Initiating gay relationships in the Philippines: A history of mediatization and place-making

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Abstract

Modern communications technologies are seen to have changed the way gay men initiate sexual or romantic relations in the Philippines. Dating websites like PlanetRomeo and mobile applications like Grindr are even said to have caused the "death" of Malate, the gay capital of the Philippines, as these now allow gay men to find partners without having to meet in-person and risk being "outed" in public or censured by heteronormative norms. Given this observation, this paper aimed to explore: How have gay men's practices of and places for relationship initiation with other men in the Philippines changed over time? A total of 36 informants for this study shared their narratives and traced out the physical spaces and the media ensemble where and through which gay relationship initiation happens. By looking at the communicative practices in these places and media ensemble, the notion of place-making of the physical and virtual spaces for gay meeting was discussed.

Keywords: mediatization; relationship initiation; gay technologies; gay spaces; place-making

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Communications technologies are seen to have changed the landscape of how gay men initiate sexual or romantic relations in the modern, mediatized milieu in the Philippines. Dating websites like PlanetRomeo and mobile dating applications like Grindr are seen to have displaced the more traditional face-to-face meeting places of gay men. These technologies are even said to have caused the "death" of Malate, the gay capital of the Philippines, as these now allow gay men to find partners in a safer way, compared to those cruising in parks, where they risk being arrested for vagrancy, or in bathhouses which can be raided by the police (Baytan, 2015).

It may be observed that gay men nowadays could easily turn on their mobile dating apps in search of like-minded gay men nearby, also looking for love or sex. My informants in this study use Grindr, a mobile dating app exclusively for gay men, which lists the profiles of the nearest 100 gay men in the radius of the app user. From a technological determinism standpoint, it could be said that gay men have now considered mobile gay apps as an automatic extension of their eyes and legs, prompting them to log on, search for, and hook up with gay men nearby, every time they step into a new vicinity. While the dominant technology, in this case the mobile dating apps, seems to determine the ways gay men communicate in the midst of these people-nearby locative technologies, certainly, there are communicative practices that prove the domestication and appropriation of technologies according to these gay men's needs and desires. For instance, some gay men in the late 2000s, still using analog mobile phones, would deliberately come up with random numbers or use chat TV channels in the hopes of matching with another gay man who would be willing to become their text or sex mate using the text messaging function of mobile phones (Solis, 2007).

Given these observations of determinism and domestication of communicative technologies in gay men's practices of meeting other gay men, this paper aims to explore: How have gay men's practices of and places for relationship initiation with other men in the Philippines changed over time? To examine this mediatization of gay men's practices—from the offline, to the analog media, to digital locative apps—I explored a number of questions with my gay participants in this study, following Andreas Hepp's (2013) operationalization of mediatization: Who are the actors involved and what are the types of relations that they pursue in initiating relations with other men? What is their media ensemble? And what are their forms of communication in meeting other men?

This study explores the development of emerging media vis-à-vis the new set of cultural practices and activities in the context of the initiation of relationships in the modern gay culture. In this paper, I will show how gay

men, still restricted by expectations and conventions of a predominantly heterosexist society, make gay spaces, whether online or offline, where they can initiate encounters with other gay men. While in computer mediated communications (CMC) studies, the online and offline spaces are viewed as separate, with the bias for the "authentic" offline interactions and the scapegoat of the virtual environment for the "disappearance" of gay Malate, my informants show that the online and offline spaces are integrated in one infrastructure of gay encounters which is essentially determined not only by the "material" of the site but also the "mental" intent of initiating gay encounters in these spaces.

The SOGIE Equality Bill, also known as the Anti-discrimination Bill—a proposed law to protect individuals from economic and social marginalization on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression—as continually being challenged and is even said to have no chance of passing the Senate, is indicative of the society's stance in providing inclusive spaces and policies for LGBT in the Philippines. This study on gay place-making finds its significance in advocating for gay rights and the activism for safer spaces for gay men to explore various types of relationships without discrimination, censure, or violence. Theoretically, this study contributes to the research paradigm of mediatization, which interrogates the embeddedness communications and technologies in the everyday lives of human society, particularly that of the modern-day gay culture in the Philippines.

Relationship Initiation

In Malcolm Parks's (1997) study of communication networks and personal relationships, relationship initiation is defined as the initial phase of the relational life cycle that moves from initiation, to maintenance, and deterioration. Parks explains that a relationship develops according to the qualities of the potential partners and the norms within the group or culture, as well as the physical proximity and settings of the interlocutors. Moreover, the process of initiation involves the structure and context of communication in and through communication technologies (e.g., internet discussion groups or other computer-mediated interactions) wherein the types of relationships are explored. In an increasingly mediatized society, these technologies serve as the initial mode of communication contact between probable partners who use the technologies to explore various types of gay relations. Maintenance is the next phase in personal relationship development that indicates the desire to sustain or progress the intimacy in the relationship by establishing depth and breadth of contact more through technologies and face-to-face encounters. The communicative

characteristics and interactions of the participants in a relational life cycle stimulates the changes, the development or deterioration, of the relationship (Parks, 1997). Furthermore, Parks places the understanding of individual characteristics and interaction into the broader social context and network that allows this interaction to take place in.

William Rawlins (1982) published the first theoretical discussions on cross-sex relationships, which describes the dynamics of romance, sexuality, and sex role socialization. According to Rawlins, there are five categories to define relationships: (1) friendship, an affectionate and personal relationship lacking expressed sexuality; (2) platonic love, a relationship of deep intimacy and high emotional commitment without sexual activity; (3) friendship-love, an ambiguous relationship involving degrees of friendship as well as a potential for transition to romantic relationship; (4) physical love, a relationship based primarily on sexual relations rather than emotional involvement; and (5) romantic love, an exclusive emotional and physical love. Categorizing gay relations further for the purposes of this study, based on the insights gained from the informants of this study, the researcher adapts Rawlins's typology of relationships.

