

## Now Dating on Steroids: Play and Nostalgia in the Mediatization of Gay Cruising in the Philippines

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Gay men's lives now are increasingly mediatized, with gay cruising transforming from a purely physical encounter to the use of geosocial gadgets, causing relevant social changes, such that some gay men would actually prefer to stay at home to "meet" other men, which in earlier decades would sound preposterous. This study applies the mediatization approach in examining how the emergence of new communication technologies and the changing communicative behaviors of gay men in the Philippines explain the cultural changes within the gay community and implications of societal changes at large. Focus interviews with a total of 36 informants revealed that gay men use digital apps as part of their sociotechnical "infrastructure of sexual encounter" for cruising and that in this process of play, there emerges among the older gay men the nostalgia of the traditional identity of the *bakla* and practices of *pagliligawan*.

*Keywords: mediatization, gay cruising, play, nostalgia, dating apps*

On a Saturday night, Van, 42 years old, would invite his gay friends out for a night at the bar or the club, in the hope of meeting "the one" or some random hook up for the week. When this happens, his friend Jerome, 23 years old, would always retort about just staying in his room, turning on his mobile dating apps, and inviting a random match for some "Netflix and chill" instead. It would save him the money and energy needed for cruising in the bars, he would say. The older men in the group would then start to blurt out lines that go: "Lucky you, because during my time . . ." They would all laugh and then eventually end up going to the club, or just simultaneously going on Grindr, whichever works better for them that night.

Gay cruising certainly changed when the Internet and then mobile phones became convenient technologies that gay men use to meet other men for love, dates, casual sex, or friendship. It has changed from when gay men only had clubs and bathhouses to socialize or would cruise in parks at night and risk being apprehended by the police and charged with vagrancy (Baytan, 2015).

"Hooking up" online is now the latest version of cruising for mates or dates, which has added a sociotechnical dimension to the conventional "infrastructure of the sexual encounter" of gay men in the modern milieu (Race, 2015, p. 254). Gay men now grow up and discover their sexuality in the midst of "people-nearby applications" (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014, p. 619). Grindr is the most popular mobile dating

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app of this kind, exclusively for gay men. Its interface highlights the nearest 100 user profiles, each containing up to five photos, a direct messaging feature, as well as the user's personal information: age, height, weight, body type, ethnicity, relationship status, preferred tribes, sexual position, and purpose.

The pervasiveness of apps like Grindr has prompted researchers to examine the consequences of the prevalence of media and communications in modern life through the lens of mediatization. Andreas Hepp (2013) defined mediatization as "a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other" (p. 619). The mediatization paradigm finds its roots in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan's (1964) technological determinism that looks at society as being defined by its current dominant communication technology. Communication technologies were viewed as possessing the power to alter human senses and habits and human affairs at large. The mediatization paradigm recognizes this perspective of communications but also emphasizes that the "dialectical process" of both communication technology and communicative action result in the "double articulation" or "circulation of meaning" that mutually shape each other in an interactional process (Silverstone, 2002, p. 762). Mediatization studies underscore that a historical approach may demonstrate how technologies may cause social changes, and that looking at the specific contexts of "domestication" (Silverstone, 1994) also illustrates the balance of power vis-à-vis the user's social construction and meaning-making of technologies in the everyday. According to Hepp (2013), to investigate mediatization, it is essential to look at the media ensemble as well as the communicative practices of the constellations of actors involved in a particular thematic framing.

### **Mediatized Cruising as Play**

Recent studies show that online spaces have become a site for gay men to evade heterosexism. In the study of Miller (2015), for example, he pointed out that gay men use Grindr because it affords them an alternative queer space that is not accessible in an offline setting, where they can interact with other queer men with some level of privacy and anonymity. It also provides a safe space to find romance, otherwise difficult in heteronormative spaces like bars and clubs. Grindr also gives its users a sense of control in terms of "whom they interact with, how they interact, and how much information they want to disclose" (Miller, 2015, p. 479), which results in connections with like-minded people for a variety of functions. Miller (2015) calls Grindr the "modern-day gay bar" (p. 476), rendering obsolete the notion of "gaydar" that is essential in cruising in nonvirtual "gay scenes." Van De Wiele and Tong (2014) also highlighted that people-nearby applications like Grindr redefine gay space in a still predominantly heteronormative society, blurring the strict hetero/gay boundaries with the "virtual visibility" of gay men now being integrated in the wider heteronormative spaces such that gay men can now trace the "queer cartography" beyond just the geographically-zoned gay neighborhoods.

