Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation
Intimate Strangers

Andrés Jaque is the founder of Andrés Jaque Architects and the Office for Political Innovation. He has developed a series of architectural experiments intended to explore design from a political perspective, including 'IKEA Disobedients' (2011), which was the first architectural performance ever included in the collection of MoMA (New York), and 'Superpowers of Ten' (2015), a performance based on the narrative and ideas of Charles and Ray Eames's 1977 film *Powers of Ten*. He is professor of Advanced Architectural Design at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and visiting professor at Princeton University School of Architecture.

COSMO, MoMA PS1, New York, 2015

'Superpowers of Ten', Lisbon Architecture Triennale 'Close, Closer', Lisbon, Portugal, 2013

Rolling House for the Rolling Society: prototype of a shared European home, Construmat, Barcelona, 2009

Phantom: Mies as Rendered Society, Mies van der Rohe Pavilion, Barcelona, 2012

At the end of the twentieth century, people were predicting a future in which physical proximity would no longer be necessary. Instead, we would have virtual relationships. Such predictions turned out to be unfounded. The launch of 3G portable devices equipped with global positioning (GPS) in 2008, followed by locative geosocial media (LGM) in 2009, made it easier than ever for people to come to together. In just eight years, the design of location-based, real-time dating (LRD), proximity-based people discovery (PBPD), Facebook's Nearby Friends and other 'hook-up' apps have not only transformed the way we find friendship, love and sex, but also attitudes to our cities and even our bodies. Badoo, Blender, Blued, Down, Glimpse, Grindr, happn, Hinge, Jack'd, JSwipe, Manhunt, Pure, SCRUFF, Tinder—together they amount to an alternative form of urbanism fueled by sex and love. These overlapping networks have been specifically developed to detach sex from familiarity, or to present sex as a perpetually available infrastructure that allows strangers to become intimate.

Location is back, but not in the same way as before. In PBPD, presence is not exact but coarse-grained. It is not a spot on a map but an estimation of the time it would take to meet. Available user profiles are no longer determined by fixed distances but by changing densities. In rural areas, hundreds of kilometres separate potential lovers; in cities and airport hotels, it might be a matter of metres. Location is no longer an identity but a behaviour—it is not based on 'belonging to a place' but on the opportunism of where you happen to be. Profiles are not meant to be transparent representations of users' bodies or minds ('they all lie' is a common refrain), but to sexualize members so that their path to intercourse can be *smoothed*. If precision, permanence and trustworthiness were once the foundations of urban relationships, they are now approximation, promiscuity and self-pornification.

Locative love is not forever, it is not for sweethearts, it is not about finding one's 'other half'. With locative love, digital ubiquity has become ubiquitous sex. Meanwhile, anonymity and identity fabrication have become tools of mutual trust. Tinder alone operates in more countries than the United Nations. Together with Badoo and Grindr, these platforms have mobilized a mass of users almost equivalent to the entire population of the US. Through locative love, urbanites have reinvented themselves as those who develop their intimacy with strangers.

Launched in 2009 by Nearby Buddy Finder, and majority-owned by Beijing Kunlun Tech, Grindr was the first gay-men-oriented LGM. There are more than one million active Grindr users at any time. Yet twenty per cent of the company's servers are located in countries where gay sex is banned. It has been seen as a space for LGBT emancipation, providing access to sex to a global population of gay men, of which no less than eleven per cent remain closeted. An endless stream of single-men profiles is available for users to check, by dragging their fingers across sexy photographs behind the potassium-coated ion-strengthened glass of their smartphones. Grindr has helped to normalize gayness. It has become a place for gay celebrities to be seen, streaming media for JW Anderson's 2016 summer menswear show, a place for *PAPER* magazine to recruit models. Grindr has also been seen as a counter-queer space in the age of same-sex marriage. The app has been criticized for its contribution to transforming gay scenes from spaces of gender activism into contexts of healthy looking individuality and one-to-one intercourse, shifting gay societies from being spaces of collective activism to networks of comfortable lifestyle consumption.

