

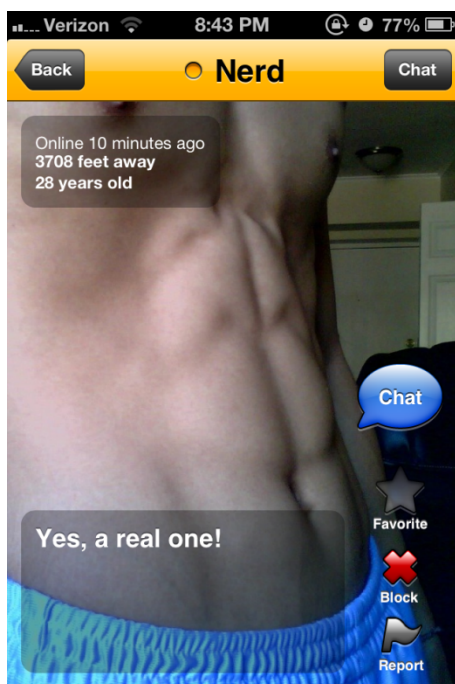
## Gay Men, Grindr, and the Gender Binary: A Tragic Love Story

*"Not only do we expect perfection in the bodies of others  
(just take a gander at some personal ads), we are  
constantly encouraged to achieve it ourselves." (Bordo 230)*

When Susan Bordo was reading through her copy of *The New York Times Magazine*, she came across an image of a half-naked man posing for Calvin Klein and quite dramatically knocked over her cup of coffee in shock. I, on the other hand, when exposed to the image in question, was hardly fazed by this image: maybe times have changed, or maybe I'm just used to seeing this sort of image. As a gay male, I am subjected to images of the ideal male body almost constantly. If I log onto Facebook, there is a 100% chance that one of the ads will be for some gay dating site, complete with a picture of two half naked men. But even if cultural attitudes towards half-naked men have changed since Bordo wrote *Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body*, Bordo's essay still maintains validity when talking about the gay male community: just as she examines how straight men are given gender instructions through her selected images, gay male culture can be examined to reveal the same gender instructions—and these gender instructions are very revealing about the role of the gender binary within the gay male community. A good place to take a snapshot (quite literally) of the gay community and to look for these gender instructions is Grindr.

Grindr is a dating application aimed at gay men that can be found on many smartphones. The premise behind it is simple: "[t]o get started with Grindr, simply grab your mobile device and download and open the app. Then, give yourself a profile name (if you want), upload a photo

(also optional, but we encourage it), and answer a couple of questions about yourself (your choice, too). Then, get out there and start chatting, trading photos, and meeting up with the many men in your area -- wherever you may be" (Grindr). Men are then shown based on physical proximity, with their distances shown in their profile. But, although intended as a dating application, Grindr has been reappropriated to be used to find people to hookup with. Profile pictures that are intended to show a face now show a naked torso or a set of abs. Although Grindr's profile guidelines prohibit showing nudity in a profile (any skin beneath the hip is banned), users will often send nude photos to each other. Men are turned into baseball cards—all stats are given, and if they're not good enough, they're thrown out. They are sex objects—although, as Bordo discusses, it is incorrect to call them sex objects. Despite how many pictures reduce human beings with thoughts and feelings to a depersonalized set of abs so that they can have sex, these pictures do not appear in a vacuum. They "exert considerable power over us—over our psyches, our desires, our self-image" (Bordo 203). The gay men of Grindr send clear gender instructions to other gay men, which seem to perpetuate much more than just an ideal body image.



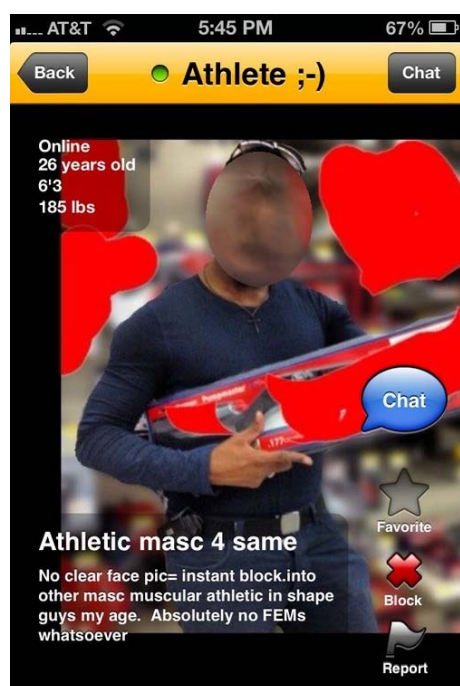
All of the shirtless pictures found on Grindr send a very clear message of what is important in the gay community: a set of six-pack abs, not a stomach of flab. As Bordo says, "the athletic, muscular, male body that Calvin plastered all over buildings, magazines, and subway stops has become an aesthetic norms for straights as well as gays" (202). As the saying goes, sex sells: and literally for Grindr, a nice body will get you sex. The image on the left (which I