Scholars like Mowlabocus, Haslop, and Dasgupta (2016) studied the implications of this place-making in the context of an emerging gay sexual culture. They argue that the liberating potentials of the Internet and social media hook up websites and apps have an ongoing impact on the sexual practices of gay men, bisexuals, and men who have sex with men (MSM). The popularity and the affordances of hook up apps like Grindr or Tinder have facilitated the emergence of "ChemSex," or the use of drugs like gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB), mephedrone, and methamphetamine in a marathon sexual activity (Mowlabocus et

al., 2016; Race, 2015). Mowlabocus and colleagues (2016) highlighted the role of hook up apps in initiating and recruiting people to participate in, as well as in digitally curating and maintaining this network of casual sexual encounters. Race (2015) also terms this "Party 'n' Play" or PNP, also known as "Wired Play" where hook up apps occupy an inseparable component in the "infrastructure of the sexual encounter" (p. 254) as the material and sociotechnical devices that mediate these new forms of sexual activities. Race (2015) added that this mediation has added a textual materiality to an otherwise solely verbal interaction and, in so doing, has provided a new way of organizing and negotiating "pleasure, connection, eroticism and intimacy—notwithstanding the known dangers" (p. 256) that frame sex as play. The context of sex as play was picked up by Race (2015) from Simmel's (1949) view of play as "a non-instrumental form of association in which the exchange of stimulus is the governing principle and in which personality, serious content and substantive ends are suspended or displaced in favor of cultivating the pleasures of association" (Race, 2015, p. 259). Race's (2015) analysis indicated that play in the online cruising encounters may be manifested through their specifications of identities and desires, their co-construction of fantasy, as well as in the experience of "wired play." This configuration of play may not be disentangled from the material devices and infrastructures because while parties are typically done through in-flesh sexual contact, it may also be carried out "through random chat; shared viewing and discussion of porn; exchanging stories about other encounters; 'camming' with remote erotic spectators; sharing information about previous experiences or images of sexual partners" (Race, 2015, p. 268).

Moreover, the notion of play as entangled with digital devices of gay cruising is emphasized with the increasingly gamified structure of mobile dating apps. The mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics of Tinder, for example, such as the swiping left and right makes it an addicting activity that users can do for fun or to pass time (Rocha Santos, 2018). A popular Chinese gay dating platform, Blued, added new features that include newsfeeds, live streaming, gaming, and online shopping to attract multisided markets, but certainly not to replace its original function as a dating app because the features, especially its live streaming, are still "sexually affective because they are produced within the parameters of same-sex desires such as infatuation, sexual arousal, online intimacy, and the like" (Wang, 2019, p. 3).

This embeddedness of hook up apps in the "infrastructure of the sexual encounter" (Race, 2015, p. 254) is seen to be one of the main reasons why online cruising is studied in a pathogenic lens and attributed to the rising cases of HIV among gay men (Mowlabocus et al., 2016; Race, 2015). While the proliferation of hook up apps has indeed contributed to the changes in gay sexual culture, the outright denigration of such apps and cruising practices pulls away from efforts to develop community outreach models using digital platforms (Mowlabocus et al., 2016) as well as endeavors in understanding this sector and their behaviors as culture, with their own sets of practices and modes of meaning-making (Race, 2015).

### **Nostalgia**

The pathogenic view of online cruising has contributed to the discourse that renders this gay practice and its interlocutors as disdainful, with studies that overemphasize the role of hook up apps in the increasing transmission of HIV and other STIs. Using hook up apps is criticized as a degraded form of cruising for bareback sex in a purely instrumental approach (Dean, 2009). Interactions through and in front of the computer and smartphone screens are deemed as resulting in the "isolation and atomization of cruising"

with PNP occurring in the setting of “the computer screen, the online profile, the crystal pipe, and so on, all situated within the solitary domestic space of the user” (Race, 2015, p. 257). Hooking up online is also seen to have led to the disappearance of the public sexual cultures (Mowlabocus et al., 2016) and the demise of authentic sociability and community with mediated interactions through technologies (Race, 2015).

This outright denigration of play through online cruising has surfaced the sentiment of the “mourning for the good old days” (Mowlabocus et al., 2016, p. 2) or the romanticizing of the cruising in the streets and cinemas in the yesteryears (Dean, 2009), or the “nostalgic complaint” (Race, 2015, p. 258) that esteems public sexual cultures over the practices of digital cruising online.

In my investigation, this nostalgia is not so much the critique of the demise of sociability, though some of my informants would also say so, but more fundamentally, it is born out of the deeply engrained traditional values and practices of relationship development and the identity of the gay man in the Philippines. Nostalgia in the context of this study, refers to the desire for a revisiting of the more traditional practices of *pagliligawan* and conservative sexual encounters of the Filipino *bakla*. In his review of the growing scholarship on homosexuality at the start of 2000, Manalansan (2003) observed that the Filipino gay identity and community is studied according to a transition from the *bakla* to the global gay or a negotiation between the two categorizations. Scholars like Tan (2001) and Garcia (1996) emphasize that the term *bakla* conflates gender orientation, expression, conduct, and even class into a perceivably derogatory word to refer to an effeminate male, a male having feminine traits, a woman trapped in a man’s body, a male cross-dresser and transvestite, including the low-income *parlorista* (hairstylist). The portrayal of the cross-dressing and effeminate *bakla* as negative, to mean cowardly and sinful, is said to have started in the 1500s when the Catholic Spanish colonizers of the Philippines strived to erase the *Babaylan*, the *asog*, *bayoguin*, and *binabayi* in the narratives and consciousness of Filipino society (Quintos, 2012; Tan, 2001). The *Babaylans* were the indigenous gender-neutral or feminine male cross-dressing religious functionaries who occupied a prominent status in society way before the Spanish occupation of the country. The *asog*, *bayoguin*, and *binabayi* were the pre-colonial Filipino homosexuals, the hermaphrodites or men dressing and behaving like women. These indigenous identities of the *bakla* are continuously being erased up to the present contemporary society by the globalizing Philippine media through omission, negative portrayals, and censorship (Quintos, 2012). Benedicto (2008b) pointed out that this “desire to imagine the obsolescence” of the effeminate *bakla* and the lower-class *parlorista* is imbibed by the growing number of “global gays” who are increasingly enculturated by the Western ideal of gayness (p. 327). Scholars like Fleras (1993) also reject these transgender and cross-dressing qualities and practices as historical remnants and call for a breakaway from this feudalist to a gay liberationist perspective which essentially takes on a Western and universal model.

