

Flirting and the web: The case study of Luxusbuerg

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Abstract: This research examines the role of the user in shaping and defining participatory platforms during the early years of the internet and the web. The focus of the study is Luxusbuerg, a Luxembourgish chat network created in 1996 as a channel on the Undernet International Relay Chat (IRC). The channel's success led its owners to develop a dedicated Luxembourg server in 1999, a web chat platform with channels tailored to users' interests. The chapter analyzes how intrinsic IRC elements shaped Luxusbuerg's evolution and user behavior, with a particular focus on the growing prevalence of flirting interactions. Finally, it includes an analysis of the #flirt and #queer channels, in order to ascertain their structural dynamics and user interactions over time.

Keywords: IRC, online dating, early participatory websites, online flirting, web chat

Luxusbuerg was a chat platform specific to Luxembourg created in 1996 as a channel on the Undernet International Relay Chat (IRC)¹, one of the largest real-time chat networks worldwide. The channel's popularity in Luxembourg drove its owners to set up their own server in 1999 with the support of Post Luxembourg.

Based on three oral interviews, an analysis of web archives, and a press corpus, this chapter first describes the platform's origins and how the fact that it was born under the wings of Undernet IRC marked its own existence. We especially highlight five main characteristics inherent to IRC, that were present during Luxusbuerg's lifetime, from its creation—following an international trend emerging at the time when channels based on geographical locations were being created and local linguistic communities were emerging—to its evolution. We also highlight the relevant role of users in such communities, in which they co-shaped and co-created the platform, following the trends marked by IRC's social structures. As the user-centered model reshaped the platform's user experience, flirting became the most popular use of the chat. We demonstrate how it drove the platform organization when it became its own channel-based server, constantly evolving and being shaped by its users. #Flirt became the most stable channel, with 400–500 people connecting simultaneously daily. The success of #flirt was also influenced by one of the distinctive features of the platform, the combination of online and offline interactions. This 'hybrid model' led to a community marked by the innervation of traditional and

¹ More about IRC may be found in Senft (2003). About IRC and Undernet see (Latzko-Toth 1998, 2010); (Stenberg 2002); and (Hinner 2000).

virtual communities feeding back to each other, what Latzko-Toth (1998) has defined as ‘tribus IRC’.

Finally, by studying the first participatory websites such as Luxusbuerg, using web archives as a source, we aim to contextualize IRC and chat platforms as precursors of modern social media and one of the ancestors of instant messaging, following Ortner, Sinner and Jadin (2018), shedding light to the first experiences on online flirting and dating.

1. Origins of Luxusbuerg and influence of International Relay Chat

Luxusbuerg started in 1996 as an Undernet IRC channel². It emerged as an alternative to a ‘Luxembourg’ channel that had already existed since at least 1994³ on the same network, as explained by Raoul Mulheims, one of the founders of Luxusbuerg, in an oral interview in 2022. The Luxembourg Channel had a growing community of 20 to 40 people from 17 to 30 years old, all with a shared interest in technology. The founders of Luxusbuerg spent some time interacting with the ‘Luxembourg’ channel until they decided to create their own. The name ‘Luxusbuerg’ was a tribute to the national cultural heritage. It came from the Luxembourgish comic series Superjhemp: the hero was a parody of a stereotypical Luxembourger who lived in a city named Luxusbuerg. This saga “represents an almost inexhaustible repertoire of possible samples regarding Luxembourg identities” (IPSE 2011, 181). Soon, some rivalry between the two channels started, and since Luxusbuerg was very active, it surpassed the original one, with 200–300 people connecting simultaneously. Raoul Mulheims, together with two friends, Mehran Khalili and Christophe Leesch, decided to take it to the next level and to create a dedicated Luxembourg chat system that became operational on October 3, 1999 (Luxusbuerg 2002) and received support from Post Luxembourg (“Luxusbuerg” 1999; Tom Kettels, interview by author, September 28, 2022). The platform was launched and organized in five channels: #cafe, #teens, #20plus, #flirt, and #computers, according to the only registered version from 1999 in the Wayback Machine⁴. All of them disappeared after some time, while other channels

² IRC is a text-based chat system for instant messaging created in 1988. IRC evolved from a program with limited features at the beginning to an extensive complex technical infrastructure with four major independent networks. Undernet was one of them, created in 1992 with a user-centric approach, focusing on the users' needs and involving them in the network's governance.

³ We do not have the precise creation date of the channel, and this is an estimation based on an oral interview with Raoul Mulheimms, one of the creators of Luxusbuerg. Based on this interview, we assumed that the Luxembourg channel existed in 1994, but we cannot confirm when it was exactly created and if it existed before that year.

⁴ The first version of the Homepage of the new server Luxusbuerg was archived by the Wayback Machine on November 29, 1999.

