight and more to do with the kind of model that they

have come to embody. The bodily discipline that involves exercise, dieting and supposedly healthy habits distances these men from prevailing stereotypes of homosexuals as undisciplined, social deviants who are prone to reproachable or dangerous habits. The muscular body is seen as the opposite of the thin, fragile one<sup>10</sup> that emasculates, and serves to denounce a homosexuality that is associated with effeminacy, lack of strength and even sickness.

At the end of the last century, images of the wasted bodies of AIDS victims were widely represented in the media, haunting a whole generation of men who came to symbolically associate – consciously or not – homosexual desire with the threat of contamination, illness and death. Yet in spite of the hegemony of the muscular body,<sup>11</sup> a wide range of body types are shown on internet apps. Rodrigo C. Melhado (2014) analyzed more than 700 profiles of men who seek other men on one such search site.<sup>12</sup> His quantitative data reveal a nearly exact equilibrium between men who declare themselves to be muscular and fit and those who seek men with this body type. The data, collected from a data bank with user profiles from two cities in the state of São Paulo, enable us to suggest the hypothesis that the muscular body, standard in media representation, is not necessarily what men want for themselves nor in a partner. The very close fit between the way

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<sup>10</sup> According to the French historian Jean-Jacques Courtine (2013), at least since the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression and its high unemployment levels, the practice of working out at the gym comes about as a way to assuage social fears concerning the loss of masculinity.

<sup>11</sup> Florence Tamagne (2013) has provided an historical examination of what she calls “homosexual virilities”. David M. Halperin also discusses this issue in his most recent book, *How to be gay* (2012). Both of them analyze the emergence and cultural dissemination of the representation of the “gay macho” during the 1970s, a model of masculinity adopted by white middle class youth whose references came from working class men. Halperin provides a critical analysis of how this cult attempted to erase the iconoclastic “queer” from gender norms.

<sup>12</sup> As undergraduate research training funded by the FAPESP and following strict ethical criteria. The data bank that was compiled includes no information that could lead to users’ identification; analysis was carried out through impersonal criteria.

users define their bodies and those who seek them could suggest that what lies underneath is a search for partners with similar life style and values. In other words, it is evident that what really prevails is not so much “muscular men” but the hegemony of a type of masculinity within forms of self-presentation and searches for partners. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to take note that until recently there were no transgender profiles to be found and it is still uncommon to find men who are searching for feminine/effeminate partners. Alongside the centrality of a male gender within the prevailing regime of representation lies the growing rejection of sexual “passivity” associated to femininity.

In recent years, through observing and analyzing hundreds of user profiles, I have witnessed – in addition to the now well-known “masculine bottoms” –, the emergence of profiles which claim to be “top seeking top”, men who introduce themselves online as heterosexuals seeking relations with other men or men who “want nothing to do with bottoms”, a strategic way of presenting themselves as “masculine” without necessarily claiming to be “top” or “versatile”. Quite astutely, the rejection of a bottom profile may be seen as the assertion of their own desire to be penetrated within a sexual relation, thus avoiding the kind of stigmas that are still attached to certain types of sexual preference.

In short – and being perhaps a bit impressionistic – we can speculate as to whether the economy of desire that we have briefly described here revolves around the rejection and erasure of the “fag” (“bicha”), an established cultural stereotype that in our society evokes the quintessence of homosexuality. Not coincidentally, one of the traits that is associated with the “bicha” is his working class origin<sup>13</sup>; the “bicha” is the homosexual that can be recognized for his femininity and therefore – in the terms that are dominant in today’s apps – as one who has failed in managing the secret of his sexuality. This is a failure frequently associated

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<sup>13</sup> Popular class background is connoted in particular Brazilian insults such as “bicha pão-com-ovo” (literally something like “bread and butter fag” or “bichinha poc-poc”, something like “noisy fag, loud fag”).

with “flamboyant behavior”, a supposedly bothersome way of behaving that is expressed through gestures and voice that are “feminine” or, at least, insufficiently virile for current hegemonic masculine standards.

This description not only denotes the refusal of a stereotype or way of being homosexual, but of homosexuality itself, increasingly rejected as a means for self-understanding and relegated to those who fail in negotiating the visibility of their desire for other men. This is a fact that makes it possible to recognize both the maintenance of a heterosexist context and the creation of gender technologies that are supposed to enable men who desire other men to keep their desire secret.

