

Networking Illicit Desire:  
Online and Offline Queer Community Identity Formation  
in the United Arab Emirates

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

AED: United Arab Emirates Dirham  
AoIR: Association of Internet Researchers  
BBM PIN: BlackBerry Messenger Personal Identification Number  
App: Smartphone Application  
CCTV: Closed-Circuit Television  
CID: Criminal Investigation Department  
CMC: Computer-Mediated Communication  
CMDA: Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis  
DNS: Domain Name System  
FPC: Federal Penal Code  
GPS: Global Positioning System  
HTTP(S): Hypertext Transfer Protocol (Secure)  
IAM: Internet Access Management  
ICT: Information and Communications Technology  
IP: Internet Protocol  
IRC: Internet Relay Chat  
ISP: Internet Service Provider  
LGBT(Q): Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, (Queer)  
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization  
ONI: Open Net Initiative  
SIM: Subscriber Identity Module  
SMS: Short Message Service  
SNS: Social Network Service(s)  
TLD: Top Level Domain  
Tor: The Onion Router  
TRA: Telecommunications Regulatory Authority  
UAE: United Arab Emirates  
URL: Uniform Resource Locator  
VoIP: Voice over Internet Protocol  
VPN: Virtual Private Network

## Introduction

Having survived the nightly high-speed chase down Sheikh Zayed Road, my Emirati guide Omar<sup>1</sup> steadied his SUV into a sandy parking lot and jumped from the driver's seat, cocktail in hand. "You're Luke Mancini, and you're Omar Stewart tonight," a Spanish friend reminded us as we entered a hotel lobby in Bur Dubai. The Spaniard's Lebanese boyfriend checked his eyeliner in the elevator mirror as we inched toward the party. Huddled outside a room, we knocked twice and pressed our ears to the door. A Filipino man poked his head out and checked our fake names against his guest list. Omar led the way as we entered the crowded sitting room turned dance floor.

Pink and purple feather boas cascaded from the ceiling. Dozens of international flags draped the walls. All eyes were turned toward a makeshift stage near the bay window. The curtains were drawn. We had missed the singing and dancing competitions but arrived just in time to see Miss Brazil crowned Queen in this 'international beauty pageant'. Of course, Miss Brazil was not from Brazil, nor even a Miss. Six Filipino men in ball gowns stepped down from the stage, removed their wigs, dropped their shoulder straps, and returned to the only legally and socially sanctioned gender they can embody outside the hotel walls.

This 'gay Filipino house party', as Omar and others described it, is a private monthly event to celebrate birthdays and identities. It highlights the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) complex social hierarchy and illustrates how sexual minorities have learned to navigate local taboos to avoid imprisonment, deportation and death. It also encapsulates many of the country's social and legal paradoxes I witnessed firsthand.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all non-expert interviewees have been changed to protect anonymity. See 'Ethics' p. 9.

Homosexuality, public displays of affection, and the unlicensed consumption of alcohol are all strictly forbidden in the UAE, yet widely prevalent. I spotted one male couple kissing passionately, ‘Taken & Pr♥ud’ emblazoned across their matching sleeveless shirts, as I pushed my way toward the free-flowing bar. Although the UAE is built on immigration and positions itself as a champion of diversity, society is hierarchically structured and regulated by power relations of race, nationality, class, and traditional gender roles. Omar quickly abandoned us that night, saying he felt uncomfortable partying with Filipinos below his class. Despite heavy censorship, high Internet and mobile penetration has revolutionized how people communicate and congregate in the UAE. This particular gathering was arranged by private Facebook event and memorialized using Facebook photo albums the next day. Journalist Jim Krane (2010: 307) wrote, “Dubai is simultaneously the planet’s most cosmopolitan and tolerant city, a beacon of peace and prosperity where all of mankind is welcome—as long as you work.” He should have added, ‘and as long as you conform’.

This thesis investigates some of the paradoxes mentioned above wherein reality diverges from traditional law and society. It constitutes the first academic analysis of queer men’s digital lives in the UAE. Specifically, it explores how queer<sup>2</sup> men, rendered invisible offline, overcome technological, social and legal barriers to forge visible identities and communities online. It also traces how these online identities are manifested in offline spaces of desire. In analysis, it examines why homosexuality is criminalized but punishment is seldom enforced, and why the rule of law is often determined by an offender’s perceived social status.

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<sup>2</sup> I use ‘queer’ to describe all same-sex acts and desires. Where interviewees and literature use other terms, I adopt them accordingly. See ‘Importing Global Gay Identities’ p. 25.

### **Why the Internet? Why the UAE? Why Queer Men?**

These three elements present a fascinating trifecta for analysis. Internet usage in the UAE is among the highest in the Middle East today, with latest penetration rates above 75 percent (Internet World Stats 2010). 87 percent of the country's population is non-Emirati, and many young expatriates arrive alone (UAE NBS 2011). This might explain why two-thirds of the UAE's Internet users are members of the social network service (SNS) Facebook, the highest rate among Arab countries (Mourtada and Salem 2011: 14). Yet high Internet penetration is coupled with pervasive filtering. The country's two primary Internet service providers (ISPs), both largely government-owned, actively censor web content related to homosexuality, nudity and dating. Many expatriates and locals have found illegal ways to circumvent these filters, risking imprisonment and hefty fines.

The UAE's population is extremely diverse and transient. Immigration, predominantly from South Asia, helped double the country's population to 8.2 million between 2004 and 2008 (Ibid). Rapid demographic shifts have urged the Government to adopt Emiratization policies aimed at employing native citizens and preserving local identity, but economic factors deter rulers from curbing the flow of foreigners. Tourism represents 25 percent of Dubai's GDP, and the UAE welcomes more than 7 million tourists each year (Krane 2010: 117). Immigrant laborers and business professionals skew the country's sex ratio to 75 percent male, increasing homosocial interactions (UAE NBS 2011).

Despite cultivating an international reputation for tolerance to attract tourists and expatriates, the UAE maintains some of the world's harshest anti-homosexuality laws. Local laws in Abu Dhabi and Dubai punish consensual homosexual acts with up to 14 and 10 years in prison respectively. Article 354 of the Federal Penal Code states,

“Whoever commits rape on a female or sodomy with a male shall be punished by death” (Sofer 1992: 144). Locals and foreigners have both been imprisoned under these laws in recent years, the former threatened with ‘reparative’ hormone treatment and the latter swiftly deported (BBC 2005).

Despite their severity, these laws are seldom harshly enforced. Queer men have been jailed for attending ‘gay weddings’ (Davidson 2008: 198), and ‘gay clubs’ are periodically shut down (Gardner 2001), but crackdowns are rare and primarily constitute a reminder to the general population that anti-homosexuality and decency laws still exist. Non-queer tourists and residents are also jailed for kissing (BBC 2010) or fined for drinking in public during Ramadan (Za’Za’ 2008) for similar demonstrative purposes.

High Internet and SNS usage intersects with social taboos and restrictive laws; the country’s population is dominated by young, diverse, single men often away from their families in a global urban backdrop that is simultaneously conservative and consumption oriented. These characteristics make the UAE a unique environment in which to explore queer men’s digital lives in the Middle East.

## **Structure**

This thesis is presented in five chapters woven around one central research question: What role does the Internet play in forging relationships among queer men in the UAE? The introduction outlines the impetus for research and addresses critical methodological and ethical considerations.

Chapter One, *Contextualizing Queer*, frames homosexuality’s history in the UAE and broader Middle East. It explores how imported global gay identities, heavily influenced by online interactions, have shaped contemporary queer expression and identity in the country.

Chapter Two, *Subversion and Seduction*, analyzes how and why queer men challenge hegemonic structures by circumventing Internet censorship and forming identities online in the UAE. Ethnographies reveal issues of self-identity and representation, notably the roles race and nationality play in local queer computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Chapter Three, *Online to Offline Community Formation*, explores queer offline space in the UAE. Perceived privacy and anonymity online juxtaposed with legal, commercial and social restrictions offline means queer communications typically flow online to offline. This direction runs counter to most previously studied communication patterns. Amid power and privilege dynamics, I also explore whether queer groups in the UAE constitute online and offline communities.

Chapter Four, *The Delicate Balance*, details the UAE's anti-homosexuality legislation and enforcement policies. I argue that a delicate balance between harsh legislation and weak enforcement is maintained to optimize the country's political status and trade relations with neighboring countries and the West.

The conclusion summarizes significant findings and evaluates Chapter Four's claims post-Arab Spring. I argue that an Emirati Spring is unlikely and that the delicate balance concerning homosexuality will remain as long as the status quo continues to economically and politically benefit the UAE. I conclude by proposing areas of further research.

## **Methodology**

Internet studies is an interdisciplinary field that requires multiple methodological approaches. The disciplines I invoke herein include communication studies, gender studies and anthropology, all relevant to exploring queer men's digital lives and social networks in the UAE.

The Internet is both a medium and a space, a tool and a venue for strengthening preexisting offline connections and forging new bonds online. David Silver (2004) describes Internet studies as a meta-field still very much under construction. The cyber methods often employed in this burgeoning 'meta-field' are far from neutral. Helen Megens and Brian Martin (2003) echo Marshall McLuhan's classic adage "the medium is the message," meaning Internet usage is shaped by knowledge, access and other socioeconomic constraints. Pursuing an interdisciplinary approach overcomes some of these limitations and avoids false dichotomies between online and offline spaces, which Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson (2002) correctly characterize as inextricably linked.

An interdisciplinary approach unveils cyber imperialism as characterized by Y.Z. Ya'u (2004) and moves this thesis beyond the predominantly Eurocentric corpus of Internet literature that has shaped the field since its inception. Tim Mitchell (1991) cites how ethnocentrism has long forced the Middle East into a monolithic, cognitively congruous frame to satisfy and satiate western audiences' assumptions. Academics researching the Internet often accentuate these ethnocentric generalizations by focusing more on technological determinism than the particularities of regions and cultures. Aside from several Gulf neighbors, the UAE is unlike other Middle Eastern countries in terms of information and communications technology (ICT) usage, so regional comparisons will be drawn only when appropriate.

The Internet-based methods employed in this study are computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) and online interviews. Susan Herring (2004) expounds the virtues of CMDA, citing how this language-focused approach to CMC avoids homogenizing online communities as a single genre. CMDA can prove especially useful in answering questions about gender and identity. In Chapter Three, using her six criteria to identify online communities, I determine whether the term ‘community’ so often cited in queer rhetoric accurately defines group interactions among queer men in the UAE. CMDA in this case applies not only to direct communication between individuals and groups, but also to indirect communication via self-projection, a concept I will explore in Chapter Two. Lokman Meho (2006) cites synchronous online interviews as a useful qualitative research method. I conducted several interviews using the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service Skype.

Offline and in person, I interviewed 14 queer men in the UAE between September and October 2011. I later increased the total number of interviews to 20 via Skype from Oxford. These men represented 11 nationalities and ranged in age from 21 to 50. Each interviewee read an informed consent form<sup>3</sup> before the interview began. I also interviewed relevant experts, many of whose academic and journalistic works are cited herein.

Fieldwork was necessary to document offline interactions among queer men and to embed myself behind the UAE’s Internet firewall. Even in the age of virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxy servers, it is difficult to experience from abroad how ISPs and countries censor access. Circumvention services like Psiphon, FoxyProxy and the Tor project are designed to liberate Internet users from censored countries. Exit nodes allow users to experience the Internet in a country of their choice, but none were

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

operational for the UAE in early 2012. Physically visiting Dubai was therefore the best way to determine which sites were blocked. I also engaged in offline participant observation, visiting popular sites of queer congregation discovered through interview responses and online forums. These sites included Dubai's most commonly cited 'gay nightclubs', private gatherings, and public spaces.

Online fieldwork in the UAE included firewall testing and participant observation. Firewall testing determined which queer-focused websites and smartphone applications (apps) were blocked on the UAE's two primary ISPs Etisalat and Du. I also tested keyword filtering on Google and Bing Search using methods outlined by Helmi Noman (2010). I engaged in online participant observation using two pseudonymous profiles across several SNS and Android apps. User profiles on these SNS and apps provide the bulk of raw material for CMDA and content analysis. CMDA in this context focuses on text-based communication broadcast through profile headlines and usernames. Content analysis focuses on self-projection through images and demographic data selections where the range of choices is limited.

A study considering online identity formation inherently presupposes Internet usage. Barriers including basic computer literacy, English proficiency, cultural knowledge, access and privacy preclude migrant laborers and other men from interacting with the UAE's diverse and stratified queer networks online. In addition to these constraints, repressive government policies and pervasive surveillance rumors produced hesitation, reluctance and often refusal in my attempts to solicit interviews from strangers online. These obstacles and more will be explored in Chapters Two and Three.

## **Ethics**

As the field of Internet studies is still evolving, so too are ethical guidelines for online research (Deibert 2011). The sensitive nature of this thesis merits a robust discussion of ethical considerations and decisions. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2002) Ethics Guide provides a useful starting point, stressing the importance of flexibility and ethical pluralism. Charles Ess (Ibid: 8) poses a central ethical question: Do this research's potential benefits outweigh its potential harms? Jim Thomas (1996) adds, we should never put our subjects at risk and never lie to them. I consider these guidelines not only with respect to the men I interviewed, but to all queer individuals and to Gulf society at large. Potential benefits include a critical understanding of this repressed and understudied sexual minority group. Potential harms, which I described to each interviewee, include more repressive policies targeted at online and offline queer spaces. The precautions outlined below were taken to protect interviewees and queer individuals from harm that could result directly or indirectly from this study.

The first precaution I take is anonymity. I informed all interview subjects their names would be anonymized upon publication. Several men granted me permission to use their real names, but I refrain from doing so in the interest of their safety. After an allusion to prostitution at a Dubai club in the 2008 film *Body of Lies*, the venue was promptly shuttered (Krane 2010). I anonymize real names, online usernames, unblocked websites, and offline venues to avoid a similar fate befalling spaces of queer congregation in the UAE.

Granting anonymity is a common convention in queer research regardless of homosexuality's legal or social status in a given country. David Shaw (1997), Ben Light et al. (2008), Sharif Mowlabocus (2010) and Akhil Katyal (2011) provide anonymizing conventions for cyberqueer studies, several of which I have adopted herein. In his study

of cyberqueer Britain, Mowlabocus applies what Amy Bruckman (2001) terms ‘heavy disguise’ to anonymize subjects facing potential harm. Mowlabocus (2010: 121) writes, “anonymity and non-disclosure is imperative when we recognize that the object of study here is a clandestine world in which anonymity (or at least imagined anonymity) is vital to its appeal, success and survival.” This quote, intended for online forums, also applies to offline queer spaces in the UAE, which is why I apply the same anonymizing conventions to both virtual and physical spaces. Light (2008: 6) avoids reproducing quotes verbatim to ensure “no ‘private’ data is unwittingly or unnecessarily made ‘public’ for arguably marginal benefit,” and Shaw (1997: 144) creates alternative nicknames embodying the essence of the originals. By changing usernames, avoiding verbatim quotes, and taking other ‘heavy disguise’ precautions, I can disclose and analyze sensitive personal details without exposing specific individuals to risk. Aside from names, all anonymized data herein is italicized.

Meho (2006) points to ambiguities around perceived privacy online. SNS users might not understand privacy settings and inadvertently post private thoughts in public spaces. This possibility calls into question whether publicly accessible data should be fair game for researchers to analyze. In this debate, David Berry (2004) considers non-alienation a more resourceful concept than perceived privacy and Meho (2006) argues that properly anonymizing data is enough to avert harm. I agree with their analyses and believe the anonymized user data herein does not increase the risk of harm or alienate users.

To fully rationalize this position, I must also consider perceived deception. I used pseudonyms not to deceive interviewees, but to escape potential legal troubles during fieldwork. Circumventing Internet censorship, especially for the purpose of accessing content that “relates [to] or depicts acts of homosexuality,” is forbidden under Etisalat’s

(2011) government-mandated prohibited content categories<sup>4</sup>. In the context of researching criminals online, Ronald Deibert (2011: 533) justifies deception. He explains, “self-identification may result in the researcher being excluded from conversations altogether, or drive malicious behavior to underground or alternative modes of communication, thus undermining the research.” Mowlabocus (2010) confirms that pseudonyms and fake photographs are commonplace on queer SNS. Most interviewees assumed from first contact my usernames were fake and all warned against using real names on queer SNS given the UAE’s anti-homosexuality laws. I never initiated online conversations and always stated my research motives from the start.

I should also address the ethics around bypassing Internet filters to access blocked content. Etisalat’s (2012) Terms and Conditions explicitly state it is the customer’s responsibility not to use ISP access “for any illegal, improper, obscene or defamatory purpose or any purpose which is prohibited by law.” Yet testing circumvention techniques and visiting blocked sites with a VPN was a necessary component of this research. Joss Wright et al. (2011) justify circumvention in their work on Internet censorship mapping, suggesting the best way to test whether sites are blocked is to attempt accessing them. I will discuss the legal implications of this circumvention in Chapter Two.