<https://web.archive.org/web/19991129040331/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.php3> Last accessed December 20, 2023.

emerged, except for the #flirt channel, which remained one of the main pillars of the chat network until it ceased its activities.

In the second part of the paper, we therefore analyze the impact of the inherent characteristics of Luxusbuerg in the development of flirting and do a close reading and analysis of the #flirt channel and its evolution through time, paying attention to its structure and user interactions. We also highlight the increasing consideration paid to security and legal issues to improve the users' experience, and the creation and implications of the #queer channel. Even though Luxusbuerg became its own platform in 1999, IRC characteristics played a significant role in its evolution, be it from a technical, organizational, social, or economic perspective. We can identify five main characteristics inherent to IRC that have defined Luxusbuerg since its inception: the rise of channels based on geographical locations, the emergence of local linguistic communities, the continuity of IRC's social structures, the users' role in co-shaping and co-creating the platform, and the synergies between traditional and virtual communities⁵ consolidating the success of flirting as one of the main uses of the chat.

1.1 Rise of channels based on geographical locations

According to Latzko-Toth (1998), geographical location played a significant role in forming IRC channels. "Of the 196 most frequented channels in one of our surveys, more than a quarter were named after a locality: country (#chile, #france...), state or province (#arizona, #quebec...), or city (#auckland, #istanbul, #manila...)." ⁶

To understand why people connected to a local community in an international chat, three main reasons can be proposed based on scholarly literature: the possibility of jumping quickly to the offline world, having quicker replies based on temporal closeness, and having a more straightforward conversation because the users share the same context (Latzko-Toth 2008, 1998; Billedo 2009; Dakhlija and Poels 2012; Velkovska 2002). These explanations align with the ones offered by the creators of the chat. For Raoul Mulheims, the possibility of going quickly to the offline world due to the small size of Luxembourg was one of the main motivations to connect to a local chat: "You meet online, and then you can say, let's meet this evening, and then we just get a drink." (Mulheims, interview by author, March 22, 2022). Similarly, Christophe Leesch, co-

⁵ More about virtual communities on IRC in Liu (1999) and Jones (1997).

⁶ Free translation of the author supported by DeepL. Original text: « Sur les 196 canaux les plus fréquentés lors d'un de nos sondages, plus du quart avaient pour nom une localité: pays (#chile, #france...), état ou province (#arizona, #quebec...), ou ville (#auckland, #istanbul, #manila...) » (Latzko-Toth 1998, 56)

founder of Luxusbuerg, explained in an interview in 1999 (“Luxusbuerg IRC” 1999, 290):

A chat is a group of users who have something in common. Our channel is reserved for users who live in Luxembourg but do not necessarily have Luxembourgish nationality. The acquaintances that we make on the more international chats usually end in an email correspondence and keep their virtual character. The small size of our country also allows us to meet our chat friends in reality.

In addition, there is a close link between the creation of chats based on geographical locations and the flirt use—a general tendency to be found not only on IRC but also in France with the Minitel, as explained by Josiane Jouët, which may shed light on why the #flirt channel was the most popular in Luxusbuerg; users were able to meet offline and were also encouraged by the hybrid model based on the innervation of virtual and traditional communities.

As the bodies are absent, the corporality is reintroduced by the words, and besides from the first contacts, it was the questions "H or F?" ("man or woman?") or "ASV" ("age, sex, city") Why? Because if I am in Dunkerque and you are in Marseille, it will be more difficult to contact you. That being said, there were people capable of crossing the whole of France to meet Minitel correspondents, but for future contacts, we were primarily looking for people from our region. (Dakhli and Poels 2012, 227)⁷.

1.2 Emergence of linguistic communities

Since its origins, Luxembourgish was the main language used to chat, even on an English-dominant platform such as IRC, while the content, the general news of the channel, and the navigation menu were both in English and Luxembourgish:

There was a long discussion as far as I can remember. We said only Luxembourgish is not great because already, at the time, there was a strong non-Luxembourg-speaking community, so we needed another language. And we said, ok, the Internet language is English, let's create it in English. But the chat language in the public channels was typically Luxembourgish. (Mulheims, interview by author, March 22, 2022).

Following the international evolution of the IRC channels that gave prominence to local languages, Luxembourgish gained increasing importance over the years until it became an identity symbol celebrated by the local press. Mousel and Lulling (2002, 16–17) noted in D’Lëtzebuerg:

⁷ Free translation of the author based on DeepL: « Comme les corps sont absents, la corporalité est réintroduite par les mots et d’ailleurs dès les premiers contacts, c’était les questions « H ou F ? » (« homme ou femme ? ») ou « ASV » (« âge, sexe, ville) Pourquoi? Parce que si je suis à Dunkerque et que tu es à Marseille, ce sera plus difficile de te rencontrer. Cela étant, il y avait des gens capables de traverser toute la France pour rencontrer des correspondants du minitel mais pour de futures rencontres, on cherchait prioritairement des gens de sa région ».

