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Queering Iran, digitally: Implicit activism and LGBTQI+ dating on Telegram

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Abstract

The Iranian state is notorious for its heteronormativity and policing regime in online and offline spaces. The question of how queer Iranians 'survive' this inquisitive and intrusive regime of surveillance and control has attracted scholarly interest across disciplines. The existing studies complicate the picture and show that queer spaces, practices, and performances survive despite the extensive control. Digital spaces have presented an opportunity for Iranians of all genders and sexualities to identify, express, and perform non-mainstream and unruly genders and sexualities. In this research, I explore a Persian-language Telegram channel used as an 'LGBT [sic]' dating platform. I use a combination of content analysis and cyberethnography to explore the content of the Telegram channel and the nature of interactions therein. The paper will present findings on how this Telegram channel is used primarily to find dating partners and how implicit forms of LGBTQI+ solidarity manifest themselves through its content. Data shows that, despite the strict control of cyberspace, queer spaces appear online, and implicit activism leaks into public spaces through everyday digital interactions of queer Iranians.

Keywords: activism, dating, digital, Iran, queer, sexuality

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Iranian president, notoriously said in a speech delivered at Colombia University, 'In Iran, we do not have homosexuals [sic] like in your country' ('Iran President', 2007). This bizarre statement has epitomised the Iranian state's attitude towards queer Iranians. Using Ahmadinejad's statement as an example of the Iranian state's queer bio and necropolitics is, of course, nothing new. I intend to contribute to the

argument – that has already been made by other scholars, such as Karimi and Bayatrizi (2018) – that this attitude has somewhat changed.

The Iranian government has officially implemented a sexual and gender policing regime backed by different law enforcement institutions that control and police online and offline spaces (Kjaran, 2019; Rahbari, 2020a; Rahbari, Longman, & Coene, 2019). In this regime, sex is sanctified only through legal marriage and, thus, premarital relationships are outlawed (Rahbari, 2016). The heteronormative regime punishes any form of sexuality and gender embodiment that falls outside the binary cis-heteronormative order, strictly defined by the state's founders after the Iranian 1979 Revolution. While cis-heteronormativity characterises gender and sexual discourses in other countries as well, including those in the Global North, there are characteristics to Iran's body politics that make it a specific case. Among these is a spatial segregation system that is implemented based on a binary differentiation of sexes, extending to many spaces of education, sports, transportation, and other public places (Arjmand, 2016; Rahbari, 2020b).

While these restrictions are real and have extensive real-life consequences for the everyday experiences of Iranians, in certain spheres, state control is not absolute and deviation is possible. This is especially the case when it comes to the spheres of dating – namely, unmarried people seeking dating partners (for attitudes to heterosexual dating, see, e.g. Motamedi et al., 2016) – and digital media usage. For urban Iranians, dating is an ordinary, albeit sometimes secret, part of their coming of age and early adulthood, regardless of how liberal or conservative their families are (Farahani, Cleland, & Mehryar, 2011). Despite the state's delegitimisation of premarital dating, many families are aware of their children's dating life and sometimes enable and support it. Even so, the dating scene is not entirely unproblematic under such circumstances, and the lack of official legitimacy and the patriarchal social order may put young heterosexual women at risk (Rahbari, 2020c). The risks of dating are, however, even higher for queer Iranians. In this paper, I use the term *queer* to refer to non-monolithic groups of people whose genders and sexualities have been rendered 'at odds' with the normalised discourses of gender and sexuality (Whittington, 2012).

Looking at the state of LGBTQI+ rights, Iran undoubtedly remains a harsh and unsafe country, but the lives of queer Iranians are not only defined by the restrictions but also by networks of support, spaces of solidarity, community building, and love (Kjaran, 2019). In addition, the Iranian government's attitudes have not remained unchanged. Karimi and Bayatrizi (2018) have gone over the 2013 changes in Iran's penal code regarding same-sex relationships. They argue that there have been changes in discourses around gay

relationships, as the derogatory term *hamjensbazi* has been removed from legal frameworks and *hamjensgerayi*, which is the term accepted by Iranian LGBTQI+ groups, is used (I will further discuss the choices of terminology in the next sections). Karimi and Bayatrizi (2018) also discuss that there have been changes in the form of punishments for gay relationships, as different levels of punishable offence are introduced when it comes to gay men, and significantly lower sentences are foreseen for lesbians. However, according to them, what makes the most difference is the new 'don't ask, don't tell' policy that was added to the penal code. This policy makes persecution of LGBTQI+ virtually impossible as long as the expressions, tendencies, or actions remain out of the public eye. The authors read this a change in the state's approach to queer rights, albeit slightly, and believe that this has been caused by continued activism.