Chad Van de Wiele and Stephanie Tom Tong (2014) identified sex, friendship, and romance as some of the reasons why gay men use Grindr. A cursory look at the app shows that users may be able to indicate in their profiles what "I'm looking for": chat, dates, friends, networking, relationship, and right now (casual sex). While hookup apps like Grindr are seen mainly as a device to initially connect random gay men who, through chats and conversational formats, explore their identities, preferences, and interests for eventual offline possibilities, these various types of relationships may also be experienced as purely online relationships. Kane Race (2015) found that mobile apps users engage in random chats and casual browsing online, which already provides a form of intimate or erotic encounter among gay men and, thus, resulting in a purely online exchange, without pursuing instrumental ends such as actually dating or hooking up in the flesh. Aside from this, Race (2015) also discussed how gay men also engage in "wired play" where participants may have sex just right in front of the computer. While scholars understand the online and offline contexts of gay relationships in terms of the dichotomy, they also emphasize their hybridity.

Place-Making

I picked up place-making as a central concept in this study from studies on urban place-making such as that of Dana Collins (2005) on the place-making of gay Malate in Manila (see also Millward, 2012 on lesbian place-making in Canada). For Collins, a place has to be made and remade not just as a physical

background or setting of gay identities, sexualities, and communities, but also as the substance and production of meanings in creating these sexual identities and communities. According to Doreen Massey (1994), spaces/places and gender are mutually constituting. Spaces are studied both in terms of geography (such as regions in a country allowing women's suffrage) and symbolic meaning (such as "home as a woman's place"). While it is easy to identify that gendered practices and relations, and the construction and understanding of gender itself, are situated within varying social spaces and cultures, Massey stressed that the interrelated concepts of space and gender influence each other, such that gender, too, create these social spaces. She added that this gendering of spaces is not simply a product of gendered relations, but also along with other forms of divisions in societies such those of economics and politics.

Place does not simply refer to the physical location or site where gay men meet, but that it is the combination of both the material and the mental (Cresswell, 1996). Henri Lefebvre (1991) sees this place-making as a dialectic production: that society conceives of and produces space, in the same way that space produces what is society. He adds: "Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it" (p. 85). Gay spaces, particularly, are contested sites which are continually produced within a history and context of heteronormativity (Nusser & Anacker, 2013; Millward, 2012; Newton, 2016) or a "culture [that] thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of production without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner, 1993, p. xxi). Thus, heteronormativity as a discursive formation regulates sexuality and essentializes those sexual experiences that are non-heterosexual to be deviant and immoral (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990).

Using Lefebvre's axiom in investigating lesbians as a marginalized group and their "invisibility in space" in Saigon, Natalie Newton (2016) showed how the invisibility of lesbian individuals, places, issues, and events is a social condition and yet this same invisibility was what led to the formation of lesbian spaces in the city. This place-making was achieved through a strategy of liminal social positioning which Newton (2016) called "contingent invisibility" which partly refers to "the contingencies of self-disclosure of one's stigmatized status, which *les* may strategically hide through sociolinguistic practices or through physical segregation of space" (p. 112). In this liminal state, lesbians perform in places and events to "pass" as a woman or a man in order to maintain heterosexual norms and to mitigate the heterosexist gaze.

Sarah Parker Nusser and Katrin Anacker (2012) call this place-making "queering of space" and suggested that this happens based on the values of fit, access, and control. Borrowing from Kevin Lynch (1984), they define fit as that which "evaluates the relationship between the physical characteristics of spaces and the activities people conduct (or want to conduct) in them" (Nusser & Anacker, 2012, p. 178). According to Nusser and Anacker (2012), "Access broadly refers to the degree of choice offered among accessible resources, including human, material, activities, or information" (p. 179). While control "is the performance dimension that addresses the regulation of space and behavior through city codes, private legal contracts, private management of space, and the perpetuation or disruption of norms symbolized in space" (Nusser & Anacker, 2012, p. 179).

For Shaka McGlotten (2014), creating queer spaces is a process of spatial formations tied to the normative politics of intimacy. They proposed a framework to study this process through an account of changes, in terms of both geographies and linear timelines, in what they termed as queerspace and queertime. In their study, they traced the changes in the public sex cultures in Austin, Texas, from a college town to a global dotcom boom city, from public to online sex, and the corollary generation of new politics and sociality among gay men, as "they poetically story queerspaces as real, virtual, and affective, as a still unfolding queertime" (McGlotten, 2014, p. 481). McGlotten (2014) further stressed that it is not enough to track the changes in "material geographies (men have sex in parks and hook up online) or linear timelines (first there was public sex and then there was AIDS)," but also to account of gay men's worlding, "[t]hat is, I evoke rather than describe my objects, mirroring the movement/ change inherent to encounters I witnessed or in which I was an actant" (p. 472). This means that the experience and the narratives, including "the power of memory and forgetting," (McGlotten, 2014, p. 481) is essential in deciphering the "psychic geography of intensities, remembrances, and longings, it tries to conjure an expansive affective archive into brief life" (p. 473).

In the Philippines, the wider social, political, and economic spheres, as well as Filipino gay men's own politics of space (power and discrimination within the community), contribute to the formation of its queerspaces. Audrey Yue and Helen Leung (2017) observed the rise of the middle-class gay consumer cultures in Manila that have led to the emergence of its gay cities and a new queer Asian urban imaginaries that are "cognitive, somatic and symbolic, formed through a mix of spatial and social practices, including architecture, business, policy, leisure, politics, culture and everyday life" (p. 748). Literature on homosexuality in the Philippines point to Malate, Manila, as the gay capital of the city, which saw its boom due to the political

and socioeconomic changes that the country was experiencing as early as the 1970s until the 1990s (Baytan, 2015; Collins, 2005). Furthermore, the technological breakthroughs in the late 2010s, starting with the popularization of dating websites and now with mobile apps, were believed to have led to the "demise of Malate as a gay space" (Baytan, 2015, para. 1).