Grindr is urban, but it is not a city. It is not fixed to a piece of land but distributed in unstable constellations. Bodies, mirrors, cellphones, servers, satellites, clothes, skins, backgrounds, software, interfaces … they all participate in the making of a collective neural system, unapologetically jumping from one city to another, and into the countryside. Not just accommodated by the urban, Grindr has become a kind of urbanism in its own right. It is both super-immaterial and super-material. It is a network of constantly moving parts, linked by desire. The setting is permanently active, constantly being produced: by updating profiles, by dragging one profile to the next one, by disappearing from one person's screen to become available on another's. If Richard Buckminster Fuller dreamt of a world of omnidirectional connectivity in the air, Grindr is it. It is an urban enactment in which LGBT realities are made in online and offline realms, where proximity, intimacy, profiling and the mathematics of sex are experienced and disputed. Urban tribes are defined and empowered, and racial or bodily features ('no blacks', 'no fems', 'no fat') become reasons for rejection. Isolated gay men, living in countries where homosexual practices are banned and punished, gain access to an alternative space for interaction. Intolerant governments can also use Grindr to track, harass and arrest gay men. But at a time when many Western cities are being sanitized through gentrification, locative sex has become an urbanism in which emancipation, empowerment, connection, rejection, crime—love and fear—are brought together.

'Intimate Strangers' argues that proximity-based people discovery (PBPD)—'hook up' software—is one of the most significant designs of the past decade. Our proposal is not meant to solve problems but to reconstruct the way human relationships happen. The multimedia installation is based on original research and independent fieldwork carried out in Grindr's headquarters in West Hollywood, and relies on an ethnography of Grindr networks in different cities around the world. The installation offers visitors the opportunity to enter Grindr interactions and follow the way it transforms its users' relationships with their bodies, with individuals and with the collective. Through six recreated historical episodes, visitors will experience some of the risks and possibilities of Grindr played to their limits.
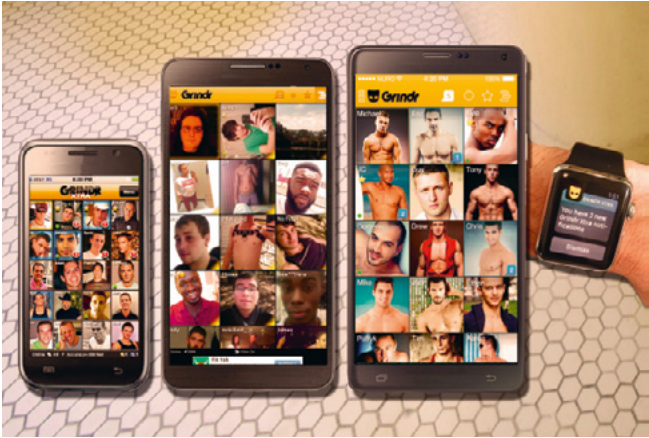

The dating app Grindr allows you to edit your profile with your picture, physical description—such as age, height, body type and relationship status—and your interests. This is the profile for Joel Simkhai, founder and CEO of Grindr.

