How has the Internet Determined the Identity of Chilean Gay Men in the Last Twenty Years?

Juan Francisco Riumalló Grüzmacher

INTRODUCTION

Through this project, I explore the changing relationship between Chilean gay men and online communication over the last 20 years. I interviewed ten gay men between the ages of 24 and 55 years of age, from Santiago de Chile, via *Skype* and *Scruff*—a gay dating app.

In this paper, I describe the experience of using Chilean gay websites for men of different ages and social backgrounds, and how useful such sites were found to be in the process of assuming their own homosexual identities. I then discuss different ways of communication among Chilean gay men during the pre-internet times, the first gay chat rooms and the newest apps for smartphones. Finally, I concentrate the discussion about how important the internet has been in creating a sense of Chilean gay community, not only in the virtual world but also in the real world. Overall, my goal is to figure out how Chilean gay men have used the internet during the two last decades, and how the internet has affected the process of creating a sexual identity in these people.

LEAVING THE ISLAND

Every one of my informants told me that the first time he looked at pornography was through the internet. This then became a habit and each spent a significant portion of his time online looking for these kinds of websites. Felipe is 36 years old and remembers that he was 16 when he used the internet for the first time. His aunt was the first member of the family with a connection in her house. To have access to the internet was not cheap in Chile in the 1990s and as a result, Felipe could not use the internet very often.

Every two weeks he used to take a bus after school to go to his aunt´s house on the east side of Santiago. At that hour of the day, around 3:00 p.m., he had to settle for simply viewing photos online because chat rooms were completely empty. The best time to meet people was at night, however it would have been considered strange to visit his aunt by night as a teenager. Then his parents got an internet connection. The first chat that he joined was called *mIRC* (Microsoft internet Relay Chat).[1] He remembers that there were people from many different countries, and with various interests. In the Chilean room there were around 200 people—this in a country with a population of around 16 million. Every night he found they were almost always the same 200 men. On the screen you could see only letters and codes, something unimaginable now in the age of *Grindr* and *Scruff*.

While Felipe was starting to discover his first gay experiences on the screen, Mateo was only six years old. Now he is 26, ten years younger than Felipe. He did not have to take a bus to access the internet, because it has been a part of his life from the very beginning. For him, the experience was completely different. "In my case it wouldn't have been so different to come out without internet. At least for me, it wasn't a deciding factor." Mateo came out in Chile ten years after Felipe. According to him, "It wasn't an aid to meet people. I had the luck of meeting real people by chance, in my daily life. I know that internet opened a world to a lot of people. But that hasn't been my reality."

Francisco is 23 years old and also started watching pornography online. He was brought up in a very Catholic context; an upbringing that caused him tremendous guilt. The first gay man that he met was not in a chat room, but in the metro. That was four years ago. He not only considers the internet irrelevant to his process of coming out and meeting other gay people, he would have preferred not to use it. For him, the internet is a highly eroticized and sexualized space, rather than a useful tool that might help him meet people who could become his friends, or help him find information and support for coming out.

Francisco's comments remind me of Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gaden's (2008) work on the problematic potential of virtual space. They write, "as virtual spaces have been popularized, they have been both celebrated as an opportunity for liberation from conventional gender roles and criticized as white-male shaped spaces, filled with pornography, sexualization, and increased commodifications" (Dumitrica/Gaden 2008: 6-7). This view, that the internet can be both a space of liberation and one reinforcing existing norms and conventions, was confirmed in my interviews with informants whom I met through a dating app called *Scruff*.

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1 | mIRC: www.mirc.com.

Balázs is the profile name of a 25-year-old man. According to him, dating apps are a double-edged sword. Balázsis thinks that he would have been healthier without the internet because, online, pornography opens an endless world for you. He told me, "I saw things and I said: 'What is this?'! It was something disgusting. It starts to idealize sexuality. It idealizes it so much that it's impossible to find it in real life. It would have been healthier to find out [about sexuality] on my own." He also thinks that the lack of information about sexual education, on websites or apps that promote sex dates, makes it much easier to engage in unsafe sexual practices.