Publishing this thesis is the final ethical concern I must address. One SNS user emailed, “I don’t see how this will do any good to those living in Dubai. They are better with details of their lives off the radar.” I received several skeptical comments, but most expressed excitement and approval that such research was finally underway. Addressing the complex realities queer men face in the UAE acknowledges their existence, but as all names and places have been carefully anonymized, this research should not increase their

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B.

risk of harm. By only describing necessary details of strategies to circumvent Internet filtering, I do not provide a manual for UAE users to violate restrictions or for government officials and ISPs to crack down on circumvention attempts. This thesis provides a window into the country's broader sociopolitical climate and an unprecedented case study for the Gulf. Its benefits, understanding a repressed minority, far outweigh potential harms, which I have taken great care to minimize.

## **Chapter One: Contextualizing Queer**

This chapter provides necessary context for the arguments and ethnographic observations that follow. Given the scarcity of academic literature on sexuality in the UAE, I will examine homosexuality's history in the Middle East. This broader context is relevant as many borders in the region were drawn by European colonialists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and do not reflect absolute cultural boundaries. I begin with a brief historical overview of homosexuality as it relates to evolving masculinities, Islamic jurisprudence, homosocial environments, heterosexism and homophobia to illuminate how contemporary social taboos against homosexuality in the Middle East are rooted in colonial imperialism and religious edicts. I then discuss homosexuality in Beirut and Cairo, two important regional cities that have been written about from a queer perspective, to show how queer men interacted in the Middle East before the Internet and to frame contemporary queer CMC in the UAE. I conclude with modern sexual identities, arguing the majority of queer Internet users in the UAE identify with global gay identities imported from more liberal environments but localized to meet social and legal constraints.

### **Historical Homosexuality**

The modern Western definition of 'homosexuality' privileges the biological sex and gender of partners involved. Historically, sexual position – penetrative or receptive – was more relevant to social power dynamics than sex or gender. This was as true in Ancient Greece as in medieval Islamic societies across the Middle East (Foucault 1978). Penetrating males could maintain their masculinity and dominant social standing regardless of their partner's sex. Penetrated male prostitutes and boys were excused from

negative judgment because they were understood to submit for the sole purpose of monetary or educational gain. “That an adult male might take pleasure in a subordinate sexual role, in submitting to penetration, was deemed inexplicable, and could only be attributed to pathology” (Dunne 1998: 10). Although identity labels like ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ now often designate sexual identity, relative sexual roles still influence social position in much of the Middle East.

Contemporary hostilities toward homosexuality in the region are largely a hangover effect of European colonialism’s condemnation of homosexual encounters (As’ad AbuKhalil 1997: 97). Joseph Massad (2002: 375) highlights the ironic effects of this legacy. “While the pre-modern West attacked the Muslim world’s alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged repression of sexual freedoms.” Both scholars explore homosexual themes in classical Arabic and Persian literature to deny contemporary clerics’ and rulers’ claims that homosexuality is a new or foreign concept in the Middle East. Early writers who expressed such themes were celebrated until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after which, “attempts were underway to eliminate evidence of sodomy or love of youthful boys altogether in reprinted books of *turāth*” (AbuKhalil 1997: 73). This purge is indicative of shifting social sentiments during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Middle Eastern societies strived to reflect the sexual norms of their European colonizers, and later, that of conservative fundamentalists in parts of the region.

History was rewritten and homosexual practices criminalized to align with European legal frameworks. The Indian Penal Code, which criminalized sodomy, was used until 1956 in British-ruled territories of the Middle East. After independent states were established throughout the region, homosexuality remained illegal and laws against it were reinforced in individual constitutions and penal codes. Homosexual activity also remains stigmatized in most Middle Eastern states. Many clerics and politicians claim

homosexuality does not exist in the Middle East as identity or practice. AbuKhalil (1997: 97, 100) believes this myth was predominantly promoted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Islamic clerics who attributed homosexuality to “a historic invasion of Khurasanian morals, or to the invasion of Western values and practices.” Hanadi Al-Samman (2008: 270) and Frédéric Lagrange (2000) cite a resurgence of homosexual themes in contemporary Arabic literature but unlike in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when they were celebrated, same-sex relations are now often used rhetorically to indicate social deterioration.

Homosexuality is often considered a temporary phase in the Middle East, one that must be rectified by heterosexual marriage (Afary 2009: 357). Asifa Siraj (2006: 214) says this view stems from Islamic beliefs that “heterosexual marriage is the only path to religious and personal fulfillment.” This sentiment reflects the importance placed on preserving traditional social structures. Rejecting heterosexual marriage risks destabilizing institutions and values that were once integral to economic and political stability. Marriage therefore “becomes a camouflage for most Arab gay men, although a few are willing to bear the social consequences of single life and in some cases ostracization” (AbuKhalil 1997: 101). These men might find comfort in the fact that discrete homosexual acts are often still tolerated in the Middle East.

### **Making Sense of Masculinities**

Social attitudes toward homosexuality in the Middle East are closely tied to notions of masculinity and patriarchy. In recent years, the study of masculinities has moved regional gender studies beyond discussions of women and the hijab (Ouzgane 2006, Moussawi 2008, Amar 2011). Paul Amar (2011) provides a robust overview and critique of Middle East masculinities, claiming the field often oversimplifies race, class

and political dynamics and too often generalizes masculinity as homophobia, misogyny and myth.

As mentioned earlier, notions of masculinity are still often determined by the role one performs in homosexual sex. Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe (1997) and Brian Whitaker (2006) discuss how assuming the passive ‘bottom’ position, typically reserved for socially ‘inferior’ women, is deemed shameful and compromising to one’s masculinity in the Middle East. Khalid Duran (1993: 187) conceptualizes the penetrative ‘top’ position as hyper masculine, drawing upon a tradition of battlefield dominance over opponents. Although these analyses might seem simplistic and primal, they do reflect experienced realities. Mourad, a Lebanese man I interviewed, highlighted these sentiments with a personal anecdote:

If a guy is butch and comes from an Arab background, he would be more comfortable identifying as bisexual than gay. This is one reason my Palestinian ex-boyfriend and I broke up. He was older and more butch. When I asked to top, he didn’t say, ‘I don’t feel comfortable.’ He flipped out! He said, ‘I would never bottom for anyone, especially someone younger than me.’ Even straight people like my brother, when he found out I was gay, he said, ‘don’t let any guy fuck you. You have to fuck the guy.’

Mark, a Filipino man I interviewed, echoes the local significance of ‘top/bottom’ dichotomies. “They say they are top,” he said of most Arab men he has met, “but in reality they want to be bottom. It’s like they are pretending to be very masculine.” This perceived pretense demonstrates the significant role sexual position plays in conceptualizing one’s social position in the region.

Closely related to masculinities are notions of patriarchy. Whitaker (2012) describes entrenched patriarchy as a challenge to gay rights in the region. “Arab leaders

personify [patriarchy], but it is imbued throughout society and built on rigidly-defined gender roles in which traditional concepts of ‘manliness’ are highly prized.” Gender roles and sexual relations have been rigidly codified by social norms and religious edicts, but these rules can sometimes be bent with different interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence.

### **Islamic Perspectives on Homosexuality**

Islam is the official religion of the UAE and Islamic shari’a a main source of its legislation, meaning Islamic perspectives affect not only social but also legal frameworks in the country. Homosexuality is addressed numerous times in the Qur’an and hadith. Despite scholarly division over how these passages should be interpreted, they are often invoked to condemn homosexuality. Murray and Roscoe’s *Islamic Homosexualities* (1997) is a good starting point to understand the original texts and converging perspectives.

The Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah is retold in the Qur’an. When angels disguised as young boys visit *Lūṭ*, an apostle and prophet of God, neighboring men arrive with lustful intentions. The next morning, their towns are engulfed in brimstone. The Arabic term *liwāṭ*, meaning sodomy, derives from this parable. Despite numerous references to homosexuality, the Qur’an cites punishment only once: “If two men commit an unchastity with each other, then punish them both” (Ibid: 89). Tom Boellstorff (2005: 4) notes that, unlike adultery, no specific punishments are listed for such acts. Perhaps paradoxically, the Qur’an promises *ghilmān*, boys “as fair as virginal pearls,” after death, implying homosexuality is somewhat permissible in the afterlife (Afary 2009: 82).

Hadith relating to homosexuality are often contradictory and their veracity suspect. Some suggest the Prophet Muhammad’s position on homosexuality was relatively lenient while others claim he recommended the death penalty. By most

accounts, Muhammad considered homosexual desire permissible as long as such desires were not acted upon. Disparities and vagueness in the Qur'an and hadith explain why Islamic perspectives on homosexuality remain divided and why "a conspiracy of silence about the issue" has developed (Murray and Roscoe 1997: 93).

Most men I interviewed consider 'gay' and 'Muslim' to be mutually exclusive identities. This perspective stems from their understanding of Islamic texts or their experience with Muslim communities. Siraj (2006: 204) argues that widespread condemnation of homosexuality within Islam sometimes turns devout Muslims into non-practicing 'cultural Muslims'. Only one of the 20 men I interviewed, a Catholic, said he still practices his faith. No one with family ties to Islam identified as Muslim without caveats. Many said they were raised Muslim, their parents are Muslim, they have agnostic thoughts, or they are now atheists. All saw a fundamental division between their families' faiths and their queer identities. Although some imams and scholars argue that Islam should accept homosexuality, the men I interviewed felt ostracized from their religious communities. Boellstorff (2005: 3) found similar views among Muslim men he interviewed in Indonesia, claiming, "Most gay Muslims understand Islamic orthodoxy to be incommensurate with sex between men." Similar perspectives are likely shared by men of different faith backgrounds.

Prevailing conservative attitudes within Islam have hindered introspection and critical reflection of the religion among many adherents. Whitaker (2012) believes many Muslims have resisted new scriptural interpretations because "the 'doors of *ijtihad* [Islamic jurisprudence] ... have long been considered closed." Clerics and rulers worry that reopening these doors would shake believers' faith and undermine existing power hierarchies. Duran proposes new interpretations of shari'a that accommodate contemporary homosexuality by better reflecting Qur'anic notions of freedom, justice

and love (1993). Such proposals are seldom entertained. In early 2012, a Mauritanian imam blessed a wedding between two men (Al Arabiya 2012) whereas popular Islamic theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi continues to declare that homosexuality warrants the death penalty (Smoltczyk 2011). Fixed interpretations of Islam have contributed to staid cultural practices and norms, including the prevalence of rigid sex segregation in the UAE and in mosques around the world.

### **Homosocial Environments**

Sex segregation in educational, religious and social spaces is common after boys and girls reach puberty in the UAE. Eve Sedgwick (1985: 1) defines such separation as ‘homosocial’ environments in which “social bonds between persons of the same sex” structure society. In many Middle Eastern societies, women often remain in the domestic sphere deemed ‘feminine space’ whereas men are expected to congregate in open public places like cafés (Ayalon 2004, Crivello 2008). According to AbuKhalil (1997: 95-96), sex segregation was codified in Islam when male friends of the Prophet Muhammad urged him to isolate his wives. Such segregation has been enforced inconsistently at different times and among different social classes. Men and women in the UAE can now transcend sex segregation online, but mixed offline contact remains a challenge, as I will explain in Chapter Three.

Homosocial environments and homosexual activity are often interrelated. Whitaker (2006: 56) claims segregated education systems encourage and normalize homosexual encounters. AbuKhalil (1997: 101) writes, “repressive sexual mores regarding males and females have normalized bisexual and homosexual experiences as a natural prelude to sex within a marriage.” Several men who grew up in the UAE and attended all male schools shared and reflected these perspectives. “Homosexuality is

rampant in schools. You group together a bunch of sexually deprived teenage guys, it's bound to happen," said 21-year-old Emirati Latif. He and others I interviewed think most boys in the region who engage in homosexual activity do so out of sexual frustration and convenience more often than as an expression of identity. Ghassan Makarem, a founding member of the Lebanese LGBTQ<sup>5</sup> rights group Helem, also attended a boys' school in the UAE. He said some Emirati mothers excused their sons' homosexual activities as normal. This sentiment reflects a 1997 study from Cairo, which suggested discreet incidents of illicit sexual behavior are permissible as long as traditional social networks are not threatened (Dunne: 1998: 9).

Homosocial environments therefore allow men to "indulg[e] in physical displays of affection...without being labeled as homosexuals" (Kandiyoti 1997: 208) "unless they decide to openly state their homosexual tendencies" (Al-Ghafari 2002: 88). This distinction between action and identity can be maintained as long as the line between fraternal and romantic affection is not crossed. Latif elucidates this point. "In the UAE, [some] guys will sleep with other guys even if they have girlfriends. It's a dominance thing. It's when you hold hands and describe your feelings that you get in trouble." Such attitudes toward homosexual encounters, although certainly not shared by all young men, reflect how homosocial environments alter perceptions of normality. Afary (2009) describes how increased gender segregation in Iran after 1979 normalized public expressions of homosocial adoration, paradoxically making it easier for homosexual men to express their love openly. Similar displays of affection can be observed in the UAE where normalized homosocial environments mask motives and blur binary lines between acceptable and forbidden interactions.

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<sup>5</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

## Heterosexism and Homophobia

Boellstorff (2004: 471) distinguishes between heterosexism, “the belief that heterosexuality is the only natural or moral sexuality”, and homophobia, which typically implies hatred or fear toward non-heteronormative genders and sexualities. Both concepts are commonly expressed in the Middle East and around the world. I will discuss legal implications of state-sponsored heterosexism and homophobia in Chapter Four, but devote this brief section to public perceptions and portrayals of these sentiments in the UAE.

Media portrayals of homosexuality in the Middle East are rife with homophobia. If reported at all, stories typically address homosexuality as a foreign phenomenon or loathsome disease unique to the West (Whitaker 2006). When the topic is discussed in mainstream media, the Arabic word *shādh*, equivalent to ‘pervert’ in English, is most often used to mean ‘homosexual’. An article in *Gulf News* titled *Too Close for Comfort: Homosexuality in Schools* epitomizes this homophobic rhetoric (Al Amir 2010). The article opens with the sentence, “A shocking trend is sweeping across educational institutions in the UAE. It’s called same-sex relationships and it’s worrying officials and parents no end” (Ibid). Similar fears were expressed in a 2012 video produced in the UAE and posted on YouTube titled *Be Yourself*, which depicted a group of Emirati teens transforming their friend from effeminate to masculine (Littauer 2012b).

Heterosexist norms are even more prevalent in media portrayals. Karim said he knew 12 of the 50 men in *Cosmopolitan Middle East’s* ‘Hottest Bachelor 2011’ competition, all of whom he said privately identify as gay. The questions posed to them including “What qualities attract you to a potential girlfriend?”, “What can you never resist in a girl?” and “How would a girl get your attention?” do not reveal this fact. Heterosexist media rhetoric is common the world over, but the dearth of neutral

homosexual portrayals, whether as a result of censorship or culture, is particularly pronounced in the UAE.

### **Hotspots Before Dubai**

Dubai only emerged as a ‘Gay Mecca’<sup>6</sup> in recent years when it developed into a global metropolis. Several cities in the Middle East predate it as congregating points for queer men in the region. Massad (2002: 373) wrote, “there is no evidence of gay movements anywhere in the Arab world or even of gay group identity outside of the small groups of men in metropolitan areas such as Cairo and Beirut.” Although this analysis pertains solely to identity politics rather than homosexual acts, Massad’s claims regarding Cairo’s and Beirut’s queer significance are reinforced in available literature (Merabet 2004 and 2006, Whitaker 2006, Moussawi 2008, Abaza 2010, McCormick 2006 and 2011). Makarem said in a personal interview that Lebanon and Egypt have been promoted as gay sex tourism destinations in travel magazines since the 1950s, implying their queer profiles have long been established. As urban hubs with millions of people in their immediate vicinities, Beirut and Cairo are natural congregating points for queer men. Migrating to urban environments away from family and social pressures provides queer individuals a degree of anonymity often considered necessary to explore homosexual desires and identities. The Internet now provides similar anonymity, as I will explain in Chapter Two.

Beirut is widely considered the most tolerant and open city for queer men in the Middle East. Sofian Merabet (2006: 202) describes “zones of encounter” including restaurants, cinemas, cafés and the Corniche where queer men in the city meet. Internet penetration has increased the popularity of such offline places by boosting their online

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewee’s phrasing.

visibility among queer SNS users, but increased visibility can inadvertently lead to crackdowns (Ibid: 232). The efforts of gay rights organizations like Helem have minimized queer men's dependence on the Internet as a meeting space in Lebanon. As social and legal constraints around homosexuality are relaxed, these men can shift from anonymous online spaces to public offline places more seamlessly. Several men I interviewed said they freely express their sexual identities in designated queer spaces around Beirut, and Mourad said he has publicly kissed men in the city. This relative freedom allows social and political queer communities to form that often transcend sectarian lines dividing the general population.

High profile crackdowns have suppressed queer life in Cairo more so than in Beirut in recent years. 52 Egyptian men aboard the Queen Boat bar were arrested and faced three years in prison on charges of debauchery in 2001. These charges were levied despite the fact that Egyptian law does not criminalize homosexuality. A BBC article published shortly after the arrests explained that queer Egyptians believed their increased visibility online prompted the raid (Hawley 2001). One gay rights activist cited a spike in online entrapment on queer SNS shortly before the Queen Boat incident. Foreign men and three sons of prominent Egyptians were quickly released while the others awaited trial. I will examine how similar enforcement discrepancies and politically motivated arrests affect queer men in the UAE in Chapter Four.