It is quite clear that the internet as a new communication medium has already contributed greatly to the recent rise in the Luxembourgish written language, whether in the web or electronic mail. Never before has so much been written in Luxembourgish as in the last two to three years. A prime example is the website *Luxusbuerg* <http://www.luxusbuerg.lu>, whose founders wanted to create a ‘platform for the Luxembourg online society with their ‘chat portal.’ With an average of 3,400 users daily, the reception can already be described as a success. You can easily ‘chat’ with different people about the most diverse topics in Luxembourgish⁸.

This shift from English to local languages is one of the characteristics inherent to the evolution of IRC chats. According to Latzko-Toth (1998, 46):

[...] the English language, formerly used as a lingua franca on the main channels, has gradually given way to a mosaic of linguistic communities, especially on the Undernet where Quebecers tend to systematically create French versions of channels belonging to the English ‘common core,’ while on the same network, for some time now, the Malay language has been asserting itself as the one that has been growing most rapidly.

The rise of local languages is also perceived when doing a close reading of the #flirt channel language policy and its evolution, as traced by the Wayback Machine (Table 1). This phenomenon is particularly pertinent in Luxembourg, a multilingual country characterized by the prevalence of three main languages—French, German, and Luxembourgish—and English, taking on a predominant role in the early years of the web. Moreover, the use of English gained increased importance in the country due to the growing number of foreign residents⁹. We observed a discernible shift in language use by analyzing the evolution of the #flirt channel rules, as illustrated in Table 1: while the platform was initially more flexible with interactions in English, German, or French, a more restricted language policy was established in later years—this shift seemed to start in 2003 according to our analysis via the Wayback Machine, but we should treat this date cautiously taking into consideration the limitations and challenges of using web archives as a source¹⁰—implementing a “mandatory” use of Luxembourgish from 6h–24h to avoid “chaos and confusion.” (Table 1). The inherent multilingualism introduced some tensions in the chat environment, particularly impacting the French-speaking community, which faced criticism for employing the French language in the chat, as explained

⁸ Original text in German translated via DeepL.

<https://persist.lu/ark:70795/j2d9wx/pages/16/articles/DTL429>

⁹ The percentage of foreign residents in the country increased from 29.7% in 1991, to 36.9% in 2001, reaching 43% in 2011. (Statec 2022)

¹⁰ Web archives are not a mirror of the web as it was in the past. They are a re-construction, where multiple choices intervene (Brügger 2008; Bachimont 2017). The very nature of web archives makes it challenging to use them as a source: an original is lacking; they are incomplete; they consist of a unique version, not a copy of the online web; and there is a temporal and spatial inconsistency between the archived fragments (Brügger 2018).

by Raoul Mulheims. In response to this issue, the chat management established a dedicated French-speaking channel, #francophone, as a remedial measure.

Table 1: Evolution #flirt channel rules

#Flirt channel rules 2000 ¹¹	#Flirt channel rules 2003 ¹²
<p>“We will try to keep Luxembourgish as the main language in the channel but French, English and German will be tolerated as long as the channel stays a "Luxembourgish one." We will NOT tolerate other languages under ANY circumstances, because that would result in an ultimate chaos with all this people. They may discuss as well in private”. (“#Flirt guidelines,” 2000)</p>	<p>“As the name implies, Luxusbuerg is a Luxembourgish chat. Therefore, we want in the #flirt that only Luxembourgish is written on the channel from 6h–24h. Then you can write English, French, and German, but even in measure. What we want to avoid in any case is that several languages are spoken on Channel 4, or that a language other than Luxembourgish prevails. That's just too much chaos and confusion. For those who want to speak French, there is the #francophone, or the private. And for all other languages the same applies: discuss in private”. (“#Flirt Régelen”, 2003)</p>

For Caroline Dohmer, an Assistant Professor for Luxembourgish grammar and orthography at the University of Luxembourg, who was a moderator of the #flirt channel when she was 15 years old, Luxusbuerg played an essential role in the literacy and standardization of written Luxembourgish and in the generalization of the use of written Luxembourgish beyond text messages:

¹¹ Translation from Luxembourgish with Google Translate. Original text accessible via the Wayback Machine

<https://web.archive.org/web/20001206025800/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu:80/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=gl>

¹² Translation from Luxembourgish with Google Translate: Original text accessible via the Wayback Machine.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20030212121050/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/>

No one used correct spelling. So, we just wrote in our own system. That is how Luxembourgish orthography is working until today. We have standardized orthography, but it is not taught in schools, so people do it as they think it is written (Dohmer, personal communication, June 13, 2023)

1.3 Continuity of IRC's social structures and organization

IRC's social structure functioned as a collective and simultaneous construction of users "unequally empowered" (Latzko-Toth 2014, 591) participating in the platform's design.