Sam Miles (2017) proposed that to study queer male sociality in contemporary cities, one must appreciate the hybridity of city spaces and the virtual environs for queer communities. For Miles, spaces are traditionally understood as physical sites for communities, but that these embodied spaces have been reconfigured with technologies now mediating queer sociality and community. Socialization before was embodied, engaged in purely public sexual cultures. In the modern milieu, the hybridity of the physical and digital sites has changed intimacies (now more expedited and fleeting), sociality (from public encounters to privatization in homes), and urbanization (with reduced spaces for anonymous cruising compounded by homonormative modes of living).

Van De Wiele and Tong (2014) look at gay men's use of Grindr as a means of redefining gay space in a heteronormative environment. With Grindr's people-nearby technology, the boundaries between the online gay spaces and the offline "gayborhoods" become more fluid such that "virtual visibility" of gay men and "queer cartography" are explored within wider heteronormative spaces and outside of geographically-zoned gay neighborhoods, leading to the desegregation of the gay and hetero boundaries of space.

As may be gleaned from these studies, the larger portion of the research field studying gay place-making is highly focused on embodied spaces and overwhelmingly dominated by Western perspectives. Thus, there is a need of more culturally diverse perspectives on the ever-expanding spaces of gay relationship development in the milieu of mediatization. Moreover, extending Van De Wiele and Tong's uses and gratifications study of one gay cruising app to that of a mediatization study, using a historical approach and focusing on a specific form of gay performance and relations, that of gay initiation of relationships, this study aims to unpack the intertwining of gender, sociality, and place by looking at the communicative behaviors of gay men within and through the online and offline spaces to reveal the practices of gay place-making in the Philippines.

Mediatization

Recognizing that place-making is an account of the changes in psychic geographies across time, through the worlding of gay men (McGlotten, 2014), this study employs mediatization as an approach to investigate place-

making in the initiation of relationships among gay men in the Philippines. This approach certainly recognizes the hybridity of both embodied and mediated spaces where and through which gay men reconfigure forms of sociality and community (Miles, 2017).

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). To operationalize mediatization in communication research, Hepp (2013) suggested the framework of communication figurations: "patterns of processes of communicative interweaving that exist across various media and have a 'thematic framing' that orients communicative action" (p. 623) which consists of four instances: (1) the *constellation of actors* as the structural basis, (2) *thematic framing* or the action-guiding topic, (3) *forms of communication* or the concrete patterns of communication practices involving mass or virtualized media, and (4) *media ensemble* or the entirety of the media through or in which the communicative figuration exists (pp. 623-624).

Mediatization theories emphasize the "dialectical process" in which both communication technology and communicative social practices mutually shape each other in an interactional process. The mediatization paradigm recognizes the tradition of Marshall McLuhan's (1964) Technological Determinism which point out that society is defined according to the dominant communication technology at a particular time because of its power in altering human senses and habits (McLuhan called this the "extension of selves"), and then shaping human affairs on a wider scale. While viewing the relationship of human behaviors and technologies from a grand historical perspective may illustrate the concept of technologies as causing social changes, looking at specific contexts of the everyday lives and circumstances of technology use also highlights the social construction, domestication, and meaning-making of these technologies by the users themselves. Thus, mediatization studies also balance the technological deterministic perspective with that of the domestication view. Roger Silverstone's domestication theory (Silverstone, 1999; 2002; 2005) looks at the way people consume and make meanings of new media in their everyday life by looking at both the material and symbolic attributes of these technologies. This "double articulation," "circulation of meaning," or the ongoing dialectic of both communication technology and communicative action is essentially, mediation or mediatization. Thus, for this study, it is essential to understand gay culture and their emerging practices, norms, and interrelations and their inextricable link with the materiality, affordances,

and features of the online and offline places of initiated interactions among gay men.

Methodology

To gather stories of how gay men initiate relationships across time, I sent out interview questionnaires through emails and social media and conducted personal interviews with a total of 34 gay men and two transgender women who had previously identified as gay men. Through snowball sampling, I started distributing invitations within my personal network and asked those who agreed to become informants in my study to forward the questionnaire to at least one potential gay informant from their own networks. Participants in the study were asked to read (or were read to) an informed consent letter before giving their agreement to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were employed throughout the recording and transcription, as well as in the publication, to protect the anonymity of my informants. After completing all interviews and the recordings were transcribed, each interview transcript was reviewed manually in three stages of coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding was done to verify and validate initial themes observed. After this, axial coding was done to relate the categories to each other, especially as to how to organize separate or subordinate categories among the coded themes. Finally, the categories were organized according to theoretical coding, based on the operationalization of mediatization, the typology of relationships, and the concept of place-making.

My positionality as a participant in this research was brought to the fore on many levels. As a researcher, my academic attachments have allowed me to scientifically and ethically draw out the lived experiences of my informants. As a gay man, with my own experiences of initiating various forms of relationships with other men, I was able to empathize with my informants but, also at the same time, facilitate and traffic our conversations to evoke the worlding of my informants and their queer geographies, experiences, and narratives. My location in the social networks of my own informants allowed me to gain the trust of my informants and to access their intimate stories of self-identification, intimacies, sexualities, dreams, and desires from multiple points of view to (co-)construct this archive of gay place-making in the Philippines. But as a gay man of the same level of social stature as my urban professional-informants, I may have also taken part in the exclusion of narratives from those in the working class, rural areas, and other minorities. This is certainly a limitation of the study.

In this article, I use the term "gay" as it was the identification that most of my respondents (two were trans women who said that they had previously identified as gay) indicated during our interviews. As a Western construct,

which does not accurately translate to *bakla*, the Filipino term used in the Philippines, I use this term to mainly be consistent with literature on gay urban and technology studies, which largely refers to same-sex desiring males, but certainly sensitive to the contexts and narratives of my own informants in this study. I have partly discussed the concept of bakla in the results of the study, but the studies of J. Neil Garcia (1996), Michael Tan (2001), and Bobby Benedicto (2008) are valuable resources to study these cultural and historical nuances further.