### **Gay Before Grindr: Pre-Net Homosexuality**

Discrete public cruising and flirting were the most common methods queer men used to find one another before Internet penetration reached critical mass and queer SNS gained popularity in the early 2000s. Although these techniques remain common in much of the world, they were perhaps more significant in the Middle East and other places

where socially and legally sanctioned queer spaces and organizations did not exist or were not easily found. Little has been written about pre-Net homosexuality in the UAE, so the primary empirical sources herein are men who lived there without Internet access.

Nadir and Makarem both lived in Dubai in the 1980s and said queer men were known to frequent a particular hotel. The same hotel was the site of queer-related crackdown in early 2012, indicating its reputation has persisted over the decades. Mark, who has lived in five Emirates over eleven years, lived in Ras Al Khaimah without a laptop in 2003. “When I first got there, I was overwhelmed by men approaching me and giving me their phone numbers. I thought it was for dates, but eventually we ended up in bed or just had sex in the car.” He said in each Emirate, queer men congregate along the Corniche like in Beirut. Arjun confirmed the Corniche as a “cruising place” in his hometown Abu Dhabi:

If you sit down there, someone sits on the bench with you. They try to figure out a way to get closer and talk to you. One time, a guy came and sat next to me then another guy came and sat on the other side. They argued over who sat down first and who got the first shot at me. They have a whole system.

Many of my findings in Chapter Three concerning discretion and barriers to entry in contemporary offline spaces readily applied before Internet communication revolutionized how queer men congregate. One notable exception is that tourists and men on short business trips to the UAE were less prevalent in queer spaces. Without search engines or queer online forums, locating such spaces was difficult. As I explain in Chapters Two and Three, the Internet has become the site of first contact for most queer men in the UAE, a key space in which to discover the local ‘gay scene’, and a means by which to explore and form identities.

## **Importing Global Gay Identities**

Much of this chapter has focused on sexual acts, but sexual identities increasingly shape how homosexuality is conceptualized and debated. Throughout this thesis, I use ‘queer’ rather than ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ to describe same-sex acts and desires among men in the UAE. ‘Queer’ is the most inclusive term available, though one that has little resonance as an identity label in the Middle East. ‘Homosexual’ has clinical connotations and ‘gay’ has become fused to political rights and particular stereotypes in much of the world. As identity terms, ‘gay’ and ‘homosexual’ have also come to imply exclusive same-sex sexual activity, marginalizing bisexual men. 19 of the 20 men I interviewed considered themselves gay and one bisexual, but whether they used these terms under the umbrella of identity politics or merely to describe physical acts was unclear. I therefore rely on ‘queer’ as a relatively neutral and inclusive term to explore homosexual identities in the UAE.

Homosexuality as rigid identity rather than mere sexual act is a concept that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term ‘homosexuality’ was not invented until 1869 and was long considered a medical diagnosis (Weeks 1992: ix). Writing about the late 1800s, Michel Foucault (1978: 43) distinguishes the old term ‘sodomite’ from the new ‘homosexual’, the former being a “temporary aberration” based on acts and the latter becoming “a personage...a species” based on “a type of life.”

Homosexuality is now often understood through the post-structuralist lens of queer theory, which conceptualizes gender categories as socially constructed and attempts to transcend sexual binaries like ‘gay’ and ‘straight’. Queer theorists often push for post-sexuality and post-gender conceptions of identity. They also challenge heterosexist notions of family and society. Véronique Mottier (2008: 111) writes, “Queer theory involves an emphasis on ‘permanent rebellion’ and subversion of dominant social

meanings and identities.” These predominantly Western analytical frameworks do not fit most queer men in the Middle East. Sexual subversion in the region, and in much of the world, remains more often rooted in achieving sexual satisfaction than in challenging hegemonic notions of sexual identity.

Max Kramer (2009) and Massad (2002) argue sexual acts still count for more than identities, which they consider utterly foreign to the Middle East. “By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary” (Ibid: 383). By ‘Gay International’, Massad (Ibid: 362) refers to international gay rights organizations and their “missionary tasks” of imposing identities and demanding political rights. He believes the groups’ “orientalist impulse” and “imperialist” efforts to “liberate” queer individuals are misguided, counterproductive and damaging because they force individuals into rigid sexual binaries. This in turn leads to greater repression and enforcement of long-ignored laws against homosexuality.

After the Queen Boat incident in Cairo mentioned above, Massad (Ibid: 382) wrote, “it is not same-sex sexual practices that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek.” Massad believes the ‘Gay International’ inadvertently represses homosexual desire among men who do not wish to assume a politicized gay identity. Although Massad’s points concerning the origins of identity are historically accurate and raise important geopolitical questions, his labeling of sexual identities as foreign belittles the fact that such identities have taken root and been localized in the Middle East. His argument comes across as essentialist and paradoxically strips more agency from queer men than do their purported colonizers in the ‘Gay International’.

Makarem, who cofounded Helem, disagrees with Massad's assault against such organizations. He believes Arab regimes more than international rights groups are responsible for categorizing non-heteronormative sexual identities in order to repress and divide individuals during times of political unrest (2011: 103). This perspective seemingly absolves the 'Gay International' of any responsibility for indirect oppression.

Perhaps a middle ground between Massad's and Makarem's arguments best summarizes the debate. To Massad's points: the mere fact that contemporary queer identities were primarily developed abroad does not render them illegitimate in the Middle East. To Makarem's: greater emphasis should be placed on the inherent political nature and corresponding consequences of assuming a sexual identity. Neo-colonial forces have imposed queer identities on the Middle East to 'modernize' the region, but men who reject these identities now face social isolation from both 'gays' and 'straights', coupled with government persecution.

Whitaker (2007: 3) moves beyond Massad's and Makarem's arguments, claiming global identities are simply a natural effect of globalization. This argument fits the highly globalized UAE particularly well. AbuKhalil (1997: 94) warns against "transport[ing] Western distinctions and assumptions about sexual identities to the Middle East" and McCormick (2006) distinguishes between local identities and imported identities, but such distinctions are murky in the UAE. The country's population is 87 percent non-native meaning most identities are partially imported. To speak of local authenticity or local gay identities does not imply Emirati or Arab, it simply means imported global identities that have been shaped by local cultures and constraints. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are global cities under the jurisdiction of an Arab and Muslim minority. Their inhabitants' identities reflect this reality. In a personal interview, Whitaker acknowledged the complexity involved in this process of localizing global gay identities in the Middle

East and highlighted the pressure many societies in the region feel to establish ‘non-Western’ identities. “There are certainly people who absorb the gay identity from the West. Others say that’s not realistic. ‘We can’t go around having pride parades. We have to find an Arab way of being gay.’ When you ask them what that means, they don’t know.” Interviews I conducted with men in the UAE confirmed this uncertainty but unveiled commonalities that contribute to somewhat cohesive identities.

The majority of men I met during fieldwork fit a “metropolitan gay male subculture,” one Mowlabocus (2010: 211) defines by age, attire, body type, and visibility. He labels this identity “the urban-centric, lifestyle-oriented articulation of male-male desire so often critiqued for marginalizing other queer identities” (Ibid). As is the case for most everything in the UAE, iterations of this identity were established abroad, globalized, imported and then localized based on legal and social parameters. This particular identity is fluid in the UAE, ever subject to the transnational mobility of its adherents. It is heavily influenced by popular culture and idealized notions of Western male beauty. It is rooted in Dubai’s cityscape and increasingly reliant on mobile Internet communication. Above all, it is ephemeral and borders on indefinable. Unlike many gay identities around the world for which political rights constitute a central pillar of cohesion, gay men in the UAE are predominantly apolitical. Whether this disengagement can be attributed to apathy, elitism, impermanence, or fear of political reprisal is difficult to ascertain.

The growing dominance of global gay identities in media portrayals can be a constraint for men who do not fit the mold, reject rigid identities, or wish to remain apolitical. Nadir, a married man with two children, was the only man I spoke with who identified as bisexual. Many men who list their queer SNS orientation as ‘bisexual’ or ‘straight’ were happy to chat but refused to be interviewed for fear that their homosexual

activities would be made public. The fact that my interview sample overwhelmingly identifies as 'gay' and fits Mowlabocus' 'metropolitan gay male subculture' is important to remember when reading subsequent interview extracts. In the next two chapters, I will discuss the Internet's role in queer identity formation and how identities merge into online and offline communities in the UAE.

## **Chapter Two: Subversion and Seduction**

This chapter explores how some queer men in the UAE overcome legal, technical and social barriers to express their sexual desires and identities online. I begin with an overview of government-mandated and privately enforced Internet restrictions followed by techniques and motivations queer men employ to circumvent censorship. After a brief discussion of how different types of surveillance affect their interactions, I examine the online spaces in which queer men communicate globally and in the UAE. A detailed analysis of queer online profiles and ethnographic interviews reveals issues of self-representation, objectification and prejudice in the UAE. I explore some of these prejudices before discussing how disparate identities form online and offline communities in Chapter Three.

### **Internet Censorship and Circumvention**

More than a decade ago, Leonard Sussman (2000) described the UAE as simultaneously the most wired state in the Arab world and a regional leader in Web censorship. Both characterizations remain true in 2012. The Government has attempted to censor online political debate, criticism of the country's rulers, religious writings that might cause dissent, and social and sexual taboos since Internet cables were laid in 1995 (Privacy International 2003). Federal and local governments have established online surveillance teams to monitor Internet cafés, chat rooms, instant messaging services, and blogs for objectionable activities (Ibid: 2, ONI 2009: 7). These initiatives show the UAE's commitment to censoring and monitoring online content and activities. Such efforts have become increasingly effective in recent years.

The UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA 2008) mandated a list of prohibited content categories in its 2008 Internet Access Management (IAM) Policy. Explicitly filtering pornography from the start, the two government-backed ISPs Etisalat and Du must now target content related to gambling, illegal drugs, blasphemy, dating and nudity – all social taboos in the country (Etisalat 2011)<sup>7</sup>. 87 percent of sites blocked in 2011 contained “content that contradicts with the ethics and morals of the UAE,” emphasizing these social categories are the most rigorously repressed (TRA 2012).

The Open Net Initiative (ONI) categorizes the UAE's political filtering as substantial and social filtering as pervasive (2009: 1). In 2005, Etisalat's broad and imprecise content controls filtered 15.4 percent of sites tested, many of which were unrelated to the government censors' stated aims (ONI 2005: 2). Du uses the Canadian-made web filter Netsweeper and Etisalat uses American-made SmartFilter to censor the Internet (Noman and York 2011). SmartFilter is notoriously “prone to classification errors and over blocking” (ONI 2005: 9). I experienced one of these errors firsthand in 2008 when the Clinton Foundation's website was blocked for allegedly containing adult content. Other sites mistakenly trapped in the filter have been the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's site and xxxchurch.com, an anti-pornography site (Ibid: 12, 27).

Certain topics, including homosexuality in the Middle East, receive additional attention from censors that exceeds SmartFilter's automatic categorizations. Only 10% of general gay and lesbian sites tested in the UAE were blocked compared with 30% of region-specific sites (ONI 2005: 15). Had SmartFilter's 'lifestyle' category, which includes queer-oriented sites, been the only active censor, this discrepancy would have

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B for the full list.

been smaller, signaling the Government's increased focus on regional queer content (Ibid: 18).

The TRA and the two ISPs publish their prohibited content categories as a badge of transparency but remain secretive about their actual filtering techniques. ONI reports, "The state combines software-based filtering with manual techniques such as blocking all sites in the Israeli [country-code] top-level domain and any site with the string 'fuck' in its URL" (2009: 20). These strategies fall under IP header, content, and Domain Name System (DNS) filtering, all popular among repressive governments that wish to broadly block content (Murdoch and Anderson 2008).

A less commonly used filtering method, perhaps because it directly violates the UAE's transparency claims, is DNS tampering, which returns false or empty results. When tested in 2006, Skype.com did not return a block page; it simply did not load (Faris and Villeneuve 2008: 16). Several of the queer sites I tested in October 2011 produced the same result. Failure to load could indicate a connection or site error, but given that these sites loaded quickly when I used a VPN, it more likely indicates that ISPs are de facto censoring sites by slowing them to unusable levels.

If users believe a page has been mistakenly blocked, they can complete a form explaining their rationale. I submitted forms to Du and Etisalat to unblock two gay news sites but received no response. Given that Michael Oghia and Helen Indelicato (2011) sent 25 emails to ISPs in the Middle East with no response, their silence is not surprising.



*Figure 1. Reporters Without Borders' Internet Enemies Map 2012. In the Middle East, the UAE, Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey were 'under surveillance' and Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria were declared 'enemies' for filtering content, restricting access, tracking cyber dissidents and spreading propaganda online.*

## Legal Barriers

A non-technical barrier to Internet access in the UAE is the law. Noor Al-Qasimi claims, "The policing of sexuality offline and its attendant dissemination and visibility of queers online has engendered the production of more rigorous censorship laws in the UAE" (2011: 297). The Prevention of Information Technology Crimes Federal Law (UAE Government 2006) outlines several punishments particularly noteworthy for queer men. The existence of a specific cybercrimes law in the UAE is noteworthy, as many heavily censored countries still prosecute Internet crimes under existing laws.

Article 2 of the Law forbids unlawfully gaining access to a website or breaking through a security measure; Article 13 prohibits using the Internet or a mobile phone to 'lure' someone to 'fornication'; Article 16 punishes 'violating family principles' with one year imprisonment and a hefty fine; and Article 20 mandates five years imprisonment for

publishing information online promoting ideas contrary to public morals. No men I interviewed knew of this law or details of its prohibitions and punishments. Some consider this ignorance blissful, as I will explain in Chapter Four.



*Figure 2. Etisalat's block page in October 2011.*

### **Private Censorship**

In addition to government-backed ISPs, private Western companies also filter the flow of Internet content into the UAE. Microsoft explicitly states, “[s]ometimes websites are deliberately excluded from the results page to remove inappropriate content as determined by local practice, law, or regulation” (Noman 2010: 6). In January 2011, Twitter announced it had developed technology to block tweets from appearing in certain countries (Twitter 2012) and Google began rerouting its service Blogger through country-specific URLs (Google 2012). Although these default settings can be bypassed, doing so requires a certain technical knowledge many users lack.

Microsoft’s search engine Bing filters keyword results by language and region (Noman 2010). Noman manually tested 100 Arabic and 70 English keywords pertaining to sex and social mores using Bing’s Arab Countries filter in the UAE. He determined

that many keywords pertaining to LGBT content are filtered out of search results. When I searched for ‘porn’ on Bing in October 2011 using this regional filter, no results were retrieved and the following message was displayed: “Your country or region requires a strict Bing SafeSearch setting, which filters out results that might return adult content.” ONI conducted a similar test with Google, searching for socially sensitive keywords in English and Arabic to determine which websites in the top results were blocked (ONI 2005). Of 10 ‘sexuality’ sites tested, nine were blocked on Etisalat’s public network (Ibid: 27). Noteworthy is the fact that more English than Arabic sites are typically blocked, likely due to the use of Western filtering software mentioned earlier (Ibid: 20).

I replicated elements of Noman’s and ONI’s tests on both Etisalat and Du using Google.ae, the country’s default URL. I compared these results with Google.com using a U.S. VPN. Both sites produced roughly the same top 10 results for ‘porn’ with only slight differences in rank order due to regional search patterns. This similarity supports Google’s claims that it does not filter regional results. I conducted the same procedure for the phrases and terms ‘list of gay sites’, ‘gay health’, ‘gay porn’, ‘gay sex’, ‘gay’ and ‘homosexuality’ and achieved similar results. More interesting than Google’s lack of filtering is which of the resulting sites local ISPs blocked. Queerlisting.com, which bills itself as “the ultimate gay and lesbian web directory,” was blocked on Etisalat but not Du. Gaypedia.com, “a community and information portal,” and Pinkpaper.com, “Britain’s leading gay news website,” were blocked on Du but not Etisalat. These inconsistencies confirm ISP- rather than government-level filtering in the UAE and demonstrate that the country’s filtering regime is far from perfect.

From these tests, I also observed that most gay health sites were freely accessible, whereas most gay porn and queer SNS were blocked. No Wikipedia, YouTube, or Facebook pages featuring queer content were blocked, nor were mainstream news stories

on queer issues. Beyond these observations, few conclusions can be drawn. The eighth Google Search result for ‘gay porn’ linked to a non-blocked site that featured hardcore pornographic images. These wormholes into forbidden content do not necessarily represent oversight, but rather the difficulties censors face in attempting to block an exhaustive list of content. Automatic filtering is not perfect, and keeping up to date with censorship is a costly and manual process.

There are simple ways savvy users can circumvent search results filtering. If users set their location to the U.S. on Bing, they are no longer filtered by ‘Arab country’ standards, even if their IP address places them in the UAE. If Google users type Google.com/ncr (no country redirect), they can view results as though they are in the U.S. These strategies overcome explicit filtering and filtering based on local usage patterns but do not allow UAE users to access blocked sites search engines retrieve. Gaining access to these sites requires complex strategies, which I summarize below.