Luis is of the same generation as Felipe. He is 35, and came out twelve years ago when he was 23. Nowadays, he is the President of "Iguales,"[2] one of the biggest and most important foundations in Chile for sexual diversity. He spent around four years looking at photos of gay pornography before entering a chat room to meet people. Luis explained, "On one hand I was not mature enough to realize that I had to talk about being gay with someone. But the internet wasn't helping much because when you searched, the only things available were pornographic photos. There wasn't a concept of community online, even less so in Chile."

In 2010, he decided to create a website called *Joven Confundido*[3] ("the Confused Young") on which young people could find answers to their questions during the process of coming out. After Luis came out, many other young gay men approached him to ask questions about how they could do the same. He tells me that he created the website so that people can find answers and interact with each other. Luis explains that in spite of the fact that being gay is so common, the internet did not offer any tools or support for coming out. "Existing sites were for people who were already out. But what happens with those who hadn't assumed their identity yet?" Luis asked.

He believes that adolescence is a very lonely stage in life for gay teens, because neither schools nor the Chilean government, nor the health public system provide young people any help. There is a lack of support among many families as well, due to the fact the parents are "straight." For the same reason, he believes that gay people use the internet to increase their exposure to a greater number of others like themselves as opposed to straight people. The feeling of being a minority pushes them to look for more people like themselves. Luis tells me: "A heterosexual goes to school and 90 per cent of his classmates are heterosexual as well. But for a gay man it's the opposite. In every working space, family space, educational space, he finds himself in a minority position. And therefore, as social beings, the internet constitutes a platform to search for pairs."

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2 | *Fundación Iguales*: www.iguales.cl.

3 | *Joven Confundido*: www.jovenconfundido.com.

On Luis's website, aimed at the young, it is possible to find many important answers to common questions. A nurse and midwife, and two psychologists—all of them homosexuals—moderate the website. Notably, the site offers users the option to delete any trace of their visit in their computer history. Privacy is very important here.

Image 1
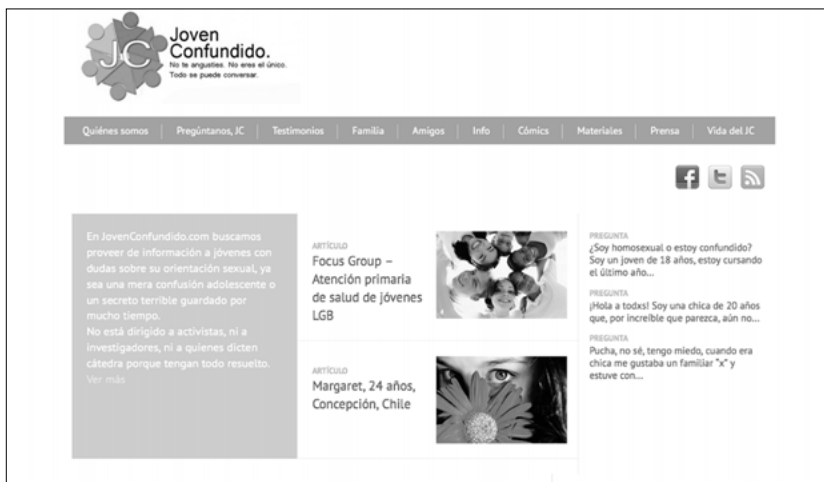
The Chilean website: www.jovenconfundido.com

Like a Cow

On March 25, 2009, a new dating app for gay men called *Grindr* was launched. According to my participants, *Grindr* is the most popular dating app among their friends in Chile. The company says that they have more than five million users from 192 countries. It works with the GPS on a users' smartphone and shows other users who are close by. The app is free but if you want to see more profiles, you have to pay. *Scruff* is its most direct competitor in the gay scene, with five million users around the world (see also Phillips 2015). The main difference from *Grindr* is that you can see who has visited your profile and you are able to search in other locations by typing in an address or the name of a neighborhood.