Actors were shaped in tandem with the development of IRC. Its developers invented user categories such as operators, ordinary users, disruptive users, etcetera. New terms were created to designate different levels of channel operator status: auto-op, super-op, channel manager or founder, and so on, depending on the network, language, or specific channel culture. (Latzko-Toth 2014, 591).

Luxusbuerg's organization followed IRC's social structures, which persisted through the years. The website was organized and divided into channels, one of the main pillars of the structure of IRC: "Once connected to an IRC server, users join conversation spaces called channels, whose names are designated by the # sign." (Senft 2002, 258). We argue that social structures were so deeply rooted in the functioning of the platform that they persisted despite the changes, first when it became its own server in 1999, and secondly when it integrated a larger structure, the company Nvision, created by Luxusbuerg's owners in 2000.

IRC was based on a hierarchical system that often created tensions between the users and the operators. Elisabeth Reid defined the operators¹³ as "people who have chosen to invest the time needed to set up and maintain the IRC program on their local machines for the benefit of other local users" (Reid 1991). They had the power to remove people from a channel if they misbehaved or to ban users if there was a significant offense, as defined in the channel rules. One of the most common conflicts within the IRC channels was the presumed abuse of power from operators towards users. The accusations of prejudice and injustice were frequent, and this conflict was no stranger to Luxusbuerg.

As explained by Raoul Mulheims, Luxusbuerg had its own regulation system, and actively monitoring the conversations was essential. Therefore, a significant role was given to the moderators in the platform. Luxusbuerg defined the operators as:

Users whose job is to help people on the channel and make sure everyone follows the guidelines. They can change some channel settings (like the topic). They can remove users

¹³ More about the role of the operators in Latzko-Toth (1998; 2014); Reid (1991); and "Undernetiquette and policies" (n.d.)

from the channel if they misbehave (a ‘kick’), as well as keep them permanently out of the channel (a ‘ban’) if they really act badly. (“What, who” 2000).

To become eligible, they needed to invest time and contribute substantially. If the operators started to kick out people without justification, they could lose their status. People offending others could never become eligible. Once they became operators, they needed to connect as much as possible, be wise, and mature in their behavior: “It became a club thing rather than anything else, and this also contributed to the quality of the experience, the user experience as we call it today,” explained Raoul Mulheims.

Above the operators were the channel administrators¹⁴, who were in charge of a specific channel and choosing its operators. The administrators were chosen by the top management, the co-founders, who eventually changed their roles after establishing their own company under which they managed Luxusbuerg (“What, Who” 2000).

1.4 Users co-shaping and co-creating the platform

According to Latzko Toth (2014), IRC was shaped as a collective construction of users actively participating in the platform's evolution. The users became the driving force behind the success of IRC by donating their time to the co-creation of the platform. They became actors, playing an essential role in the platform's governance, contributing to technical development, and reshaping functionalities based on their uses. Luxusbuerg users had been co-designing the platform since its origins. Most of the users, who were primarily students at the beginning, invested their time in helping and designing Luxusbuerg; it started as a community of users motivated by a common interest in technology. The more time the users spent, the more likely they were to become operators or administrators. Nevertheless, a significant change occurred in 2000, impacting the governance of the platform. Luxusbuerg, initially established as a non-profit entity, was transformed into a for-profit entity, selling advertisement space¹⁵, following the creation of a proprietary company by its owners, namely Nvision. This strategic decision encountered resistance from the hardcore users who were against the platform becoming too commercial. This created some tensions in finding a balance between the free collaboration spirit from the origins and the commercial exploitation of the platform as a business. The resistance to this transformation may be

¹⁴ More about the role of administrators in Latzko-Toth (2014; 2010)

¹⁵ More about their advertisement strategy in “Quel type de publicité” 2002 <https://web.archive.org/web/20020803184438/http://www.luxusbuerg.net/quelytypepub.php>

attributed in part to the pronounced influence of IRC's governance structure on Luxusbuerg's operational framework.

During the period spanning 2000 to 2002, the management of Luxusbuerg involved the participation of 120 individuals, while daily user connections ranged between 6,000 and 7,000. Notably, the platform continued to solicit assistance from users without offering financial compensation. In 2002, the Luxusbuerg Development Group issued a call for participation, seeking support for the technical advancement of Luxusbuerg:

Luxusbuerg has created a new platform for all of you interested in the technical developments of Luxusbuerg. Your benefits: Ability to contribute to one of the biggest and technically advanced internet sites in Luxembourg/Work together in a team of more experienced programmers/Improve your skills. (Luxusbuerg 2002).

