Video chat rooms, community platforms sustained only by CMC.
Case study: Banana Fever, Gay Chat Room.

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Video chat rooms are forming a new platform for geographically delocalized networks whose followers are grouped on the basis of affinities. These characteristics are becoming more relevant for users when the same belong to communities that are stigmatized at the local level.

There are previous examples of communities whose members interact exclusively on Internet - IRC chat rooms and forums - but the addition of images has produced a qualitative change that is reflected in multiple dimensions.

This work is centered on the analysis of strategies for appropriation and use of one of these spaces on the part of a community of gay teenagers, and the technique applied was observation of the screen on which the ethnography originates.

Key words: communication, geographically delocalized networks, video chat rooms, self representation, identity, gay community, Tinychat.
Interactive media are becoming more technologically sophisticated and numerous with the passing of time. Among these media are social networking sites, microblogging sites, fotologs, 3D immersion spaces and video chat rooms that allow one to establish interpersonal communications in real time and, thanks to this quality, have become the foundation of social media.

Owing to this fact, and because internet use has become accessible to all, the study of individuals and the networks in which they participate – in a scenario in which time and space tend to blur - has taken on greater importance. As Stephen W. Hawking has pointed out, after the formulation of the Theory of Relativity the concepts of space and time have changed to the point where it has become necessary to accept that they cannot be treated as two different dimensions – they both combine to form a space-time continuum (1998:26).

Zygmunt Bauman proposed a similar idea, although applied to the social sphere, by stating that space and time exist in the global world only to cancel each other out (1998:77).

In addition, the study of networks has increased in importance since the perception of the division between real and virtual came to be seen as imprecise and that, in fact, they are actually two associated and complementary spheres (Bakardjieva, 2011:68) (Boase et al., 2006:IV) (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009:93) (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002:9).

When the sociologist William I. Thomas pointed out that if individuals define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (1928:571), the Internet was many years
away from being created – or even conceived – but Thomas’ declaration took on special relevance with the rise of the web. Several decades later, Sherry Turkle warned, from a social psychology perspective, that persons using the internet to establish prolonged interpersonal relationships should know that they are putting their emotional vulnerability in play, given that Internet experiences are serious and are disregarded at one’s own risk (1995:270).

We are inclined to believe that the traditional real–virtual opposition should be substituted by a visualized relation, such as a continuum of reality in which, in any case, if one wishes to establish any difference in analytic effects between both parts, it is possible to identify a zone in which face to face interactions predominate and another in which computer mediated communications (CMC) predominate. As we stated earlier, this is a continuum in which a strong relationship of complementarity is established between the two. In 1998, Anita Blanchard and Tom Horan pointed out the existence of two types of communities among those sustained by CMC; those with a physical base and those in which a significant part of the base was the Internet, and whose users did not meet in person. Said authors not only remarked on the quality of community of the two, but also defined the central characteristics of the second type: the geographical dispersion of its members and the fact the motive for interaction was interest in a common topic (1998:295). Of course, at that time the community was sustained by the use of bulletin boards, email or IRC chat rooms.

In the context in which the number of geographically delocalized networks in which users are grouped on the basis of shared affinities or interests is steadily increasing, this work proposes to investigate socio-communicational aspects present in a video chat room oriented towards a segment of the gay community which, due to the age group involved, could be classified as digital natives according to the definition by Marc
Prensky. Said author considered digital natives to be those who have had intense and prolonged experience with digital devices since childhood (2001).

**Methodology**

This research was based on the technique of screen observation, which was systematically applied over a period of one year, following the guidelines suggested by Turkle (1995) and Christine Hine (2000, 2005). Observation was focused on a chat room attended by gay teenagers called *Banana Fever*, which is part of the Tinychat website (from July 2011 to July 2012). Observation occurred during the third week of every month in 12 hour shifts that alternated, month by month, between daytime and nighttime hours.

In the interest of research into Internet encounter spaces in which members interact almost exclusively among themselves, with no face to face contact, we also periodically observed two other chat rooms from the same website that were not of an LGBT character that served as control chat rooms: *Georgia*, a chat room for teenagers of both sexes, and *I asian and I know it!*, frequented by young people of Asian origin. In both, the daily attendance of a stable group of users was observed. In these two chat rooms, references to homosexuality were, for the most part, derogatory or in a tone of joking or ridicule.