Image 2
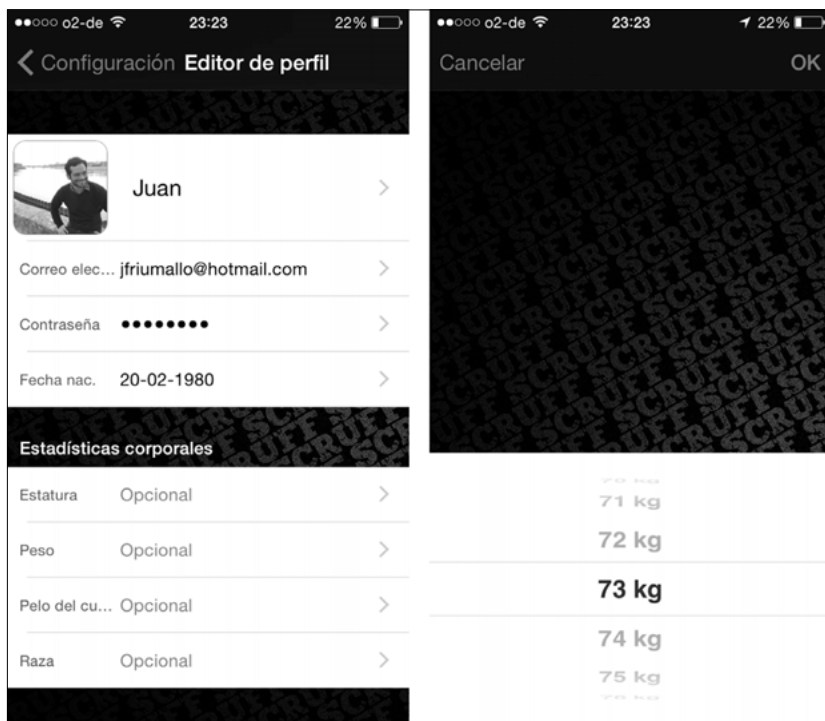
These screen shots were taken during the process of creating my own profile in *Scruff*. I wrote, as a part of my data, that I am a student of the Freie Universität Berlin.

I decided to create a profile in *Scruff* because it allowed me to talk with men in Chile while I was living in Berlin. The app recommends one to choose a good profile photo and write a short biography. I included my age at that moment, 35, and my profession as "Universitario" (Student), along with my weight and height. In my profile I wrote about my program of study, Visual and Media Anthropology, and made my role as a researcher explicit.

"El ReY DeL MaMBO" sends me a message. I am in.

Amongst the profiles, I recognize the face of the friend of a friend. The following day I sent him a message via *WhatsApp*. I thought it would be too intrusive to appear suddenly on *Scruff* asking questions; maybe that is symptomatic of being a new user.

Gonzalo is 37 years old and a user of *Scruff*. He gives me an introduction to the app through *Skype*. He explains that *Scruff* is about making dates and, unlike *Grindr*, it facilitates many types of interactions—from short chats to meeting the love of your life—and features many types of users—not necessarily "models." Gonzalo tells me that he always has felt very different

from the other Chilean gay men, because of his way of speaking, his body type and his interests, but here he feels very comfortable. "It's not the perfect physique, but a more masculine one. It's not to be extremely hot, the perfect body. But on the other hand, I think that's very popular nowadays. The manlier, hairier man. Which wasn't very common ten years ago, now it is. And *Scruff* aims for that," explains Gonzalo.

I met some people in *Scruff*. I decided not to ask about age if this did not appear in the profile. Hermann does not show his age; he is simply described as "Hispano/Latino, 1,82m, 77kg." He tells me that he has not met anyone special through *Scruff* so far. In general, he uses these kinds of apps exclusively for sex. However, he also finds these types of apps useful when he is traveling, at least to go out and have dinner with someone. "But in general, people are here only to have sex. Very few people are looking for something else," he explains.