Also, in 2002, the platform launched a call for channel administrators, who had to submit their applications in teams of three. The solicitation outlined the following terms and conditions:

You want to be responsible for a channel on Luxusbuerg? We give you the unique opportunity to apply as a team! Luxusbuerg allowed you to apply for a channel of your choice, where you can define the policies, rules, and activities. In order to join our team, we created this online submission page, where you can apply as a team for being responsible for a channel. ("New channels" 2002)

1.5 The hybrid model

One of the core elements of Luxusbuerg was the success of the hybrid model, where the traditional—normally based on a common geographic space preferably on a face-to-face mode of communication—and virtual communities merged, feeding back to each other. We have seen that offline meetings were not uncommon in IRC channels, and communities were both “technically mediated and constituted according to the possibility of face-to-face interactions” (Latzko-Toth 1998, 3). The users tended to build a consistent online persona through the pseudonym and the interactions, which acted as the basis for the beginning of the offline interactions. As explained by Bechar-Israeli, while users in IRC could change their pseudonyms—‘nick’ in IRC jargon—every few seconds if desired, the general trend was to keep them for a long time, becoming an identity-attached element. “The way to do so is to choose an original nick which conveys something about the person’s ‘self’ and which will tempt other participants to strike up a conversation with that person” (Bechar-Israeli 1995). Jouët (1989) described the dynamic created by this virtual and offline construction of the self in her study of the AXE messaging system, where she explained how virtual participation played an essential role in

offline gatherings, with users calling each other by pseudonym, instead of by name.

The hybrid model was part of Luxusbuerg's success, as explained by Raoul Mulheims. "You meet online, and then you can say, let's meet this evening, and then we just get a drink," which strengthened the club aspect, the camaraderie, friendship, or even sentimental relationship created among the members. "The elements of loyalty are, therefore, present and are constantly being developed." (Mulheims, interview by author, March 22, 2022). Complementarily, Tom Weber, who was involved in the development of the connection to the chat through a web browser, as explained by Raoul Mulheims, stated in an interview published in 2000: "These are all successful because we are curious to discover the person who hides behind a pseudonym and to see if it corresponds to the image we have made." ("Tom Weber" 2000)

Some of the encounters were integrated into the governance structure of the platform since there were different coordination meetings (management meetings, operator meetings, etc.). Others were opportunities for socialization beyond the virtual boundaries, from channel meetings with the members to massive Luxusbuerg parties with 600–800 people. These meetings strengthened the community spirit and improved the online experience, with the same users chatting on the platform and vice-versa. The first offline meeting took place in a pub in 1998; since then, similar ones have emerged in different locations. The first big party took place in December 1999, with 600 attendees (Luxusbuerg 1999), and was presented as an opportunity to go beyond the computer-based interactions:

Luxembourg's online community is no longer confined to its computers: it's decided to get out there and celebrate by organizing a big party where we can finally meet in the flesh. And the party won't be held behind closed doors for the first time: everyone's invited.¹⁶

2. Navigating through the #flirt and #queer channel

2.1 The impact of the inherent characteristics of Luxusbuerg in the development of flirting

The user-centered approach reshaped the platform's user experience to the detriment of the hardcore users' experience in some cases, as demonstrated by flirting becoming the most popular use of the chat, with around 400–500 people connecting at the same time daily. The hardcore users were disappointed because they felt the chat's essence was eroding

¹⁶ Free translation from the author supported by DeepL. Original text in https://web.archive.org/web/20030730213049/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/press/press_release_party_2_3-12-99.pdf

and they could not maintain the same level of conversation to which they were accustomed. In response, the management team created different channels when they launched the website to separate flirting from other conversations.

It became so much about flirting that it was not possible anymore to run anything else in one single channel (...) so for the others, also for the guys that had been there for quite some time, I am not saying they were not interested in flirting at all, but also they wanted to have another conversation and be there because they knew each other well. (Mulheims, interview by author, March 22, 2022)

The hybrid model contributed to the success of the #flirt channel. This links with the observations made by authors such as Gyuillaume Latzko-Toth, Josiane Jouët, and Elizabeth Reid. Even though the users went through a pseudonym in the online environment, the objective was not to be anonymous but to create an online identity, which played an essential role in online flirting. Besides, the fact that the users were in geographic proximity and had many offline events contributed to the flirt's success. Billedo (2009) observes that when it came to flirting, many users preferred someone geographically close to them to chat because it was easier to meet in real life. Latzko-Toth (1998, 63) adds: “Any attempt at seduction in the ‘virtual world’ has, as an undertone, the hope of realization in ‘real life’.”¹⁷ That is why pseudonyms play such an essential role in many online communities, where they usually are indicative of the chatter’s gender, age, or are unique to catch attention or sound familiar based on a shared culture to engage with other users. As Velkovska (2002, 206) explains, “the pseudonym is both a resource of the interactive strategy and a product of the exchange. It is a label that interlocutors temporarily associate with a person and thus constitutes the first element of self-typing and typification of others”¹⁸.