Most dating apps—including Grindr, Tinder and happn—are based on GPS location systems that enable users to connect with other people nearby. Since these apps use proximity to locate partners, some users hack their locations to access more profiles.
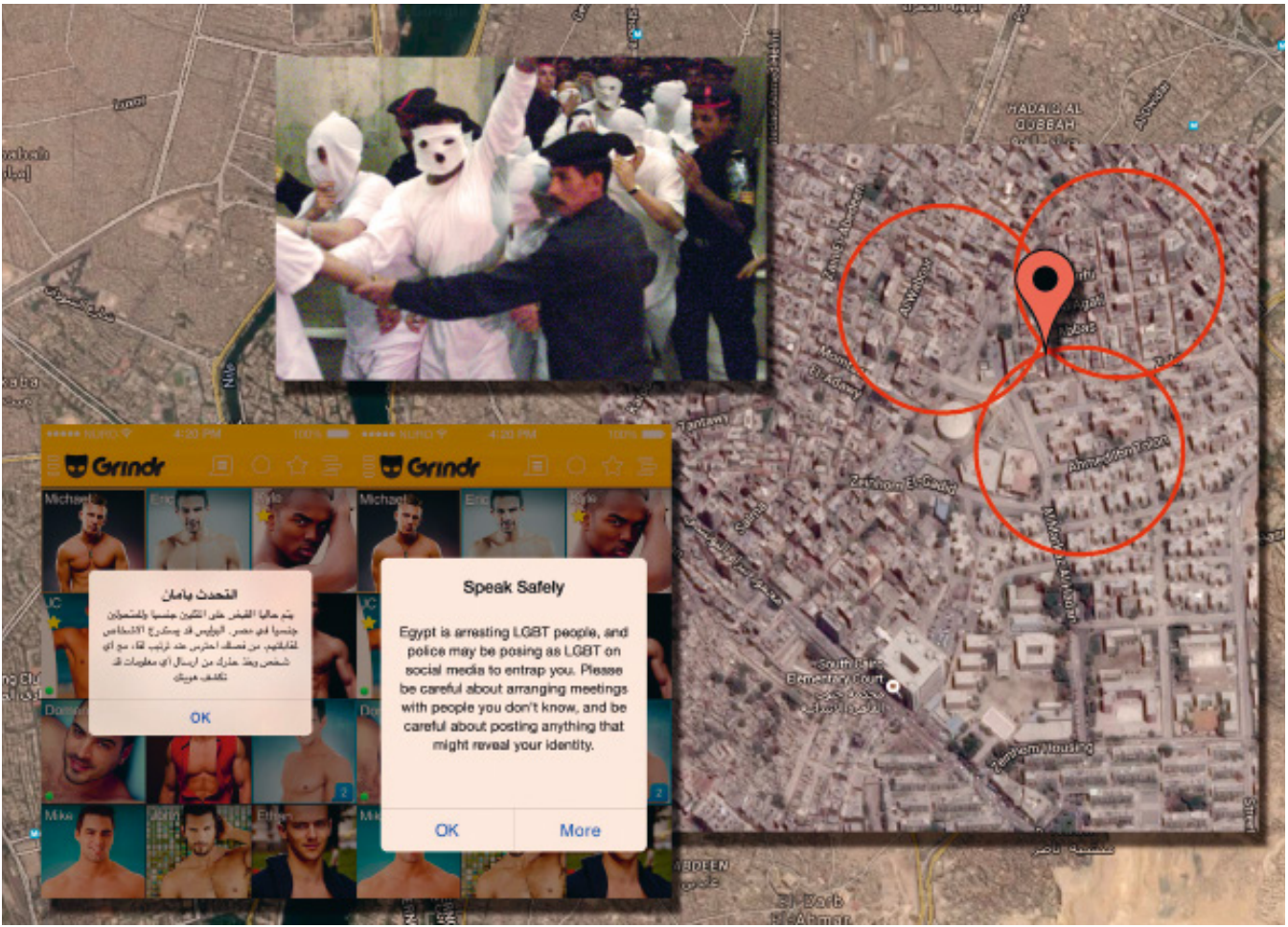
On 12 October 2013, fourteen suspects were arrested after being caught 'in the act of homosexuality' inside a health spa in the poor neighbourhood of al-Marg, northeast of Cairo. Whereas Grindr has become a means for LGBT empowerment, its GPS location basis has also been used in countries where public homosexuality is banned to track, harass and arrest Grindr users.

Stills from William Mean´s documentary *The Grindr Project* (2013). This short film explores, through a series of interviews with various Grindr users, the taboos and controversies around the use of this app. In the film, the interviewees are asked about how this app has influenced the way gays and bisexuals interact in and outside the online platform.

Dating-apps' interfaces have developed in parallel with the evolution of cell phones and interaction features in order to create a more intuitive user experience. Grindr's user interace (*left*) works across multiple devices and offers a wall of profiles at a glance.

Andrés Jaque in conversation with Gonzalo Herrero

GH   AJ

Your architecture practice is called Office for Political Innovation. How do you think architecture and politics relate to each other today?

Architecture is always political because it brings conflicting entities together. In our office, we are not interested in political rhetoric or party politics but in the way our material world is constructed by politics. We're interested in how politics is built by daily actions bringing together different scales, times and natures. This notion of politics makes architecture relevant, and reveals the role it plays in reinventing the social. We don't focus on the production of objects but on the way things interact with each other, and the networks and layers that creates.

Is this shift leading to a rupture between applied and theoretical designers?

Architecture is no longer about finding solutions—it's about redefining problems and finding ways to operate in society. An office like ours can't find an established critical ground to operate in, so we need to keep producing it. This means we need to produce research, and find partners to develop unsolicited projects. In the broad picture of architectural practices, there is a clear distinction between those who claim to be critical and those who don't want to waste energy on anything except getting more commissions. We are moving to a time in which theories are not important. What is important is the way we make everyday practices critical ones. Received wisdom is being very much challenged by intelligence-in-the-making. In other words, knowledge is created through action. That means that architecture can produce knowledge and challenge stereotypes. Of course, a lot of this intelligence comes with the way technology is embedded in our daily lives. But we don't have access to the way that technology is scripted, so we have to make the context react to our actions.