Oz is 43 years old and single: "White, 1,84m, 72kg, some body hair." I ask him how he feels using this app. He answers that he feels comfortable, but he uses it more for watching people rather than meeting them. "Sometimes I lose interest, sometimes the other person does; or, being more practical, I'm not coming out of my house at 3:00 a.m. because I got turned on with a chat." He thinks the younger one is, the more time one spends in these apps.

Balázs is 24 years old and also single: "Mixed, 1,80m, 76kg, hairy." He is almost 20 years younger than Oz. He disagrees with the idea that youth is indicative of better skills for using the app, at least on *Scruff*. He tells me that, through *Scruff,* you can find people of all ages and if you have a specific preference, you can use filters. He feels comfortable using the app but has had some bad experiences. "The local users on this app describe and demand a specific style of men, using aggression, segregation of subjects or their conditions. To my judgment, that's not healthy. It's ok to have our own tastes, but there are other ways," says Balázs.

Image 3

User profiles on *Scruff*,
in Providencia, Santiago de Chile.

I sent a good number of messages on *Scruff,* but I did not have much success. When I typed in "Providencia, Santiago de Chile,"—my former neighborhood in Santiago—45 profiles out of 100 appeared semi-nude. Of course, as researcher, that was not the case with my own profile. In general, the photos were more suggestive than mine. Particularly in this app, the photo seems to be everything.

I ask more questions of Gonzalo, this time through *Scruff*. I want to know more about the significance of the photo in the profile. "I think it's important because it's a visual app, where you sell your image and the image that you sell has to be as good as possible to achieve your goal, which in this case is to be liked by the other person that you might be interested in," Gonzalo said. For him, it is like fishing, "You pick the best hook or you keep trying until you figure out which one to stay with."

After my first experience on this app, I got an e-mail from the *Scruff* team, signed by a man called Johnny Skandros, the founder of the app. He welcomes me and explains what I can find within the app. At the close of the e-mail, he says goodbye with a "Woof!"

Nowadays, it seems to be much easier to meet gay men in Chile than 15 or 20 years ago. Felipe explains that, before the explosion in access to the internet and smartphones, it was very difficult to find people to flirt with. There were some specific places in Santiago where closeted gay men went to hook up. Felipe tells me: "You drove there in your car, first of all you had to have a car, and then you got into a precise circuit of streets. Everyone was doing the same thing. You placed yourself at the side of the other car, you looked at the other person's face and if you liked him you pulled over a little further on. For many years this was all there was." He feels that kind of circuit was much less safe than being behind a screen.

Tomás is 43 years old and had his first experience in a gay chat room 14 years ago. "Is there someone out there? With that question I went into a gay chat room for the first time." In spite of his age, 29 years old at the time, he did not have any gay friends. He remembers that these chats were based on words, nicknames and codes. There were no photos. He says that everything was very unreal and frustrating; it took many months to meet someone. You could be talking with someone and suddenly that person disappeared—you did not know if it was because his internet connection had failed or because he just didn't like you. Also the risks were higher. He remembers talking for a long time with the same person, idealizing him in spite of not knowing him. The guy sent him a picture. Then they talked on the phone over many months. However, when they met, he was a different person to the one Tomás had expected. The guy had sent Tomás a fake picture.

According to Tomás, the process now of meeting people through the internet is much faster and people lie much less. Despite this, four months ago he decided to close his *Grindr* profile because he used to spend too much time viewing profiles and waiting for something that never happened. "It's like a cattle fair. You put your age, your height, your qualities. And I felt like a cow. Also I reduced my age, because I feel I look younger. I'd say: I'll put the age I represent [32]. I started to get very annoyed with people who, instead of saying 'hi,' would say 'age?'."

When Luis went to a virtual gay chat room for the first time, he felt that his life had changed. Luis says, "I got to talk virtually and then live for the first time with someone who was living a process that was similar to mine. Neither of the two of us would call ourselves gay at the time. But I feel that it helped me to start a process, to discover my sexuality, to talk about the processes we were going through."

In 2003, Luis went to Berlin for a period of six months to study. Suddenly his context changed dramatically, and also the way he approached other gay men. In Berlin, he left the chat rooms for a while and instead felt encouraged to actually go to a gay club to meet people; then, those people introduced him to their friends.