During the entire period of observation, words were never exchanged with the users so that all the data obtained is solely based on what was observed in the form of images, public dialogue or, in some cases, follow-up on Facebook or Tumblr addresses that users made known while conversing among themselves.

The decision to prioritize *Banana Fever* was partly based on an interest in studying a group that was possibly stigmatized at the local level, and partly to ensure that the
majority of users could unequivocally be considered digital natives, as opposed to other LGBT chat rooms. In addition, among the other Tinychat gay chat rooms observed, the activities were not very different from the chosen chat room, except for conversations more oriented towards older people and a greater tolerance of the presence of women. A relevant point in the case for the application of the observation technique is that it is not obligatory to turn on your webcam to enter the site, and to do so might have even made the task impossible. From our experience, if the status of observer is maintained without intervening, the observer will not encounter any greater obstacles to carrying out the work. As Rosalia Winocur rightly stated, in social networks privacy is not aimed at protecting the observed, but the observer (2009:78).

Various social network platforms from the perspectives of homogeneity and geographic localization

The networks generated from the now obsolete instant messaging (IM) were very homogeneous as they were created in the image of the central user: similar age, economic, social and human capital. In fact, the majority of contact list members in this type of platform also interacted face to face, or had done so at some time. Only occasionally did they include individuals who were not known in person. Networks based on IM were by their nature more homogeneous than individual face to face networks, because the latter included family members or persons known for instrumental reasons that were excluded from the former. It was also observed that these networks had a nucleus of members who maintained strong bonds among themselves – contradicting the idea, now in retreat, that the Internet only establishes weak bonds.
Along these lines, something similar occurs in networks generated through use of cellular telephones; although they may adhere more closely to the face to face architecture generated by IM, they have a denser nucleus (zone of greater interaction through calls or SMS) that is also highly homogenous.

Upon advancing in the analysis of other, more recent networks, one begins to notice that homogeneity tends to become diluted, although it does not lose relevance due to that. An example of this is the social networking site. In the networks generated by Facebook, for example, the number of contacts made up of individuals not known in person increases significantly in relation to IM networks (West et al., 2009).

Concerning social networking sites, the idea that delocalized affinities among individuals are more important than affinities of geographical proximity is beginning to take shape. Contacts are no longer accepted or added to the list simply because they are known in person, but because both parties feel that they are members of a collective – a feeling that justifies transcending geographical limits.

Although there is a debate as to whether Twitter is a social site or an open information network, there is no doubt that it sustains interactive networks of high communicational value in which geographic localization has been steadily losing ground to instrumental or recreational affinities. Paula Sibilia has pointed out that beyond the use of up to 140 characters in messages, on which much has been speculated, Twitter’s significance lies in the expression of new forms of living in temporality and of constructing subjectivities (2008:158). This process also highlights changes in the form of public presentation of individuals, particularly among young people, which leads to the perception of the decline in the idea of privacy as it was understood in the 19th and 20th Centuries. In parallel, and in contradiction to the predictions made upon the rise of the Internet
(Turkle, 1995), real identities have been predominating simulated identities (Stone, 1995) (Bringué and Sádaba, 2008:78).

**Video chat rooms and the case of Tinychat**

Almost from the origin of the Internet there have been platforms in which users are grouped in delocalized form and by shared interests: IRC chat rooms and forums. But these old platforms are in sharp decline to the extent in which the majority of Young people have never even heard of them and have opted en masse for social networking sites on which to converse in real time or asynchronously. Thanks to advances in the area of software, the chat room concept has evolved to offer new possibilities, the most important of which is the use of webcams that has created the video chat room, and Tinychat has become the most noteworthy of this type. Tinychat became operational in 2009 and basically consists of a group of video chat rooms, created and moderated by users on the basis of thematic topics. At present there are approximately 70,000 users online during the hours of greatest activity (mainly nocturnal hours in the United States). Its greatest novelty is that it is possible to simultaneously maintain up to twelve open webcams on each site, while at the same time users can converse in traditional forms – written or oral – collectively or person to person. One of the characteristics of Tinychat that is key to the assertions maintained in our research is that motives for participation in the chat rooms are basically linked to the affinities of the users. What is even more relevant is the fact that there are almost no face to face relationships, principally due to differences in age and geographical distance.
Being that these video chat rooms are delocalized, grouped according to shared interests and that they offer opportunities for exhibition and visualization lacking in traditional chat rooms, young people have found in them a privileged space for encounter and expression that empowers them when they are members of minorities such as certain urban tribes, ethnic groups or the LGBT community.