Whereas there is some indication of a change in legal discourses, looking through the mainstream official channels, from the national state-run TV/radio – the only options available to Iranians who do not use illegalised satellite TV to access non-official channels – and other forms of media to sexual education and public discourses around gender, queer Iranians and their rights remain invisible to the Iranian public and primarily manifest themselves through derogatory references or jokes (See, e.g. Abedinifard, 2016). Other studies on the lives of queer Iranians have demonstrated that the imagery of queer and gay life in Iran is often at odds with the extremely 'negative' one painted in the Global North (Kjaran, 2019). There is no denying the everyday threats and limitations to gay- and queer-friendly spaces and expressions of identity; however, these spaces are not non-existent, although they often remain private.

Digital spaces offer one opportunity (among others) – while not for all forms of intimacies and interactions – for some activities, such as dating and different forms of activism (Golzard & Miguel, 2016; Kjaran, 2019). I came across a Persian-language Telegram channel used as an 'LGBT [sic]' dating platform while searching for dating spaces as a part of my research on digital spaces of queer intimacy. I take up the register of activism to read queer Iranians' dating practices on this channel to explore the political and activist potential in seemingly everyday and mundane practices of dating. This study thus situates itself within the discussions on digital spaces' potential not only to offer means for marginalised people to connect, articulate, and express their desires and belong but also to resist. I aim to contribute to the growing body of research on digital spaces of queer resistance in Iran, as well as to make a case for a redefinition of activism using the example of a queer dating Telegram channel. I used a combination of content analysis and cyberethnography to

explore the content of the Telegram channel and the nature of interactions therein. The paper will present findings on how this Telegram channel is used primarily to find dating partners. Moreover, it will show that implicit forms of LGBTQI+ solidarity manifest themselves through the channel's content. In what follows, I will first critically analyse the concept of activism and discuss some of the shortcomings in the scholarly definition of the term. I will then turn to introducing my data and presenting my analysis.

Implicit and explicit activism in Iran

Activism is a concept used widely across academic and public spaces, often without being carefully defined. I use Horton and Kraftl's (2009) critique of the theorisation of activism to problematise the way activism is often considered an intentional and goal-oriented act. According to Horton and Kraftl (2009), activism is perceived and imagined as a practice that has the following characteristics: it is organised, collective, intentional, and agentic, connected to a preferably already named and known movement that makes significant noise and fuss. Activism is also rarely considered a secluded or hidden phenomenon but rather an extroverted act that is involved in generating public events (Svirsky, 2010). What this definition of activism does is to expect a visible series of actions carried out by explicit and organised sets of actors. These actions are subject to their context's politics of visibility. The safety and even lives of some activists engaged in explicit activism may be at stake. The risks are not limited to undemocratic or Global South countries (e.g. minority protestors facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia),¹ as Global North activists also face public and/or political harassment if not persecution (e.g. Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg has been continuously targeted by online harassers and politicians such as the former US president, Donald Trump).²

The mainstream definition of activism that only validates extroverted and explicit forms of activism encompasses many existing movements by LGBTQI+ activist communities, including Iranian activists living outside of Iran as part of the substantial and politically active population of Iranians living in the diaspora.³ Some Persian queer organisations outside Iran can be characterised as some of these explicitly and openly activist groups. Such groups enjoy certain advantages, including openly advocating for Iranian LGBTQI+ rights within less risky environments and outside the Iranian state's reach.⁴ While it is possible to locate queer online and offline sites inside Iran, explicit activism can be extremely risky, if not impossible.

