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WATCH // Israeli Founder of Grindr Talks About Growing Up Gay and Coming Out to His Family

Joel Simkhai talks about how he developed the uber-popular hookup app for men.

Doron Halutz | Jun 28, 2016 1:55 PM

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Grindr, a location-based dating networking application for men, celebrated its fifth anniversary this spring with a colorful party in Los Angeles. While on Google Play and the Apple App Store, Grindr is described as a social network for chatting, socializing and meeting gay, bi- and -curious guys, it's best known as a shameless hookup app. But 10 million downloads and a growing number of mentions in the press, in films and on television show that its importance is much greater than the sum of hookups it has facilitated. Grindr is today not only a thriving business, carried along on the buff shoulders of millions of gay men. It is also an integral component of gay experience and identity, whose implications for attitudes toward sexuality and society have made it an increasingly popular subject of academic study.

Joel Simkhai, the man behind Grindr, was born in Tel Aviv, the middle son of a diamond-dealer father and jewelry-seller mother, and he speaks fluent Hebrew with a heavy American accent. He says that when he conceived of Grindr, he was simply trying to answer a need. "I never thought it would turn into something global, and I never thought of it as a way to make a living. It was just that as a gay man, you always want to know who else around you is gay," he says.





five million people every month.

A man using Grindr on an iPhone. Used by around five million people every month. Credit: David Bachar

In college, Simkhai majored in economics and international relations and, he says, “I slept with a man for the first time, someone I met when I went to a different college for summer session. I was 18, and to get rid of the thoughts I had on the subject, I decided to try it once. In the end it turned out differently, of course.”

His father “easily accepted” the news that his son was gay. “He suspected it and dropped hints, he wanted to know,” Simkhai says. But for his mother, “it took time.” In fact, his announcement was just the coming attractions: Eventually, both his brothers came out. Today, Simkhai says, their mother boasts of her connection to the casual sex hall of fame, and even installed Grindr on her own cellphone. “She doesn’t use it to chat with people there, she just wanted to have it, she’s proud of it.”

In addition to Apple iOS, Grindr is available for Android and Blackberry devices “It’s still strange to me that anywhere in the world, with the exception of two islands in the South Pacific, people use my app, Grindr is known everywhere and that every day we have a million and a half users on average. That’s quite a lot of people. I don’t know how it happened.”

The McDonaldization of hookups

Simkhai has always been careful to maintain his financial independence.. “A lot of people wanted to invest in or buy the company, but I didn’t see the need for it and didn’t want to cede control. We made money from launch day, which we put back into development, and even before that our costs were low.” Today the company has 30 employees in customer service and in advertising sales, and a few dozen more whose job is to review user photos and screen out problematic content (mainly nudity, the public display of which is prohibited). According to company figures, every month Grindr is used by around five million people (including two million in the United States, about 700,000 in Britain and 18,000 in Israel), who privately send each other around 38 million messages and three million photos a day on average





where sex could take place. I don't know whether there is more sexual activity because of Grindr, but it's definitely become simpler and more convenient."

So is Grindr just a new way to satisfy old drives? Or have the acceleration, streamlining and simplification of the process of meeting people — the McDonaldization of hookups — changed the rules of the game? Some people viewed it as a brilliant invention, a tool of queer social empowerment that would also end loneliness, while others lamented the end of monogamy, the intolerable ease of infidelity and the addictive and alienating potential of the endless pursuit of anonymous sex.

"That's how men are," says Simkhai. "They're always looking for a new thrill. We've just made it faster and more open and accessible. So old-timers say it was nicer in the past — but it was also very ineffective. That's how it is in any market. Look at diamonds. Once you would go to the diamond exchange, you'd circulate around a big room with your diamonds, see what people were looking for, meanwhile you'd have a coffee and ask, 'How's the wife and kids?' Today, it's all done online. I look at Grindr the same way. We've made the process more efficient, more modern. I think that's a good thing."

Like the diamonds that Simkhai's father trades, many of the men on Grindr market themselves like goods. One of the most common genres of user profile photos is of a muscular torso, cut off at the neck. Simkhai doesn't see a problem in presenting oneself as merchandise. Using Grindr is "a transactional experience," he says. "The profiles are short, the conversations are brief. Maybe we made the market too fluid, but it is a market, and I am one of many, so I need to be competitive and to promote and sell myself. In the meantime, my awareness of my appearance has also grown, and — fine, I need to go to the gym too. Is that good or bad? It's reality. Looks are important. That's how people judge."

The large, nearly always available supply leads some users not only to emphasize their physical qualities, but also to describe their tastes with firm precision: "no femmes," "no fatties," "no Asians," "no blacks." "There have always been racists," Schwartz says, including on pre-Grindr dating sites. Although the app's terms of service prohibit racially or ethnically offensive material, Simkhai says there's little he can do about it. "I don't like it," he says, "but it's not my job to police such things. I'm not a sixth-grade teacher."

The data on Grindr's servers could be fertile grounds for study, but few Grindr users cooperate with researchers. Nevertheless, last year the book "Meet Grindr: How One App Changed the Way We Connect," by Jaime Woo, was published, and a number of scholars are also studying the social network.





Simkhai keeps Grindr open on his cellphone all the time. “I’m always looking,” he says. In his profile pic, with the hills of Santa Barbara in the background, he is shirtless. 1.68 meters, 68 kilograms, white, single, 37.

What are you looking for?

“A relationship. Or to meet. When you start talking with somebody, you don’t know where it will end. Maybe friendship, maybe sex.”

He goes out on a lot of dates, but says he doesn’t like “the kind of first date where you go to dinner and ask each other, ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘What do you do?’ It’s not natural for me. But I have hookups, and try to go out when I can.” Simkhai says that while he has been in relationships in the past, it’s not easy for him to find partners. “It’s a lot of work, and I don’t want somebody only in order not to sleep alone. That’s not enough for me.”

His profile once indicated that he was the man behind the brand, but he deleted that information. “It’s simpler that way. I want to talk with people without being obligated to answer anything, without feeling that I’m working. And I want someone who is attracted to me, interested in me, not in Grindr.”

When you like someone, don’t you go through their message history and photos a bit? After all, they’re on your server.

“No. Technically, I could, obviously. But if I want more information, I ask for it.”



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