**Banana Fever, a gay chat room on Tinychat**

Rules: no girls, no spam, no open mic, no picture cams. Questions?

Banner seen upon entering the chat room

At the time of observation *Banana Fever* was a gay chat room from Tinychat that had been in existence for almost three years. For reasons related to its origin, it tended to attract young people with an average age of 16 – 18, with extremes running from 14 – 30. As of July, 2012 the chat room had 985 registered followers, a condition necessary for direct access.

The chat room was created by a young Dutchman whose pseudonym was Fremo, and whose real name (and probably surname) was known to habitual users. Towards the end of 2012, Fremo unilaterally closed the chat room on Tinychat and moved it to another site, claiming technical deficiencies. On the new site, Incanhaz Chat, use of the chat room began to rapidly decline until it virtually disappeared. When this occurred, our observation had already ceased, for which reason we can only conjecture that Fremo overestimated his supposed position of leadership and underestimated the followers’ attachment to Tinychat. If this speculation is correct, we could hypothesize that the chat room had real value of place, and that its users were not inclined to move. This would
suggest that Internet communities are less nomadic than they are generally assumed to be.

In 2005, Graham Brown, Bruce Maycock and Sharyn Burns carried out research into the behavior of gay men in IRC chat rooms in Perth, Australia. One of their conclusions is applicable to what has been observed in Banana Fever: the chat rooms were especially useful to those who were in the process of exploring or understanding their sexuality. There they could interact and socialize with a reference group, thus acquiring the knowledge, norms, attitudes and language of the gay community. For these men, the Internet was, to a great extent, a first step in this process of socialization (2005:67). This purpose is still maintained, but in contrast to what the aforementioned research stated, in Banana Fever the great majority participants did not act in covert form – this being the unique and original characteristic of video chat rooms.

**Synthesis of obtained data**

The data obtained during the period of observation will be presented in synthetic form, using as a reference the group of daily users whose number did not exceed 30. During this period, a part of this nucleus spaced their entries, or stopped entering, while others joined the group or increased their entries. A number of peripheral users entered more sporadically, which brought the total number to approximately one hundred.

**Signs of belonging** - Almost none of the frequent users reside in the same locality or, judging by their conversations, know each other in person. If due to some circumstance they have met each other personally, they do not meet regularly. Despite the fact that most have not met in person, they feel themselves to be part of an established group. This is evidenced by the greetings exchanged upon entering or leaving and by the familiar tone of conversations. The number of Greetings received is a sign of the degree of belonging to the group, or popularity among the same. The greetings of someone considered to be a stranger are not answered, at least not until the “stranger” has demonstrated his desire to be a member of the group through his
persistence. In extreme cases, unwelcomed interventions are cut off with a brusque And who are you?, evidencing the “otherness” – at least temporarily – of the interloper.

Another element demonstrating belonging to the group is the use of users’ real Nick names in place of the pseudonyms that they use to log on. Knowledge of real names is considered as an unmistakable sign of having belonged to the group over an extended period of time.

**Geographic localizations** – The majority of the users are from the United States, approximately one third are European and the rest (very few) are Canadian, or of some other nationality including Latin Americans. Presence in the chat room is not determined by respective local hours – the time of greatest activity corresponds to nocturnal hours in the United States and early morning hours in Europe. Of interest beyond the countries of origin is that within the American and European nuclei there is an over-representation of ethnic minorities, which in the case of Asians and Latinos is generally made up of the children of immigrants. This suggests that we are dealing with young people that suffer double social discrimination due to their sexual orientation and ethnicity. The ethnic factor did not go unnoticed in the dialogues, and references are frequently made in “politically incorrect” terms (the word “nigger” being an example), but their use is perceived as more proof of the degree of familiarity that makes this conduct permissible.