Results and Discussion

The Actors and Thematic Framing: Gay Men and Their Typology of Relations

The youngest informant in this study was a 20-year-old student, and the oldest participant was a 52-year-old hotel manager. The other informants were mostly managers in the following industries: software development, BPO operations, IT, training, non-profit, hotel. The study also involved supervisors, business owners, and analysts (actuary, finance, social media). I also spoke with some informants who were specialists in science research, and monitoring and evaluation, as well as teachers in the elementary, high school, and college levels. One participant was a high-level executive assistant, another a marketing consultant, an HR practitioner, a lawyer, a bank employee, a project staff, and a university student. All of my informants have identified themselves as having experienced actively seeking out other men for whatever purpose, representing gay life stories from Metro Manila, nearby provinces of Laguna,Rizal, Bulacan, Cavite, Bicol, and farther metropolitan cities of Cebu and Zamboanga.

Adapting Rawlins's (1982) typology of relationships: (1) friendship, (2) platonic love, (3) friendship-love, (4) physical love, and (5) romantic love, this study explored what types of relations gay men initiate in physical and virtual places. According to my informants, the reasons why gay men seek connections online and/or in social spaces may be clustered in three main categories, with some variations within: (1) for sexual relations, (2) romance, and (3) friendship. For those who initiate connections for sexual relations, they may resort to either offline sexual encounters or purely online sexual activities such as phone or video (cam to cam) sex. In-person sexual encounters may also be one-time trysts or for regular longer-term sex buddies. For those who look for romance in gay spaces and apps, they may initially look for casual dates which may progress to serious love and partnership. For gay men who look for friendships, they hope to expand their social networks by connecting with like-minded individuals or potential

activity partners, such as those whom they can go out for social events like drinking, sports, and gay parties. This is somehow different from those who look for friendship specifically for social support, especially for those who are still exploring their sexual identity or are curious about gay life.

The Media Ensemble and Forms of Communication

The Pre-Mediatization Embodied Spaces and Gay Men Communicative Practices

Before the popularity of the internet, the older gay men in this study met other men (gay or otherwise) through their "offline" social networks: dates set up by friends, mostly gay friends too; meetings through their regular interactions at work, school, and student or professional organizations; and spontaneous connections in social gatherings and events like rave or dance parties and out of town trips. Malate in the city of Manila was seen to be the hub of overt LGBT interactions and activities with the boom of clubs and bars that catered to this sector in the streets of Orosa and Nakpil in the early 2000s. But some informants pointed out that Malate was already a popular social place among gay men as early as the late 1970s to early 1990s with discotheques like Coco Banana, which was frequented by the more well-off gay men.

Collins (2005) studied the urban transformation of Malate in 2000s into a commercial space for gay patrons and a hub for the cosmopolitan lifestyle. Collins identified this place-making as caused by "the city-directed measure to erase the history of sex tourism through mass commercial development and a gay entrepreneurial oppositional urban renewal" (p. 186). In the 1970s, the Philippines embarked on a strategy of urban development in the hopes of harnessing tourism and attracting foreign investment in Metro Manila. This eventually led to the rise of the sex industry, particularly in Ermita and Malate in the early 1990s with the mobilities of US servicemen and Australian and Japanese overseas workers in the city. As a response to this growing reputation of Manila as a hub for foreign sex tourism, the Manila City government later transformed the sex district into a commercial dining and entertainment center flanked with malls and high-rise condominiums. Filipino and foreign gay men, who identify with the sense of artistry and cosmopolitanism of the location, began to own their own cafes, restaurants, and bars which then led to the area's gentrification.

Collins pointed out though that this transformation had ushered a gay-inspired cosmopolitanism that excludes other gay men based on gender and class. The area now favored the upper- and middle-class domestic patrons and foreign tourists who are predominantly male while the women

and transsexual sex workers, as well gay hosts who cannot afford to live in Malate, were relegated to the margins of Malate's gentrification.

Gay men who are excluded in cosmopolitan Malate, or are practically located far from the gay district, cruised in non-gay spaces like malls, cafes or coffee shops, public toilets, public transportations like the MRT (Metro Railway Transit) and buses, as well as in gyms, spas, and movie houses to meet potential sexual and romantic partners. The participants in this study shared detailed stories of how gay men would use such public places where, in spite of these places being "gender neutral" spaces, gay men would appropriate strategies to meet men for sex or love. For example, informant Mon explained how gay men, before the advent of modern communications technologies, would pick up men in beauty salons and random pedestrians in streets:

> Based on what my neighbors told me, haircutters solicit sexual acts and relationships mostly from their parlors. These were mere stories until I witnessed it myself. When I befriended some gay haircutters then, they told me how they hooked up with straight boys who visited their parlors for free haircut in exchange for sex, mostly fellatio. One day, I saw how they did it. Boys would come over to their place in the morning for free haircut and would visit at night for the exchange … the sexual pleasure. This could be a one-time arrangement, or this could blossom into a relationship. But mostly at that time, it was more [like a] monetary [transaction]. But I never indulged in one. Back then, my gay classmates would also tell me the boys who were for sex (could be free or with pay). There was a time when they tagged me along in their escapade, when we played volleyball first and later on some guys from their place came and my friends introduced me to them. Later that day, we went to a vacant house (still being built) and one by one had their sexual chance with those guys. Well, not me as I was too scared to do it then. Like the story of haircutters, but this time it was done in different place … I had some gay friends who live near our area who would deal with bystanders. A "tambay" or a bystander would deal, sexually, with gay people for free food, soda, etc. This could be an intermittent arrangement but could also lead to a relationship eventually.

In a modernizing and highly globalizing milieu, the *parlorista* or effeminate gay is said to be discriminated within the gay community, particularly by the young middle-class gay men in Metro Manila. The parlorista is identified as a low-income bakla who typically works in beauty parlors, but also in domestic work, wet markets, and small entertainment enterprises (Tan, 2001). Tan added that they become the go-to people for the sexual needs of young people who could not access girlfriends or afford female sex workers. According to Benedicto (2008), modern gay men are trying to "imagine the obsolescence" of this type of *kabaklaaan* (gayness) in favor of gay globality, "founded on claims and hegemonic representations driven by the market and sustained by a networking of (urban) scenes that separately, though similarly, depend on the erasure of othered gay men, both in Manila and in those cities read as epicenters of the gay globe" (p. 319).