*Pagliligawan* or courtship is a Philippine tradition described as a “long or short process, but it is marked by frequent interactions between the attracted couple, which may or may not include sexual relations” (Torres, 2002, p. 5). This romantic custom was further constructed as heterosexual relations, especially during the conservative Catholic rule in the Philippines, which placed the man in an active position of pursuing a woman by first asking for the parents’ blessing to visit the woman in their home, and then wooing the woman under the parents’ supervision and mandate. It is also associated with the expectation of women to behave as *dalagang Pilipina* (Filipina maiden) characterized by the “Maria Clara syndrome”

prescribed in 19th century Philippines that imposed passivity and repression of the woman's feeling of sexual and physical attraction for the man, while the man is expected to be chivalrous and protective of the woman that he is pursuing (Torres, 2002, p. 33). *Pagliligawan* is also seen as an essential stage in relationship development which is ultimately expected to end in *kasalan* or marriage. Thus, sexual relations ought to be postponed until done for the purpose of procreation and creation of the family (called *mag-anak*, which also translates to "to have a child"; Medina, 2001; Torres, 2002). In modern society, the youths now call *pagliligawan* "dating," which is characterized by a more independent and autonomous set of practices that have loosened the control of family in courtship (Medina, 2001). In an earlier study, Solis (2007) found that gay and bisexual men have assimilated this gendered relationship where, through mobile courtship (using the SMS function of mobile phones), the more aggressive male courts the more passive male, circumventing social and familial supervision through the private and regular exchange of intimate messages and strengthening their bond before actually meeting in person.

### Research Problem

Using the mediatization approach, this study aims to understand the intertwining of the media environment and the communicative behaviors of gay men within and through the online and offline spaces to reveal the practices of gay cruising in the Philippines. Specifically, this study explores two concepts in mediatized cruising by asking the following questions:

*RQ1: How does mediatization afford the practice of play in gay cruising?*

*RQ2: How does nostalgia occur among these gay men who now cruise in a mediatized environment?*

In the research findings, I will first present empirically how Filipino gay men nowadays grow up in a mediatized environment of cruising, a new sociotechnical "infrastructure of sexual encounter" that affords them to "play" (Race, 2015, p. 54). I will show the media ensemble and practices of mediatized cruising and their intersectionality with age, class, and nuances of *kabaklaan*, especially to show which ones benefit and which ones are excluded in mediatized cruising. In the second part, I will argue that these "playful" practices are seen by the gay cruisers in a deeply mediatized milieu as displacing a more traditional practice of *pagliligawan* and erasing the identity of the *bakla*, resulting in the nostalgia of their older public sexual cultures.

In the Philippines, there is a dearth of studies on gay online dating and sexual cultures. The larger portion of the research on the mediatization of gay male culture is overwhelmingly dominated by Western perspectives. This empirical work on gay media and sexual cultures in the Philippines hopes to contribute to a growing and more culturally diverse conversation in contemporary queer media and cultural studies.

### Methodology

To gather stories of gay men cruising across time, I sent out interview questionnaires through emails and social media and conducted personal interviews with a total of 36 participants. Through snowball sampling, I initially sent out these questionnaires to gay men in my personal network and asked those who agreed to

participate to forward the questionnaire to at least one potential gay interviewee from their own networks. In the end, I interviewed a total of 34 gay men and two transgender women who previously identified as gay. The participants ranged from 20 to 54 years old; live in Metro Manila and nearby provinces of Laguna, Rizal, Bulacan, Cavite, Bicol, and farther metropolitan cities of Cebu and Zamboanga; and work as business owners, managers, supervisors, analysts, specialists, teachers, a high-level executive assistant, a marketing consultant, an HR practitioner, a lawyer, a bank employee, a project staff, and a university student.