The legal precarity of LGBTQI+ is not consistent and differs between groups in Iran. Gay and lesbian people risk criminalisation due to anti-gay laws (Hutt, 2018), and visibly queer and non-binary individuals are additionally criminalised through public indecency laws.⁵ The trans experience is somewhat different from other groups because the Iranian state exerts some control over the sphere of gender reconfirmation through the medicalisation of transitioning and facilitation of changing one's legal gender, both of which are legally possible in Iran (for more on this, see Saeidzadeh, 2016). Because of this partial legal recognition, Iranian trans people have been internationally perceived as less exposed to criminalisation. Trans activism exists, and there are activists – such as the renowned artist Saman Arastoo – who actively and explicitly organise around the recognition of trans experiences (see 'LGBTQ Iran', 2021). Trans people are, however, only less threatening to the state if they comply with binary gender reconfirmation, medical transitioning, and legal registration. Therefore, while it is possible to locate sites of queer (online) presence and resistance in Iran – except for specific trans activisms that are considered compliant with the Islamic Republic of Iran's gender and sexual politics – explicit LGBTQI+ activism remains rare.

In this paper, I follow Horton and Kraftl (2009) to critique the conceptualisation of activism that only involves loud and extroverted practices on the grounds that this definition fails to address quiet and less high-profile acts of resistance that may induce a slow-paced shift in community's collective sentiments or perceptions. A conceptualisation of banal, non-institutionalised forms of activism has emerged in the scholarship of critical citizenship and digital culture studies (see, e.g. Isin & Ruppert, 2020). Some scholars have proposed rearticulating explicit activism by including acts that go against the mainstream current but are banal and/or personal activities that attract little fanfare (Ryan, 2016). In social contexts where the loud and out forms of activism are impossible, following the definition of activism as an extroverted collective practice would make less high-profile activism seem non-existent. The rearticulation of activism provides us with a definition for implicit activism: smaller acts that engage with civil disobedience and reclaim human rights in less organised ways and without extensive collective action. This definition could help us understand activism under more oppressive regimes. As Isin and Ruppert (2020) argue, it is no longer effective to focus on streets and squares as the sites of civil disobedience because power was dispersed digitally and through information networks. Therefore, if there is to be disruption of this dispersed power of information networks, acts of disobedience, too, must be dispersed and seek power disruption in the same networks (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). In Iran, considering

the substantial risks involved in any form of open activism, specifically in queer activism, it is naturally not unexpected that no large-scale and extroverted collective LGBTQI+ movement exists. Based on this premise, in this paper, I ask whether it is possible to find moments of implicit activism in a queer dating space online.

Methods, data, and the research context

This study uses cyberethnography and digital media content analysis to explore the content of a queer dating platform and the nature of interactions therein. The Persian-language Telegram channel I came across and selected for this study was created as an ‘LGBT [sic]’ dating platform. Based on my experience researching sexuality and Iranian cyberspace (see, e.g. Rahbari, 2019, 2020a), I had expected to find smaller-scale initiatives and private channels. The Telegram platform I encountered was significantly larger than I expected. This channel had over six thousand subscribers at the time of research in late 2020 and early 2021. The subscribers’ number, in this case, is not necessarily a clear indication of active participation. Since anyone could join or view the channel, it is thus possible that many subscribers were potential lurkers, inactive users, or not necessarily on the channel for dating.

Additionally, LGBTQI+ identities are seldom openly expressed in digital spaces. However, in the Telegram channel I studied, users expressed their identities openly and publicly. There are ethical considerations in studying queer digital culture in Iran since studies can also put subjects at risk, specifically if participants’ identities or previously unknown or non-public channels are exposed. Since I did not participate in dating practices, gathering the data occurred through ‘lurking’ around the channel and observing the profiles. Lurking in digital research comes with ethical issues pertaining to privacy and to a researcher’s position as the one who has the power to observe (Yadlin-Segal, Tsuria, & Bellar, 2020). In this type of research, one has to continuously reflect on the question of what is being observed and whether data gathered online requires consent. Since direct contact with the admins was impossible, I employed the Telegram bot that was used to create profiles to reach the admins (please see the ‘content, regulations, and dating practices’ section for a detailed description of the technical aspects). I did not receive any reply from the admins and, as a result, limited my research to general observations. The channel I studied was already public, but to reduce the chance of attracting any attention to the channel, its name and the identity information of the user profiles have been anonymised.