While the parloristas and the less well-off gay men cruise discreetly and negotiate monetary transactions in random places, for the more affluent gay men, they would meet other gay men in bars and dance clubs. Informant Adam and his friends would call encounters in these places the "bump and grind." He added: "There was no smartphone during my time, only call and text. So, you have to get the number first before you start flirting." Nico shared his experience in one of the bars in Malate that illustrated how the "bump and grind" works:

> There are guys who are always looking for someone at clubs, whether it be just a one-night stand or something more than that. When you put yourself out there, there's a possibility of someone noticing you, and that's how things start. I remember I was at O Bar in Malate one night when someone held my hand as I was dancing. I thought it was just an accidental contact since the bar was packed and people would "collide" with each other all the time. But it was the guy's way of catching my attention, and we ended up leaving the bar and talking outside.

To meet other men, gay men frequent the few places that exclusively cater to gay men, like O Bar, the Malate gay bar now located in Pasig City. For those who are particularly looking for sexual encounters, although not discounting the possibility of romance, they also visit saunas or bathhouses that are specifically for gay men. One bathhouse in Manila is said to have been opened as early as 1977. Jude explained that these bathhouses require a membership to access a cruising area, predominantly a big dark room, with maze-like layout of private rooms, where gay men go around mainly in their underwear or a towel looking for someone to take to the private rooms

for sex or just for conversations over drinks at the bar. Sometimes, they have live shows with drag queens and DJs, and bikini contests as well. While there are these legitimate businesses exclusively targeting gay customers, other businessmen would also go "underground" to establish more cruising spaces for a growing gay clientele. David shared of a very discreet old house converted into a private gay club with "a house party vibe" somewhere in Mandaluyong City. He described it as having "different areas where guys could interact, ranging from innocent (garden seating), mild (TV room with porn, cramp back alley), to naughty (a dark room where you can't see anything but could hear a lot of moaning)." David emphasized that this venue is very clandestine and exclusive, and is only discreetly shared among gay friendships in Manila.

Another kind of sauna was identified by my informants as a place for gay men to meet for friends, networking, or even for sexual encounters. Chris told of the strategies of gay men to initiate sexual activities in the warm rooms, the showers, and even in the more exposed locker rooms of gyms:

> Typically, you stare at each other first, waiting for someone to make the first move inside the sauna. When you establish eye to eye contact and he starts to touch his private parts, then that's the sign that he wants you as well. Sometimes two guys do it, or if the person is too confident, he would initiate even if there are other people in the sauna or steam room, given that he knows that the other guy is looking too. It can also happen in the locker room after shower. Instead of leaving the room after getting dressed, they will stare at you and your organ under the towel. And if you stare back and give a signal like a smile, touching your crotch, or suddenly removing your towel, then they will make the first move by sitting near you and waiting for the locker room to clear.

Gyms are not necessarily gay-exclusive places that have been, as Chris termed it, "invaded" by rich gay men who are able to subscribe to gym memberships and normalize sexual encounters in the lockers and steam rooms. Van said that he has straight male friends who are afraid or cautious of using the gym sauna and would just rush through the showers because they know of gay men cruising in the wet area. Gay appropriations of public places for meeting and sexual activities are also experienced by my informants in the dark and crummy spaces of movie houses. Jude shared his

experience going to one in Recto, Manila, when he was still in college at the end of the 1990s:

> Well, those theaters are old, hot, and smelly. You can meet all kinds of men, from a professional guy who has a decent job and looks good, there are call boys or money boys, and there are the super desperate older gay guys who are very effeminate. It's basically a cruising type of place, you go to the CR (comfort room) and just try to see if there is any interesting guy that you can lock your eyes with and then smile to. Sometimes you can see them stroking their dicks and inviting you. There are also instances that you just sit in the middle or far corner and then someone will just sit beside you and will have some lame conversation like 'hi' and 'hello' and then will ask if you want a blowjob etc. If you are lucky that you find someone attractive and likes you too, then you can have an agreement to find a motel around the corner.

Troy claimed that any place could actually be transformed into a "gay territory." He explained:

> I invaded cruising areas—movie houses, malls, mall's CRs (comfort rooms), bath houses, and anywhere I can find treasures … [A mall in Mandaluyong City] is known as a cruising area. Normally, one would hop from one CR to another, stand there, not peeing but waiting for someone to expose his privates!

Two of my informants, who just recently graduated from college, shared about a gay practice that they also performed inside their campuses. Mac shared:

> I did try contacting numbers written on walls of [a university in Quezon City] restrooms. Primitive! Haha. That did not go very well, and I've only gotten to meet one guy for a blowjob! Clearly the purpose there was for instant sexual gratification.

Jay had a different experience and reaction to this discreet gay practice in schools:

> I had about a couple of cruising experiences in campus, but I was too uptight to make it a habit….Usually deserted

restrooms in large buildings. You'd look into each other and you just kinda know what's about to happen next in an empty stall. That happened only twice during my stay in the university. Some people get off on the thrill of it. I don't.

Oscar literally cruised "on the streets" when he finally purchased his own car which allowed him to move around more freely and pick random guys "looking for fun" or those who were just bored and looking for a "joy ride."

However, while my informants narrated various successful encounters in these public spaces, they also recognized that there were risks involved. Ronald Baytan (2015) summarized these risks also encountered by my informants:

> Cinemas and bathhouses were subjected to repeated raids by the police, and men cruising in the streets could be charged with vagrancy. No bathhouse in the Philippines has been exempt from police raids. Gay bars were somewhat safer places to meet other gay men as, to my knowledge, they were very rarely raided by the police.