Since my informants occupy relatively affluent positions and are located in metropolitan cities, mostly in Metro Manila, the study is by no means generalizable. The limitation in my selection of participants may have missed some of the narratives of those in the rural areas, the working class, and the minorities in the gay spectrum. For instance, my informant from Zamboanga City said that access to mobile phones and gay apps came much later in the provinces and was harder for the poor, compared with the more privileged gay men in Manila. Queer men who consider themselves nonbinary or nonconforming and who are becoming more expressive about their gender identities and sexual orientations in recent years, may surely have a different perspective about their dating practices as compared with a questioning and confused man in the province who has no access to information other than the prescriptions of a community with a predominantly patriarchal ideology. Certainly, the involvement of a more controlled or varied set of characteristics of gay men would provide a richer account of the mediatization of cruising in the Philippines.

In this article, I use the term gay mainly to remain consistent with the use of the term in the gay online dating scholarship, as well as with the identification indicated by most of my respondents. It is used to basically describe a man who is attracted to the same sex. As it is a Western construct, according to Garcia (1996), gay is not the most appropriate term to be used in the Philippine context because of its history of the *bakla* (which is considered to be the closest translation of gay in Filipino) as understood in terms of the inner self, the psychospiritual dimension, of gender transitivity or intransitivity based on *pagkalalaki* (maleness) or *pagkababae* (femaleness). Thus, a cross-dressing effeminate male makes him a homosexual and a man who has sex with another man is still a heterosexual for as long as he has no emotional attachments with the *bakla* partner and does not act effeminately (Garcia, 1996). Benedicto (2008a) and Dumdum (2010) argue that because of globalization and mediatization, Filipinos have now acculturated to Western ideology and have redefined the identity of the modern gay Filipino. The *bakla* is now also seen "in terms of the other person" and sex transitivity, similar to the Western, binarized definition of homosexual (Dumdum, 2010, p. 19). In this study, my respondents narrated their emotional and sexual attractions and transactions with other men in various ways. While "gay" is not the most appropriate signifier that has been self-evident in the history of my informants because of the changes in the meanings of same-sex desire over time, I use the term mainly out of convenience but certainly still sensitive to the contexts based on the narratives of my informants.

### **Playing With Multiple Options**

My informants appreciate the mobility of dating apps now as compared with the former desktop-based Internet dating apps. According to Justin, 29 years old:

Grindr can be used anytime and anywhere (as long as you have GPS and Internet access). For PlanetRomeo (PR), back then, you'd have to use a computer, go to the website, browse and search profiles, message, etc. So many interfaces and pages for PR. Grindr can just give you the closest profile that you like, message, and meet.

Justin would just "open Grindr in places that I think there would be a lot of guys I would like. Usually, Katipunan or Taft. That area. Hehe. I'll use them if I was bored or curious who would appear."

Because of the mobility and location-based searching, gay cruising now "is like dating on steroids," Sherwin, 34, said. Ali, 33 years old, "became more particular when choosing hookups since there are a lot of fishes in the ocean." Being choosy for my informants is an indication of gay men having developed very high standards in cruising and getting more judicious and even finicky in selecting their matches. Mac, 24 years old, shared:

Gay men have become pickier and more discerning. We have this option because there are a ton of options. Sifting through guys has become easier; with a click of a button, I can choose guys via "tribe," body type, and fetish. These platforms, as they try to bridge gaps and connect gay men, have also empowered us to disconnect from other gay men who do not fit our preferences.

Another common practice among most of these gay informants is that they utilize several accounts or apps on their smartphones at a time. Perhaps 39-year-old Troy is the most prolific, having eight cruising apps downloaded to his phone. He explained that there are different "characteristics" or branding that these apps possess. For example, as 32-year-old Jude clarified: "In Jack'd, they have many Chinese men profiles there. In Scruff, you can meet older daddy types. Grindr, I think is very common and more widely used and has more chances to meet someone close to you." David, 38, on his part, explained his choices of gay dating websites:

They each had a different "flavor" which led me to become interested in them and to sign up. I look at Connexion and see a generic gay dating site, Downlink tried to market itself as a tougher brand (complete with the slang "downe," used mainly earlier by the black gay community, in its name), and PlanetRomeo capitalizes on its international appeal.

Jay, 29 years old, shared that because there is "a lot of fish in the ocean," online cruising seems to have become like an addiction:

It's just there. The fact that you can open the app just like Facebook and Twitter makes it accessible. As for sex, a friend has a term for it: *hanap, usap, deal* [search, negotiate, deal]. The ease of finding a sex partner gets to my head and derails my routine. One moment I'm mindlessly using the app, next comes an invitation to his place for quick fun. It's all very . . . instant.

These addictive, distracting, and “derailing” characteristics of mobile dating are explained by the gamification of love and sex by digital apps such as Tinder. Rocha Santos (2018) found that audiences are continuously being engaged by the game-based mechanics and interface of Tinder. She added: “Tinder, as a casual game is focused on chance, implicating that a user gets a match among many profiles and competes against a chance rather than a direct adversary. For some, the experience of both users’ match seems amazing” (Rocha Santos, 2018, p. 65). Thus, the more they swipe, the more chances of “winning” more matches from the “lot of fishes in the ocean.”