At the same time, among the white Americans there is a numerically significant presence of young people from small and medium sized towns of the region known as the Bible Belt.

**Moderators and exclusion** – Not everyone has a similar role in the chat room. There is a group with the role of moderators who have the power to exclude, by means of a command (ban nickname), users who for some reason are considered to be troublesome,
or who do not follow the rules of Tinychat or the rules created by the chat room itself. These violations were referred to in the aforementioned banner that is seen upon entry to the chat room. If an exclusion is considered to be unfair, the rest of the group may protest quite vehemently and force the moderator to justify the action. The position of moderator is not granted by Tinychat, but by the creator of the chat room in consultation with the existing moderators, and upon proposal of the person interested in taking on the function.

There is a certain degree of tension in the relationship between the moderators and the rest of the group, as the former are viewed as “sheriffs”, in addition to the sympathies or antipathies that they may awaken. When at least one of the moderators is in the room, behavior is more rigid than times in which none are present. In any case, there exists the idea that their task guarantees their permanence in the Tinychat room.

In the case that a girl who has gone unnoticed because her pseudonym does not reveal her sex turns on her webcam, she will be banned almost immediately. On days in which there are few users present, the presence of a young woman (normally with her prior declaration of being a lesbian) will be tolerated, but it will not be long until voices are raised in a reminder of the rule against women in the chat room and a tense situation is generated. If the real sex of a person is in doubt, the person will be asked to show at least a breast, if not their genitals (although the latter extreme has never materialized).

Language, topics of conversation and attitudes – the language used is English, with the occasional use of other languages. Even non-British Europeans of the same nationality tend to exchange comments in English in the general conversation zone, being that the use of their native language usually sparks protest from the other members in the room, who will tell them to use private messaging.
As is typical in chat rooms, the public dialogues are often brief, repetitive and, when viewed as a whole, incoherent. Communication by voice is very rare. Conversations usually revolve around topics related to sexual orientation, but given the possibility of open webcams, members are often asked to remove an article of clothing. As an example, a member proposes a *shirtless hour* and at times the proposal is accepted.

Despite requests, or in their absence, it is only very occasionally that one of the users present will exhibit nudity, and this is only tolerated on the condition that the individual is a frequent user - in the case of a stranger, they will be quickly banned. The prohibition of nudity is a general rule among sites similar to Tinychat, though it is common for users to be dressed in nothing but shorts or similar. Obviously, positive or negative comments about a participant’s physical appearance are made.

Despite repeated invitations exchanged to continue the conversation through Skype, which implies greater intimacy, permanence in the chat room show that these encounters are not frequently carried out. In any case, occasional references to cybersex between users through Skype are made, which when not denied by those implicated could possibly be real, although some cases could simply be put down to empty boasting.

References to the rights of homosexuals or to past struggles for recognition (in the United States and Europe) are never made and mention of family conflicts caused by users’ sexual orientation is rare. However, accessing Facebook pages of some users shows that in the majority of cases their sexual orientation is dissimilated, especially among minors. Explicit references to social stigmatization are only made by the few users that live in Islamic countries. Some of these last can only be seen in silhouette due to the lighting in the places that they are speaking from.
Quite frequently there are conversations centered on experiences of unrequited love, in which cases the effected party is consoled by the group.

There are also circumstantial dialogues on topics related to the daily lives (work and studies) of those present. During the period of observation, a particular tumult was caused by one of the more popular moderator’s decision to enlist in his country’s armed forces. At the same time, another moderator was already enlisted in the Army and accessed the chat room from a post in the Far East, very far from his country of origin. The latter situation did not create any major commotion.

It is important to point out that not all conversations are held in a cheerful tone. In addition to the occasional argument, at times the conversation becomes dramatic if, for example, a participant expresses thoughts of taking his own life for motives of a generally existential character, although not discounting social rejection due to sexual orientation as a direct or indirect motive. In these cases the older participants try to diffuse the situation through advice and reason, and it is evident that they take the probability seriously. The younger participants do not intervene in these types of conversations, probably because they are emotionally overwhelming.