Most significantly, it is a visibility regime based on an economy of desire that rewards discretion, awarding those who are successful in keeping their desire and practices secret a position that brings them closer to heterosexuality. Within the context of the open normative competition of online platforms, to seem (or even to declare oneself) straight is equivalent to maintaining a subject position that is desirable insofar as guarantee of moral recognition and material well-being.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to discuss the cultural, political and material factors that have led the subjects of my research to adopt the use of mediated technologies as a privileged means for searching for love/sex partners. I have also brought historical and sociological elements to bear on reflections regarding the social character of the desire that fuels this search and the kind of economy that it injects into the present. I have argued that contemporary love/sex searches cannot be detached from the demand for recognition.

In dealing with the experiences of historically subaltern subjects who seek same-sex partners, I associate the empirical sources of my research with theoretical and conceptual reflections that aim to contribute toward making its sociological analysis



possible. This has led me to conceive, still in preliminary form, of what I call a regime of visibility, which I describe as connected to a new economy of desire that I consider to be a characteristic of our contemporary social and cultural scenario. The importance of reflecting on historical contexts as visibility regimes is also linked to the way in which they draw boundaries around the limits of what is thinkable. Queer and gender studies have problematized these limits in order to incorporate that which has been excluded from canonic social theory, historically negligent in its disregard for the role of desire, gender and sexuality in social life.

I hope to have been successfully explicit in showing how, over the last two decades, a connected set of economic, political, cultural and technological changes have created a new social reality in which sexuality and desire have a more fundamental role than they did in the past. Within post-industrial contexts, centered as they are around services and consumption, personal life becomes a cornerstone for self-understanding as well as in terms of the recognition of others. Work continues to be a fundamental aspect of people's lives, even if only insofar as it provides the material conditions they need to take their place within a segmented and "connected" consumer market that awards increasing protagonism to online relating and relationship.

Without abandoning other relational spaces, my interlocutors make up part of a specific segment of online interaction, one which pertains to a variety of online same-sex partner search platforms. They have entered a specific arena of competition therein that can be described as a type of love/sex market within which they learn to operate according to values and techniques that enable them to become desirable according to current standards. Although these values come from previously existing offline sources, they require new online characteristics and act to shape types of subjectivity and corporeality. They undergo subjective and bodily changes through their use of these media, frequently subscribing to the visibility regime that is based on discretion and secrecy.

My research suggests a current transformation of the space occupied by the expression of same-sex desire in contemporary social life. It is a transformation that occurs through the negotiation of public visibility, in terms of exchange that involve safe forms of exposure which do not erode heterosexual hegemony and foreclude any type of gender bending.<sup>14</sup> Within this regime of discretion and secret, homosexual relations are not prohibited, as long as they express no threat to heterosexual hegemony - in other words, the cultural and political context that sustains unequal access to rights and recognition, maintaining the privileges of those who, at least publicly, relate sexually to people of the “opposite sex”. In queer terms, we could say that we have gone from a heterosexist to a heteronormative society, from one that took heterosexuality for granted to one that demands that non-heterosexuals adopt its political and aesthetic standards. From margins to center, from the ghetto to the market, from abjection to recognition, paths have been walked without deconstructing heterosexuality as a political and cultural regime, evident insofar as it continues to provide hegemonic forms of representation.

The new regime of visibility is associated with a new sexual economy in which the desire for recognition is shaped by values that come from a heterosexual regime of representation and its cult to intransitive, binary gendering. Although some changes have taken place, heterosexual male domination tends to be preserved in symbolic, political and economic terms. In the era of digital media, the latter has in fact become eroticized and serves as a representational model that users look to in their secret searches for discreet, masculine men.

It is arguable whether, through online same-sex platforms, there is really a search for “heterosexual” men. I suggest that it is more likely that this constitutes a specific sexual arena where what

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<sup>14</sup> In this regard, my research reiterates Luiz Felipe Zago (2013) analysis of one of the most popular search sites. In his view, two essentials that rule these online spaces are the foreclosure of femininity and the construction of what he refers to as “curricular bodies”.

is shared is a collective fantasy in which hegemonic representations of the masculine homosexual man become the most desirable object. And if desire can be understood as the search for self-recognition through a desiring other, then it is in the search for recognition from a masculine heterosexual male that that is actually in operation on these platforms. Even when not really present therein – perhaps he doesn't really even exist! –, through an imaginary dislocation, he comes to be embodied in “masculine” men who could “pass for hetero” on these platforms, men who have acquired – however ephemeral or even dubious this may be offline – the power to separate those who are worthy to be chosen for love and pleasure from those who are relegated to abjection and scorn.

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