In this game of matching involving many potential partners to choose from, certain online daters get excluded based on physical and social filters. My informants shared that class, or at least the impression of it, is one of the considerations that make or break a potential initiation of relationships among the interlocutors. By default, mobile dating requires a certain level of affluence that would enable a gay man to purchase mobile phones and access Internet connectivity. 33-year-old Mon observed this when he was still using the mIRC and Yahoo! Groups up until his more recent use of Grindr and Tinder: “Most of those who used these technologies were young professionals and college students with a stable budget for smartphones and Internet data.” For Jonathan, 32:

Around 2010, I owned only a basic Blackberry phone and so even if I wanted to, I did not have access to Grindr. Also, I got very limited access to the Internet at that time and so my experiences with cruising were mostly in the bars and jogging in [a university]! *Char* (kidding but not kidding)!!!

For some of my informants who did have access to smartphones and the Internet, they experienced being “discriminated and filtered out” because they do not project an image of wealth that seems to have become a requirement, especially among the young gay men in Metropolitan Manila. Nico, 32, treats chatting as a “screening process” because he does not want to get disappointed if he just meets the person right away. He explained:

Somehow it has become a filter for me on how a person communicates since it's hard to rely on just a photo. Some of my friends say they would only talk further and probably meet if that person lives in the same area, say in the same condominium or subdivision. Some would even interact only with people who are professionals in their careers or from a certain school or profession.

Jonathan said that he has *parlorista* friends that he invited to use Grindr but that they refused because they do not like using gay apps:

She said it is just for the smart ones. And it's expensive. She just gets embarrassed when she goes online because some of them are snobs and think they are smarter than you. They get discriminated against because they are trans and *parlorista*. They are called *jologs* (a young person who is out of style, gaudy, or with poor taste). So, they would rather just go to the side streets or construction sites [to cruise].

Some of my informants also shared that they get rejected because they are, according to Lee, "not as good looking as what the mainstream culture dictates." Jude explained that this mainstream culture "has something to do with the influence of media and how we continually embrace the western cultures depicted in movies like *Brokeback Mountain*, which was banned in other countries, and in TV series like *Queer as Folk*, *Dante's Cove*, and *Sense 8*." Randolph, 37, shared his experience about this "discrimination within the community":

Yes, I tried the mIRC, PlanetRomeo, and now Grindr, initially looking for relationships, but that world is a cruel world. People there frown on those who aren't sexy by their standards. They make fun of the *parlorista* and effeminate gays and look down on fat, nonmuscular, and dark gay men. I used these technologies also for sex but most of them were futile attempts.

### **Playing by Creating Personas**

Adam, 33 years old, and a marketing professional, pointed out how branding oneself on gay apps is an exciting strategy for successful online cruising. He explained:

Positioning and placement are very important to us. Positioning is the way you sell yourself to your market. If you position yourself as a smart, conservative, serious one, people who see that as interesting will treat you that way. Hence, if you position yourself as sexually available, open for sexual meet-ups, no-strings-attached fun, then your market would ask for the same thing. Placement or the "right tool" is the medium you use to meet your objectives. As I mentioned, I used Grindr for sex. Facebook and Twitter on a more serious note.

The preference for affluent and good-looking partners caused some of my respondents to emphasize certain aspects of their lives and to project or even feign a personality that would be received favorably by potential matches online. Danny, 24, confessed that on his Tinder profile, he would post travel and gym photos and even his graduation photos so that his potential matches would know that he is "financially stable" and that he went to a reputable school. He added that for Grindr, he would post mostly half-naked photos taken in gyms not only to show that he could afford a gym membership but because:

In Grindr, it's mostly about sex anyway. Plus, I indicate in my profile that "I have my own place," which not only says that I can afford a place of my own but also that we can hook up easily.

For Jay, self-presentation in gay cruising permeates across online and offline performances. He confessed that because apps like Grindr put a "premium on looks and physique," he tries to keep himself fit by jogging regularly so that he can upload good photos and so that his matches would not be disappointed after meeting him in person.

For some gay men, misrepresenting themselves is a way of attracting potential partners online. None of my respondents shared that they have created fake accounts or exaggerated their features, but

Jude, who also prefers masculine and muscular men like himself, shared a typical story of deception in mobile dating:

I met someone who was very effeminate, he had trimmed eyebrows, a colorful shirt, super tight-fitting pants, and a hand pouch which really threw me off, because his picture online was buff and muscular. When we decided to ride the MRT, I let him enter first and I didn't move from where I stood until the door closed.

According to Race (2015), play is experienced in mobile app users' co-construction of fantasy, where random chats and other textual features enable the discussion of sexual desires to determine compatibility in the pursuit of instrumental ends, like moving onto an offline sexual encounter. In Labor's (2020) study, Tinder and Grindr users show or misrepresent their offline lives to attract prospective partners. In Dumdum's (2010) XTube study, users decide not to show their faces in the videos to add a mysterious effect that may appeal to potential sex partners. In this study though, my informants claimed they were at the victim's end of this playful practice in online dating. For Jonathan and his older friends, they get tired of performing and even being victims of the pretensions in online apps and so they resort to going back to physical cruising. He said:

I have a friend in his 40s working in [a university], who went back to walking around [the same university] for cruising. Because nowadays, the people on the gay dating apps are *jologs*, my friends have become impatient and they want to see the person right away as he gets catfished a lot.