### **Circumvention Techniques**

Most men I interviewed reported using multiple strategies to circumvent Internet censorship. The most common and holistic solution mentioned was the popular VPN Hotspot Shield. An ad-supported version of the service is free and allows users to bypass filters and experience the Internet as though they are in the U.S., but several men complained using VPNs significantly slowed their connection speeds. Hotspot Shield’s website is blocked in the UAE, but sending a blank email to the company will automatically return the necessary software. Some men also trade it on flash drives.

Another popular circumvention technique is typing ‘HTTPS’ instead of ‘HTTP’ at the beginning of a URL. The ‘S’ means ‘Secure’, and this protocol is often used to encrypt data on banking, email and other sensitive websites. If users type

<http://www.manjam.com> into a web browser using Du or Etisalat, they will hit a block page, but if they type <https://www.manjam.com>, they can freely access the site. HTTP and HTTPS use separate ports, meaning that URL requests are directed to different endpoints. Recent events in Syria have shown that HTTPS is not always as secure as its name implies. In early 2011, government hackers launched a ‘man in the middle’ attack on Syrian Facebookers using an HTTPS version of the site. This enabled the Government to monitor and record their activities and networks (MacKinnon 2012: 64).

Several interviewees also used obscure Top Level Domains (TLD) to access blocked sites. If [manjam.com](http://www.manjam.com) is blocked in the UAE, the same is not necessarily true for [manjam.eu](http://www.manjam.eu). The fact that [manjam.eu](http://www.manjam.eu) is freely accessible implies that, unlike ‘fuck’, the term ‘manjam’ has not been flagged for exhaustive DNS filtering. Manjam has set up several ‘Secret MJ’ sites to allow users in repressive Internet environments to access the SNS.

Men I interviewed also use proxy servers to reach blocked content, although these can be difficult to find as most sites that list proxies are blocked in the UAE. Another solution is The Onion Router (Tor), an anonymity network that routes traffic through a dispersed network of servers to bypass surveillance and censoring. Similar to Skype and Hotspot Shield, Tor works if software is downloaded before entering the country, but [torproject.org](http://torproject.org) is blocked in the UAE. An email sent to [gettor@torproject.org](mailto:gettor@torproject.org) will return the necessary software.

### **Circumvention Motivations**

Queer men are not alone in using these circumvention techniques, and their motivations are not limited to sex and pornography. Many people I spoke with use VPNs to watch their favorite foreign television shows or to download Skype. Circumvention

strategies might be similar for everyone, but motivations and risks are different for queer men. Those seeking queer SNS or pornography are using illegal means to access illegal content, compounding the risks of their actions. They break laws to explore their sexual curiosities, desires, and identities, all motivations at odds with state and societal norms.

Just because many men I interviewed knew how to subvert censorship does not mean the censors' efforts are futile. Some strategies mentioned above require a degree of technical literacy, meaning a blocked page still stops many Internet users. Several men said they were too worried about contracting a computer virus to search for working proxies or to download an unfamiliar VPN. Raj said some of his colleagues new to the UAE waited five months before asking him how to get around Internet censorship.

The fact that queer content is blocked also serves as a constant reminder that homosexuality is legally and socially taboo. In her chapter on the UAE, Al-Qasimi (2011: 284) explores how “state apparatuses and technologies of control both shape and govern the expression of queer subjectivities in cyberspace.” Enrico, a management consultant who decided to leave the UAE after two years, said, “This place made me feel something was not right with me and had to somehow be censored at a deeper level.” Hitting a block page while trying to access queer content, even if a user knows how to get around it, is still a reminder that his sexuality runs counter to state conceptions of acceptable behavior and identity.

I asked each interviewee for his thoughts on the UAE's filtering policies. Many asserted the attempts were futile. Several men, who find censorship easy to circumvent, question whether the Government really cares about policing access to banned sites. Arjun, a university student in Abu Dhabi, said, “If they wanted to put an end to everything, they could. I think because no one is putting it out in the open, they are just letting it be.” When queer or subversive identities are flaunted online, government

officials do sometimes step in. This happened in 2010 when a young Emirati was sentenced to one year in prison for cross-dressing and posing as a prostitute online (Za'Za' 2010).

### **Surveillance**

Surveillance in the context of queer CMC is not limited to government monitors. Self-surveillance pervades online queer culture, as does commercial commodification. I therefore propose a three-tiered approach to address these levels of self-, commercial- and government-surveillance.

### **Self-Surveillance**

boyd [sic] and Ellison (2007) describe how SNS activity reveals impression management, self-presentation and friendship performance and Wilson and Peterson (2002) explain how gendered identities are negotiated, reproduced and indexed in an online context. Such representations rely on self- and group-surveillance. Mowlabocus (2010: 77) describes queer men as being “enmeshed in strategies of self-surveillance, self-discipline and self-control.” ‘Self’ in this context extends beyond the individual and often incorporates strangers who are brought together under the guise of a queer SNS ‘community’. ‘Tracks’, a common functionality across queer SNS, allows users to see who has recently viewed their profiles, something most mainstream SNS do not provide. Queer SNS thus represent a digital panopticon à la Foucault (1975), which allows queer men to survey, regulate, discipline and normalize interactions with one another. Offline queer self-surveillance, epitomized in ‘cruising’ for and staring at desired strangers in implicitly designated places, has thus found its online equivalent in queer SNS.

According to Mowlabocus (2010: 87, 92), “Gaydar [a popular queer SNS] promotes and endorses the twin practices of consumption and commodification central to the success of metropolitan gay culture... The profile is as much a mechanism for self-identification as it is one of self-promotion.” Nothing epitomizes self-surveillance on queer SNS more than the profile picture, the posting of which is as much an act of representation as it is of commodification. Queer SNS etiquette, as displayed through user headlines, often dictates, “no face pic = no chat,” meaning if a user does not post an image revealing his face, he will not be fully accepted into the online community. Posting a face picture constitutes publicly identifying as queer, a potentially dangerous move given social and legal restrictions against homosexuality in the UAE. The ‘face pic’ therefore represents a form of currency and authenticity in the socio-sexual economy of queer SNS, its market value determined largely by the local risks of posting it. Mowlabocus (2010: 105) summarizes this economic analogy. “The faceless user is a sub-prime investment—unknown and unseen, he is treated with, at best, distrust, at worst, disdain.”

Having the means to photograph oneself is a socioeconomic barrier that excludes lower rungs of society from successful queer SNS interactions. Photographing one’s nude body, often used for trade in subsequent interactions, typically requires privacy and access to a mobile digital camera, neither of which are provided in most cybercafés. One man I interviewed, Nadir, said, “In the 22 years I’ve lived here, I’ve never come across someone in construction on these sites. They don’t have Internet access. The Internet is outside their dreams.” These access and knowledge barriers in the UAE do not preclude prejudice in queer SNS interactions, as I will demonstrate in later sections.

## Commercial Surveillance

John Campbell (2004), Light (2008) and Mowlabocus (2010) have written extensively on the role queer SNS plays in commodifying queer male bodies and transforming users into both products and consumers, echoing similar claims made by Liesbet van Zoonen (2002) and Niels van Doorn (2009) about women. This corporeal commercialization is the second type of surveillance I will explore here.

Today's SNS are privately owned and maintained through user-targeted advertisements. Campbell (2005: 665) claims online gay marketing and surveillance repositions queer individuals in "commercial panoptic formations" to create a niche appeal for advertisers. Light (2008: 9) notes a similar trend claiming, "the power and rhetoric surrounding notions of the pink pound<sup>8</sup> are being brought into play to commodif[y] sexuality and gender in a systematic manner." Queer SNS are profit-driven enterprises whose success depends on converting users into commodities that can be sold to advertisers.

This neoliberal process relies on surveying SNS profiles, gathering data, and targeting marketing campaigns at users, an increasingly lucrative and common practice (Thelwall 2008). Campbell (2005: 678) worries target marketing reduces queer individuals to "a singular axis of identity, disregarding the ways in which sexuality intersects with 'race', ethnicity, class, gender and religion." Consumer commodification thus creates prescriptive models for queer identity, like the global gay identities outlined in Chapter One, that are reinforced at the individual and queer SNS community level through self-surveillance.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Pink money' describes the purchasing power of queer men.

## Government Surveillance

While queer CMC can function as a “tool of resistance against autocratic governments and state censorship” (Al-Qasimi 2011: 289), it can also provide a wealth of incriminating evidence with which to arrest people in repressive environments like the UAE. Several men I interviewed expressed concern that the CID (Criminal Investigation Department<sup>9</sup>) was monitoring their activities online. The mere fear of government surveillance produces a chilling effect that prevents many queer men from fully exploring and expressing their sexual desires and identities online.

Such fears have long tempered utopian claims that the Internet inherently liberates people. David Lyon (39) wrote as early as 1998 how police were deploying online surveillance in the U.S. More recently, Evgeny Morozov (2011: xiv) has discussed how governments around the world use propaganda, surveillance, and censorship to suppress individuals. Government surveillance capabilities increased significantly when the USA Patriot Act expanded the monitoring of electronic information in 2001 (Kellner and Kahn 2004). Governments throughout Asia have also implemented sophisticated cyber surveillance technologies (Weimann 2006: 178).

Perhaps most troubling for queer men in the UAE are queer smartphone apps like Grindr, which store user’s precise Global Positioning System (GPS) locations. After Etisalat’s surreptitious attempts to monitor BlackBerry data in 2009, it is reasonable to assume government officials could intercept data, track GPS location, and create fake SNS and app profiles to entrap queer men if they so desired (Gallagher 2011). Whitaker cites cases in Egypt and Iran and Mowlabocus cases in Jordan and Iraq where cyber surveillance has been deployed to monitor and deter queer activity. “Technologies of communication are being used by gay men *and* against gay men, often simultaneously”

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes derisively referred to as ‘Cops in *Dishdāsha*’.

(2010: 206). If the UAE Government already uses surveillance techniques to filter the Internet, it is reasonable to assume they could use the same techniques to monitor and arrest offending users.

### **Queer Computer-Mediated Communication**

*“There are no closets in Cyberspace” – Advertisement in The Advocate magazine (O’Brien 1999).*

### **Global Development**

The Internet has played a critical role in queer men’s community identity formation since the 1990s. Its significance is further accentuated in restrictive social and legal environments like the UAE. Shaw shows a primary appeal of Internet Relay Chat (IRC, an early instant messaging protocol) among queer men was the sense of community it forged. He writes, “[IRC] presents an opportunity for gay men, who often go through life hiding this most vital aspect of their identity, to try on this real identity” (1997: 144). Campbell (2004) echoes Shaw’s identity assertion, and Gross (2003: 266) emphasizes the Internet as a venue for solidarity and support among emerging queer communities. Queer men are not the only individuals who benefit from online anonymity in the Middle East. Pardis Mahdavi (2007) and Deborah Wheeler (2006) discuss how heterosexual youth in Iran and Kuwait consider it safer to mingle online than in public when breaking sexual taboos. I draw from these queer and local ethnographies to explore queer men’s digital lives in the UAE.

CMC has allowed some queer men in heteronormative environments to overcome isolation, marginalization and shame. Before homosexuality’s decriminalization in India in 2009, Swaroopa Iyengar (2001) wrote how urban queer men who could afford an Internet connection traded cruising the streets for finding partners online, outside the

immediate purview of police crackdowns and family pressures. Access and privilege are key considerations in determining which men can use the Internet this way. Eszter Hargittai (2007) has shown that race, gender and socioeconomic inequalities lead to different SNS adoption among different groups, replicating offline inequalities in digital spaces. Socioeconomic issues, although slightly alleviated in the past decade by reduced Internet tariffs and increased global penetration, remain a central factor preventing many queer men around the world from logging on to queer SNS and exploring their sexualities online. This holds true for low-paid migrant laborers in the UAE, among whom Internet access and computer literacy prove constraints.

### **Local Context**

Local offline gay press in the form of magazines and community newsletters have often preceded queer SNS around the world. No sign of such publications exist in the UAE, neither clandestine nor with government approval. Censors in the UAE still manually black out underwear advertisements in foreign magazines with permanent markers, so the prospect of queer-oriented magazines like Britain's *Gay Times* being distributed or local versions being produced is unlikely. 'Discredited communities' often rely on informal CMC rather than a formal press to support and negotiate their interactions (Mowlabocus 2010). The UAE's queer community message boards and personal classified ads were first established online where they remain. Courtney Radsch (2008: 7) describes how, "as the blogosphere expanded and diversified [in Egypt], identity communities began to form." This expansion provided queer men in Egypt, and in Iran as Nima Mina (2007) shows, an anonymous space in which to share ideas. Anonymity online often shelters queer men from state persecution and repressive moral judgment and allows them to discuss the taboo subject of their desires and identities.

Access to queer sites among men I interviewed was not problematic because they can afford Internet access and have learned to circumvent censorship. Most considered computers necessary for communication. Mowlabocus (2010: 157) describes how marginalized sexual minorities depend on digital media technologies and consider the Internet their primary discursive space. Mottier (2008: 106) echoes this sentiment in the case of pedophiles, who establish less visible communities online to escape police supervision and social stigma. Fear of government surveillance keeps online spaces relatively restricted in the UAE. “Everyone knows if you put something online it will get shut down. If you Google ‘Gay Dubai’, you will find very outdated information,” said Enrico. Private and semi-private online spaces have thus become the venues of choice for queer men. These spaces are typically borrowed from Western companies and reflect foreign rather than local queer taxonomies, beauty norms and community-oriented rhetoric. In an analysis of ads on the now-defunct queer SNS PlanetOut.com, Campbell (2005: 680) determined 80 percent of the models featured were male, 80 percent were white and 100 percent were young. These homogenous representations likely enforce the predominance of global gay identities in the UAE, as outlined in Chapter One.

### **Queer Social Network Services**

The three queer SNS most commonly cited in interviews and most popular based on UAE user figures are Manjam.com, GayRomeo.com and Gaydar.co.uk in this order. They are based in the U.S., Germany and the UK, respectively. Other queer SNS were mentioned in interviews but seldom used based on local profile numbers. Most men learned of one of these three sites from friends or via search engine. Their site of first entry often helped them discover other SNS and smartphone apps.

Manjam, GayRomeo and Gaydar all use the political identity term ‘gay’, and stress the international reach of their networks. GayRomeo’s default homepage<sup>10</sup> explicitly states, “Welcome to our Community,” Manjam’s instructs users to “connect with like-minded people,” and Gaydar’s claims to be “home to millions of men,” emphasizing the three sites’ commitment to notions of a global gay community. Most men interviewed used ‘we’ to describe queer men in the UAE and some referred to “people from our community.” Whether a community of total strangers can form online around a single identity element, queer in this case, is an important question I will address in Chapter Three.

### **Co-Opted Mainstream SNS**

Many queer men use mainstream SNS and are often among their earliest adopters. Gay men in New York were among the first to join the SNS Friendster when it launched in 2002 (boyd 2006: 14). This early adoption reflects how queer men have often created virtual spaces and alternative iterations of their identities to overcome marginalization and isolation from society. In the UAE, few queer-coded offline spaces exist, increasing the popularity of non-blocked mainstream SNS including Facebook and Twitter.

Most men interviewed were active Facebook users and many had two accounts to separate genuine friends from queer sexual encounters. 45 Facebook groups, one with nearly 4,000 members and most with several hundred, are predominantly used to facilitate offline sex in the UAE. Mark said he had collected more than 3,000 ‘friends’ by joining local queer groups before the company suspended his account for posting pornographic images. The most popular Facebook groups are named for specific Dubai residential areas or ethnicities. Most usernames are obviously pseudonymous (*Suckyur*

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<sup>10</sup> Texts retrieved on 9 March 2012.

*Cock, Dubaicallboy Gayuae*) and many use fake profile images (professional models and celebrity headshots). Group wall posts are more sex-driven and urgent than messages on queer SNS or apps (“*anyone awake and want to fuck me now? I have place near dubai marina metro*”). Facebook’s interface is easy to use, and the service is free unlike premium models of queer SNS, making it conducive for arranging sexual rendezvous.

Even group pages geared toward political and human rights have been taken over by men looking for sexual partners. Paul let his page fall derelict several years ago, but Latif, whose Facebook page promotes LGBT rights in the UAE, said he must constantly weed out users who solicit sex on the page. Facebook no longer permits fine-grained searches based on sexuality, and users who ‘like’ these pages and join groups are not necessarily representative of all queer Facebook users in the UAE, so I did not analyze Facebook when coding SNS profiles in the next section.

The Twitter handle *@DXBgayz* has no profile image and has never tweeted, yet it has nearly 200 followers. Based on followers’ profiles, this account serves as an online congregation space where followers are assumed queer and sexually available. Twitter policy bars the use of pornographic images in profile pictures, but the number of penises adorning these accounts calls into question its enforcement. Online classified sites including Craigslist.org and Expatriates.com are significantly less popular, featuring only one or two posts per day in the UAE’s ‘men seeking men’ section. Local equivalent Dubizzle has no such section for legal and cultural reasons, but I did find a few queer ads including one with the explicit headline “*living in dubai, need sex with a man.*”

Interviewees said online classified sites and early SNS were popular several years ago, but that Facebook and the three primary queer SNS have siphoned users away. Predominantly heterosexual dating sites, some mainstream and many obscure, were also mentioned as online spaces where queer men meet. One man I interviewed knew of a

private password-protected online forum for lesbians in the UAE. New members must undergo a lengthy screening process before entering to maintain the group's safety. Similar forums likely exist for men, although their utility would be limited given the popularity of male-oriented queer SNS.