During our observation we visited a Tinychat room frequented by teenagers of both sexes belonging to an urban tribe in which a death had occurred. We learned of the situation from the banner displayed upon entering the chat room, in which there were signs of the commotion that had been generated by the incident. The chat room was for young emos.

**Presentation and representation** – We define presentation as the moment in which users begin to enter the chat room and turn on their webcams for the first time. It is a stage of insecurities and negotiations, and it is not always necessary to maintain the image that they presented themselves with. For this reason we prefer to use the term
“representation” when we are dealing with a daily image that has been established over time. In general, the presentation is more timid or moderate than the representation. Many of the representations are the result of a careful production involving apparel (hats, costumes, flamboyant wigs, makeup, surrounding scenery). This behavior was possible to confirm because the representations were repetitive – almost ritual. Some members of the group who were frequent users occasionally appeared dressed as women.

Webcams remaining on for many hours at a time is a common occurrence, and for that reason it is normal to see users eating, cooking, sleeping, changing clothes, studying, working, playing video games, dancing, singing, playing guitar, listening to music through headphones or talking on cellular phones. At times the webcam is simply focused on an empty room. Some users openly drink alcohol or smoke marijuana in view of the webcam.

Some actions have a collective character, such as each user doing a dance piece from their bedroom which is emitted in the chat room.

On rare occasions a user is seen in bed with his partner. The situation is far from a sexual encounter, but it is insinuated that the same will happen off camera. This act increases the prestige of the user, as one of the reproaches used in arguments among users is that they “don’t have a life” in the face to face environment.

On numerous occasions an adult family member will accidently pass in front of the camera. If it were not for their age, and judging by their conversations and the furnishings of their rooms, one could be left with the false impression that the majority of the young people in the chat room lived alone. This speaks volumes about new forms of parent-child relationships.
Almost all of these behaviors and forms of presentation and representation are similar to those found in other observed chat rooms on Tinychat.

**The relationship with minors** – Despite the fact that there is little difference in the age of users, there is a strong sensitivity in respect to age. In fact, a recent arrival is always asked how old he is.

Especially among users from the United States, those over the age of 18 avoid openly propositioning minors and, on more than one occasion, derogatory references to the police are made. In this context the mere mention of the police is enough to intimidate. If someone who is obviously older than 30 enters the chat room he will be quickly banned, and even though he claims to be gay he will not be able to avoid accusations of being a pedophile. Similarly, if someone entering the chat room is suspected by one of the moderators of being a child (the limit seems to be about 13 years of age), he too will be excluded.

Through their conversations it can be deduced that many of the users see their youth as a permanent state and that the passing of time is something remote which does not worry them.

**Those who never speak** – In addition to the members that use webcams, there are others in the chat room (presumably, as it is impossible to know if they are in front of their monitors) who never intervene in conversations or turn on their webcams (some stay for weeks or even months). Frequent users express the assumption that these are snoopers, or even pedophiles, but as long as they do not intervene in conversations they are mostly ignored and the ban command is not used against them. During the observation, we did not find any manifest reason for this behavior – if someone from this group of unknown users writes something, it is demanded that they identify themselves by turning on their webcam under threat of exclusion.
**The pick-up** - The behaviors that we have referred to are an indication that the chat room is more a place for communicational encounters, confirmation and affirmation of sexual identity and public exhibition rather than a site for seeking sexual encounters, which is not to say that the last does not occur. What is relevant to our working hypothesis is that the pick-up and the probable subsequent acts will only occur on-line, or in other words, cybersex. On the few occasions that reference was made to a place explicitly intended for pick-ups, the Chatroulette site was mentioned. Arriving at this point, we believe that we have identified codes, mechanisms and uses that serve to demarcate and strengthen the group, as was affirmed by Diane Gifford after analyzing the balance of her research on another community (an IRC chat room frequented by women who had been abused at some point in their lives) significant for its role of emotional support (2006:18).

