

STYLE

The Sex Education of Grindr's Joel Simkhai

By GUY TREBAY DEC. 12, 2014

LOS ANGELES — High on a ridge here, up a series of winding roads from Sunset Boulevard, up where coyotes skulk into backyards, up and away from the sprawling megalopolis of nearly four million people, Joel Simkhai recently bought himself a tear-down.

The house is a white cube, three bedrooms and two baths. There is a pergola and there is an oval pool. The pergola and the oval pool and the ugly white cube do not much matter because the house was purchased for one reason — and that is its 15,911-square-foot lot.

From this multimillion-dollar apron of land overlooking Los Angeles can be seen a commanding panorama. It extends in a broad and vertiginous sweep from the spine of the Santa Monica Mountains across the flat Los Angeles Basin, east to the high-rises of downtown and west to the scimitar arc of the Pacific coastline.

It is a top-of-the-world view, and from this vantage Mr. Simkhai is able to scan a city where his fellow Angelenos are going about their daily lives, largely invisible to him and also, from this particular multimillion-dollar perspective, substantially abstract.

It is the kind of view that may for some induce a feeling of dread or alienation, and yet for Mr. Simkhai is a source of exhilaration. Standing at the cliff edge on a cool recent morning, he surveyed his adopted city from his new ridge top and pronounced himself content.

“I look down at that view and I feel, like, totally connected,” said the man who built a fortune on the widely accepted perception that the totality of any one human being can effectively and, for the purposes of “connecting,” be rendered in a photo the size of a thumbnail and an accompanying biographical text of no more than 140 characters — fewer if the search engine optimization of one’s brand is a concern.

It has been nearly six years since Mr. Simkhai, a wiry and slight California transplant, born in Israel in the year of the American bicentennial, introduced the world to Grindr, a geosocial networking app geared toward men who — whether they define themselves as gay or bisexual or merely “curious” — take a lively interest in those of their sex.

In both free and subscription-based versions, Grindr employs the GPS function of a smartphone to allow a user to identify men within relative proximity. With a tap on a screen, a cascade of images appears on a user’s iPhone or Android, as in a video game. Each photo is accompanied by snippet of profile text and, where previously the text was superimposed on the profile, in an iteration introduced this month without fanfare, Grindr quietly refined its format to suppress text in a semiconcealed swipe-up screen.

“Grindr is a very, very visual experience,” Mr. Simkhai said. “I’m not really a big believer in words.”

By tapping on an individual image, any given Grindr user is given the option to chat, send photos, share a precise location and — provided things go according to the implicit promise of the app’s architecture — sooner or later to do a good deal more than that. “I’m not saying inner beauty is not important,” Mr. Simkhai said. “But the visual leads to the drive to desire and to be desired.”

If Grindr did not altogether revolutionize online meetings, it has been on the market long enough to have inspired many imitators, apps with names like Scruff and Mister and Hornet and Jack’d; to have given critics of its technical shortcomings plenty of grounds for complaint; and to have provided material for moralists who accuse it of fostering misogyny and racism; and, also, as the blogger Choire Sicha once did, to characterize it as “the biggest, scariest gay bar” in the world.

Yet it remains the killer networking app in gay social media, with an estimated four million users in 192 countries, reportedly including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Ghana, places where by being overtly gay, people sometimes risk death. Its founder shirks the label “hookup app,” preferring to frame Grindr as an online meeting place. But the distinction is largely lost on such users as a Berlin-based performance artist who embarked in September on a project titled “Save the Date,” for which he planned on using Grindr to arrange sexual encounters with a different man daily for a year, or another artist who in October mounted an installation in which his raunchy Grindr conversations were projected publicly on a wide-screen.

The title of the piece was “Wanna Play?”

“You know, I never had any master plan to shift a culture,” said Mr. Simkhai, a regular on the circuit-party scene. “I made something because I wanted it for myself.”

While the idea for a geolocative man-finder had been floating around in Mr. Simkhai’s consciousness for a long time, he said, it was not until the Apple iPod Touch appeared and with it a generation of smartphones equipped to harvest GPS data that he was able to put his plan into play. With the help of a Scandinavian software developer he met online and a \$2,000 grubstake, he devised and started the app in 2009.

“I was thinking about what was out there at the time,” Mr. Simkhai said one afternoon at the Grindr office, a suite of rooms on the ground floor of a nondescript West Hollywood office building.

“Craigslist was so anonymous and explicit,” he said. “And on Craigslist, you have no real identity. It’s just a post. It’s not your face or maybe not even a real ID.”

With Grindr, Mr. Simkhai said: “You can’t change your identity so much. Most dating sites require you to post a face pic and we think a lot about do we force you to post a picture of yourself, rather than a cat or scenery, because those scenery pics really drive me nuts.”

Hanging on a wall behind Mr. Simkhai’s desk is a variety of masks, including one resembling Hannibal Lecter’s face restraint, references to the Grindr logo, which is a mask. Given the historic necessity for gay men to live in concealment, a mask may seem a curious choice of logo, and yet it is not altogether at odds with Mr. Simkhai himself, who though he wears his paradoxes lightly can sometimes seem like two very unlike personalities in the body of one small man.