Telegram is an instant messaging application that was launched in 2013. Since its launch, it has remained one of Iranians' most used messaging applications. The app became so popular that it replaced many other internet applications such as email, messaging apps, forums, blogs, news websites, e-commerce, social networks, and even television (Kargar & McManamen, 2018). Telegram was also used in organising mass political protests in Iran in 2017–2018, and, as a result, it has been banned and blocked by the Iranian state since May 2018. Despite this, Iranians use anti-blocking mechanisms to access the app (the same way they access YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Other research in Iran confirms that queer Iranians also use other social media and/or dating apps from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp to Snapchat, Grindr, and Hornet (Yadegarfar, 2019).

In the channel I studied, users who wanted to post their dating profiles were asked to share their name, age, location, height, and a picture with the admin(s). This information is the standard requirement for many dating apps, including those used in Western contexts. The admin(s) then verified the authenticity of the users. Unlike other users, the admin(s) could see the user profiles and then post them on the channel. Interestingly, another (sister) channel coupled with this (main) dating channel and run by the same admin(s) was used to expose unauthentic accounts and warn users about possible scams. Telegram's privacy policies do not allow channel admins to be contacted or recognised. This partly protects admins in less democratic countries from persecution. This meant that my study focuses purely on my cyberethnographic experience and content analysis of the users' experiences and perspectives.

Cyberethnography is a qualitative-interpretive approach to studying social interactions and cultures manifested and experienced through internet-based media (Yadlin-Segal et al., 2020). This approach is neither solely focused on the media nor on the agentic subjects using them, and acknowledges that media are inseparable from the other activities, technologies, materialities, and feelings through which they are used, experienced, and operated (Pink et al., 2015). My study field primarily consisted of user profiles shared by admins on the channel; therefore, besides trying to make sense of the user experience, roaming on the channel, and observing patterns, I analysed 140 user profiles for this research. The selection criteria were profiles that had both visual and textual content, but, in many profiles, the textual content was limited to a rudimentary description of the person's age, place of residence, and interests. The analysis thus included the content of what the users shared on the channel in both textual and visual forms. My observations led me to believe that the primary users of the channel were

cis-men. Less frequently, there were also cis-women or (self-declared) trans profiles. One difficulty in interpreting the data and writing was translating Persian-language profile content to English. Persian is a genderless language,⁶ and hence, I opted for the pronoun ‘they’ when clear gender identity was not observed, as it was not possible to learn about the users’ gender (self-)identification through linguistic markers.

Findings: Queer digital dating on Telegram

Language usage

The posts on the Telegram channel used many English loanwords/transliterations. English words such as gay, lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, and relationship were used without translation on the platform. Similarly, different variations of the acronym LGBTQI+ were also mentioned using either Latin or the Persian alphabet. The admins used the acronym to describe the channel as well. However, not all terminology was derived from English, as some of the terminology variations exist in the Persian language. Some loanwords, such as ‘top’, ‘bot’, ‘soft’, ‘fetish’, ‘femme’, and ‘butch’, were used parallel to words deriving from Persian and Arabic languages such as *Fa’el* (dom) and *Maf’ul* (sub). The Persian word *hamjensgera* was also used. *Hamjensgera* is one accepted term for gay and lesbian for the Persian-speaking LGBTQI+ movement.

Some users employed the term *hamjensbaz*, which is often considered a derogatory term that connotes deviant, pathological, and non-stable tendencies rather than a sexual identity. This term is not generally accepted as appropriate by the Iranian queer community to refer to gay and lesbian identities and is sometimes used to differentiate between gays/lesbians and those (temporarily) seeking gay/lesbian sex. One lesbian user introduced themselves using the loanword lesbian and explained, ‘I am looking for a good girl. Come forward if you are *hamjensgera*, not if you are *hamjensbaz*.’ The user indicated with this distinction that they were interested in a ‘real’ relationship. Other users discouraged people who they considered *havasbaz* (a person who is primarily interested in sex) from approaching them or declared that they would not date those who are primarily driven by sex. ‘If you are after sex, do not write to me,’ said one user, ‘I am looking for a stable relationship. Someone who understands love and knows what he wants [from a relationship].’ There was a recurring mention of authenticity as an important factor for dating in profile descriptions. Many users emphasised ‘realness’ as a value criterion in their desired dating partner. The real/fake distinction is central in debates about what it means to communicate

authentically, given the prevalence of new media technologies where communications are often faceless (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