2.2 Close reading of the #flirt channel

#Flirt was the most popular channel that lasted the platform's lifetime since 1999. It became a channel in its own right even before the creation of [luxusbuerg.lu](http://www.luxusbuerg.lu), as flirting was already one of the main uses as a channel at IRC Undernet. The channel was organized with a landing page and a navigation menu allowing access to features such as forum, message board, channel guidelines, initiatives such as Flirt Girl and Flirt Boy of the Month, and Miss and Mr. Flirt, in which the users could participate by sending their

¹⁷ Free translation made by the author with the support of deepL. Original text: « toute démarche de séduction dans le “virtuel” comporte, en filigrane, l'espoir d'une concrétisation dans la “vraie vie” »

¹⁸ Free translation made by the author with the support of DeepL. Original text accessible via the Wayback Machine. https://web.archive.org/web/20030730213049/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/press/press_releas_e_party_23-12-99.pdf

picture and description with their nickname, hobbies, favorite food, favorite music, among others. The news, announcements of parties, meetings, changes of channel operators, etc., were displayed on the channel's homepage. The community spirit and the participatory style were present throughout the channel's history. They announced the parties and events, shared pictures, and, as of 2006, included a short survey to take the users' opinions on channel improvements into account.

The initial archived record of #flirt, dating back to May 10, 2000, introduces the channel with the following description:

“Are you single/lonely? You like to flirt?

You want have fun?

You like to talk to / meet new people?

So don't hesitate, join the #Flirt-Channel by clicking here.

Please respect our guidelines. Thanks :-)

And remember: You do NOT have to be single to flirt!”

The last version from the #flirt channel was archived on September 22, 2009. One only needs to navigate through the different versions from May 10, 2000 to September 22, 2009 to see the similarities and differences. It showed a completely different look and feel that evolved together with the platform. Essentially, the spirit retained its original essence—a club atmosphere where updates about new administrators and operators, as well as farewells, were also featured. One of the main changes was with regard to security issues, as demonstrated by the channel rules, which became more specific as the platform grew. It likely evolved due to the lessons learned from various emerging negative practices, as evident when comparing the lists of prohibited actions and behaviors in 2000 and 2007. It is important to remember that Luxusbuerg served as an early example of a participatory website, with users and owners learning together through hands-on experience. Another example of the increased attention to security issues was the creation of the #adultflirt channel at some point in 2002 to separate the interactions of teenagers and adults. However, there were no measures to prevent someone from subscribing to a channel except for detecting misconduct based on the channel rules. For example, in the #adultflirt rules it was highlighted that minors were “banned immediately” and no nicks with numbers below 18 were allowed. (“Adultflirt Channel Regeln” 2007)

Table 2. List of forbidden behaviors

List of forbidden actions/behaviors 2000 ¹⁹	List of forbidden things/behaviors 2007 ²⁰
No colors No repeating No flooding No insulting No Denial of Services attempts (like warscripts, nuking, ping-flooding, Trojan, or any other abuses) No advertising No scripts No clones (only line sharing with other identd will be allowed) No sexual harassment Don't threaten the Channel Operators No begging for Channel Operator No Sport events (“#Flirt guidelines”, 2000)	Nicks no nicks that mean nothing (e.g.: kjashfdih) no racist nicks no nicks with sexual misconduct (many minors in #flirt) the OP has the right to self-assess when these points apply General rules no colors (not automatically recognized by the system) no bold / underlined / italic. This is mainly reserved for OPS and ADMINS no Caps Lock (capital letters) no repetition (no more than 5 times within 3 min.) keen CTCP / text flooding no insults vis-à-vis other chatters no insults to Operators & Admins. no sexual harassment do not talk too much about sports on the channel (privately with no problem) no CS (Cyber Sex) keng War / Fun / Mp3 / ... etc. scripter (nuking, icmp flooding, etc.) no URLs from other chats or sites that sell anything! (the only URLs that are allowed are from sites that have something to do with Luxusbuerg (partners) or by luxusbuerg itself (e.g. images that can be found on Luxusbuerg.lu etc.)) Do not write numbers, emails in the channel! no Idling (not more than 3 hours) no bots (eg like FlirtBOT, ChatBOT, CyberBOT.) no clones (except for connection sharing with different IDs) not for Channel Operator Status (“#Flirt Régelen”, 2007)

¹⁹ “Flirt Guidelines”, 2000

<https://web.archive.org/web/20001206025800/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu:80/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=gl>

²⁰ “Flirt Régelen”, 2007

Translation from Luxembourgish with Google Translate. See original text:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070807094739/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.php?tab=content&channel=flirt&ContentID=67>