### **Queer Smartphone Apps**

Smartphones have also revolutionized queer CMC in recent years by embodying men's online social networks with instantaneousness and mobility. Adriana de Souza e Silva (2006) describes how mobile phones blur the borders between physical and digital spaces. Before smartphones, queer men used Bluetooth in the UAE and around the world to find sex partners, broadcasting unsolicited messages to strangers within a 10-meter radius (Agarib 2005). Now smartphones make precise physical location an integral aspect of mobile cruising.

Grindr (2011), the world's largest location-based social network tool for queer men, reaches 3 million users in 192 countries. The app uses GPS technology to arrange men's profiles based on distance from the user. Its motto, "Zero Meters Away. Our Mission For You." makes the app's offline end goal clear. Constant user movement means these apps are ever changing. This instability makes urgency and directness normative behavior in soliciting meet ups. Grindr is blocked in the UAE but still popular among men who use VPNs. *Sexr* is similar to Grindr and one of the most popular queer apps not blocked locally. In March 2012, *Sexr* had 225 users and Grindr 149 in the UAE.

Derek, who actively uses *Sexr*, said, "At *'Īdu āl-Fiṭr* [the end of Ramadan], you see a spike in the number of people logging on to these apps in Dubai because more people from Saudi and Kuwait come here for holidays." This reported spike emphasizes how these apps facilitate local queer networks for mobile and transient users. I used *Sexr*

frequently in the UAE to aggregate data and arrange interviews. One interviewee said he used SNS on his laptop when he first arrived to Dubai but now prefers apps on his iPhone because they are conveniently always at hand.

I documented three other non-blocked queer apps with more than 100 users in the UAE including one geared toward the heavy-set ‘bear’ queer subculture. A stark contrast emerges between this app’s users in Dubai and London. Profile pictures among users in Dubai fit all ages and body types whereas those in London very much embody the bear image. The wider variety of queer men using this app in the UAE highlights the dearth of non-blocked alternatives.

Beyond apps, BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) groups, many in Arabic, allow BlackBerry users to chat on the go. Some queer men post their BBM Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) on Facebook and queer SNS in hopes of being added to a group and entering its implicit sexual network.

### **Legibility**

Representation, categorization and legibility structure queer men’s digital spaces, identities and interactions (Mowlabocus 2010: 70). Men are rendered legible on queer SNS based on how they choose to categorize and visually represent themselves. For this reason, Campbell (2004) and Mowlabocus (2010) reject the ‘disembodiment thesis’ often touted in cyber studies that claims gender and biological sex are irrelevant online. Instead, they argue, “gay male culture relies on the body of the user as a point of reference within its digital interactions and virtual spaces” (Mowlabocus 2010: 13). GayRomeo asks users to list their ‘Body Stats’, which include sexual orientation, ethnic origin, height, weight and body type. The site also asks users to list their penis size based on a printable ‘DickOmeter’, whether they are circumcised and their preferred sex roles.

Manjam requires 50 percent of a user's profile to be complete before messages can be sent, inflating the significance placed on such legibility markers. These drop-down categories represent limited taxonomies of interpretation. According to Mowlabocus (Ibid: 116), "the profile can be understood as a text that serves to construct, articulate and legitimate identity within gay sub-cultural spaces online. As such, it is both a method of communication and a means by which men are rendered culturally legible." The next section analyzes how queer men represent themselves and achieve legibility through online profiles in the UAE.



Figure 3. 'DickOmeter' from GayRomeo.com

## Queer SNS Profiles

### Approach

Campbell (2004) relies on participant observation and interviews in his content analysis of queer IRC and Mowlabocus (2008) 'lurked' on a queer mailing list to analyze it. Following their leads, I created two research profiles across several SNS and mobile apps in September 2011. *Lance Wymore* featured the photo of a 20-something white male's torso. His headline read, "I'm new to Dubai and looking to meet people. What's fun in this city?" *DarrenDXB*'s photo was the pixelated headshot of a white man. His

statement read, *“I’m researching how queer/gay expats and locals use the Internet in the UAE. Please message me if you are willing to discuss.”* The analysis below focuses on Manjam, GayRomeo, Gaydar, Grindr and *Sexr* – the SNS and apps I used most frequently. Many queer men communicate directly by email and through private SNS messages, but to view such conversation threads would be technically difficult and grossly unethical. The following analysis therefore relies on information accessible to anyone with a free queer SNS account.

### **Demographics**

Although GayRomeo is the most popular<sup>11</sup> queer SNS I analyzed worldwide, Manjam is more popular in the Middle East. Both SNS are blocked in the UAE, so local traffic data is greatly distorted by the use of VPNs and proxies. Based on the sites’ own data, Manjam had 14,182 users, GayRomeo 4,816 and Gaydar 2,862 who claimed to be located in the UAE in February 2012. I analyze only Manjam and GayRomeo below because their popularity and fine-grained search capabilities permit the most accurate local demographic data.

Not surprisingly, Manjam’s UAE users are overwhelmingly (98%) male. 64% list themselves as gay, 27% as bisexual and 6% as straight. Of those who report ethnicity, 50% are Middle Eastern, 17% Asian and 16% White. These numbers support interviewee impressions that Manjam is particularly popular among Middle Eastern men. The majority (62%) of men on Manjam are 25-34 years old. 72% locate themselves in Dubai and 23% in Abu Dhabi.

GayRomeo offers different parameters, terms and choices for its searches, notably omitting gender/sex because male is assumed. 60% of users list themselves as gay and

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<sup>11</sup> Alexa page rank calculated by average daily visitors and page views.

28% bisexual. The category 'straight' is not an option. 24% of men list themselves as Asian followed by 19% Caucasian, 15% Arab and 10% Mediterranean. 64% of men are 24-34 years old.

Based on user data, the average queer SNS user in the UAE is therefore a Middle Eastern, Asian or White gay man in his late twenties living in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. The youth and urbanity reflected here are both critical components of the global gay identities discussed in Chapter One.

### **Self-Representation**

For a more nuanced perspective, I coded<sup>12</sup> profiles of the 100 most recent users on Manjam and GayRomeo to investigate how men use and present themselves on these sites. I focused primarily on profile photos, username conventions, and the brief 'headline' section in which users are instructed to write a 15- to 200-character statement. Mowlabocus (2010: 110) believes queer SNS profiles reveal identification, objectification, validation, investment and connection. I will explore some of these characteristics in the photos, usernames and headlines below.

88 of the 100 coded SNS profiles feature photos, only 34 of which show the user's face. Sunglasses, cropping, camera placement and scratch marks disguise half of these faces. As previously discussed, Mowlabocus (2010: 103) argues that face pictures in Britain demonstrate an investment and willingness to identify with queer space. Based on 100 Gaydar profiles I coded in the UK<sup>13</sup>, men in Britain are four times more likely to show their non-obscured faces than in the UAE. Mowlabocus said in an interview that many non-white men do not upload face pictures to queer SNS for fear of racial discrimination. While race certainly plays a role in UAE queer interactions, the social and

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<sup>12</sup> 27 February 2012.

<sup>13</sup> 6 March 2012.

legal dangers of posting face pictures are likely greater deterrents. Face pictures are typically shared privately in the UAE, often sent as attachments after a few messages have been exchanged via SNS.

The most common photo, featured on 34 profiles in the UAE, is the user's naked torso cropped above the waist and below the neck. Other common photos include bare buttocks and erect penises concealed by translucent briefs. These images reinforce the significance of corporeal commodification and self-surveillance in queer self-representation. Legal and social fears force the nude body to stand in where the face cannot, further sexualizing queer interactions online.

Username conventions are less uniform than photo choices. 13 of the 100 usernames I coded directly reference the UAE (*marcodxb, dubizzleboii, dxbitalian*). Given the population's transience and the fact that global users often change their location to Dubai or Abu Dhabi when traveling there, a UAE-tagged username can imply a modicum of permanence and experience that might be desirable for travelers seeking local advice. Based on interview responses, these users are occasionally Emirati, but more often foreigners who help queer men new to the UAE navigate the country's social mores and queer environments. The disproportionate number of men with UAE references in their usernames who contacted *DarrenDXB*'s profile to be interviewed supports this assertion. Usernames also reflect sexual desires and body types (*muscle23, hairybearxxl, peonmyface*), demographic data such as age or name (*scorpio29, raj27indian*), sexual flirtation (*nudeinshower, ineedunow*), and self-descriptions (*hotnsmart, super6y*).

Headlines allow the most flexibility and reveal the most about self-projection on queer SNS. Of the 100 coded headlines, only two contain Arabic script or transliteration. The rest are in English and two in French. English, already the UAE's working language,

is evidently well established as the lingua franca on queer SNS. The nearly illegible English grammar and spelling that pervades headlines and profiles suggests that many queer men who use English online are not native speakers. These brief descriptions often include contact information, residential area, upcoming travel plans, sexual preferences, prejudices and etiquette – all details relevant to facilitating social and sexual interactions.

Of the 100 headlines, five reference specific residential neighborhoods where they would like to meet (*Mar!na for sex now*). Seven imply users are visiting the UAE (*From Beirut, comin' uae SOOON ;-)* !!). Seven reference personal ethnicity (*....arab sexy top here.....no indian, no fatty plz*). Nine include contact details intended to move conversations to other platforms (*lookin 4 fun BBM 27a2b42, khaled AT live.com*). Men often include these details because the chat functions on Manjam and GayRomeo do not include audio or video capabilities. 18 headlines seek friends or dates without necessarily implying casual sex (*looking 4 mature relationship only; hi i want b frend ship with all gays*). 18 reference SNS etiquette (*no face pic = no reply; discrete guy, ur secret is safe*). 30 reference desired sexual partners (*pure botom for hot, none feminine guys, preference 2 Indians*).

Many of these headlines could be considered discourses of absence “replete with homosexual desire and homosexual need” (Shaw 1997: 144). With only a few words, much must be inferred, a task made more difficult when text is deliberately ambiguous. Four headlines use the ‘\$’ symbol which, given the context of their profiles, can be interpreted to mean users are soliciting or seeking prostitution (*Not Chat...direct...Ju\$t For \$; Nothing 4 free here. 21 cm long \$\$\$\$ out calls only*). Not all profiles are ambiguous about prostitution. *Top4bznz* describes himself in Arabic as a top Emirati looking to pay for 15-year-old smooth bottom boys. His profile image is a man’s hand

holding \$100 bills. These particular profiles seem to confirm impressions that the UAE's queer population is, in the words of one interviewee, "young, transient and transactional."

### **Queer Mobile App Profiles**

In order to determine whether queer men represent themselves similarly on SNS and mobile apps, I coded the 120 geographically closest profiles on Grindr and *Sexr* using similar criteria to that stated above.

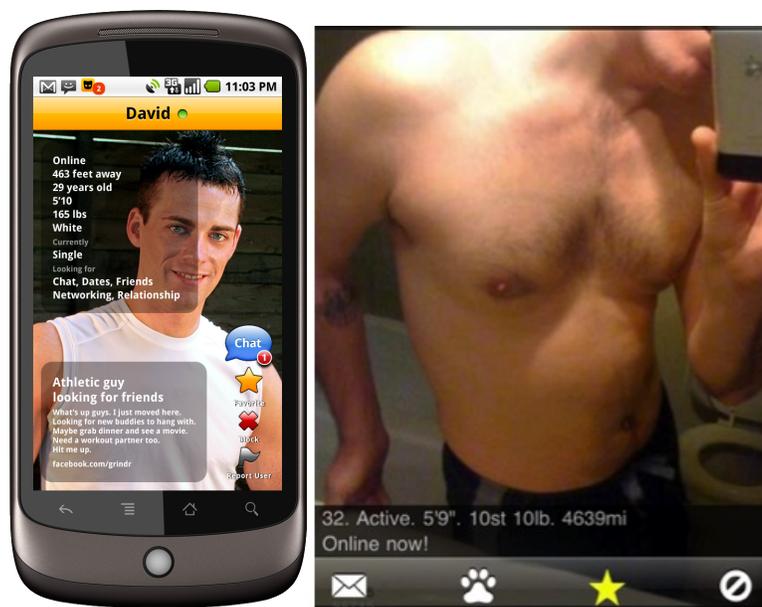
98 app profiles feature photos and 63 show faces, only 19 of which are slightly obscured. "The whole point of Grindr is to see and be seen" (Mowlabocus 2010: 196), but this relatively large number of face pictures is surprising given how few are shown on SNS and the potential risks of identifying as queer in the UAE. 19 photos feature naked chests and abs with cropped or covered faces, and 13 feature non-corporeal images, including the UAE flag and a Hindu shrine, to express identity elements.

Of 106 usernames provided, 28 appear to reference real names compared with only five in the SNS sample. Perhaps names are more expected on mobile apps because the chance of a casual offline encounter is greater when GPS data enables users to know when others are near. Not a single desktop SNS username references travel or transience, whereas seven app usernames do (*just visiting; on hols; globe trotter*). This convention likely reflects the mobility inherent in mobile apps.

Only 60 of the 120 app profiles feature headlines. 12 imply the user is just visiting the UAE (*young bttm visiting; staying at X hotel*), 12 specifically reference a UAE location (*Dubai; X hotel*), 14 reference ethnicity or country of origin (*German based in Dubai*), 16 feature app etiquette (*no pic/facepic = no chat/reply*) and 17 reference sex role or preference (*Versatile bottom; into athletic guys*). Of users who listed their ethnicity on Grindr, 27 were white and 12 Middle Eastern. Grindr's overwhelmingly

white user base in the UAE might mirror Mowlabocus' claim that non-white men are less likely to make evident their ethnicities on queer SNS. The ethnicity gap could also stem from the fact that Grindr was developed in the U.S. and cannot be freely downloaded within the UAE. Tourists and new arrivals wealthy enough to afford smartphones and who have used Grindr before coming to the UAE are therefore more likely to use the app. Only two app profiles compared with nine on SNS include further contact details, likely because these apps are as efficient as SMS or BBM.

The transience expressed in app usernames and headlines coupled with the fact that twice as many men show non-obscured faces and five times as many use names on apps over SNS might suggest more app users are merely visiting the UAE and their relationship with the country is ephemeral. App users are therefore less likely than their SNS counterparts to be aware of anti-homosexuality laws and norms in the country. App and SNS users are of course not mutually exclusive beings. Several users with identical usernames and photos slightly alter their profiles to best fit a given medium's perceived culture, etiquette and criteria.



*Figure 4. Screenshots from Grindr (left) and Sexr marketing promotions. Sexr's photo is a perfect representation of the nude torso photo ubiquitous across queer apps and SNS.*

## **From Virtual Poke to Physical Sex**

All men I interviewed have used queer SNS or mobile apps, and many initially contacted me via these channels. I combine their interviews with my own observations from six months spent ‘lurking’ on these sites to analyze queer CMC usage patterns below.

Most users log in to one or two SNS or apps several times per week and maintain other accounts they check irregularly. Logging in allows men to appear online and ‘available’, prompting more messages to be sent while requiring little engagement. Most men said they primarily use the sites to browse other users’ profiles and to arrange sexual rendezvous. Few said they use queer SNS to meet friends. Amir has met roughly 40 men offline for coffee or shisha, but describes them as “very superficial acquaintances.” Few men are optimistic about finding long-term relationships online, claiming sites geared toward queer dating rather than casual hookups are not popular in the region. Arjun, who has met more than 100 men from 40 nationalities offline after chatting on SNS, said, “if you say you’re looking for something serious, [other men] think you’re desperate. My profile says ‘ideally looking for more than sex’. The keyword is ‘ideally’.”

Most young men are from abroad and do not intend to settle down in the UAE, making long-term relationships difficult. Cultural differences also complicate matters. Mark, who is Filipino, dated an Emirati for six years until his boyfriend was pressured to marry a woman. Mark said, “I like to go out with Arabs, but I know there is no future. They will always ditch you.” Enrico, who estimates he has slept with 50 men he met online in the UAE, said few rendezvous led to friendship or subsequent dates. Most conversations, especially those on apps, do not result in offline meetings. The asynchronous nature of the medium means few even get past “hello.”

Successful conversations on SNS typically consist of private messages exchanged, usually accompanied by pictures featuring faces or nude body parts. If both users are interested, the conversation will often shift to phone, BBM or Microsoft Messenger. The conversation will continue by instant message, often under pseudonyms, and might transition to webcam chat or to a proposed offline meeting. Nadir and Adam said they always speak to someone by phone before meeting to ensure their partners' sincerity. Aziz outlined a typical conversation:

'Hey, where from, how old', ask for pics, ask if interested or not. The conversation might lead to 'where you work, where you live, do you live alone?' Some people might talk about what they like to do in sex. From there, if it's ok, if both agree, 'let's meet up.'

Dylan, who has chatted with many men via queer CMC portals, said the two he met offline for sex came about immediately. "The conversation went, 'how are you, where you from', then it comes to the face pic, then it ends up, 'are you free now?' Then the mobile numbers are exchanged, then we hook up." Etisalat and Du require proof of identity when purchasing SIM cards. Many men are reluctant to exchange phone numbers because they know their real identities are linked to them and suspect the Government monitors calls and SMS.