For Felipe, it was also very useful to start chatting with people through the internet but he also had bad experiences. At the end of the 1990s it was possible to send photos online but it took more than five minutes to send or receive such an image; downloading happened slowly, one line of the picture at a time and was viewed in a separate window. A digital camera or a scanner was also required. Most of the times he sent fake photos because of the fear of being discovered. Felipe tells me, "One time, we exchanged pictures with a guy. And while the picture was downloading I figured out that we were both sending the same fake picture. When I realized this, I just ended the chat."

In spite of the disadvantages of the early chat rooms, Luis, Felipe and Tomás agree that the internet contributed to the idea of feeling like a part of something; it was like a common new place where you were able to find more people like yourself—a weak sense of community, but one that was transforming with the passing of the years.

However, for my two youngest informants, the situation is different. Francisco feels that he was lucky, because immediately after coming out he was able to meet people face to face. Although he used *Grindr* and another website called *Manhunt*,[4] he told me that he had been able to make only one friend through the apps. "They were, in general, older people. It was the first time that I was in contact with so many Chilean gays and I thought: "What the fuck am I getting into?! If these are the gays from Chile, I'd rather not come out of the closet because it was all very explicit," explains Francisco. The experience was very shocking for him. He thought that he was never going to be able to introduce his family to one of "these people that show their penises on the internet."

He assumes that even for his generation—he is 23—to be seen on *Grindr* can be complicated, as it is still relatively taboo. He thinks that in Chile, sex is still considered something bad because of the Judeo-Christian culture. He closes the door of his room and tells me that if his mother hears him, she is going to collapse. "That they see you looking for sex on the internet is like, wow. What are they going to think, that I'm looking for sex all day long or that I'm not capable of doing it in person?" explained Francisco.

Mateo neither trusts the virtual world, nor feels particularly part of a community: "I think it's a double-edged sword. Someone who's 14 who is now coming out of the closet has an easier time meeting people. At the same time, I think it's a social insulator. You have access to everything but at the same time it's very easy to hide yourself in it. To have access to everything can be either a good thing or something to keep you in the dark, hidden."

But what happened with people who had to come out and meet other gay people before the internet era? Alfredo is 55 years old and started the process to

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4 | Manhunt: www.manhunt.com.

assume his homosexuality when he was 18. He had some sense of community in some bars during the 1980s, which were the places where he sought to identify with others and started to discover that there were others like him who were in a similar situation. He tells me, "But it was a physical thing [in person] because you couldn´t get to know them if you hadn´t seen them physically before, in any friend´s house, or any bar or places like that. There were not any other ways." For this reason, when the internet appeared as a social tool at the end of the 1990s, Alfredo and other gay men of his generation did not use it to find out answers about how to come out or make friends. "Those of us who identified ourselves [as homosexuals] in our twenties, 25 years ago, approached the internet with a different attitude. And at the beginning we used it a lot to find sex rather than to form groups," explains Alfredo.

Sense of Community

As mentioned, Luis—the President of *Fundación Iguales*—believes that Chilean gay people use the internet more than Chilean heterosexual people, mainly because of the difficulty in meeting other gay people in a country where the Catholic Church still exerts so much influence. "The notion of minority makes you look for mechanisms to make contact with others like you," explains Luis. At Iguales they also use the internet, through their website and social networks, as a way to inform, educate, raise money and recruit volunteers.

Alfredo believes that the internet has been crucial in affecting changes in Chilean society. According to him, social networks such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* are much more able to capture peoples' feelings and express changes in mentality about topics, such as LGBT[5] rights. When those changes are reflected on these networks, it is much easier to point to a social basis for modifying or creating new legislation in parliament with regard to issues such as civil unions. Alfredo is a lawyer and also is involved with Iguales. "The internet provides you with the input to improve laws, in the long term," he said.