### **Playing in Unconventional Sexual Encounters and Casual Relationships**

Van shared that digital dating apps allow him to easily organize group sex or orgies:

I live alone, so it is easy for me to invite people over for sex. I just turn on my Grindr and it shows me those who are near and currently online. I find that on-the-spot meetings are better. I just tell them to send me face and body photos right away, ask if they are top or bottom, and then send my location right away.

Van added that the textuality of these negotiations allowed him to invite "quality" participants: "by the way they reply to my message, I right away know if they are decent or smart."

Ali and his 31-year-old partner Chris decided to engage in an "open relationship" and to play around together, in "strictly sexual relations with other men," using dating apps. But as they progressed in this type of arrangement, they became more stressed and their relationship was strained because they realized that while they found each other through social media, these same apps could make them look elsewhere and lose the relationship. Chris said: "Why would someone stick around if they can have anyone they want?" This confirms a previous study about geosocial networking apps among MSM in serious romantic relationships. Macapagal Coventry, Puckett, Phillips, and Mustanski (2016) found that while conflict, jealousy, loss of trust, and distractions from the relationship can result from the use of these smartphone

apps, there are also positive contributions of such apps to the sexual, social, and relational aspects of those in a homosexual romantic relationship. For Ali, he said that "relationship-wise, I learned much from our experiences, which made me handle it better each time."

In this study, online cruising is an essential component in the enjoyment of nonconventional sexual plays, such as threesomes and group sex, and casual relationships for some of my informants. In Race's (2015) study, online apps are used to invite and organize extended chemical sex and even purely "wired play" involving pornography or sex right in front of the computer screens.

The older respondents tend to view the current generation of gay men as growing up to be only concerned with sex, especially in a milieu where it is very easy for them to hook up with other men. Ronan, 48, expressed this alarm about the younger gay men's "reckless abandon." For Paul, 52, these "unconventional" sexual activities may have been happening before but they have "become mainstream" now with the proliferation of gay websites and apps. He explained:

There was no PNP before and open relationships were a no-no. Now you just have to look at profiles on Grindr where there are icons of rockets or injections to know that there are many men looking for chem sex. Orgies were considered taboo, but now you easily organize that in gay apps. You see couples looking for sex and indicate that they are in an open relationship. I have nothing against sex positivism, but for conservative people, and maybe those who are looking for love on these apps, these are just too much. Filipino values tell you to stick to one partner. And no drugs!

### **Nostalgia**

The informants believe that digital cruising has ushered the "quickie mentality" among gay men due to "the fast and impatient nature technology has instilled into younger people" that makes it easier to spark connections among online daters but also makes the maintenance of these relationships more challenging. My informants tend to idealize in-person meetings as initiation of "meaningful" relationships, as opposed to random hookups through online apps. This nostalgia for the "traditional way," as most of them would say it, is said to be more proper, reliable, and secure. The changes in the gay sexual and dating culture made some of the gay men in this study "long for the good old days."

Playing with multiple options and hooking up for casual sexual encounters in online cruising are modern practices that challenge Filipino conservative values which are largely defined by religion and the traditions in the country (Dumdum, 2010; Labor, 2020). My informants see the "people-nearby" way of meeting and dating gay men as just "quick hookups." The geosocial and gamified nature of gay apps has caused my gay informants to become distracted, addicted, or even sex-crazed. In these fast-paced interactions, my informants seem to be longing for some respite, to a more purposeful, sustained, and goal-oriented transaction, such as *Pagliligawan*, or the "investment" of courtship or dating on a long-term basis.

In the pre-meditated Philippines, courtships were initiated when potential romantic partners in rural areas meet in the *barrio* or town plaza for dances and *fiestas* (festivals; Torres, 2002) and in urban

areas, during social gatherings and parties, in restaurants, cinemas, school or at work (Medina, 2001). After initial flirtations, the men visited the women in their houses where courtship happened under the parents' supervision. With the mediatization of society, potential partners started writing letters and then, later on, exchanged phone numbers, calls, and messages. In *Intimate Letters of Young Lovers* (Garon, 1995, as cited in Solis, 2007), mediatized courtship afforded the social expectations of passivity and *panunuyo* (to pursue) on a long-term basis but also because there were geographical limitations too, such that partners had to write letters and make phone calls daily to sustain their romantic connections. Courtship was further mediatized using the mobile phone, such that gay men are now able to initiate and develop romantic relationships through the convenience, privacy, and intimacy of texting technology (Solis, 2007).

My older respondents who owned a mobile phone starting in the late 1990s shared that phone number exchange was common and that "patience was the virtue" because they took time to exchange messages first before deciding to meet (again) for dates or sex. Now, in an intensively mediatized milieu with geosocial dating apps blurring the line between online and offline, the geographical and temporal criteria of traditional courtship are surpassed. Mediatized "foreplay," so to speak, is eliminated and nostalgized by gay men who seem to get exhausted by the speedy means of online cruising.