### **Authenticity and Desirability**

Most men I interviewed asserted their online profiles accurately reflect their offline personalities. This supports Hargittai's (2007) claim that offline identities often carry over online. Several men over 30 confessed to reducing their age to appeal to a slightly younger crowd. For safety concerns, pseudonyms are the norm and many men do

not reveal their actual names until they meet in person. Arjun said he spent several nights with one man before realizing he was using a fake name. “People love to lie. Most men try to be so careful here.”

Whether to post a face photo is not always a matter of safety, but often one of perceived desirability. Dylan, half Asian and half Latin, decided to post his face publicly when he realized men were ignoring him after he sent his face photo in private messages. He believed they were rejecting him based on his race and decided showing his face from the start would save time and avoid disappointment during the courting process. Dylan said, “A lot of people have preference on nationality, I guess because there are so many people from everywhere. If I were to chat with someone, I wouldn’t ask about that, but here it’s automatic.” Many men reflected his sentiments.

If the first question is not ‘where from?’ in queer CMC it is often ‘top or bottom?’. Of Manjam users in the UAE who express a preferred sex role, those who listed their ethnicity as African were 3.23 times more likely to prefer being the penetrative sex partner than the passive partner. Using the same parameters, the ratio was 2.36 for Middle Easterners, 1.49 for Latinos, 0.97 for Asians and 0.81 for Caucasians, where numbers less than 1.00 signal a preference for assuming the passive role<sup>14</sup>. Raj noted his perception that on Manjam, where half of users are Middle Eastern, ‘tops’ are less likely to show face pictures than ‘bottoms’. These observations can be explained by the historical association of sexual position and masculinity discussed in Chapter One. Amir, an Emirati who grew up in Dubai, said, “there’s always this perception that the role defines your masculinity. Guys I met in high school would think it was ok to be top, that this wasn’t really gay.” Of the 865 men who identify as ‘straight’ on Manjam in the UAE,

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<sup>14</sup> 28 February 2012 from 14,188 UAE profiles.

327 list their sexual preference as ‘top only’ compared with eight ‘bottom only’<sup>15</sup>. Enrico said Westerners he has met usually identify as gay whereas Arabs identify more as bisexual or straight. The preceding numbers seem to confirm what my ethnographies suggest.

Since the 1990s, activists and academics have argued that the Internet deemphasizes “the gender-race-class triad, empowering the user and thus serving to democratize societies” (Al-Qasimi 2011: 289). Herring (2001), who disagrees with this line of reasoning, characterizes the claim as resting on two assumptions. The first being that text-based CMC lacks physical and auditory cues, which makes gender online irrelevant or invisible. Sherry Turkle (1995) and Fereshteh Nouraei-Simone (2005) support this argument, but Miriyam Aouragh (2011: 2) believes such assumptions “believe the reality of daily lived experiences outside cyberspace.” Many men I interviewed reflected Aouragh’s skepticism, claiming anonymity online only amplifies interlaced gender, race and class prejudices. The second assumption, which I will discuss in Chapter Three, is that the Internet inherently links geographically dispersed users, empowering individuals to form communities and to organize politically.

Nadir from India said, “There is a lot of racism on the Net. Locals and Middle Eastern guys prefer Westerners. The minute you say you’re from India, China, Sri Lanka, you are like garbage.” Adam, who is white and British, said some men try to exploit him for the assumed wealth and status that accompanies his race in the UAE. These sentiments highlight real intersections between race, nationality and class that pervade UAE society. Arjun, of Indian descent, describes nationality issues in the UAE as a caste-based pyramid with Asians at the bottom and Caucasians at the top. Given that racism is often explicit in employment ads and certain sectors are dominated by particular

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<sup>15</sup> 19 April 2012.

nationalities, this pyramid describes desirability as much as it would income. It should be noted that racism via queer CMC is not unique to the UAE. The website [douchebagsofgrindr.com](http://douchebagsofgrindr.com), a forum on which Grindr users post prejudice-laden profiles, attests to this fact. The UAE's extremely diverse and segmented society combined with perceived anonymity online does however seem to amplify racist expressions.

Internalized racism was another common theme in interviews, perhaps because the UAE's diverse population allows for great exploration beyond one's country of origin. Raj, who is Indian, avoids his countrymen. "Honestly speaking, I don't care for Indian types. If they contact me, I ignore them." Men of most ethnicities expressed similar views. Jay, a Filipino man, said, "If you go to some guys' profiles, they say 'no Asians, no Filipinos, no Indians'. It's frustrating." Jay concedes he also avoids Asians, but would never state this on his profile. Racial preference might be closely tied to fetishized stereotypes of exotic 'others'. When thousands of men are reduced to demographic data, shirtless photos and a few dozen words, race becomes an easy way to narrow the selection.

Emiratis, although atop white men on the social pyramid by most accounts, are not immune to racism. Amir said he purposefully dresses like an expatriate in shorts and T-shirts and walks around with his iPhone earbuds in place to escape negative perceptions of Emiratis as narrow-minded, traditional people. "I'm open-minded. I'm a 4G Emirati," he said referencing the latest cellular wireless standards. He thinks many people discriminate against him on Manjam because they fear getting involved with a local could bring legal ramifications. "There is very little international mingling, which is ironic because we have so many different nationalities here. People have this perception they can only trust people from their own nationality. I've felt so much alienation from mine that I try to avoid them."

Karim, a Lebanese man, emphasized some of the prejudice he and others feel toward Emiratis. “Local guys do not consider themselves gay. They’ll fuck anything that walks, a sheep or a boy, and then show off about it to their circle of friends.” Nadir confirms Amir’s assumptions, saying he is afraid to approach locals. “I am worried about police being online. I never give locals my number. He could be a millionaire or a king, but it’s just not my thing.” Conversely, some expatriates fetishize local men and local dress, another instance of exoticizing the ‘other’. Enrico recalls:

One man came to my apartment in national dress. I always felt if you wear the *dishdāsha*, there is a barrier. It means you want to identify yourself with a particular group and communicate some disconnect. It was very intriguing to play with that barrier with someone I was dating. I knew at some point we would touch. It was mind-fucking.

Beauty-based discrimination is rampant in the UAE and in casual queer sexual encounters around the world. Aziz, who grew up in Kuwait, said one night stands are more difficult in the UAE because people have higher standards and are looking for perfection. Karim’s actions seem to support Aziz’s claims. If someone came over for sex who had posted a fake or deceptively attractive photo on Manjam, he would shut the door in his face. Mourad said he’s been on several dates with men whose profiles showed them 10 years younger and a lot skinnier. When anonymity is coveted, deception is part of the game.

This chapter outlined barriers queer men overcome to form identities online and analyzed how they represent themselves via queer CMC. The next chapter focuses on how these identities transition to offline spaces of desire and how collective identities merge to form online and offline queer communities in the UAE.

## Chapter Three: Online to Offline Community Formation

*“We have a gay club, but we can’t call it that. But it is that! Men dance closely, but kissing and touching is not allowed. Everyone knows when you say the name ‘Underground’, it means gay.” – Aziz*

Queer community identity formation in the UAE regularly flows from online to offline spaces of desire. This pattern runs counter to most SNS interactions previously studied largely due to legal, commercial and social restrictions preventing queer men from meeting freely offline in the UAE. The offline queer spaces that do exist can be divided into designated spaces, co-opted spaces and private spaces. Despite constraints, many foreign men find it easier to be ‘out’ in the UAE than they would amid social pressures at home. Based on several criteria and academic frameworks, I argue that queer groups in the UAE do constitute online and offline communities but are fragmented by power, access and privilege dynamics based on race, nationality and class.

### Online Supremacy Amid Offline Restrictions

Given the UAE’s incredible transience and dearth of queer offline spaces, online spaces are paramount to queer identity formation and community development. boyd [sic] and Ellison (2007) assert that most online social networks promote latent connections, those already existing offline. The opposite is often true among queer men in the UAE, where connections originating online are manifested offline. Shaw concludes in his study of IRC that, “For many gay users, the face-to-face meeting remains the ultimate goal,” (Shaw 1997: 143-4). Despite online supremacy, offline encounters are still highly coveted in the UAE.

The continued existence of queer offline spaces depends on them remaining underground and unpublicized. When party organizers canvassed Dubai with thousands of flyers advertising a public gay night in 2001, the host club was immediately closed (Gardner 2001). As made clear in the introductory anecdote about a Filipino hotel party organized on Facebook, queer tourists, locals and expatriates rely on semi-private online forums and SNS to materialize offline connections in the UAE.

Digital cruising on mobile apps and online voyeurism via SNS can be considered a response to the ‘placelessness’ queer men often feel in heterosexual societies (Mowlabocus 2010: 189). Queer placelessness is more than a perception in the UAE. It is a legally mandated reality. Mowlabocus (Ibid: 122) terms the phrase ‘cybercottage’ to mean a “digital space created for the sole purpose of negotiating casual sexual encounters...” In the UAE, where men are afraid to publicly declare their sexualities, most SNS and apps fit this description.

Although coming from different theoretical disciplines and perspectives, Whitaker (2007), Boellstorff (2008), Ken Hillis (2009) and Mowlabocus (2010) argue that, contrary to popular perceptions, online spaces are not inferior to or mutually exclusive from offline spaces. The two realms are inextricably linked, and to analyze them in isolation would be to misunderstand their relationship. When offline spaces are severely restricted, however, the online realm does acquire greater significance. Hillis writes, “with respect to gay/queer experiences of material public space, belief or desire that the Web might constitute not only mobility but also some form of *actual space*<sup>16</sup> grows in tandem with the reality that it remains taboo, for example, to hold hands with one’s same-sex partner at the mall” (in Mowlabocus 2010: 201). Repressive contexts like the UAE thus require reconfigured notions of space and one’s place within it.

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<sup>16</sup> Italics mine.

In many societies, queer men flow freely between online and offline spaces, experiencing the “simultaneous place and placelessness of the Internet” (Katyral 2011: 116). Fluid relationships between the virtual and physical exist to a degree in the UAE, but are immeasurably hindered by fear, surveillance and censorship. Most interviewees said online space trumps offline in establishing local queer networks and communities. “The Internet is the only way you can meet people here,” said James, who met his two previous boyfriends on Gaydar. Amir said, “If it wasn’t for the Internet, I don’t think my life would be the same. I’ve gained self-acceptance. That would not have been possible without the Internet.” Most men, regardless of age, reflect these cyberutopian sentiments, perhaps partially to cope with offline restrictions.

The UAE’s transient society means new queer individuals are constantly arriving on business or holiday. Because the country’s primary offline ‘gay scene’ is underground (sometimes literally as discussed below) and constantly moving to avoid police crackdowns, the best and oftentimes only way to find other queer men is online. Queer SNS and apps provide a digital word of mouth community to initiate new men to the UAE’s virtual and terrestrial queer landscape. New arrivals must establish a modicum of trust, authenticity and desirability with UAE users to gain entrance to the local ‘gay scene’. This task often requires coherent command of the English language and a skin tone deemed acceptable or desirable to other users.

Online spaces also provide continuity for queer men in the UAE, where urban and social landscapes are constantly changing. In his book *The Dubai Experiment: Accelerated Urbanism* architect George Katodrytis writes of Dubai, “the city has ceased to be a site. Instead it has become a condition. It tends to be everywhere and nowhere,” (in Krane 2010: 304). Many global cities fit this description, but Dubai stands alone in the Middle East for its diversity and connectivity. Internet access thus becomes a

coalescing force holding minority communities together over distance and time. Online spaces also allow queer men in the UAE to “partially transcend the public/private dichotomy found in ‘real’ space” (Al-Qasimi 2011: 290). This is made possible by anonymity and the ability to suggest one’s queerness without explicitly stating it online. Queer men who wish to remain invisible to police but visible and present on gaydar<sup>17</sup> maintain this delicate position online but regularly dip into offline spaces of desire when the opportunity arises.

### **Offline Spaces**

*“When I’m with my closest friends in a club is when I’m 100% real.” – Dylan*

Based on interviewee responses, only two offline places in Dubai and another in Abu Dhabi have, as Karim puts it, “been branded in everyone’s mind as gay.” I refer to these three nightclubs as ‘designated offline spaces’, not legally or publicly sanctioned for queer activity, but widely known among queer men and much of the general population for attracting predominantly queer clientele. Far more common are public and semi-private places that are temporarily co-opted as queer. ‘Co-opted offline spaces’ in the UAE can be classified into two general categories: those that are predominantly queer on a relatively fixed schedule (a typically ‘straight’ nightclub with an occasional ‘gay night’) and those where queer men regularly congregate but seldom represent the majority population (a specific public beach or gym). At its queerest, the former category becomes almost indistinguishable from a designated offline space, whereas the latter category always requires greater discretion. The final category of offline space I discuss

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Gaydar’ here refers both to the private SNS and to the colloquialism meaning to intuit another’s sexual orientation by non-verbal clues.

is private space. Often difficult to secure in the UAE, private space is the site of most sexual encounters among queer men.

Linda McDowell's analysis of space, place and gender relations focuses primarily on women, but many of her observations readily apply to queer men in the UAE. McDowell (1993: 169) asserts that sexual orientation "influences freedom from fear and affects spatial behavior in urban areas," especially in city quarters where gay men do not feel their identities threatened. Although queer districts like Soho in London or The Castro in San Francisco do not exist in the UAE, a few designated and co-opted queer spaces do allow some men to express their sexual desires and identities. Race, nationality and class segregate these spaces, as is still often common to varying degrees in their Western counterparts.

### **Designated Spaces**

One nightclub stands out in Dubai as *the* offline place where queer men congregate. *Underground* is hidden in a hotel basement. Every man I interviewed referenced it by name, and most had spent at least one Thursday night dancing in its bowels. At closing time, patrons are herded through an underground parking lot rather than exiting via the lobby. The hotel's website lists its many other restaurants and attractions, but avoids any mention of *Underground*. To write the club's real name here would be to order its closure, but rest assured its pseudonym accurately reflects the original. Karim said, "Every few years, when things start getting out of control, police will raid it and no one will go there for three months, then it picks up again." He added that *Underground* was last raided several years ago and is now regularly at full capacity on weekends.

I visited *Underground* in September 2011 on a Thursday evening, the start of the UAE's weekend and the club's 'gayest' night. Karim invited me to join his group of friends, who served as my cultural ambassadors and de facto research assistants. By all accounts, the night I experienced was typical. We arrived by midnight, descended to the basement, and joined the smoky queue. The entrance fee was 100 AED (\$27) –expensive by most standards in Dubai, exorbitant for *Underground*'s location and décor, and prohibitive for South Asian migrant laborers and Filipino service staff. The hundreds of white and Arab men who flock here every weekend evidently consider this fee a small price to pay for the pleasure of dancing with friends and cruising for strangers. Women enter for free, a common policy meant to balance the UAE's male-dominated sex ratio, but *Underground*'s clientele remains over 90 percent male. A small group of butch women clustered in a corner and several straight couples sat at the bar, but the main dance floor was packed with more than 250 men.

At least 15 burly bouncers barreled through the club, periodically pulling groups apart for dancing too closely. On two separate occasions, I witnessed bouncers round up and funnel small groups of European and Arab men into the hallway. They were kicked out of the club for inappropriately touching each other or dancing provocatively. One man I interviewed said he was kicked out of *Underground* for hugging a friend. Being literally underground, mobile phone reception was intermittent. I was only able to check queer apps when I surfaced into the hotel lobby. A dozen men were within one mile on *Sexr*, but none in my immediate vicinity, implying I was not the only person with signal failure below.

I circumnavigated the elliptical bar more than 10 times, forcing my way through tightly packed groups to see the entire crowd at different stages throughout the night. Karim joined me on several round, chatting with friends he recognized along the way.

When I mentioned my research to one man, he asked if I was *DarrenDXB* on GayRomeo, anecdotal evidence if nothing more to support my earlier claim that online communication often precedes offline interaction among queer men in the UAE. An older man discretely grabbed Karim and several men caressed my back as we passed. Patrons are well aware that physical advances can get them ejected from *Underground*. Most men maintain a few centimeters distance and flirt with their eyes.

When the music stopped abruptly and the lights came on at 3 a.m., we finished our conversation and waded through broken glass and cigarette butts, up the parking garage ramp and into the humid night air. I listened to snippets of conversations, men sorting out after-parties and making desperate attempts to secure a hook up for the night. Between a pool party and a hotel suite, Karim opted for the latter and we drove to a nearby tower. A group of 10 men had beaten us there. Hotel managers were checking IDs and refusing them access to elevators. We called it a night and headed home.

Most men I interviewed expressed their own perceptions of *Underground*. One American man said *Underground* was like New York City in the 1970s. “Whenever you have a subculture that is so underground, it takes on a more serious and earnest tone.” Amir, who celebrated his 21st birthday at *Underground*, compared it unfavorably to Heaven, a famous gay bar he visited in London. “There’s a homophobic manager at *Underground* who stands in front of me when I’m dancing. Here you can’t touch anyone. *Heaven*, though, is very open. It really felt like Heaven.” Several men described *Underground*’s clientele as ‘aggressive’, ‘hyper masculine’ and ‘too many bears’. “There’s a vibe of shame and an aggressiveness that comes from being attached to a self image,” said Enrico, describing what he termed an ‘Arab masculinity complex’. Mourad said entering *Underground* carries unambiguous implications. “The moment you step

foot inside, it means you're gay. If you want to have sex, you go to *Underground*." Adam described it as a "cattle market."