The channel content and admin posts indicated that the emphasis on ‘authenticity’ may have partly been caused by experiences of abuse and harassment that queer users experienced online from individuals who pretended to belong to the LGBTQI+ communities, often with malicious intentions such as, according to the admin(s), sexual harassment and rape. To counter this threat, the admin(s) regularly warned users about the existence of scammers and fake accounts, almost all owned and run by groups of men who preyed on gay men. There were practices of boundary-making in place to exclude the perceived ‘outsiders’, either due to their inauthenticity or them posing a threat to the community. In some cases, exposing scammers took place using problematic and derogatory language. The channel admin(s) used offensive words such as ‘*kooni*’ [derogatory word used to refer to gay men] to describe ousted members or users who they suspected as ‘fake’. Using such a term that has historically marked homophobia on a platform primarily used by queer users could indicate that the admin(s) did not adhere to the rules of conduct preferred by the Iranian queer communities. Another offensive word that was used on the channel was ‘shemale’. For a period, the channel described itself as a space of dating for ‘lesbian, gay, trans, shemale [sic], and singles’. The word was deleted later as the channel’s description changed a few times during the fieldwork. This may be a sign that the admins became (or were made) aware of the offensive nature of the term. However, the usage of this word was not limited to the admin(s); some users mentioned the word within the list of people they desired to date. In this context, it appeared that the word was not intentionally used in ‘derogatory’ ways, and its usage could have been associated with a lack of knowledge on appropriate terminology.

Channel users employed different terminologies to express how they identified and what kind of relationship they sought. They often used ‘rel’ – the abbreviated form of relationship – to refer to variations of relations between sex friends, casual sex, long-term relationships, and even marriage [in Persian, *ezdevaj*]. By the latter, they did not mean legal marriage since same-sex marriage is outlawed in Iran. The word marriage used within the research context could signify ‘informal’ and ‘unofficial’ marriages in the form of personal contracts or long-term/permanent relationships or unregistered religious marriages. The most common form of ‘rel’ sought by the users of the studied profiles was a ‘long-term’ relationship. Most users emphasised this on their profile by stating that they would block users who were not interested in long-term relationships and those looking only for something casual.

Content, regulations, and dating practice

At the time of research, the channel presented itself with a tagline that could be translated to 'come in single and leave in a relationship'. In Telegram channels, admin(s) control which users can join or stay in the channel and the flow of information. Admin(s) also have the advantage of staying anonymous; while they are not identifiable, they have access to the list of subscribers. The admin(s) were the only parties authorised to post on this channel. Users could subscribe to the channels to follow the content, and if they wanted to post their profile as a dating candidate, they would have to send a message to the admin(s) through a bot. The bot delivered the material they wanted to share, including a personal picture, information on the person's preferences and characteristics, and a short accompanying text to the admin. The admin(s) would then share the information as a dating profile on the channel. The subscribers to a Telegram channel could see the channel's posts but could not see other subscribers' personal information. This meant that there was no list of subscribers available online, and only those who willingly shared their profiles on the channel were visible.

The privacy features of the Telegram channels enabled 'lurkers': individuals who could roam in the channel and look for partners without being detected or publicly declaring their presence. Lurkers could stay anonymous to all other users except for the admin(s). The posting format of the channel did not allow for constant modification of one's profile since the admin(s) had exclusive access to content editing. Besides advertisements and posting fees, this exclusive access seems to be a source of monetary profit for the admin(s). There was a down payment to post a profile. The fee would gradually decrease for reposting a profile. The admin(s) also charged the users for profile changes or deletions. Advertisements on the channel included a small number of other much less frequented LGBTQI+ dating Telegram channels, some of which closed because of a lack of success in gathering users. The profiles on the studied channel were viewed between four and twelve thousand times. I did not find a specific pattern explaining why certain profiles were viewed more and others less.