Nostalgia as a resource for the participants of this study reflects the findings of earlier studies that claim that nostalgia assists people in their efforts to deal with and defend against anxieties and maintain a sense of comfort in the continuity and sameness of the past during periods of rapid change (Davis, 1979). Niemeyer (2014) applied this as nostalgia resulting from relationship development that is increasingly mediatized by technologies, leading to superficiality and distrust in relationships and even increased HIV cases. Nostalgia is a resource for creative reaction and a cure for fast technologies and progress and the desire to slow down and escape.

Moreover, love and romance in the Philippines are traditionally sanctioned to be in transition toward marriage, one that is socially approved and sanctified by the Church (Torres, 2002). In the course of the courtship, virginity is valued and premarital relations are forbidden, such that the "Maria Clara syndrome"—"characterized by subterfuge and the repression of feelings of physical attraction for a man, which was the social prescription in 19th century Philippines"—is considered to be the appropriate courtship behavior (Torres, 2002, p. 33). Meanwhile, digital technologies such as Tinder, Grindr, and XTube, usher the gay Filipinos to a globalized terrain where the "accumulation of sexual images and bombardment of sex to its users has come to the point of the Filipinos' acculturation to Western ideology and erosion of traditional beliefs and values system" (Dumdum, 2010, p. 19). My younger informants in this study are tagged as millennials, those born after 1981, who are distinctly identified to be digital natives or have grown in an ecology of digital social networking, with the tendency to constantly document their lives and share them on social media (Velasco, 2020). Growing into this networked society of globalized ideologies, these Filipino millennials have imbibed a "Westernized" more casual take on dating and sexual encounters (Labor, 2020). Even so, the promiscuity still associated with online dating, especially among older gay men—the liberal notion of playing with multiple options and unconventional relationships and sexual encounters—influences gay men's desire to return to the traditional ideals of virginity and propriety that tend to "romanticize" gay relations and incite guilt among the sex-positive gay men in the modern milieu.

Brown and Humphreys (2002) understand nostalgia as a means of maintaining sameness and continuity to access a collective sense of shared heritage, values, and beliefs. This nostalgic reference to the past provides not only a sense of identity and belonging but also the construction of pride and uniqueness that sets them apart from other groups, in this case, those belonging to the present generation of progress and crisis. DaSilva and Faught (1982), emphasized the same historical importance but also highlighted the notion of continuing identity; that nostalgia is "a collective emotional reaction" that "represents an unfulfilled search for community," and "a quest for communality" (pp. 49–50).

The accumulation of Western ideologies through the consumption of global and digital technologies like Grindr, Tinder, and XTube has also complicated the Filipino gay men's desire to recapture their more indigenous identity as *bakla*. Filipino gay men who explore the "circuits" in "gay meccas" (Benedicto, 2008a) and the scenes in New York (Manalansan, 2003) are said to experience discrimination and exclusion on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Similar to the interactions of my informants in this study, rejection and castigation are based on models of whiteness, masculinity, muscularity, and wealth. Benedicto (2008a) went on to say that this Western gay narrative has been exported through some neoliberal configurations of a global marketplace to the urban centers of third-world countries like the Philippines, set in a historical backdrop of colonialism, where middle- and upper-class gay men desire for gay globality grounded on Western cultural forms. These global gays are marked "with a personal aesthetic (a muscular physique, particular hairstyles, even grooming habits) and certain identifiable practices, including consumption patterns (the so-called pink economy), travel preferences (gay cruises), and the intersection of leisure activities with sexual habits (clubbing and cruising)" (Benedicto, 2008a, p. 281).

*Pagliligawan* as a gendered practice with the expectation that the man pursues the woman is seen to be bypassed by online interactions. In digital gay cruising, the traditional notion of the *bakla* as identified in terms of their inner identity rather than their external action now shifts to the Western notion of the homosexual, as someone who is transitive of a sexual act. Dumdum (2010) found the same in his study of the gay interactions on XTube, a gay pornography site:

Despite the informant's diverse views, the central theme was their definition of the bakla's identity *in terms of the other person*. It is not anymore the inner self, or the "psychospiritual depth" (Garcia, 1996, p. 336), which makes the bakla a bakla. However, it could not also be characterized using Garcia's contemporary male homosexual identification in terms of gender transitivity or intransitivity. Being a bakla is now being defined by these XTube users as *sex transitive*, similar to how the West's definition of the homosexual. (p. 19; emphasis in original)

Among my informants, though, there seems to be a longing to revisit the inner psychospiritual self, which Garcia (1996) identifies as gender transitivity based on maleness or femaleness. Although effeminacy is still censured in gay interactions online, my older participants who have experienced a purely public sexual culture, nostalgize the traditional roles of the "pursued and the pursuer." Ralph, 45, explained:

I think the reason why I enjoyed cruising or meeting men in person is that there is that thrill of sparking a connection and yet sometimes still get rejected. You start from there and then you pursue the person by gifting or going out on dates. It's like the traditional *ligaw* (*pagliligawan*) which apps now do not really do. There was effort before. I like it too because I'm the one being pursued and I feel more valued.