Based on the limited messages retrieved from forums and message boards accessible through various archived versions obtained from the Wayback Machine, it is evident that the majority of these communications were concise and conducted in Luxembourgish, with occasional entries in English. Both the message board and forum discussions appeared as somewhat disordered dialogues, frequently lacking coherence or continuity. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent constraints when evaluating the extent of widespread public engagement based on a scant selection of excerpts retrieved via the Wayback Machine. This is particularly true for forums and message boards, where immediacy plays a key role, akin to the dynamic nature of social media. Web archives may fall short of capturing the fluidity and real-time interactions intrinsic to these platforms²¹. Indeed, Ortner, Sinner, and Jadin (2018) considered IRC to be one of the precursors of modern social media and one of the ancestors of instant messaging. Moreover, we cannot forget that one-to-one conversations played a fundamental role on the platform, being the preferred way of interaction for flirting, established privately, hence not harvested due to privacy issues. Some examples of the interactions found in the message boards are calling attention to a particular person, like “I love you, Nancy” or to the general channel users, such as “moien” in the message board. In the forum, messages were devoid of titles and arranged chronologically, with the most recent ones appearing first. Many of the messages served as calls for attention to create conversations, such as messages generating expectations about a user’s identity after a nickname change (Table 4) or the self-promotion of websites (Table 4). Channel rules regulated such practices, particularly the promotion of other chats and commercial websites, which was strictly prohibited.

Table 3. Message board

Date	Nick	Subject	Message
2000-04-16	Dexio15	I love you Nancy	Nancy, I just wanted to tell you how much I love you! ²²

²¹ More about the challenges of archiving social media in Marshall and Shipman (2012), Vlassenroot et al. (2019), Byrne (2017; April 2018), among others.

²² Translation from DeepL. Original text archived via the Wayback Machine on 27 August 2002. <https://web.archive.org/web/20020827150801/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=bbs&bbs=flirt&action=message&id=13> Last accessed 19 December 2023

2000-03-12	exit	chat meeting	How about a chat meeting soon? any suggestions, proposals, etc.? Purely out of curiosity .. what sort of environment do *you* think is good / appropriate for a chat meeting? ²³
2000-09-23	dragola	moien	hello dear why don't you chat with me ²⁴

Table 4: Forum²⁵

<p>Nance Huh!! Wanted to immortalize me here for a while =) hmmm... that's what you meant.. :) until then then CU!! Ciao (2001-04-17 – 33)</p>
<p>ZERO-NICE From the looks of it, no one has come here to look for a long time, but still! please type View all my homepages: http://zero-nice.da.ru (2001-03-25 - 32)</p>
<p>Flatterma hello, I greet all of you from the chat who know me, but seeing that I recently changed my nickname, no one knows who I am, so just take all my greetings to the chat "FLIRT"!!!!</p>

2.3 Flirting and the queer

In 2005, Luxusbuerg opened the #queer channel. It was managed in collaboration with the association Rosa Lëtzebuerg, a national LGBTIQ+ organization in Luxembourg. Raoul Mulheims explained that the channel succeeded especially in creating a sense of community, a complementary place of integration, as stated by the welcome message: “The crew of #queer welcomes you all on their journey to a slightly different world, a world where man with man, woman with woman, and man with woman are

²³ Archived via Wayback Machine on 4 July 2002

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020704222550/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=bbs&bbs=flirt&action=message&id=8> Last accessed 19 December 2023

²⁴ Translation from Google Translate. Original text in Luxembourgish:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020704032451/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=bbs&bbs=flirt&action=message&id=37>

²⁵ Translation from Google Translate. Original text in Luxembourgish:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020615142519/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.cgi?origin=luxusbuerg&site=flirt&lg=eng&display=forum> 3

welcome and where there are no borders.”²⁶ As with other IRC channels, the chat became a complementary place of integration. For Raoul Mulheims, this channel contributed to the identity-building of the LGBTIQ+ community in Luxembourg:

It was something for the coming-out stage. It's exactly what you need, first thing you get in touch, you do not go to other real-life meetings and so on, for people not knowing about your sexual identity, and trying out and getting in touch with peers. The guys from the association told us that it was a really great thing that we had this forum because, under the protection of anonymity, there were a lot of people. (Mulheims, personal communication, 2022).

This vision aligns with studies such as Chaplin’s (2014) on the Minitel and how “virtual spaces” contributed to creating “new forms of lesbian identity untethered to specific locations, organizations, embodiment, or proximity” (Chaplin 2014, 452). As stated by Dame-Griff (2023), the internet shaped transgender identity and activism from the 1980s to the present, and trans people online exploited different digital infrastructures in the early days of the internet to build a community. For the author, the development of the internet and the transgender life histories and identities are inextricably linked.

