

Meeting, Mating, and Cheating Online in Iran

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Over the past two years, Iran has seen a major technological revolution to accompany its sexual and social revolution.¹ Today, Farsi is the third (some say fourth) most used language in the blogosphere² and young Iranians increasingly use the internet and cyberspace to explore relationships and engage in forms of cultural consumption prohibited by the regime. In 2004 and 2005 I conducted fieldwork in Teheran among (mostly) middle or upper middle class educated young adults. I used ethnographic methods such as participant observation (in internet cafés and in cyberspaces such as chat rooms), in-depth interviews, and group discussions, to describe Iranian young people's uses of the internet in three major ways: 1) as a place for cultural consumption and production prohibited by the government (including news, movies, music, etc.); 2) to create a blogosphere or Weblogistan as a venue for exchanging information and creating a space for the emerging youth sexual culture, and perhaps most importantly; 3) as an unregulated means of meeting, mating, and cheating with potential partners online. In the context of a modernizing Iran, it is important to explore the emergence of this new "cyber-sexual culture," its identity formation, cultural consumption patterns, and sexual and social trends amongst urban Iranian young adults.

The question underlying the study was: how do young adults understand and enact their erotic and sexual lives within the laws and restrictions of the Islamic Republic? Many of the young people in Iran see themselves as "children of the revolution" born to a nation in the midst of political upheaval. Interestingly, the Islamic Republic's free education policies have created a highly literate and politically charged youth with voting rights (age 16 currently) who are ready and willing to express their dissent.³

Sexual revolution and internet usage

Many young people in Iran describe changes in sexual and social behaviour and discourse as a "sexual revolution" (*enqelab-e-jensi*). According to informants throughout the study, because the current Islamic regime seeks to exercise its power through legislation on moral issues, young people argue that they are undermining the regime by attacking the fabric of morality through which the regime seeks to govern. Many of these young adults feel that by consuming goods prohibited by the regime, and engaging in activities deemed immoral by the regime (i.e. wearing "revealing" Islamic dress, downloading Western music online, dancing, drinking, or premarital sex), they are undermining the power of the Islamists and enacting a quiet revolution.

For many young Iranians, a large part of this quiet revolution is taking place online and in cyberspace. Currently, the government does censor a number of internet sites (about 35%), particularly sites that touch upon "red line issues" as defined by the government. These issues include, but are not limited to: pornography, politically infused blogs, websites talking about women's rights, and certain types of Western media. Sites where users are able to maintain anonymity (meaning sites that do not require the user to

Urban young Iranians have recently begun to use the blogosphere and cyberspace to construct new sexual and social discourses. This article describes how Iranian youth link indigenous discourses of sexuality to other discourses of sexuality and how they understand their practices as political and social statements. For these youths, the internet provides important avenues to circumvent restrictions on cultural consumption and production while allowing them to engage in "safe" sexual encounters. As such, it fuels the creation of social movements that may pose new challenges to the regime.

type in an identifying ISP number or accurate user name) are also highly regulated, as are sites such as "Orkut" or "Friendster" which facilitate youth encounters. However, young Iranians are highly skilled at constructing websites and blogs that do touch upon "red line issues," but which are nevertheless hidden from the DCI Smart Filtering system that the IRI authorities use to find and block sites.⁴ Young people have become adept at hacking into sites that have been banned, and creating alternative sites for expressing their views—engaging in online "globalized" youth cultures, and meeting and chatting with other young people—which are not "screenable" by the authorities.

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Sites, blogs, and cosmopolitanism

A large part of the sexual revolution is about participating in an imagined "cosmopolitan" and "globalized" culture and consuming certain types of goods restricted by the government. The goods most demanded by all of the young people I spoke with were information and cultural products coming from the West—though increasingly young people are producing music, films etc. that are banned by the government and then sold online (such as the music of the popular underground rock band O-Hum)—which fulfill a desire to be part of an online "globalized" youth culture. This ideal of an imagined "foreign-ness" is incorporated into the ideal of being cosmopolitan and "modern." The sexual culture in Tehran is influenced by global images, tales, and texts. Cheap CDs, pirated movies, and internet cafes give young people from a range of economic backgrounds access to the global sexual culture.

The blogs and websites of young Iranians living abroad also play a role in this process. Many informants relied on stories and adventures from their "online friends," "web pals," or popular Iranian bloggers (such as the famed Iranian blogger Hoder who now lives in Canada and whose travel blog can be found at www.hoder.com) who travel the world and keep a "travel blog" for models of the West they seek to emulate. Indeed, young Iranians who travel or live abroad take pictures of their lives, surroundings, and any other novelties they experience. One popular Iranian blogger who now lives in New York City would go to night clubs in New York in between trips to Iran, taking pictures of the line outside clubs, bouncers, walking through the doors, walking onto the dance floors, and even the bathrooms in order to help create the party scene as she lives it outside of Iran. Her site is quite popular amongst young women in Tehran who use the pictures to get ideas about fashion, and live vicariously through the lives of their friends on the other side of the water (*oon-taraf-e-ab*).