GH   AJ

How do you approach this in your practice?

At the Office for Political Innovation, we have dedicated a lot of effort to examining fragments of daily life and to questioning the way they are constructed through design. It also implies exploring alternative formats for design—like, for instance, the use of the re-enactment as a design tool, as we did in the project 'Superpowers of Ten'. There, we re-enacted a version of the Eames's Powers of Ten to bring in the politics that was hidden between the frames of their original film.

Did you see yourself practising architecture in this way when you were a student?

I never imagined myself following the route that other people were taking: working in a well-known office, becoming a younger version of the kind of architect the office was based on, winning competitions, etc. As a student at architecture school, I was already writing for newspapers, working on research projects in the political sciences and having conversations with people who saw architecture from the perspective of sociology, ecological politics, or science and technology. I never pictured myself following a master. Back when I was a student, Madrid was a very lively city, one that came alive at night. The night-time was much richer than my daytime life at school. Madrid's nightlife was a bigger influence on my current work than architecture school.

Do you think our rapidly changing world is causing a shift in our understanding of design?

Design is changing. It's not just that we inhabit a world that is totally designed—there is no longer such a thing as nature—but also that we can only inhabit the world by participating in its permanent reinvention. What Hans Hollein said of architecture in 1968 now applies to

design: 'everything is design'.
The moment we wake up in the morning, we start posting online and responding to messages on our phones. Our lives are becoming a design activity.
We inhabit a moment in which living means designing and so 'design' is no longer delegated to 'designers'. It is expanding into something that needs to be practised at every moment and by everyone. This is not limited to people but also applies to machines. They are designing themselves, and are starting to become autonomous in the way they shape our existence. This kind of exponential evolution is exciting but also causes a lot of uncertainty—I don't think we are ready for this.

How have you represented this in your installation for *Fear and Love*?

Love and sex are often perceived as sources of security, pleasure and relief from the anxieties of daily life. This idea, however, has become obsolete. The way sex tends to be performed today, in particular through the use of locative social media, is overexposing us to uncertainty in the way we experience sex and affection. The acceleration of sexual satisfaction and love comes with a daily cost in risk and disappointment. The interaction of online and offline spaces where the excitement of intimacy with strangers can occur is in itself a new form of urbanism—a new way of inhabiting the city that produces new kinds of citizens and civic manners. Old forecasts about the future of cities predicted that digital technologies would make location unimportant. Dating apps, such as Tinder and Grindr, show that location is in fact more significant now than ever, but not as a source of familiarity but the other way around. The digital proximity given by these apps is the scenario where we become intimately closer with strangers.

And how is this reflected in architecture and design?

Some of our previous projects, such as The Rolling House for the Rolling Society, Sales Oddity or Cosmo are actually trying to explore how design could operate in these digital locative

regimes. The most important thing that's happening is that design is starting to be socially distributed. It's something that is not only happening or being practised by certain actors in the network, but is something that the whole system is producing. This forces architects and designers to rethink the way they work, and the way their work is relevant.

How is this represented in the exhibition?

In this project, we want to create an installation to communicate the situation created by locative geosocial dating apps. This project doesn't try to create a new reality, but to work as a visualizer of an actual, daily social reality. Perhaps it could help design practitioners understand the way they can contribute, or at least the way they are affected by something like locative dating media.


Andrés Jaque's and the Office for Political Innovation's installation for *Fear and Love* proposes a multi-screen display analysing location-based apps at different scales—from identity definition with profile design to the impact on social interaction, both online and face-to-face, and data visualization on an urban map in different times and at landmark events, such as the 2012 London Olympics.
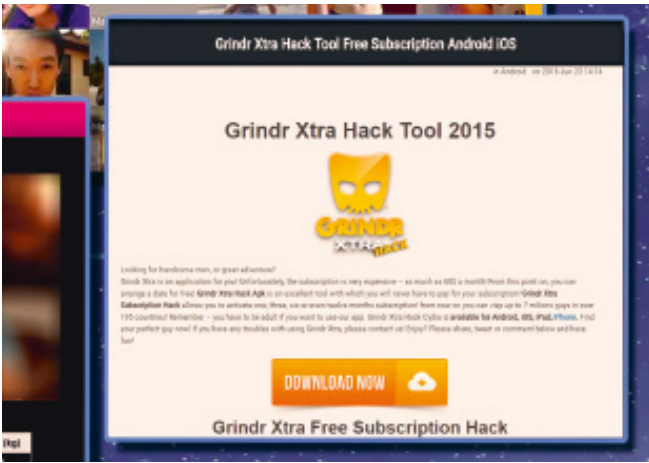
In 2012, 'Block' was reported as the most used Grindr command. It instigated the development of a number of independent apps with which Grindr users hacked the platform.