> However, even if a gay bar was a safe choice for socialising, there were nonetheless many Filipino gay men who refused to go to these venues for fear of being "outed" or identified as gay. In this context, virtual communications technologies have become a viable solution to the problems posed by the dangers of physical spaces and the self-acceptance issues haunting non-scene gays. (para. 4)

Mediatized Spaces and Practices

For my informants, mediatized initiation of sexual or romantic encounters first came to be when some gay men started to dial random numbers using the landline telephone in the hopes of another man picking up and agreeing to be "phone pals" or to engage in phone sex. Van shared how he "played around" with the landline telephone to be able to seek other men:

> I was in high school then, in 1996, I'm not sure if the internet was already popular, but definitely not in the provinces, when I just thought of dialing a random number and wait for a man to pick up. There was a point when a horny man picked up and we engaged in phone sex.

Gay men also found love and sex by posting personal ads in magazines and tabloids even before there were computer and internet technologies. The use of the print media for matching eventually converged with that of another technology that became popular at the end of the 1990s: the mobile phone. Gay men would post their mobile numbers in these personal ads, in search of "text" or "sex mates." Francis shared his experience of how texting, in connection with the tabloid ads, led him to meeting a sex partner and a boyfriend in the past:

> During my younger days, mostly it was only text messages. I remember that one experience that I got his number from a tabloid. Texted him. The next thing was, we were lying in each other's arms. We had three rounds [of sex]. Bwahahahaha. Silly me. When texting was on the rise, tabloid sections always had this textmate corner where users post their numbers [in search of] friends, dating, and the likes. I just tried [responding to] a couple of those numbers and luckily, I had two replies. The first one became my boyfriend for six months. The other one is a FUBU (fuck buddy) *blushing*.

Justin, on the other hand, experienced being the receiver of such random SMS messaging:

> My first encounter was a random text message from some guy in Pasig… [S]omeone randomly texted me asking if we can "meat." As a curious guy, I replied and set a time and date when it would happen. Took two buses to meet the guy, but I didn't like him in the end. I ended up ditching him after a "naughty round." The anonymity gave me courage to meet the guy, but it was also what made the encounter bad.

Mobile phone service providers also integrated the texting technology with that of television with the introduction of Text TVs like LinkTV and The Lounge at the start of 2000. Ali took advantage of Text TVs to meet like-minded gay men. He explained:

> They are literally TV channels, not specific for gays, where there is a chat box on one side and an entertainment, mostly MTV or Karaoke, on the other. You get to register a name and send one message at a time to a certain number and it will be posted.

Also around this time, Ali, who was just 12 or 13 years old, was introduced to some "underground" gay chatting through the value-added features of cellphone subscription. Smart and Globe, the two largest mobile network providers in the country, launched the Smart ZED and GlobExplore to attract mobile phone subscribers for their respective brands. These value-added services allowed users under each network to build online communities by registering as members and then sharing their age, sex, and location and by navigating through the phone menu options, meeting random people for 2.50 pesos per transaction. A number of my gay informants played with the networks' value-added features by downloading ringtones, logos and virtual pets, and retrieving latest information on travel, movies, bar tours, games, and shopping, but gay men also took advantage of the mail and mobile chat features to meet strangers. Ali shared his own story:

> Upon owning a mobile device, I ran into Smart Zed (it was when Smart Zed was introduced); it has the capability of sharing your age, sex, and location virtually, and buddying up randomly or specifically was possible, and was not limited to searching the opposite sex. It worked by going into the phone menu and navigate from there, there was only GSM at that time, so you pay 2.50 pesos for every transaction you make in the menu (I do not consider it to be an app), and of course to outsmart Smart, trading of mobile number was the only way. It all started when I encountered a stranger who apparently was a guy, a lot older than I was back then—he was I think, 22 or 24. He said he was looking for a buddy, or a younger brother to share interesting life stories with. At first, it went that way, but later on he realized that he spends more time with me—virtually, than his GF (girlfriend). Somehow, I looked forward to chat with him every day, after school, and before bedtime. Most of the time, it went past bedtime! We talked about anything and everything. I did not recognize what I felt—I was kind of innocent. Time passed, and I recognized and accepted it.

The analog cellphones were slowly upgrading into a more digital device, with the introduction of the GPRS (now 2G) phones which enabled phones to connect to the internet. Digital cellphones also now had the Bluetooth technology that was appropriated by gay men to be able to chat or hook up with people nearby, within the radius of the Bluetooth connection, discreetly and for free. David shared how he used to post his cellphone number in his device name to get other gay men's attention, for example: "I remember

those bluetoothing your number or changing phone name to something like "sexmeuprighthererightnow09171231234." A similar strategy was used when the Blackberry Messenger, introduced in 2005, although exclusive to Blackberry cellphone owners, allowed users to randomly send sweet or sexy messages and photos to a person whom they suspect is also gay or in a chat group to coax a potential match.

The informants in this study recalled that it was around the years 2002 to 2004 that social networking websites proliferated, contributing to the growth of venues through which gay men can meet other men online. Friendster, MySpace, and Multiply were earlier forms of Facebook which allowed users to create a profile of themselves, to post photos and videos, and even blog entries, although these websites were not exclusively catering for gay men. In the late 1990s, social networking sites like Gay.com and Gaydar.co.uk became accessible to gay men in the Philippines. More similar websites surfaced with the following being most popular among Filipino gay men: Guys4men (now PlanetRomeo), Manjam, and Downelink. These sites made it more convenient for gay men to search other men, with the websites' search functions according to their location, age, availability of photos, whether they are searching for chat, friends, dates, sex, relationship, or activity partners, etc., ethnicity, height, weight, body type, sexual preference, and the likes. With the transformation of the mobile phones from analog to digital, with the introduction of smartphones like iPhone and Android phones around 2007 and 2008, and with the development notebooks and iPads around the same time, internet-based social networking websites eventually migrated to a more mobile platform. These mobile apps are equipped with a geosocial technology that allows locating of people nearby and online. The informants of this study identified the following gay mobile dating apps that are popular in the Philippines: Grindr (2009), Scruff (2010), BoyAhoy (2010), Growlr (2010), Jack'd (2010), Hornet (2011), and Blued (2012). Improving from the group chat features of their predecessors mIRC and ICQ, and building on the profile-based features of websites like PlanetRomeo, the mobile dating apps are now location-based, allowing gay men to search for men nearby in real time and chat with them directly, privately, and synchronously.

Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and Skype were some of the social media and mobile communication apps that were mentioned by the informants as, according to Van, "not really gay apps but are creatively used by gay men to make romantic or sexual connections." Chris shared how gay men can actually find other gay men through WeChat:

> Because of the same technology Grindr is using, GPS, you can see a list of the nearest people on your location and you can filter it by gender. So, if a man messages you, which is unusual, most likely he is gay too. You can also post a status indicating what you want (e.g., looking for fun) and that is a sign for other gay people using the same app to message you.

Jude, just like Chris, would also receive messages from random men through Facebook to make sexual connections: "Although I've never tried using Facebook as a gay hooking app, I've received some messages from these guys telling me that they like my pictures, that I am sexy, they like my full lips, etc." Justin confessed that he preferred hitting on other guys on "neutral" apps for fear of getting "outed" or exposed when found that he uses gay apps. He explained:

> As for Tinder and Facebook, there are no sexual preferences there. You need to match or be friends with people in order to talk to them. Tinder, I treated as a game. Risk my identity to meet new guys. I'm not out. Hehe. But then, it was high-risk-high-reward thinking for me, so I went for it. I used Tinder in the last couple of years. I can say I could talk my way out if people saw me on Tinder. I'd say if they saw me on Tinder: "Oh, I did not realize that my settings were on 'both' (looking for women and men)." "Oh, I have a poser?" These were usually my explanations IF people saw me. High risk, high reward in the sense that when you meet someone you really like, you have to risk swiping right to their profile. If they didn't swipe right on you, tough luck. If they did, then awesome.

My informants still had the tendency to pit physical and virtual place-making against each other. For them, the latter is seen to provide a safer space for gay men to express themselves and find love or sex. For one, cruising online is a safer choice for gay men who fear being "outed" as gay in public places (Baytan, 2015). Another reason, as illustrated by the stories of my informants, is that physical spaces are still governed by heteronormative codes that restrict gay meeting and risk gay men getting caught in raids (as it still happens even in gay saunas with legitimate business permits in the Philippines) or charged with vagrancy for cruising in parks at night. Ultimately, my informants also recognize the hybridity of the physical and virtual places, that while initiation of contacts happen online, which also

has its own sets of virtual risks, the decision to finally meet and start some form of relations, whether to date or have a casual sexual encounter still happens in the flesh.

A History of Place-Making

Many of the physical places (movie houses, gyms, malls, etc.) and technologies (telephone, group chats, Facebook, etc.) were not exclusively gay nor sexual spaces but were continually appropriated by gay men until such point in history that actual places and apps were created specifically for gay men: Malate becoming the gay district of the country, Tinder allowing men-seeking-men searches when it was initially intended to be a straight dating app, and the proliferation of gay mobile dating apps like Grindr, Jack'd, and Blued. David explains how this appropriation and place-making happens:

> It became fairly well accepted for people on social networking sites to just add people to their friend list even if they don't really know each other. This offered another avenue for gay men to meet and interact with a larger group of men who share their interest. I've had strangers add me up on these sites and then start a conversation with me. These sometimes result in dates or meet ups for sex.

Nico also experienced this on Twitter, although highlighting how this appropriation seems to be done "behind closed doors":

In my case, when a guy finds me interesting, he would send me a private message to take things further, and not just engage me through tweets. If things work out between us, then we'd set a date and meet. Not a lot of people do it publicly through tweeting so sending someone a DM (direct message) takes things on a different level.

These strategies of appropriation point to the notion of place-making. The informants in this study talk about their strategies of place-making as, as one informant put it, "carving out of their own spaces in the physical world, away from judgment and ridicule." In a study of lesbian space and community formation, Newton (2015) showed how "contingent invisibility" was used a strategy by lesbians to "look and pass as heterosexuals," to use physical spaces for les community events in such a manner that only les know about these spaces in the broader urban landscape, in an effort to evade social stigma and police regulation and not to challenge heterosexism. Among the informants in this study, gay cruising is seen to happen in dark (like movie houses or parks at night) and secluded places (toilets with less foot traffic) where they exchange "codes and signals to express interest."

These places are transmitted to other gay men through word of mouth and it becomes a "gay" space. Jay explained:

> Some spaces have been passed around as an unofficial designated "gay" space. Over time, I guess some of them have felt ownership over these places. It gets repeated over and over again until it becomes a cultural information being passed around. To illustrate: I've heard from gay friends that the "friendliest" mall is [a mall] in Cubao. I've experienced that for myself. Gay men just to tend to linger and exchange glances in the restrooms. I was surprised that even some of my straight male friends shared the same observations, thankfully without a tone of disgust or derision.

Diego added: "Once the place has been identified as a cruising place, patrons would gravitate toward the place. However, if it gets too popular even outside of the community, stricter measures are deployed then it would cease to be a cruising place."

Collins (2005) studied gay hosts' identity, practices, and interactions in Malate and how these have led to the transformation of Malate into the cosmopolitan gay hub in Manila. Collins illustrated that the repetitive performances of gendered sexuality (Butler, 1990) and public expression of these gay hosts' same-sex desires in a prominent gay bar and even in non-gay spaces like that of a mall sidewalk café, have made these places their own gay space. This is similar to the gendered sexuality performance, whether in disguise or in full view, on non-gay social networking apps like Facebook or Twitter, or in places like movie houses and gyms, although in the context of "hooking up" where the repetitive performances can be sexual in nature, although not eliminating the chances for love and friendship.

Nusser and Anacker (2012) studied "queering of space" based on the values of fit, access, and control. These were certainly embodied in the stories of the informants in the study, where fit refers to the relationship between the physical space and the activities that they do or intend to do, that is, their desire and actual performance of expressing themselves, meeting a potential lover, and satisfying their sexuality in these spaces. Access in my informants' experiences means that they are given more and more options for information and human and material resources to freely hook up or meet in these public places. Control, for the informants in this study, refers mostly to the issue of safety and the strategies and codes that they employ to circumvent the regulation of city spaces. As one informant shared: "if gay men think that a place can be "safe" to do the deed, they'll mark it as theirs, a haven for them to enjoy the pleasure of meeting and mating."

