
Meet Joel Simkhai, the Israeli founder of Grindr

By Tess Cutler

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“Everybody knows Grindr. If you’re a gay man and you don’t know what Grindr is, then you’re lying.”

Steve Levin may be head of sales at — you guessed it — Grindr, but he isn’t speaking hyperbole.

Late at night at a drag bar in West Hollywood, a table of seven gay men in their 20s all discussed the social app, which has revolutionized how gay men meet each other since it launched in 2009. All but one of them had the app downloaded on their phone. When the odd man out was asked why, he said that he used to be on the app, but a year ago he opted for Scruff (a Grindr spinoff designed specifically for men with facial hair). Regardless of the app, though, he continued, “Being gay, there’s no way around it — apps are the best way to meet guys.”

Grindr was started as the first social app exclusively for, as it advertises, “gay, bi and curious guys.” Now embarking on its sixth year, it boasts staggering stats with nearly 14 million downloads in more than 192 countries.

Founder and CEO of the social phenomenon, Joel Simkhai, never expected Grindr to be such a success. Born in Israel, raised in New York and now living in Los Angeles, Simkhai first got the idea for Grindr as a way for him to meet guys — simple as that.

“As a gay man, you’re always wondering who else is gay,” Simkhai, 38, told the Journal. “The problem is pretty inherent and [there] has never been a good solution. For years I’ve been thinking about this problem.”

Finally, when the second-generation iPhone came out in June 2008, he came across an answer. The technology is fairly straightforward: The app uses a geolocation device that allows users to view a selection of profiles categorized by location (the nearest Grindr user is pictured first). Tapping on a profile picture allows the user to read a brief profile and, if he so chooses, send a pic, message or share his own location. The next step, if both parties agree, is an official meet-up.

So what separates this social network from all other social networks?

“It can help you get out of the house,” Simkhai said. “Unfortunately, a lot of the social networks don’t do that. They’re asocial in a lot of different ways. With Grindr, you interact with the goal to meet, and that’s something that I’m very proud of.”

Simkhai called the app “magic vision” for guys, referring to how it’s changed the dynamic of how gay men meet each other.

“You sit in your office, you sit in your house, you sit on the bus or wherever, and there’s all these people around us, but it’s pretty hard to

**“[W]e’ve been fighting for our equality and against persecution for a long, long time. Gay men and women are still fighting back now.”
— Joel Simkhai**

figure out who else is gay,” he said. “It really gives you a way to see everyone who is gay around you.”

Sure, the app originated as a hook-up app, but it’s become much more than that, especially in smaller communities, according to Levin. He said that in major cities, “There’s a million ways for gay guys to meet each other, but in other countries and Middle America or rural areas, it doesn’t exist, and it’s terrifying to come out.”

It’s in cases like those, where gay men are virtually isolated from a larger gay community, that Grindr makes its biggest impact, Levin said.

There are pages and pages of testimonies on grindr.com where users share their success stories. There’s Mario from Sulzberg, Germany, a place he described as “very conservative”; Min and Paopao found each other in Suzhou, China; and Skip, who’s currently serving in Iraq, met fellow Grindr users in Baghdad. The stories are endless.

Simkhai said Grindr adopts a bigger role in the lives of secluded gay men throughout the world, especially in countries where homosexuality is criminalized.

“From our perspective, in a lot of these countries, there are no gay bars or gay communities, no real gay life, and so for our users, that’s really gay life for them,” he said. “This is their main media to meet other gay men, to interact and to not feel alone, to not feel like they’re a weird creature, that they’re very normal and very human.”

In 2013, Grindr was officially banned in Turkey. Simkhai immediately responded by issuing a public statement: “We are very upset to hear that the Istanbul

Anatolia 14th Criminal Court of Peace blocked Grindr as a ‘protection measure.’ Grindr was created to help facilitate the connection between gay men — especially in countries where the LGBT community is oppressed.”

Instances like these are why the company founded Grindr for Equality in 2011, an outreach initiative that mobilizes Grindr users across the globe to bring LGBT equality issues to the forefront. In 2014, its “Get Out Safely” campaign partnered with Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration International, the only international organization devoted to advocating for LGBT individuals seeking refuge from persecution based on their gender and sexual preference. Grindr distributed a message to app users living in countries such as Egypt, Russia and Uganda, providing step-by-step information that would ultimately help them leave their countries and escape persecution. More than 7,000 users clicked on the link to seek help.

“We’ve done a bunch of things around the world to push governments into new things and to warn users of the dangers that they’re facing. We try to figure out what can be done,” Simkhai said.

Simkhai said that as a Jew he’s a minority already, and “we’ve been fighting for our equality and against persecution for a long, long time. Gay men and women are still fighting back now. I’d love to see that greater equality and greater love for different people and different sexual orientations.”

Coming to this country as an immigrant — not to mention being diagnosed with dyslexia as a child — he is proud to have overcome significant challenges.

“To think that you could build something from scratch that becomes international and is used by millions of men all the time, to have such an impact, is really exciting,” he said. “Hopefully I serve as a role model,” he said.

After a few quiet moments, Simkhai continued, “The word ‘role model’ comes off a little strong. Hopefully, somebody could look at me and say, ‘If he could do it, then I could do it.’”