The crowd was demographically diverse in terms of age and ethnicity with a noticeable absence of Filipino men. Those I interviewed said a bar on the other side of Dubai creek with no entrance fee is particularly popular among queer Filipinos, explicitly acknowledging *Underground*'s socioeconomic barriers.

A culture of fear blankets the smoke-filled basement and cross-creek Filipino bar. Latif said, "everyone knows police go undercover and shut places down when they get too out of control or too comfortable." Adam said nine years ago, the CID raided the Filipino bar, and many men were arrested and deported. "That was another thing that put me off going to these places." Recent reports confirm queer crackdowns still occur (Littauer 2012a). One man I interviewed said the predominantly Filipino hangout is the oldest gay bar in Dubai and has stayed open for so long because female prostitutes who operate inside act as a cover, hiding queer men and rendering the club a 'normal' heterosexual space. If true, the fact that one moral vice cancels out another rather than accentuating both is a perfect example of UAE authorities championing façade preservation over policy enforcement, a concept I will argue in Chapter Four.

### **Co-Opted Spaces**

I visited several public and semi-private queer co-opted offline spaces in Dubai based on interview responses. Paul said nine times out of ten men hit on him in 'straight' clubs. "That's just Dubai." Navigating predominantly heterosexual spaces in the UAE can be challenging for queer men because flirting with the wrong person could have legal repercussions. Codes and systems, common the world over, have been adopted and perfected in the UAE. Jay said, "For us as gays, there is eye conversation. When you

stare at their eyes you know, let's meet in the toilet.” Nadir describes himself as a straight-looking guy, which means few queer men approach him in public. “You have to have a roaming eye, wink at each other in malls, etc.” GPS-enabled queer apps represent a new form of digital queer signaling and reduce the risks and likelihood of getting it wrong, unless of course police are using the apps to entrap men as some fear. For all the inherent risks and potential embarrassment, many men prefer to remain in ‘family hangouts’, meaning queer designated spaces and the two types of co-opted spaces described below.

Several bars and restaurants fit the ‘**occasionally predominantly queer**’ model of co-opted space in Dubai. In early 2012, new clubs began hosting ‘gay nights’ organized by a popular DJ under the brand *Phoenicia*. According to Karim, *Phoenicia*’s venues change when “gayness gets out of hand. The hotels where the clubs are don’t want all the gay attention.” Word of these nights and venue shifts spreads via Facebook, BBM and email. Karim said *Phoenicia* events now rival *Underground* for clientele, spurring “online and BlackBerry chat wars” in which *Underground* managers spread false rumors that its competitor’s venues have been raided, canceled or closed. The speed with which these rumors are dispelled and ‘queer flash mobs’ congregate would have been inconceivable before the Internet.

I attended the ‘occasionally predominantly queer’ nightclub *Bronze* in September 2011 where employees of a large international company in an industry known to attract queer men receive free entrance and discounted drinks one night per week<sup>18</sup>. Karim introduced me to six men who work for the company. One of their colleagues, a man I had previously interviewed, sent me an SMS before I arrived saying, “Enjoy tonite. Unlike *Underground* u need to have a girl to get in. The first bar on the right is usually

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<sup>18</sup> I am deliberately vague here to preserve anonymity.

where the boys will be.” Unprovoked, Miguel, who Karim calls “the nicest diva you’ll ever meet”, elaborated on this segregated space. “The bar on the right is where the gay guys and gay friendlies hang out, the big open bar in the middle is where the straight people congregate, and the one on the far left is a mixture where the closeted lesbians hang out.” I cannot confirm his last point, but the first two were evident. Karim detailed sexuality-based floor plans of two other clubs and said this degree of spatial segregation<sup>19</sup> in co-opted queer spaces is normal in the UAE.

We arrived at *Bronze* after midnight and paid the 100 AED entrance fee while the song, ‘It’s Raining Men’ blared from inside. Tracks by Abba, Madonna and Wham, all international gay icons, followed during the night. Our predominantly male group entered without trouble despite a sign reading “preferential treatment will be given to couples for entrance” outside the door, suggesting the policy is not always strictly enforced. Miguel latched onto my waist and sashayed down the makeshift runway into the club. Unlike in *Underground*, the bouncers ignored his advance. When the club closed at 3 a.m., the last-minute race to find a partner began. One man who had stared at me much of the night approached three times to ask for my phone number. Such persistence was evident throughout the club. On our way out the door, two female prostitutes grabbed my arm and tried to pull me aside, saying ‘hey baby’ repeatedly. Another dozen loitered in the parking lot. The presence of female prostitutes luring men at *Bronze*, noticeably absent at *Underground*, reemphasizes the fact that queer co-opted spaces are not exclusively queer.

Several shopping malls, beaches, parks, and gyms fit the ‘**mildly queer most of the time**’ model of co-opted queer space in Dubai. Different levels of discretion are required at each, and men craft their rules of engagement based on perceived risks. Many

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<sup>19</sup> For more theoretical perspectives on gendered space, see Bell and Binnie (2004), Oswin (2008) and Tucker (2010).

described these places as integral to queer community identity formation. Paul said, “Yes, gay communities exist. They have a section at the beach where they sit and everyone knows everyone. They meet at the gym too.” Aziz said he sometimes recognizes familiar faces from queer SNS profiles in malls, and Raj said, “If you get Grindr to work in a mall, you will see 200 [men].” Raj’s figure is an exaggeration but does highlight the integral role mobile technology, specifically queer smartphone apps, plays in facilitating offline queer interactions.

This use of smartphones was most evident and most cited at a particular beach in Dubai. Some men, presumably those without smartphones, arrange rendezvous before arriving in public spaces. Nadir said he has seen messages on GayRomeo that read, “I’ll be at *Dubai Beach* in a red speedo.” I visited this beach and saw many red speedos one Friday afternoon, but more interesting were the several dozen men within one mile of my location on *Sexr*. Walking down the beach, I received three messages asking where I was sitting.

Many men cited a specific gym as central for discrete queer congregation. One of the Facebook groups I analyzed in Chapter Two names the gym in its title. Queer men reportedly drive from all over Dubai to visit this particular location. Three men I interviewed referred to this gym’s steam room as a ‘happening place’. Enrico said when he visited, “There were people doing things. It was full on, but they were careful.” Aziz had a different experience. “A guy kept checking me out, then he went to the steam room. He kept wiping steam from the window to look out. I approached him, but he chickened out.” I entered the steam room and sauna but witnessed nothing sexual. Aziz said of an average queer man in the gym, “if you pass his virtual check list, he might approach you and open some random subjects to determine if you’re gay.” Several signs in the locker room read “Preserve your modesty. Please use the cubicles provided.” and “Do not cause

offense. Please use your towel.” Metrosexual men changed in the corner while others prostrated on a prayer mat next to a rack of *dishdāshat*. These diverse scenes reemphasize the discretion queer interaction in public space requires.

### **Private Spaces**

Private offline space is the site of most queer sexual activity in the UAE, but privacy is not always easy to find, making online mediation crucial. Rent in Dubai and Abu Dhabi is expensive, so many men share accommodation. Men who have their own apartment or villa are often at an advantage when seeking casual sex. Mark and others said men SNS and app users will often ask one another if they have a place and live alone. “If you don’t, they will reject you right away. They are only thinking they want to sleep together.”

Housing may be expensive, but cars are relatively cheap to rent or lease and the UAE remains a driving culture. Two men said they have had sex in cars, one reportedly with a local police officer. Others said car sex is not uncommon. Hotel rooms also provide private space for men who can afford them. Nadir has a home in Sharjah, but is married with children. He sometimes brings men to hotels near the airport where rooms can be booked on an hourly basis. As made clear with the Filipino hotel party, private spaces are not only used for sex. They also provide sites for queer congregation outside the purview of bouncers, police officers and closed-circuit television (CCTV) where men can express aspects of their identities they must often hide in public.

### **Beyond Dubai?**

Despite queer outlets and populations in other emirates, some mentioned in Chapter One, Dubai remains the Gulf’s ‘Gay Mecca’. “Dubai is like the gateway for gay

people, a hub, a congregating spot,” Mohammed said. The men I interviewed who live in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah drive to Dubai every few weeks for a night out at *Underground* or to complete an online hookup with offline sex. Much of this travel stems from the fact that Dubai has the largest internationally diverse and Internet savvy population of any emirate. “Dubai is the sin city of the Gulf for sure,” Paul said. He compares the other emirates and neighboring countries to “living in your parents’ house. Drinking, sex, everything you’re doing is a bit bad. You don’t need to sneak out as much in Dubai.” “Not as much” is not enough for Enrico. “I want to be in a place that is more filled with generosity and love. This is not my place. There is too much fear.”

### **Offline Obstacles**

Legal, social and commercial barriers, some of which I outline below, explain the relative lack of offline space for queer men in the UAE. Krane cites the country’s tendency to privatize public spaces. “Instead of parks, [Dubai] builds themed malls where it can weed out low-wage expatriates and tranquilize consumers from reality” (Krane 2010: 304). Privatized indoor spaces are heavily monitored, ruling out the prospect of queer public activity. “I didn’t use Manjam in the U.S. There were sanctioned public gay spaces, so I didn’t need it,” said Bill, who now has an active account. As demonstrated earlier, socially sanctioned offline queer spaces exist in the UAE, but to find them requires knowing where they are, a catch-22 for queer men new to the scene.

All associations must register with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which does not approve LGBT NGOs or political organizations. International human rights NGOs are also barred from establishing offices in the UAE (U.S. State Department 2011). Even corporate LGBT groups are prohibited from operating local chapters. Enrico said he contacted a lawyer at his company to push this issue but was told his firm is not allowed

to ‘encourage’ homosexuality in the Middle East. Several men I interviewed travel to Europe to partake in company-wide LGBT conferences and periodically host unofficial events with queer staff in the UAE after office hours. Regional LGBT rights groups and online initiatives like Helem, Latif’s Facebook group and Ahwaa.org address queer issues in the UAE but are based in Lebanon, Canada and Bahrain, respectively. Their primary influence within the UAE is therefore online.

Ramadan can be a confusing time for anyone in the UAE, but queer men find the holy month particularly perplexing. *Underground* and other nightclubs are closed, but many bars remain open during the month. Derek said, “If you’re specifically looking for sex, I think it’s the wrong season. Lots of Emirati friends are not interested in sex during that time. Some Arab Muslims cut off gay friends entirely during the month.” Queer online spaces therefore assume greater significance for non-Muslims and non-adherent Muslims during Ramadan.

Several queer men said much self-control is required around alcohol so as not to accidentally ‘reveal’ their sexualities through public displays of affection. James and his boyfriend were once warned to leave a bar before managers called the police because they were being “too affectionate.” “We were both drunk. I think we learned our lesson from that point. Taxi drivers will often drive people to the police station if they’re making out, drunk, or vomiting in the taxi.”

Discretion is key in queer offline interactions and is explicitly requested on many SNS profiles. Most men share Raj’s advice. “If you don’t advertise yourself, you won’t get into trouble. You just need to be reasonably discrete.” By advertising, he means acting flamboyantly or explicitly stating one’s sexuality. “There are some Emiratis that are naturally camp. Their family knows they are not straight, but if they don’t say it or flaunt it, then it’s fine,” said Paul. Karim and James both referred to this culture of

silence as ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’. “Everything here feels like a cloud of smoke. People don’t talk about it,” Enrico said about homosexuality. Discretion often borders on paranoia. Adam describes one Arab man he met online as “nervous in his own shadow” for refusing to meet for lunch or be seen with other queer men in public. Perhaps a degree of paranoia is rational given the harsh laws around homosexuality I outline in Chapter Four.

Nadir, who is married, said he leads a dual life. “I have a straight circle and a gay circle of friends. My balance sheet is quite balanced.” He avoids the “known places” where “the scene is happening” like *Underground*, saying, “If it’s just one-on-one, I can deny the whole damn thing” if ever caught. Family pressure to marry someone of the opposite sex is strong in Arab and Muslim culture, as it is in many cultures. Aziz said this pressure leads to many ‘sham’ weddings among queer men in the region. “They get married and play [with men] every now and then. It’s strictly sexual.” But for some men, like Mark and his Emirati partner of six years, homosexual relationships are more than sexual. Arjun said he met two Saudi men in Abu Dhabi who have been in a relationship for ten years. One of the men recently married a Saudi lesbian who has her own girlfriend. The four of them now live in two separate houses in Dubai, the men in one and the women in another.

Cohabitation is a barrier for all unmarried couples in the UAE, but discrete queer men have a distinct advantage over straight couples due to heteronormative conceptions of permissibility. Men in the UAE often live together to save money, so queer couples can usually share one-bedroom apartments without drawing attention. Derek said, “When everything was good economically, landlords made it a point to ask who was living in the house. Now they don’t care because people are desperate for you to move in.” Several men implied money has trumped conservative values since the UAE’s economic troubles

began in 2008. Heterosexual couples often face greater scrutiny. In 2010, Sharjah police went door-to-door arresting unwed couples. A lawyer quoted in *The National* said violating couples could face lashes, but imprisonment or deportation was more likely (Kakande 2010).

Transgender individuals face more offline challenges than their cisgender counterparts. There are 191 transgender profiles<sup>20</sup> on Manjam in the UAE compared to more than 14,000 male profiles. This difference implies transgender individuals are very much a sub-minority group. A cisgender individual (someone who's gender identity matches the behavior considered socially appropriate for his or her biological sex) can conceal one's sexuality without necessarily compromising one's identity in the UAE. The same is less true for transgender individuals, whose identities are often tied to their external appearance and behavior. In 2008, the UAE Ministry of Social Affairs launched a "Social Values" campaign called "Excuse me, I am a Girl" meant to target "the fourth gender" – "manly women" with short haircuts who wear baggy clothes and cologne – to protect society from "social deviancy" (Al-Qasimi 2011, Al Amir 2010). 41 men and women were reportedly arrested for cross-dressing during the campaign between May and July 2008 in Dubai alone (Abdullah and Agarib 2009). An official at the Ministry said, "The phenomenon of manly women has become apparent in society... These women are against the normal nature of females. Their deviant behavior threatens other normal girls," (Rafei 2009, Al Amir 2010). Paul said his effeminate male barbers, not directly targeted but still implicated by this initiative, took heed of the campaign. "They were really camp and dressed trendy. As soon as the campaign started, they dressed differently."

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<sup>20</sup> 16 March 2012.

Transgender women (biological males who identify as women) are also police targets in the UAE. Tia Phoenixx (2010), a “Toronto Shemale Escort” according to her website, wrote a lengthy blog post about being detained in the UAE for over three months after CID officials arrested her in a sting operation. She said she was raped in prison and moved to a “lady boy’s cell” for tgirls (transgender women) and effeminate men in one of Dubai’s central jails. Another post on a popular Asian transsexual blog describes how Aiyah was questioned and groped by officials at Dubai International Airport when returning from the Philippines because her appearance did not match the word ‘male’ on her passport (Transpinay World 2009). Although the veracity of these reports cannot be independently confirmed, they do echo interviewee responses and a recent report on discrimination and police violence against transgender women in nearby Kuwait (Human Rights Watch 2012). Mark has heard of transgender people getting blocked at immigration and has seen men taken away by police for wearing lipstick and female clothes. He dressed in drag and performed at a club in Ras Al Khaimah when he lived there. He said the crowd was mainly Filipino, but several Arabs and locals would also come. “We were all wearing makeup and wigs performing Destiny’s Child. The Police never said anything.”

Racism, which I discussed in Chapter Two, is also an offline obstacle queer men face in the UAE. Jay, who is Filipino, said some clubs enforce the ‘couples policy’ more rigorously for Asian men than for Arabs or Westerners. He still considers himself more privileged than Indians, who he said are often ignored altogether. Derek said he suffers no lack of attention from Arab men who whistle and catcall at him in public. “When you’re Asian, they think you are easy prey, easier to approach sexually. My Emirati friend tells me they like Asian boys because we’re soft, clean and hairless.” Paul said, “People come [to the UAE] and get into a mentality that they are better than another race.

That probably does spill over into the gay community when people think, ‘I don’t want to be with Indians or Filipinos because they’re not on top of society.’” Enrico, despite his general pessimism about UAE society, holds a slightly more optimistic view than Paul on how class, race and nationality are expressed among queer men. “Being gay brings people together across groups and breaks down some of these barriers.” Although prevalent offline, racism is often more explicit online behind pseudonyms and anonymity.

Despite many obstacles facing queer men in the UAE, several said they first began exploring their sexualities there. Most also revealed they were ‘out’ to friends in the UAE but still ‘closeted’ at home. For many men, the UAE provides an opportunity to establish individual identities away from social pressures in their home countries. This stems from perceived anonymity and is commonly cited as a primary reason queer men congregate in urban environments around the world. Raj said he can be ‘out’ in Dubai because he is away from his family and other Indians at work. Jay said, “I am more free and can be more gay here. Dubai helped me to identify more as myself.” For the American men I interviewed who were comfortable and open about their sexualities in the U.S., moving to the UAE felt like going back into the closet. David, who has been publicly ‘out’ for five years, said he does not feel comfortable letting coworkers in the UAE know his sexuality. He finds this situation distressing but practical given the legal and social environment. Most queer men cite increased identification with their sexualities in the UAE, but whether these individual identities converge to form communities online and offline is a separate question I will explore below.