The profile posts on the channel often included information on gender, sexuality, and dating preference. The users started their profiles by posting their names, ages, and places of residence. They also declared their sexual identification and clarified what type of relationship(s) they were looking for. Some users – but not all – included information about their body size and preferred position and described themselves. Users shared their personal information and profile pictures publicly – albeit sometimes heavily modified. Some users made active use of emojis and visuals to express or

illustrate their sexual preferences. References to fetishes, sex preferences, and positions were commonly present in user profiles. Besides LGBTQI+ dating, there were other forms of non-mainstream dating possibilities on the channel. There were, for instance, profiles of cis-men looking for sugar mommies, individuals trying to connect to gay- and queer-friendly communities, and some profiles interested in BDSM.

Digital technologies are sometimes used to change appearances and identities online to invisibilise what one needs to keep private and present what one chooses to express. The affordances of digital spaces allow for controlling, managing, and changing what one desires to share with the outside world. Affordances are how objects shape action for socially situated subjects by enabling and constraining their activities. The concept reminds us that materiality and human agency are intertwined and operate together (Davis, 2020). Affordances such as face filters, make-up filters, and cartoonish edits – that are not part of the Telegram channel but of external apps – that help mask identities were not common practice on the channel. Some users did employ digital filters and make-up and even changed the colour and shapes of their faces but, at the same time, also shared information that could identify them. While modified images were present, many users shared selfies or images that seemed to be not heavily modified. The capacity to modify the appearance, along with other affordances offered by Telegram and digital apps, such as security and anonymity features, could be seen as empowering an otherwise subjugated population to feel relatively safe to participate in a queer online space. The use of filters and make-up may, however, not be a result of a desire to hide but rather simply a way to present oneself as more beautiful and desirable.

Another recurring theme in the user profiles was physical places to meet [in Persian, *makan*], highlighting how online interactions were connected to aspirations of offline dating. *Makan* can be literally translated to ‘place’, and, in the context of dating, it refers to a space where the dating partners can meet privately. The reference to *makan* made perfect sense in the context of Iranian public spaces, where queer dating is problematised and risky. Similarly, having a car was mentioned, albeit less often. A car – similar to *makan* – provides a sense of safety and enables individuals to meet in a semi-private space inside a car. Having a place of one’s own and/or a car has thus become an attractive asset in the dating scene and was often mentioned in user profiles.

There were also recurring statements about the preferred age on the channel. Many profiles included the age of the profile owner and their age preference. Within the 140 profiles I studied, most mentioned interest in

dating people younger than themselves. The age preference was sometimes clearly expressed as someone ‘young(er)’ and other times mentioned more explicitly with the desired age range, such as ‘younger than 22 years old’. There were also profiles seeking relationships and sex with underaged adolescents. One profile declared that they sought relationships with individuals ‘older than fifteen years old’.

As mentioned earlier, users shared information about their body types. One user emphasised that they sought someone who did not care about ‘looks’ and expressed that they were ‘fat’. In spite of existing openness about body types, there were also explicit forms of fat exclusion in dating profiles. One user said, ‘No fats!’ and ‘[Don’t contact me] if you are fat!’ Another user wrote, ‘older, fake and fat...individuals will be blocked’. The fact that such statements – regarding age and fatness – were present on the channel demonstrated the lack of a critical standpoint by the channel’s admin(s) towards fatphobia, ageism, and the attempts to have sex with minors. It is noteworthy that fatphobia and ageism do not only characterise the Iranian dating scene and have been documented in many other contexts (see, e.g. Kaufman & Phua, 2003; Taylor, 2020). Despite these rather negative comments, other user profiles contained messages against homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, and messages of solidarity. Many users declared their solidarity and respect to others, sometimes by stating that they ‘[don’t] care how one identified’ or by showing ‘respect to all LGBT [sic] people’.

Implicit digital activism in seemingly ‘apolitical’ realms

In this paper, I used a combination of content analysis and cyberethnography to explore the content of a Persian language Telegram dating channel and the nature of interactions therein. Such online channels show that either the state is not as much in control of cyberspace as it often presents or that, despite the strict control of cyberspace, seemingly apolitical behaviour is tolerated by the state. This allows for constellations of queer spaces to appear online and for implicit activism to find ways to manifest itself in the everyday interactions of queer Iranians. Telegram channels, such as the one studied in this paper, and other digital spaces offer a space to practise everyday life activities and normalise an otherwise illegalised practice. I showed how this channel has the potential to create an alternative for missing and risky offline dating spheres.