**Some final interpretations**

There is no doubt that video chat rooms sustain socio-communicational networks, given that the most active users participate on a daily basis and create strong bonds of belonging and identity, even though the exchanges are only sustained by CMC. In fact, these chat rooms are currently the Internet sites most similar to a global social space, validating Marshall McLuhan’s prediction, in his own terminology, that electro-magnetic discoveries would simultaneously reproduce scenes of all the affairs of mankind, creating the conditions for all of the human family to live in a global village (Rogers:2000). In parallel, the concept of privacy has changed and public exhibition of the person on the part of Young people is more similar to what was done by Jet-Set personalities than
to the members of secluded petit bourgeois homes of the 19th and 20th Centuries. In light of this fact, renewed legitimacy is given to Cristina Corea’s statement that contemporary youth are the bearers of a publicity subjectivity – that is to say one modeled on publicity and the media (2004:166).

Another aspect of theoretical interest is that of simulation of identities. When a significant portion of the members of a network are known in person it is difficult to maintain a false identity over a period of time. Paradoxically, now that face to face interaction is declining in importance, the various platforms used by the same individual and the fact that the networks sustained by these platforms have, in part, the same members have made it increasingly difficult to maintain a false identity in the medium term.

In addition is the fact that the most popular social networking sites have become stricter regarding the control of identities. This is basically due to commercial motives, as their prestige could be damaged in the eyes of advertisers if identities of potential consumers are false. The days when America Online (AOL) offered their associates the opportunity to create up to five different profiles are long gone.

In video chat rooms with the possibility, if not the demand, to show ones face and body the eventuality of a simulation is even further reduced. The evidence strongly confirms that real identities on the Internet are the norm. In any case, it should not be forgotten that imposters exist to a greater or lesser extent in daily face to face interactions. For that reason individuals behave, with a certain limit of socially acquired tolerance, in person, as well as on the Internet, in accordance with Erving Hoffman’s astute observation that shamans who are performing tricks nevertheless believe in their own powers, and especially in the powers of other shamans – given that they consult one another when their children are ill (1962:21).
In the case studied it has also been confirmed that when members of a network are not from the same geographic location it does not necessarily mean that the network is heterogeneous. Beyond the topic/affinity that attracts and unites users in video chat rooms is the homogeneity of the age of the users. Of course, in video chat rooms and *Banana Fever* there are other homogeneities that are not easily corroborated by observing a screen, although we suspect that this is not an impossible task if systematic techniques commonly used in the social sciences and marketing research are adapted and applied in a complementary form. In the case of video chat rooms, analysis of the scenario as seen through a webcam must be resorted to.

**Conclusions**

The observations carried out confirm the existence of Internet communities that do not depend on their members knowing each other in person, and that these communities, owing to the facts that they endure over time and that their members establish bonds of reciprocal support, are more solid than is usually acknowledged. This ascertainment takes on special significance when dealing with a community formed by young people who have been socially stigmatized. Within the community, these young people can express themselves with a degree of freedom that is not granted in the local scenario, owing as much to their sexual orientation as to their age, which in many cases makes them dependants of their families and schools. This data is extremely important to our theoretical assumptions, because before the rise of the Internet these delocalized spaces, with the capacity for providing emotional support to individuals who may be alienated or even discriminated against in their local environments, did not exist. The result is even more powerful if one considers the case
of individuals that are from small towns or especially repressive cultural environments.

For the users of *Banana Fever*, the chat room is their territory.

Although spaces with these characteristics have existed since the origins of the Internet, video chat rooms offer the possibility to exhibit oneself and see the other participants in real time. In relation to other platforms, these differential properties found in video chat rooms offer people, especially young people, a privileged space for encounter and expression that overcomes borders, languages and cultures.

Lastly, advancing along a line of reasoning outlined at the beginning of this work in respect to the existence of a continuum of reality that covers face to face interactions, as well as those sustained by computer mediated communication, we have sufficient reason to validly question whether Internet encounter spaces, in our case being video chat rooms, have also become real places. For a member of the *Banana Fever* group, what is the social and psychological limit between the reality of his community and the reality of the chat room? We acknowledge that this postulation merits thorough study of greater disciplinary scope in the future.

**Location of the chat rooms:**

On Tinychat:
http://tinychat.com/bananafever

On Icanhaz Chat;
http://www.icanhazchat.com/?room=bananafever

consulted in January, 2013

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