Close to 40, he appears far younger and has about him the air of an overgrown adolescent. Head of a successful privately held and far-reaching international business, he is so low-key as to be easily mistaken for a parking attendant. Boyishly handsome, with a toothy smile and a shock of dark hair, he claims to be beset by physical insecurities.

“Grindr made me get fit and go to the gym more, get better abs,” said Mr. Simkhai, who occasionally posts a shirtless photograph on his own profile. “People criticize it for being superficial, but I didn’t invent that in human nature. What Grindr does is makes you raise your game.”

Though he has inarguably effected seismic changes in contemporary gay male culture, altering not only how men meet, but also how they portray and even see themselves, he thinks of himself, he said, primarily as a service provider.

“If someone had said to me 10 years ago is, ‘Is it your dream to be a C.E.O. and manage people?’ I would have said no,” said Mr. Simkhai, who is a charter member of the Young Presidents’ Organization, an international network of chief executives under the age of 45; a multimillionaire capable of gleefully reporting that he redeemed a \$14 Yelp coupon for lunch; and a marketing wizard who admits to having conceived of the influential Grindr cascade of thumbnail images while stoned.

“I’m still wowed by how Joel took Grindr and made it so central to queer male culture, how he used its ability to mimic a social network and slide past a lot of nongay people’s ick factors,” said Jaime Woo, a Canadian writer and the author of “Meet Grindr,” a 2013 exploration of the app and its cultural aftereffects.

If Mr. Simkhai has had to give thought to the “ick factor,” it is for the simple reason that Grindr is governed by Apple’s puritanical terms of service and thus remains among the least prurient of the so-called hookup apps.

“We were constrained by Apple in the beginning,” in terms of what was permissible on the site, Mr. Simkhai said: no suggestive images, no underwear shots or pictures below the waist. And, while the app’s moderators, who are half a world away in India, are not always successful in screening out images of dubious taste, it remains dominated by inoffensive face photos, headless selfies of torsos viewed in bathroom mirrors and the occasional image of a mountain meadow or the Golden Gate Bridge.

“I see us as more of a bar than a sex club,” Mr. Simkhai said. “If you go to a bar, you don’t want to see someone with his genitals hanging out.” And if, as Mr. Simkhai said, there would be a “certain ickiness” to Grindr devolving into a mere digital sex club, that is not to suggest the desired endpoint for him or any other user is to organize a holiday food drive or a Scrabble tournament.

“Outside the gay community, people would probably say it’s just a hookup app,” Mr. Simkhai said. “And absolutely, sex is going on. But it’s more than that, because there’s always the possibility you will hit the jackpot and find someone who will move you. It has this potential for making a huge impact in your life.”

It is surely that video-game promise that keeps people coming back to the app, the Candy Crush allure of a score. In pursuit of it, the Grindr founder himself hooks

up once a week on average, he said, more often when he is on the road. Agnostic about type, Mr. Simkhai is clear on “deal-breakers.” Smoking is one; another is people who live with cats.

“I like brunettes and always end up with blonds, so I don’t think I have a shiksa thing, but apparently I do,” Mr. Simkhai said one afternoon not long ago over lunch at Ammo, an organic Hollywood restaurant, where he ordered with the caution of someone adhering to a strict food plan.

Son of a Tehran-born Israeli diamond dealer and a teacher-turned-jeweler, Mr. Simkhai arrived in this country at 3. He was raised first on Roosevelt Island and later in Mamaroneck, a middle-class Westchester suburb, the middle of three boys, each of whom, as things turned out, is gay. The youngest is the New York fashion designer Jonathan Simkhai. “I downloaded the app, and searched through it a little,” he said recently by telephone. “But I haven’t used it that much, because I’m a bit of a hopeless romantic and always looking for a relationship and to have kids.”

Educated at Tufts University, Joel Simkhai had no particular specialization in information technology.

“When I first thought about Grindr, I had no idea how to make it happen, technically,” Mr. Simkhai said. “But that’s something I’m good at, taking the challenge of something people tell me can’t be done and then figuring it out.”

If the initial challenge was devising a way to meet men without resorting to traditional gay gathering places, the bars that are now largely a thing of the past, the new one for Mr. Simkhai is how to reduce the intervals of time between first contact and connection.

“What I think about a lot is speeding up the process,” Mr. Simkhai said. “That’s why the image and the visual are super important. I can tell you I’m in good shape, but if you look at the photo, you know, and then we can get past the awkwardness, having the same conversations over and over. You can get closer to the magic of what might happen.”

That is the theory, anyway.

Until then, and like most users surveyed, Mr. Simkhai tends to check his Grindr profile hourly — whether in restaurants once the bill has been paid; in clubs where from opposite corners of the room men cruise each other online; or in Starbucks or Duane Reades, where some repair to find new proximate populations.

“It’s a habit,” said Mr. Simkhai, who has been in relationships of up to two years but who is currently single. “People think I can have any boy I want, that I can point and have. And I would love that, but it’s not my reality. So I’m on the app 10 times a day looking, because you never know when you might have that magical, transformative encounter.”

That much is certain. You do not.

Correction: December 15, 2014

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of an Apple product. It is the iPod Touch, not the iTouch.

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