Through close analysis of the #queer channel, we could see that the rules required users to be at least 16 years old to connect to the channel (“Queer’s rules,” August 20, 2007). Based on our analysis, the only channel that stipulated an age restriction was the #adultflirt for individuals 18 years and older. Apart from that, the #queer channel followed the same dynamic as the others, with news about channel parties, plans, and updates on administrators and operators:

“Barbecue on the Weiswampecher Lake on the 7th of August (2005)

Finally, it is time for the #Queer to have its first meeting, and indeed on the 7th of August in Weiswampech on the lake, with grilling, swimming, and having fun. Everyone is welcome; you are also welcome to bring your colleagues, children, or pets. The day would only fail if the weather wasn't good. Everyone must bring their own food and drink. A grill is definitely provided. For further information, email us at Queer-admins@luxusbuerg.lu We also know how to drive with carpools, so we'll see everything until then.²⁷

As the title says, we have a new admin in Queer today. A warm welcome to PetitPrince. Continue to have a lot of fun and great work together in Queer. [13/05/05 @ 23:47]

Hello, two ladies have arrived. Wildgemse as operator and Boogie as supporter. Have a lot of

²⁶ According to the information saved on the Wayback Machine, the queer channel was created in January 2005, although we cannot confirm the creation date. Translation from Google Translate . Original text archived via the Wayback Machine on 7 April 2005. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050407225811/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.php?tab=news&channel=queer&PHPSESSID=14379147775969f756bdd0166904e318> Last accessed 19 December 2023

²⁷ Translation from DeepL. Original text on <https://web.archive.org/web/20051029194413/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/?p=844>

fun. [06/07/05 @ 20:19]²⁸

Consistent with the pattern observed in other channels, #queer also included a section on statistics with data pertaining to recent activities. This encompassed information on the most and least talkative users and what they called “the big numbers,” in which they highlighted the users' more relevant behaviors with a certain sense of humor. For instance, “lucy_maus could not decide whether to go or stay and visited the channel 5,592 times. time-lu did not agree either, 5,442 out and in :)” or “wildgemse wanted to tell others what he/she was doing—6,651 descriptions. Furthermore Hey_Mr_Dj—5,805 descriptions”²⁹.

Conclusion

Through this study, we have seen that the origins of the chat, as part of IRC Undernet, with its social structure so profoundly rooted in the functioning of the platform, exerted a profound influence on its evolutionary trajectory, as well as on user roles and expectations. Throughout its history, first as a channel on Undernet IRC in 1996, then becoming a web server in 1999 and transforming itself into a go-for-profit under the company Nvision in 2000, the users remained active participants who reshaped and redefined Luxusbuerg by designing, programming, and co-creating the governance rules as the platform evolved.

The evolution of the platform faced some tensions with hardcore users. The first issue was discontent among hardcore users at the direction the platform was taking, due to the growing prevalence of flirt use. While users played an essential role in reshaping the platform as it expanded, some hardcore users felt that they were shifting away from the platform's original purpose of fostering connections and engaging in conversations among friends. To keep both user groups engaged, the management team decided to create the website following the same channel-oriented structure as IRC with distinct channels for various interactions, separating the flirting use from other conversations. The second issue was with the platform's shift towards commercial goals. Recognizing the potential business benefits, the owners transitioned Luxusbuerg into a for-profit venture, creating tensions among the hardcore users and as they strove to balance not-for-profit ideals

²⁸ Translation from Google Translate. Original text on <https://web.archive.org/web/20051029195503/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu/index.php?tab=news&channel=queer&PHPSESSID=0ff97dddac74e143a0373519e8973437> archived via the Wayback Machine on 29 October 2005. Last accessed 3 January 2024.

²⁹ Translation from Google Translate. Original text on <https://web.archive.org/web/20051215204333/http://www.luxusbuerg.lu:80/index.php?tab=toptalkers&channel=queer&PHPSESSID=24ad9ce66776ab985a03b90edd2e995d> archived via the Wayback Machine on 15 December 2005. Last accessed 4 January 2024.

with commercial success. Maintaining a delicate equilibrium between commercial exploitation and soliciting non-remunerated user collaboration reminiscent of the platform's early years posed a significant challenge for the management team.

We have seen that the hybrid model—combining online and offline interactions— has been essential to the platform's success. It laid the foundation for a robust 'community' spirit and contributed to the success of flirting on the platform, strengthened by the country's spatial specificities. Notably, for the LGBTIQ+ community, the chat network became a complementary space of inclusion and played a crucial role in fostering sociability and shared experiences.

Finally, the history of this website and its analysis with the support of web archives as a source has helped us contextualize and shed light on contemporary practices related to users' interactions, flirting, and online dating. As Raoul Mulheims explained during his interview, with chat platforms such as Luxusbuerg emerged the essence not only of today's online dating, but also the foundations on which the whole social communications part has been built up.

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