This notion of pursuing and being pursued, which emphasizes the emotional dimensions of the interactions more than the outward manifestations of maleness or femaleness, is being bypassed and even scorned for being too "female" in online dating. The nostalgia for *panunuyo* in *pagliligawan* among gay daters online seeks that balance between the effeminate male of the chivalrous pursuer and the passive pursued in courtship. In Ralph's words: "I want to be courted like a girl but we are both strong men, without being judged as effeminate."

Thus, nostalgia is also experienced to be a source of resistance to the hegemonic claims of elites (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). In my informants' case, it is a way of questioning the dominating Western ideology of what is gay and even of desiring or reclaiming their indigenous *bakla*.

### Conclusion

In this article I have shown how through the media ensemble and communicative practices of gay cruising, gay men are able to play with multiple options, enjoy negotiating personas and sexual encounters both online and offline and explore pleasures in unconventional forms of sexual activities. In these evolving practices of mediatized cruising, which the Filipino millennials grow accustomed to, the older generation nostalgizes the traditional identity of the *bakla* and the custom of *pagliligawan* because of the shift in gay identity and practices brought about by the globalized nature of online cruising and the acculturation to Western ideals.

This is not to say that the more liberal take on dating and sex is absolutely wrong. In fact, some of the older respondents, especially the self-confessed "single who still mingle," consciously decide to cruise and play using digital apps precisely because they refuse to "settle down." Love also does result from these interactions, as in the case of Ali and Chris. But with the evolving landscape and practices of dating, changes would necessitate that some practices are supplemented or even supplanted and that nostalgia is a valid response to these changes. What can be highlighted here though, is that nostalgia may be transformed from mere "nostalgic complaint" (Race, 2015, p. 6) to an agency of the gay man. In a study of cybercottages— websites set up by gay men to look for casual sexual encounters in public places like toilets—gay men who are considerably "bored of being 'legitimately' gay" "queer" the space of cybercottages by deliberately withholding their visibility as gay men to be able to explore older homosexual fantasies of heterosexual masculinities and sexual activities with "the great dark man" (Mowlabocus, 2008, p. 432). Although Mowlabocus (2008) mentioned that gay men do not deliberately do this to make a political statement, he emphasized that this is an indication of gay men "(reclaiming) older narratives and spaces of homosexual activity in their everyday lives" (p. 430).

Manalansan (2003) illustrated the transformations and negotiations of Filipino gay identity in the context of migration and diaspora. This study illustrated similar transformations and negotiations in gay identities and practices brought about by mediatization. In this study, I have illustrated that one does not need to physically travel to acculturate to gay globality (Benedicto, 2008a) or to the American gay ideal (Manalansan, 2003); one only needs to subscribe to mobile dating apps, which are essentially foreign technologies, and which have become the main mode of cruising nowadays. Add to that the importation of mostly Hollywood media products that propagate the gay global ideal in a mediatized environment. Filipino gay men are increasingly adopting these ideals and in so doing, negotiating the notion of the Filipino *bakla* which in the global discourse is not adequately imbibed in its identities, languages, categorizations, and models.

The fascination for the global gay ideal implicates patriarchy, which venerates the masculine and the muscular. A study on masculinity ideals in the Philippines indicates that both straight men and, to a higher degree, gay men experience great psychological distress when they conform less to cultural expectations of manifesting physical and emotional strength (Rubio & Green, 2009). The acculturation to the global gay also implicates capitalism, which puts primacy on economic capacity and global (media) consumption patterns. These indicate that patriarchy and capitalism are (persisting) dominant descriptors of global modernity. This modernity contributes to the "obsolescence of *kabaklaan*" (Benedicto, 2008b, p. 327) throughout its colonial past, from the Spanish Christianization to the importation of the American gay culture. However, as may be gleaned from the narratives of my informants, Filipino gay men continue to contest and negotiate their identity through online play and the nostalgia for the older public sexual cultures. In this dialectic of the *bakla* and global gay, Manalansan (2003) stresses that a self-determining gay man must refuse an assigned or one universal framework:

The *bakla* is neither a ludic nor anachronous figure, but a subject in constant mediation, whose modernity is not always dependent on Western mainstream queer culture. Therefore, the everyday struggles of queer subjects such as Filipino gay men form a strategic path leading not to a teleologically determined home but rather to other more exciting possibilities. (p. 125)

Nostalgia is not a denial of the present with an absolute retreat or a physical journey back to the past. It is a revisiting, a state where the gay men in my study go back and forth by "playing around in the dark" and/or on online realms. This nostalgia indicates that self-identification is a journey that disrupts and negotiates a nonmonolithic gay identity to incorporate the more indigenous *bakla* and the traditional custom of *pagliligawan* which tend to be forgotten or erased in the face of a modernizing and globalizing world.

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