In 2015, screenshots of Reverend Matthew Makela's private messages and pictures on Grindr caused controversy when they were published alongside his previous public statements criticizing the LGBT community. The case revealed the discrepancy between some users' public profiles and their private—though not private enough—personas.
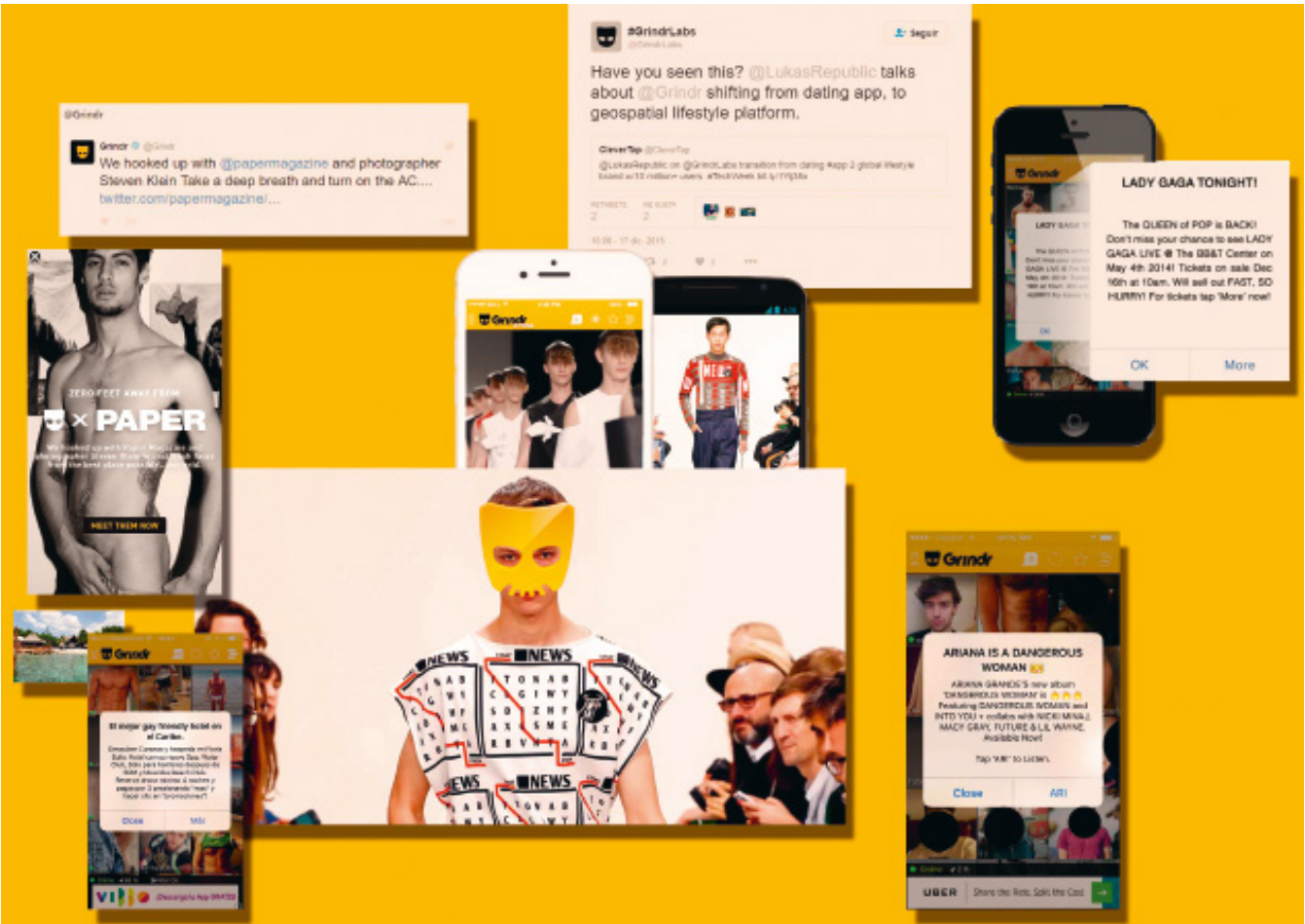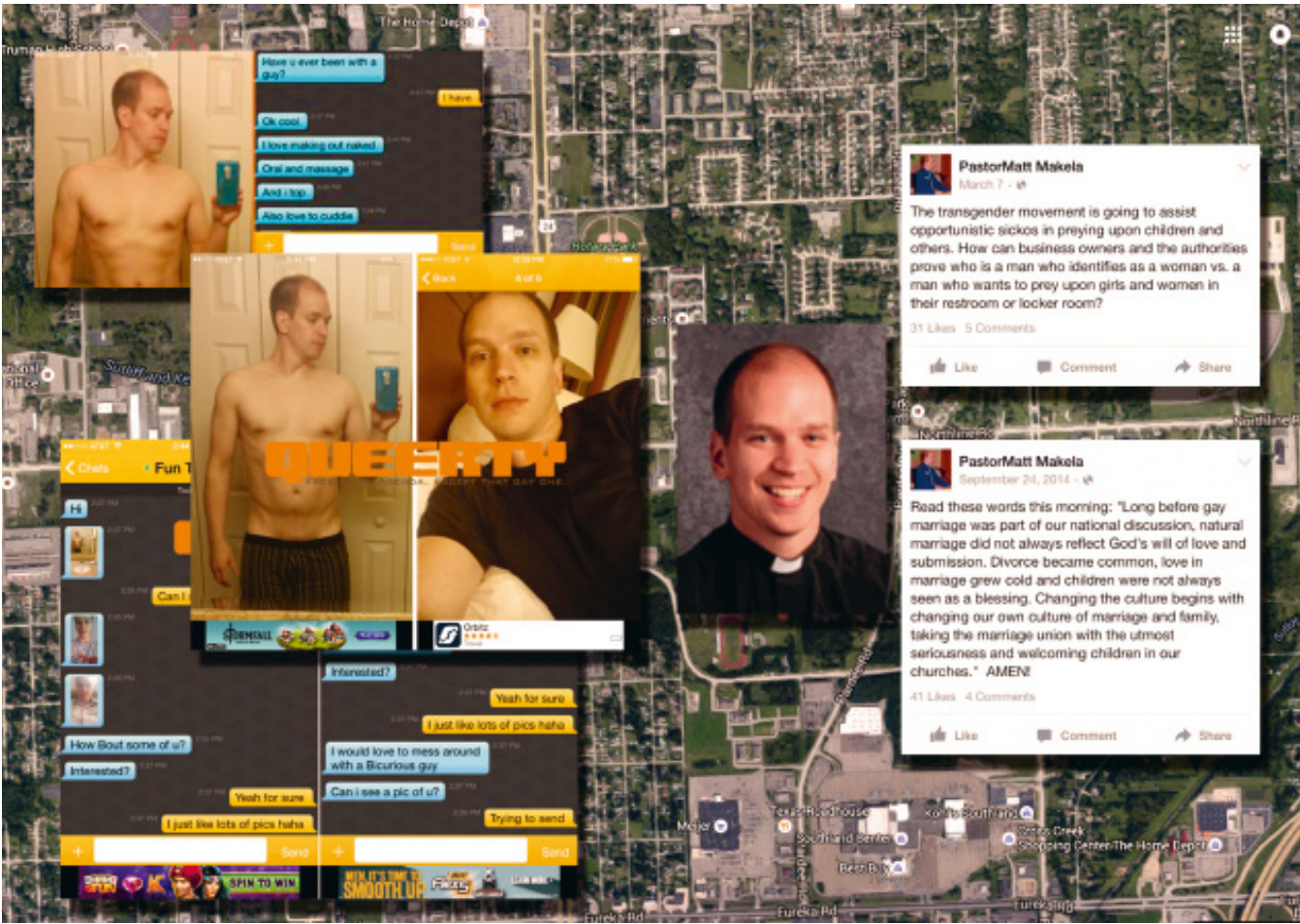
Dating apps are quickly expanding their business market into lifestyle consumer platforms and creating partnerships with fashion brands, event companies and media. In early 2016, London fashion brand JW Anderson partnered with Grindr to live-stream their Spring/Summer 2016 collection show, and in summer that year Grindr debuted its own twenty-nine-piece menswear line titled 'The Varsity Collection'.