According to Felipe, the internet was enabling in creating a sense of Chilean gay community twenty years ago, when he used the first chat rooms to share his experiences and doubts with others unknown guys. He commented that when you have a good group of friends in real life, the internet becomes more dispensable. During 2014 he moved to Berlin for six months for work. Through the process of relocation to a strange city, he was reminded of a similar feeling that he had experienced a long time ago. In moving to Berlin, the internet was very determinant in his ability to find his way; it took on the same importance that it had in the past, largely because he was in a place where he did not belong

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5 | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

and also where he did not know anyone. "I didn't have work mates because I worked alone, and I had a sense of urgency because I was certainly not going to spend two months talking to a wall. And that is when the internet makes you feel part of a space, of a group. The smaller the circle, the more important the internet is."

On the other hand, Felipe says that today you can find several small communities online on *Facebook* or other websites specifically for gay people. However, while there is still not a large online Chilean gay community, there are different smaller groups around several topics or interests, like the fetish scene. "There's still a community being created there and you go back a little bit to the past because these things are more of a taboo. What yesterday was to be gay, today could be sado-masochism. And the internet protects you, it gives you a safe place to interact with other people," Felipe told me. In this sense, Gonzalo said something similar when he described *Scruff* as an app for people with more specific characteristics or tastes.

Tomás also does not feel like he belongs to an online Chilean gay community. He feels more comfortable meeting people through wider apps and social networks like *Instagram* or *Facebook*, which are for gay and straight people alike. A few weeks ago, he met someone via *Instagram*. He sent him a message and then they started talking. "Today I'm interested in showing my context and having access to others. More than just knowing if the person is gay. It's amusing to know who his friends are, because it enriches the relationship. His tastes, the way he takes pictures." According to Tomás, these things are much more important than height, age, or if he is a "top" or a "bottom."

In spite of their 20 years of difference, Francisco also prefers to use apps like *Tinder*, which is for both homosexual and heterosexual people, rather than *Grindr*. "*Tinder* is more like a community. It's healthier because pictures from *Facebook* are being used. Pictures that everybody sees. You're no longer who you want to be, but who you really are online." *Tinder* allows you to know if you have more friends in common. Also it will not let you send extra pictures, so you have to move to *WhatsApp* quickly if you are really interested in one person. Francisco feels that the internet has not directly contributed to generating a Chilean gay community. For him, the websites and social networks for gay men, in most instances, alienate people rather than help them due to the extreme sexualization of the interactions that such sites foster.

Conclusion

In spite of it being quite difficult to generalize, based on 10 interviews, I think it is possible to compare these different points of view, and so discover some aspects of how the internet has determined and modified relationships among Chilean gay men.

In general, it seems that the initial interaction between these gay men and the internet was through pornography. The first time that they saw pornography was on the Web, and that factor seems to have determined the ensuing relation between my participants and the internet. The second notable aspect was the search for other gay people as a way to leave their place of isolation and loneliness. While the first step has not seen big changes in 20 years—with the exception of the fact that today access to the internet is far more widespread and relatively inexpensive —the second one has changed dramatically.

Nowadays, younger Chilean gay men seem to have more opportunities to meet other people like them in real life, rather than just through online apps. It is also evident that for those who are younger, most apps and sites that are geared only to gay men do not have a good reputation among their friends; they do not feel comfortable being seen using those apps. However, almost one year after doing these interviews, my participants are still frequently using *Grindr* and *Scruff*. Apparently, apps have become part of everyday life as a way to meet or observe other gay men.

However, many of my informants agree that after the first boom of the gay sites and apps such as *Grindr*, they now prefer to use less targeted social networks such as *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Tinder*. These tools provide more context about people—such as photos, interests, information about friends, studies and work—while also allowing users to get to know new people. Either way, the internet seems to be less important and useful when gay men already have a circle of friends and relationships in real life.

Yet, the virtual world can be considered of more vital use to Chilean gay people than heterosexual people, because of the stark necessity to safely find more people with the same sexual identity but remain behind a screen; this in the context of a country that still is perceived as very conservative. The virtual world still seems to be the public square for gay people to meet and share experiences.

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