collected from Grindr) is a typical profile—a face is usually omitted in preference of a shirtless picture, gratuitously showing off his body. The six-pack abs are like a magnet to gay men—and in his profile, "Nerd" is selling his six-pack abs for sex. This gives gender instructions to gay men: gay men on Grindr see profiles like this one, and they see what is attractive to other gay men. This sends a very clear message about how gay men should look: if a man wants to have sex with another man, he needs to have a good body.

And this is something that is well-known within the gay male community—many gay men are gym-goers. In fact, a study done by Kerith Conron at Northeastern University revealed that on average, gay men are slimmer than heterosexual men ("Why Gay Men Don't Get Fat"). It's generally accepted within the gay community that going to the gym is a necessity to be attractive to other men. If you have an unattractive face, you can go to the gym and get an attractive body to make up for that. If you have a boring personality, you can go to the gym and fix that as well. This is only further supported by Grindr, and creates an imbalance between gay men, between the fit and the unfit—fit gay men, like "Nerd" are the in-crowd, who are seen as an aesthetic ideal for gay men. Those who are not fit, lacking a set of six-pack abs, who do not fit in that view of what a gay man should look like, are given subtle, unsaid instructions that they need to go to the gym and work out so they can look like "Nerd" and have the proper body of a gay man.

It's funny though: gender instructions on Grindr are not a one-way street. Just as "Nerd" gives off gender instructions on how a gay man should look, he is following these same instructions. He is aware of his image, and the six-pack abs certainly don't come from sitting around doing nothing all day. He is perfectly aware of the expectations of other gay men—and in order to live up to their expectations, he has to work hard to maintain his body. Gender

instructions for gay men, in this way, are a self-perpetuating system: gay men receive instructions, strive to meet the expectations contained in those instructions so that they can fit in, and then simultaneously give those gender instructions to others while maintaining an image that fits in with the gender instructions. But where do these instructions originate from? Bordo says that the gender instructions for straight men come from gay models—but if the gay models get *their* gender instructions from other gay men who get it from other gay men, then what is the source of the gender instruction? Perhaps the answer lies within the ideal male image and what it means to be "male" in the first place.



Gender instructions for gay men from Grindr don't just come from the images of shirtless men—they also come from the men themselves. And often times, gender instructions are more direct in their dictation of how a gay man should exist. In the picture on the next page ("Untitled", face blurred out for privacy), gender instructions are dictated through words, rather than images. While, similar to "Nerd", he gives instructions that a gay man should have an athletic body, he also gives instructions on how a gay man should act. For him, a gay man is

"masc", short for masculine: "Absolutely no FEMs", meaning feminine. "Athlete" is not a isolated Grindr user: there are many Grindr users like him, who abhor the "femininity" that often comes along with being gay, preferring to call themselves "straight acting"—the only "gay" thing about them is who they choose to take to the bedroom. "Athlete" is sending gender instructions of his own—gay men should not be effeminate at all, they should fit into a preconceived idea of

what it means to be a man. This language of "masc and fem" creates a subculture within gay culture, of those who do not want to be seen as gay.

In a way, this subculture within gay male culture parallels Bordo's discussion of the Haggar ad on page 209. To these men, to be seen as gay is to be seen as being less of a man. In relation to the Haggar ad, Bordo quotes David Altschiller saying "if a man is self-confident—if he knows he is attractive and is beautifully dressed—then he's not a man anymore. He's a fop. He's effeminate" (Bordo 210). This subculture of "straight acting" gay men send this same instruction to all other gay men on Grindr through their 140 character profile. And this message can even be seen in how "Athlete" dresses—he dresses plainly, in dull colors, not flamboyantly or in a "feminine" manner. He even perpetuates the idea that "men act and women appear" that Bordo toys with throughout the section on the Haggar ad—the way "Athlete" is posed, holding some large object, is showing him in action, his "masculinity" exuding off of him. He is definitely not "a FEM"—clearly he is manly and masculine, and is telling other gay men to be more like him.