As place is both material and mental (Cresswell, 1996), the informants of this study also see the online environment, or hooking up through mobile dating apps, as just another place for meeting. For them, "as long as the intent to meet a match is there, it's still the same as meeting in public places." Moreover, while the informants in the study typically distinguished the physical/social spaces and the mediated spaces in the narrations of their gay practices and experiences, they are also aware of the blurring of the boundaries between and the hybridity of the online gay spaces and the offline "gayborhoods" brought about by developing technologies, as discussed by Van De Wiele and Tong (2014) in their Grindr study. Some informants mentioned that they make friends on social media but, at the same time, they still meet common friends and are set up for dates in person, through their social circles. They also meet new friends or potential mates through hangouts, sports activities, out of town trips, or videoke parties. The hybridity of the offline and online spheres also occurs when, for instance, in organizing gay social events, gay men use online chatrooms, website forums, and social media when inviting participants to these events. As one informant recounted:

> Some people on these gay sites (i.e., PlanetRomeo) organize real life events for the members of the website. They might do a general invite or an invitation-only event for people they want to attend. I've received some of these in the past and it usually states what is expected of people who will show up to these events. These are usually held in private residences or hotel rooms.

And in all of these mediated interactions, while the virtual platforms conveniently link gay men as a place for relationship initiation, the "intent" is almost always to consummate their purpose in meeting online, whether to have sex, go on dates, or engage in an activity together, which has to result in a face-to-face meeting and for the relationships to progress and develop further. This geosociality (Hjorth, 2012) or the blurring of the virtual and the actual allows gay men to interact outside the physicality of the actual gay scene (Batiste, 2013), which for the informants of this study are more safe, as queer people generally perceive the internet as a safe space devoid of homophobia (Fraser, 2010). The informants recognize though that these apps are, at the end of the day, businesses and that the developers or companies of these apps do not necessarily have to care about the safety and emancipation of gay men as much as the money generated by this market. In the end, gay place-making, as Quilley (1997) suggested, is not merely an outcome of gay agency, but that it is also determined by political

and economic processes which may be restrictive or beneficial for the gay community.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to illustrate how the mediatization of gay relationship initiation has indeed changed the landscape and practices of finding love and sex among gay men in the Philippines. I have done this by historically tracing the physical spaces and the media ensemble where and through which the initiation of gay relations happens. By looking at the communicative practices in these places and media ensemble, I was able to draw out the stories of place-making of the physical and virtual spaces for gay encounters.

For my gay informants, any place can become a site for gay men's relations for as long as the "mental" intent of meeting men goes hand in hand with the "material" component of a physical or virtual space. Any place becomes a gay space through strategies of place-making to serve gay men's purpose of finding sex or love. Thus, the online and offline spaces where gay men meet are not seen as separate, but rather as an interconnected place where the virtual provides a venue for "foreplay" or organizing a set of practices and activities that may progress and be culminated in a physical meet-up or hook-up. In the same way, potential partners may initially meet in transitional spaces like movie houses, gyms, clubs, or parks where they can access their mobile numbers or exchange Facebook accounts and maintain interactions online.

According to Lievrouw (2009), the cultural turn from "media" to "mediation" emphasizes the trend in communication theorizing that moves away from the focus on media as channels or technological conduits in the transmission of communication to the view of CMC and new media as communicative actions, experiences, relations, and systems, with both the technical and social aspects as inseparable and dialectical in the process of meaning-making in communication. Theoretically, this study of the mediatization of the initiation of gay relationships progresses the view of computer-mediated communications as separate technologies that merely intervenes between and mediate interlocutors in gay practices to the view of communication technologies as places and ecologies that are inextricably linked with offline spaces and practices and their embeddedness in the infrastructure of gay romantic and sexual encounters.

The hybridity and transmediality perspective of Hepp (2013) offers a new way of looking at environments as ever-expanding, where places are no longer just the material and physical ecology but also their symbolic and virtual interaction with media and technologies as environments. Lisa

Parks and Nicole Starosielski (2015) call for this infrastructure disposition in looking at the mediated environment; the sociotechnical systems that embody not only the material forms but also the discursive constructions in human life. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) look at this transmediality in society as "polymedia" or the integrated structure of affordances that provide a vast array of media and technologies to choose from in order to manage interpersonal relationships, with corresponding social, emotional, and moral consequences. The inextricability of the technical and the social must therefore be emphasized in the study of urban place-making, particularly of those in minority groups such as the LGBT communities. The narratives in this study show that gay men, who nonetheless continue to contest and negotiate physical social spaces in a predominantly heteronormative society, are increasingly becoming innovators and more adept at the languages of emerging new media and technologies if only to be able to formulate and form more inclusive spaces where they could navigate and perform their identities and sexualities strategically, circumventing heteronormative policing and even creating outright and exclusive gay spaces.

While there is indeed evidence that the mediatization of gay initiation of relations provides more pronounced spaces for gay men to make connections, particularly with the proliferation of gay mobile dating apps, these developments may also be criticized as to whether they are truly serving the needs of the gay community, even in advocating gay rights and empowerment as some of these brands may claim, or are these mere machinations of capitalist sectors taking advantage of the growing pink economy?

In the end, we reflect as to whether or not the mediatization of gay encounters contributes to gay empowerment. The notion of gay place-making, both online and offline, may appear to be an emancipating phenomenon. But when I explored this idea with my informants, they do not see gay cruising as empowering precisely because of its discreet nature. Gay men's strategies of place-making in non-sexualized spaces such as movie houses and gyms, or gender-neutral social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, mainly involve discretion, using secret codes, and hiding "in the dark" which are not empowering at all to my gay informants. They admit, though, that they do experience a sense of control or power if they get to meet partners on Facebook or perform sexual behaviors in public places, but these are always in the context of "getting away with it" from the risk of being "outed," embarrassed, or censured by heteronormative norms. In the end, my informants see this place-making as "just another opportunity to meet other men."

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