In addition to providing a connection to globalizing youth culture and the party scene, blogs created by Iranian youth also serve as a space for young people to voice their opinions, ask their questions, and vent their frustrations about the changes taking place in their social and sexual lives. They also provide a space in which to discuss problems faced by Iranian youth in a modernizing Iran. One recent blog created by a woman who called herself Asemoun (the sky) focused on the question of hymen reconstructions with a forum for discussing where and how

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to get them, and what potential moral or social problems may arise from choosing to undergo the procedure. This suggests that blogs are also turning into important sources of information in a country where sex education before marriage is highly restricted.

Meeting, mating, ... and cheating online

Since hetero-sociality is heavily regulated in Iran, and an unmarried man and woman may be punished for simply being in the company of one another (let alone having a sexual relationship), internet meeting and mating takes on new significance. Out of the 80 young adults interviewed, more than half indicated that they had at one time or another engaged in some sort of heterosexual relationship through the internet.

For some of these young adults, the interaction took the form of a courtship whereby young men and women would meet through a site such as "Orkut" and begin exchanging emails for a period of time leading up to a face-to-face encounter. At least 5 of the young people I interviewed noted that they had met their current boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife through an online site. They recalled exchanging photographs, poetry, and engaging in instant messaging or chatting before meeting their partner for the first time. Many said that this form of encounter felt "safer" and allowed the young people to get to know their partners before taking the risk of being seen on a date with them. "Going on a date is risky in Iran. I know it's hard for you to conceptualize that, but for us it's a reality," said Gohar, a 20 year old university student. "By meeting the person online first, and getting to know him that way, we can be sure that taking the risk of a first date will actually be worth it," she added. Several other young women indicated the same feeling about online dating as a way to make the risk of an actual encounter "worth it."

Other young people described their use of the internet as a place to safely engage in cybersex. Many of my informants noted that cybersex was safer than sex because it was not as easy to be caught while engaging in anonymous sexual exchange, which did not involve being in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. "My parents don't let me go out that much," explained Roya, a 19 year old beautician. "But I still like to be a part of what my friends are doing, so I just do it online," she said referring to her friends' engagement in sexual relations. "I love to chat online, and I love to have romantic encounters with boys on the internet. Half of them probably send me wrong pictures, but I don't care, I just imagine what they look like while we are exchanging hot sentiments," she added. Several young men added that cybersex was a socially safe way to learn about sex without the embarrassment of having to be in the physical presence of a girl (note that hetero-sociality is not allowed and so many young men do not know how to interact with young women or how to court them, thus the difficulty and potential awkwardness of the first encounter can be a source of extreme anxiety). "I love chatting online and having sexual relations with a cyber-girlfriend because I'm not as shy or awkward," described Hooman, a 22 year old medical student. "It's hard for me with girls. I get shy and I don't know what to do with them, so this way I can work on my sexual style, my sexual courtship before the real thing," he explained. "Plus, this way, my reputation stays intact. No one knows about my cyber-girlfriend, not my parents or my friends, so no one can give me a hard time about it," he added quickly.

Still others (especially married women) with whom I spoke, noted that the internet provided a "safer" way of cheating on their husbands. Some women described cybersex as an outlet for their sexual frustrations. Others said that it was a way to pass the long hours of the days and weeks when their husbands were away. And many noted

Image not available online

that "cyber-cheating," as they called it, was not "real" cheating, and the anonymity of the internet made it so that their husbands would never find out, and their online partners could never find them or blackmail them.

Because reputations and respect are important in the Iranian context where gossip is often rampant, many people rely on the anonymity and privacy of the internet, one of the few spheres in which they can enjoy any privacy to facilitate what the regime and society view as immoral encounters. Because the regime seeks to legislate on people's bodies, their sexualities, and intimacy, and because they have the right to enter private homes at any time and arrest all "moral offenders," young people have delved more deeply into the "safer" space of the internet as a venue to seek out intimacy.

Urban young Iranians thus use the internet as a way to further their social and sexual revolution, indulge their consumptive desires, be part of a globalizing youth culture, and to carve out a private sphere for themselves. It is true that purchasing illegal goods or engaging in cyber-sex may not be seen as an obvious form of resistance; nevertheless, it must be looked at as situated resistance. Many key informants reminded me that because wearing an *Adidas* shirt (purchased online) or being in an internet café and chatting online with a cyber-lover could get them arrested, this shirt was more than a label, and cybersex was more than a passing amusement; these behaviours challenge the social and moral order of the Islamic Republic, and are part of a social movement of resistance currently enacted among many of today's young urban Iranians.

A computer shopkeeper posts a notice telling women to observe the hijab, Tehran, 27 April 2006

Notes

1. For a discussion of the sexual revolution in Iran, see: P. Mahdavi, "Passionate Uprisings: Young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran," in *Culture, Health and Sexuality* (2007).
2. Yahyanejad and Anvari, presentation at Iran: Future Prospects (IFP) Conference 2005, Stanford University, October 2006.
3. K. Basmenji, *Tehran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran* (Tehran: Saqi Books, 2006).
4. Yahyanejad and Anvari, op.cit.

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