This obsession with masculinity and femininity that so many "straight-acting" gay men carry reveals a lot about the origin of gender instructions: gender instructions to gay men come from an adherence to the gender binary. This gender binary is evident in the language they use: "masculine" and "feminine" imply that there are only two options for gender: male and female. Although they recognize that being male does not always mean that one is "masculine", they reject those who are male but are "feminine" in favor of those who fit into their "masculine" image of what a man should be, down to body type and mannerisms. This problem grows out of the limited options offered by the gender binary, and thus dissecting the gender binary is

important to get to the root of why gay men continue to perpetuate the gender system which actually works against them.

Adhering to the gender binary within the gay community has several interesting effects, which parallel the struggles with gender that transgendered people face that Kate Bornstein discusses in *Gender Outlaw*. The gender binary, she says, is actually a class system, "an arena in which roughly half the people in the world [men] can have power over the other half [women]" (Bornstein 107). If we look at the idea of "masculine" gay men and "feminine" gay men (ignoring, for the moment, that Bornstein would disagree with the use of gay to describe sexual orientation as it too carries connotations of a gendered system) this same idea of a power struggle can be seen. Those who are seen as masculine are on one half of this binary—the half that has power over the other. Here, the power isn't physical power or cultural power as in the binary between male and female (thus creating male privilege), but rather, it's psychological power. Gay men who lie on the "feminine" side of the binary are told through the images they see that the ideal gay man is one who lies to the "masculine" side of the binary, which reinforced by sexual gratification. While there are some who recognize how ridiculous this idea is and reject the idea, there are even more who don't recognize this, and attempt to change what side of this binary they lie on: but unfortunately, this attempt to assimilate has implications broader than how a gay man portrays himself.

An assimilation into the lifestyle of "masculine" gay men also brings an assimilation into heteronormative culture. The phrase "straight-acting" that so many people use is telling of this—they are acting straight in order to fit in. It is a surrender to heteronormativity—they are saying "yes, I'm gay, but I will live by your rules of gender and fit in, and you won't have to see me breaking gender roles". Bornstein actually discusses this briefly, stating that "the exclusion of

homosexuality... has less to do, I think, with sexual orientation than it does with gender role.

When a gay man is bashed on the street... [i]t has little to do with imagining that man sucking cock. It has a lot to do with seeing that man violate the rules of gender in this culture" (104).

While it is praiseworthy that gay men now do not completely ignore their sexuality in order to avoid harm from others, it is just as much a transgression against gay men everywhere who are proud of their sexuality and unafraid to break the rules of gender that have so long been held in place. By trying to incorporate themselves into the heterosexual lifestyle, "masculine" gay men are rejecting what makes them unique in favor of something else—power.

In the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality, just as in the gender binary, there exists a power struggle—heterosexuals have privilege over homosexuals. By attempting to fit into the heterosexual side of this binary, "masculine" "straight-acting" men are trying to regain the power that they have lost because of their sexuality. And herein lie the tragic consequences of adhering to the gender binary, which, sadly, seem to be unseen by those who perpetuate it. One would think that, in general, being gay is a fight against the gender binary. This is correct on the broad scale—the gender binary only allows for one option of long-term partnership: men with women. Men loving men (or women loving women) does not fit into this binary, it is not allowed as it is "against nature". Being gay is a fight against heteronormativity. But when "masculine" gay men attempt to assimilate into heteronormative society, they are giving up the fight against heteronormativity. They are subscribing to the preconceived ideas of gender held by the rest of the world, "acting" straight in order to live under the radar and be unseen by those who could do harm to them. And by using words such as "masculine" or "feminine" to refer to potential sexual partners, a message is sent telling others to give up this fight as well. By

attempting to become the ideal man, with chiseled abs, being "masculine" and seemingly straight, gay men allow the system which oppresses them to continue.

This isn't to say, however, that all gay men who work out and have a six-pack are allowing the gender binary to continue: there are plenty of gay men who have a six-pack of abs and flaunt their sexuality (see any image of a gay pride parade), thereby fighting against the gender system which oppresses them. And even if the "masculine" gay men stop going to the gym and lose the body of the "ideal male", they won't stop using the language and the mindset that maintains the gender binary. Rather, I think a solution to the oppressive gender binary (at least for gay men) needs to come from within the gay community—we need to stop using words like "masculine" and "feminine" and "straight acting"—keep the chiseled bodies if you want, but ultimately, if the words that cause gay men to assimilate into the heteronormative view of life are erased, then I think that we might have a chance at breaking down the gender system, and finally have equality for all.



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