To go back to implicit activism in digital platforms such as this Telegram channel: while the intention of activism is not evident, the platform does

provide LGBTQI+ Iranians with a space to meet and date. Being the admin(s) of an LGBTQI+ dating app inside Iran certainly bears many risks. One human rights group claims that Telegram has been monitored, and LGBTQI+ groups' admin(s) have formerly been arrested (see Article 19, 2018). Therefore, even though there may be financial interests and individual gain involved in setting up and running the channel, the channel offers what an explicitly activist group would eventually aim for: facilitating and normalising everyday life experiences. The seemingly apolitical attitude and perceived banality of digital dating activities online make them potentially more tolerable to the state apparatuses of control (Rahbari, 2020a). As the Iranian state's policing regime focused on more explicit activism that questions its authority, queer Iranians do what activism would eventually aspire to achieve, albeit in a seemingly apolitical atmosphere. I have not intended to argue that apolitical performances create absolute safety for LGBTQI+ people. Even the perception of relative safety is extremely fragile in such a precarious social position. Instead, I argue that such spaces have the potential to amplify moments of implicit activism and, consequently, counter and subvert mainstream politics of exclusion and fear.

For queer Iranians, to use José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) term, survival requires explicit masking of all that is political not to (further) instigate the inquisitive machinery of Iranian cyber police. Based on the definition of implicit activism discussed in the introduction, I consider the creation of the channel and the very creation of user profiles implicit acts of activism. This Telegram channel creates a space where admin(s) and users collectively normalise otherwise illegalised and marginalised identities and practices. The act of bringing together individuals who could date in relatively safeguarded environments creates an online community of LGBTQI+ Iranians. By doing so, even though they do not explicitly portray their actions as political resistance, they create moments of everyday life where public presences that are denied and suppressed can appear in relative 'safety', albeit a fragile one. Admin(s) also put extra effort into providing a safe experience for the users. The channel protects its users from harassment by exposing abusers and detecting online scammers in a parallel Telegram channel. Similar to other forms of collective activism, the risk of being out is shared between all the users and admin(s), and every user's presence can encourage and facilitate the presence of others. Whether intentional or not, their collective online practices resist and temporarily suspend discriminatory discourses enacted in public spaces.

The analysis of the channel's language showed that the space could not be characterised solely as solidarising. As I showed in the findings, the

channel's content is far from unproblematic despite its potential. While many users show solidarity towards LGBTQI+ individuals, other discriminatory discourses such as fatphobia, ageism, and the usage of homophobic concepts were present. While the admin(s) of the channel took substantial risks by running a queer dating platform, they did not take action against all forms of discriminatory discourse. Finally, this study has serious limitations. The channel I studied is not necessarily representative of all Iranian queer spaces, and my analysis of the content relies solely on my interpretations of the data, thus lacking the insider's perspective. This study, therefore, reflects my interpretation of queer voices inside Iran due to my choice of methodology, and my findings should be substantiated with further participatory research.

Notes

1. Human rights activist Israa al-Ghomgham, imprisoned for protesting alongside Saudi Arabia's Shia minority, is facing possible execution by beheading (see 'Saudi Female Activist', 2018).
2. Trump targeted environmental activist Greta Thurnberg on Twitter, and asked her to work on her anger management problem (see Skafle, Gabarron, Dechsling, & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021).
3. There is no exact number for the Iranian diaspora, but most estimates range between one and four million (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009).
4. Among these are the UK-based Persian LGBT Organisation (<https://persian-lgbt.org/en/about>) and the Iranian Queer Organization (<http://www.irqo.org/persian/>) based in Canada, which was dissolved in 2019.
5. Public indecency laws are vaguely defined in Iranian law, and it is up to the judge to decide whether the crime falls under this categorisation or not. Legal scholars have discussed that 'cross-dressing' is often considered as a publicly indecent act and punished as such (see Akhondi, 2003).
6. These languages have neither grammatical gender in the noun system, nor gender differentiating personal pronouns (for more on this, see Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007).

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