## **Online Communities?**

Do a few thousand anonymous strangers connected online by their shared queerness and a transient geographic location constitute a community? Having discussed numerous online and offline barriers, this question is integral to understanding queer identity in the UAE. In the early 2000s, SNS developers were as clueless about how offline and online identities would overlap and diverge as were their users. Friendster initially capped a user's friend count at 150 to reflect the estimated cognitive limit of relationships one person can simultaneously maintain (boyd 2007: 7). By contrast, several queer men I spoke with have thousands of 'friends' on their pseudonymous Facebook accounts, the vast majority of whom they will never meet offline.

Herring (2004: 5) focuses on six criteria to determine whether people interacting online constitute a virtual community. Her checklist is by no means the only benchmark available, but it does provide the most detailed framework with which to approach this question. Herring believes online communities should exhibit: 1) active and self-sustaining participation; 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values; 3) solidarity, support and reciprocity; 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution; 5) self-awareness of the group as distinct from others; and 6) the emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance and rituals.

That hundreds of men are on Manjam and GayRomeo at any given time in the UAE fulfills the first criteria for queer SNS, less so for mobile apps on which usage is sporadic. The UAE's demographic diversity makes the second criteria point more problematic, but queer SNS users do tend to share a common purpose, namely finding sex, and have developed site-specific cultures, norms and values. The third point requires the greatest stretch to fit Herring's framework. Several men I spoke with have forged support and solidarity networks on queer SNS in the UAE, but many more are just

looking for sex. Reciprocity is, however, embodied in the oft-cited ‘no face pic = no chat’ rule. To point four, there is certainly no shortage of criticism and conflict on these SNS, most often expressed by prejudice. Blocking users is the most heavy-handed form of conflict resolution, ignoring hateful messages the most common. Queer men on these sites are self-aware of their distinct sexual identities, fulfilling point five. Herring’s final point about roles, hierarchy, governance and rituals is expressed through sex roles, racial and national hierarchies, and etiquette.

Queer SNS users in the UAE, with a few allowances for site-specific variability, do generally fit Herring’s model and therefore constitute virtual communities. These communities change rapidly due to transience among their user bases and might be construed as superficial due to the primarily self-serving sexual nature of their interactions, but Herring’s framework fits nonetheless. It should be noted that a platform in itself does not constitute a community. Facebook is not a single community of 850 million members, but rather a space in which smaller communities form. The same is true for queer SNS, where communities emerge from individual users and their interactions.

Defining what constitutes online communities has been much explored in the past decade<sup>21</sup>. In her piece on the subject, Jenny Preece (2005) highlights difficulties in defining community boundaries online. What used to be based on face-to-face social relationships among a limited number of people is now more determined by the strength of relationships. Mathieu O’Neil (2009: 25) distinguishes communication as a virtual community’s core activity and frames membership as unstable because it is founded upon shared personal interest rather than obligations. Al-Qasimi (2011: 290) credits the Internet with facilitating dialogic online communities for queer individuals in the UAE,

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<sup>21</sup> See Wilson and Peterson (2002), Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004), boyd (2006), Schmidt (2007), Weyman (2007), Boellstorff (2008), Shirky (2008), Mejias (2010) and Aouragh (2011).

communities she calls ‘transgressive’ and ‘imagined’, borrowing Benedict Anderson’s famous concept. Berry (2004: 4) cites Dag Elgesem as claiming, “one key aspect of online communities is that they are bound by mutual respect and trust amongst their members.” Most men I interviewed said queer SNS users uphold these considerations in the UAE, but fear of blackmail and entrapment still negatively affect their interactions.

Although I believe the above framework and rationale is solid, group perception is key. Some men I interviewed dismiss online communities, suggesting an online group constitutes a community only if and when it is transferred offline, as often happens via SNS and apps.

### **Offline Communities?**

Offline community theory has long focused on geography and shared identity. Among the UAE’s transient and diverse population, one Arjun Appadurai (1996) would term an ‘ethnoscape’ for its shifting dynamics, communities often form on the basis of political economy and relative social power. Elizabeth Frazer (1999) provides a useful overview of how the concept ‘community’ has been defined in different ideological paradigms:

...for Marxists ‘community’ means...a group of individuals equally situated vis-à-vis one another, integrated by relations of solidarity, reciprocity, and cooperation, united by shared goals, beliefs, and a common material situation. By contrast, conservatives think of ‘community’ as a hierarchically organized human group, integrated by obligations, united by an orientation to a common tradition, common set of institutions, and so on... (53-54).

Frazer also lists community characteristics for socialism and anarchism, but the hierarchic description of her conservative model best fits the UAE’s diverse population of

queer men. Small groups do exhibit solidarity and cooperation, but the larger queer population is stratified by nationality, race and class. Karim reflects these structures in his understanding of how offline queer communities form in the UAE:

Nationality plays a big role, and probably social status and finances. The most prominent community based on nationality is the Filipino community, which is really big and active. They all know each other and have parties together. I'm Arab but don't affiliate with many [Arabs] because of language and the lifestyle they form. I'm not part of a singular gay community. I'm part of many different communities.

He said he has friends in the Filipino, Arab and 'lifestyle' communities. He explains the latter:

These people are very mixed in terms of where they come from. It's very much socialites and fashionistas, spanning nationalities. Financial status plays a bigger role than nationality here. Our usual day out would be renting a yacht or partying. I think these people are the freest in terms of expressing who they are and being gay. They have the financial independence to do it and can leave the country [if need be].

Karim's description stresses the critical significance of access and privilege in community identity formation. Queer communities often cross barriers of class or race/nationality, but seldom both. Low-income Filipinos might host a predominantly Filipino party, and a few of the wealthiest Filipinos might go yachting with an international cohort, but if class and race/nationality were two circles of a Venn diagram, their intersection would be a small sliver. This is similarly true of the UAE's broader society. In a state of such diversity and regular demographic overturn, people tend to congregate with familiarity, whether that means money, language, skin tone or passport color.

Many men interviewed spoke of one ‘gay community’ in the UAE but negated this singularity with their descriptions. Enrico said queer communities are defined by sex rather than political identity and held together by the Internet. He sees income as a major barrier to entry and therefore a major dividing line between communities. As previously mentioned, many Filipinos in the service industry cannot afford to pay exorbitant entrance fees at gay clubs, and construction workers cannot afford private laptops and cameras to post nude photos online. They must therefore find or create their own exclusive spaces of desire. Nadir said age also plays a role in queer community formation. He is 50 but lists his age on GayRomeo as 37 to fit in with a younger crowd. Dylan said he relies on his community of work colleagues who frequent *Bronze*. This network has allowed him to meet more queer men offline than online, a rare privilege reserved for those with regular access to queersocial environments.

Not everyone I interviewed thinks queer communities exist in the UAE, and many who do avoid them. Mourad said he rarely associates with other queer men because he does not want to be part of ‘the subculture’. “It’s a really small community. Everyone just wants to pleasure themselves sexually. There are no true friends.” Arjun said, “There is no such thing as a gay community here. Everyone is paranoid and scared of being outed. It’s just one secret meat market.” Aziz agrees, “This is just an underground place you can meet for sex, not even coffee. Other than that, men are just looking to waste time online.”

Online and offline queer communities exist in the UAE, but only for men who believe they do and actively participate in maintaining their existence. The previous two chapters focused primarily on social barriers that impact identity and community formation. Chapter Four will explore how legal barriers are manifested and overcome.

## Chapter Four: The Delicate Balance

Understanding illicit community identity formation requires analyzing the UAE's legal framework. This chapter discusses why anti-homosexuality and public decency laws remain on the books but are seldom harshly enforced. I begin with a brief historical overview of the country and its relevant legislation to highlight paradoxes and contradictions that are mirrored in present enforcement policies. Nationality, race, class and *wasta*<sup>22</sup>, which I collectively term 'power relations' hereafter, often affect how laws criminalizing homosexuality are applied. I analyze how such power relations affect queer men's perceptions of permissibility and how these perceptions shape their lived realities. I argue this delicate balance between harsh legislation and weak enforcement is maintained to optimize the country's economic and political status. The UAE must appease local neighbors and Western trade partners to preserve its cash flow, reputation and identity. Whether laws or enforcement policies are likely to change amid recent political upheaval in the region will be discussed in the conclusion.

### From Poverty to Powerhouse

Many paradoxes in the UAE can partially be explained by the country's meteoric rise from desolate desert to colonial outpost to global hub for transport, commerce, finance and tourism. In the early 1800s, Dubai and neighboring territories were ruled and populated by small groups of tribal Bedouins. These tribes became the Trucial States of the Coast of Oman under a British protectorate in 1820 (Krane 2010). Dubai's fortune changed when Sheikh Maktoum established a free port in 1901 and Iranians began crossing the Gulf to set up shop in the new tax haven. Economic hardships resumed when

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<sup>22</sup> A regional notion meaning clout.

the Great Depression irreparably crippled demand for the Trucial States' pearling industry, indicating how globally connected the region's economy was even in the 1930s. When oil was discovered offshore Abu Dhabi in 1958 and in Dubai in 1966, leaders recalled the pearling demise and committed to diversifying their economies away from a single finite resource. The Dubai creek was enlarged in 1961 and evolved into a global trade port. When the British protectorate ended in 1971, seven Trucial States became one independent federation, the United Arab Emirates. Special economic zones now attract multinational corporations and foreign direct investment from around the world, and in 2006, tourism represented one quarter of Dubai's economy (Ibid: 118).

In 40 years since independence from Britain, the UAE has risen to global prominence. Dubai has become synonymous with unimaginable wealth and garnered a reputation for bringing the seemingly impossible into fruition. The city is now a cabinet of curiosities complete with an indoor ski hill, the world's tallest building and massive manmade islands in the shape of palm trees and the world. Adam Hanieh (2011) argues Gulf economies are now interconnected around a Saudi-UAE axis, emphasizing the country's key regional significance in global capitalism. Yet moral and cultural values among most Emiratis, some youth the exception, have not changed as rapidly as infrastructural development and shifting demographics have reshaped the UAE.

Rima Sabban (2002: 2) calls the country "a striking picture of contradictions." "Its advanced urban development...coexists with some of the oldest systems of social interaction, gender-segregation, and tribalism." Marwan Kraidy (2009: 203) cites regional similarities across the Gulf. Although somewhat essentializing, both authors highlight real paradoxes and stark juxtapositions between infrastructure and values that lead to understandable confusion among tourists and expatriates. Latif said of his home country, "People go [to the UAE] and see people holding hands and it's like, 'Oh my

god, this place is open!’ They forget it’s a conservative Muslim country, kiss in public and get arrested.” Such scenarios often occur because visitors do not know the UAE’s laws or assume they are never enforced based on behavior they see at bars and beaches. Vagueness and contradictions in the law coupled with inconsistent enforcement policies justify confusion among many men I interviewed concerning anti-homosexuality laws in the UAE.

### **Legislating Against Homosexuality**

The UAE’s birth as a state was marked by a provisionally adopted Constitution in 1971 made permanent in 1996. The Constitution explicitly refers to the UAE as an “Islamic and Arab society” and was proclaimed “before the Supreme and Omnipotent Creator.” Although sexuality is not explicitly mentioned in the document, Article 15, which states, “The family is the basis of society... The law shall guarantee its existence, safeguard and protect it from corruption,” could reasonably be construed to prohibit homosexuality based on shari’a interpretations outlined in Chapter One.

Articles that should theoretically safeguard queer individuals from persecution include Article 26: “Personal liberty is guaranteed to all citizens...” Article 30: “Freedom of opinion and expressing it... shall be guaranteed within the limits of law,” and Article 40: “Foreigners shall enjoy, within the Union, the rights and freedom stipulated in international charters ...” The Constitution enshrines personal liberties and freedoms, yet queer men have long been legally oppressed. Contradictions between the Constitution and subsequent legislation diminish the former’s authority and force the question: How can the rule of law be upheld within an unconstitutional legal framework?

The UAE remains one of only seven countries in the world, all Muslim, to still prescribe the death penalty for homosexual acts (Economist 2012). These laws stem from

Islamic interpretations as much as from the countries' colonial legacies. Section 377 of the 1860 Indian Penal Code, which applied to the Trucial States, prohibited “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” and stemmed from the anti-Catholic ‘buggery law’ of 1534 (Sanders 2009). The Indian Penal Code was replaced in 1956. Article 171 of the new draft “made sodomy punishable with imprisonment not exceeding 10 years, with or without corporal punishment” (Sofer 1992: 144). Article 354 of the UAE’s 1987 Federal Penal Code (FPC) added the death penalty, but ambiguities in its text have resulted in different interpretations of its application. Some UAE lawyers consider it to mean death for male-male rape, whereas others translate the Article to mean death for consensual homosexual sex (Ibid). Beyond homosexuality, any sexual act outside of heterosexual marriage is illegal in the UAE and punishable by whipping or stoning (Al-Muhairi 1996: 365).

In addition to federal statutes, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah – four of the seven emirates – also criminalize homosexual acts locally without the death penalty. Article 177 of Dubai’s Penal Code and Article 80 of Abu Dhabi’s punish consensual sodomy with up to 10 and 14 years in prison, respectively. These local and federal laws are seldom invoked and seemingly never to their fullest extent. There have been no reported death sentences for consensual homosexual acts in the past decade, and prison sentences have ranged from a few months to three years. An Emirati man was executed by firing squad in 2011, but this sentence was levied more for rape and murder than the fact that his victim was a boy (Za’Za’ 2011).

### **Shades of Gay: Enforcement Discrepancies**

How anti-homosexuality legislation is enforced in the UAE depends less on the offense and more on power relations of the offending individuals, along with how much

local and international media publicity a case receives. The same is true across much the Middle East, where enforcement has been lenient, sporadic and primarily symbolic in recent history. “There are cases when the state chooses to punish a poor and powerless individual for a ‘homosexual offense’ but only to send a message of moral strictness to religious leaders” (AbuKhalil 1997: 101) or to “bolster regime legitimacy” (Dunne 1998: 10). Massad (2002: 384) argues that the global rise of politicized sexual identities, as outlined in Chapter One, has led to increased enforcement of such laws in the Middle East whereas Makarem said in a personal interview that increased scrutiny by international media means, “few countries can still get away with killing gay people.”

The U.S. State Department (2011) reported not a single prosecution for homosexual activity in the UAE in 2010, but previous reports show queer men have been subjected to psychological treatment and deportation in the past decade. Gay clubs are still periodically raided, and news reports from 2012 show queer-motivated arrests and prison sentences still occur (Littauer 2012c). The most publicized arrest in recent years was in 2005 when two dozen Emirati men were arrested at a ‘gay wedding’ in Abu Dhabi. Government officials threatened to ‘treat’ the men with hormone injections, but when international media covered the story, the U.S. State Department publicly condemned the plan and the proposed treatment was dropped (BBC 2005). Enforcement cases against homosexuality are rare and heavily symbolic, intended to remind the general public they live in a ‘conservative Muslim country’ and to appease factions who chastise the UAE for its relative permissiveness toward social issues they consider un-Islamic.

Who someone is matters more than what he or she does when punishments are levied in the UAE. This logic applies to both queer men and the general population. The most publicized case of sexual indiscretion in recent years involved two heterosexual

British expatriates who were arrested for allegedly having sex on a Dubai beach in 2008. Krane (2009: 261) writes, “Probably because they were European, the linchpin of Dubai’s tourism sector, the police [first] let [them] off with a warning.” When police returned later to find the couple still entangled, both were arrested. After months of press coverage in British tabloids that “veered toward outrage at Dubai for subjecting paying tourists to Muslim-style punishments” (Ibid), both received short jail sentences, which were later dropped on appeal (Topping 2008). The fact the acquitted couple were well-paid white British expatriates and that the story picked up international press is not inconsequential to their amnesty. Power relations matter a great deal in the UAE where demographic data is often interlaced with one’s perceived worth and influence.

Emiratis caught engaging in homosexual acts are seldom named in local press, and stories exclusively involving them rarely make print. Amir, who is Emirati, believes the law is more lenient to nationals because they often have greater *wasta*. Nadir, who is Indian, agrees: “If you speak Arabic, the scale will tilt toward you a little bit. If you are local, it will tilt even more.” Enrico adds, “the laws are a cloud of smoke, and locals can shape that cloud more powerfully.” This unofficial privilege is one of the perks Emiratis receive by virtue of their nationality. As the only residents with voting rights, many are subsidized into political complacency and unconcerned by disparities between law and enforcement that benefit them. As mentioned earlier, an Emirati was imprisoned for cross-dressing in abayas and bikinis and posing as a prostitute online (Za’Za’ 2010), demonstrating that overt public statements are still prosecuted regardless of nationality.

### **Perceptions Shape Reality**

Queer men I interviewed in the UAE have noticed discrepancies in enforcement policies against them and have altered behavior based on perceived dangers. Some

believe most police officers and government officials hold a laissez-faire attitude toward homosexuality but continue to periodically enforce laws to remind residents and foreign governments they exist. This demonstrative enforcement reflects AbuKhalil's assertion that such laws are primarily invoked to appease conservative factions in local and neighboring societies.

A culture of silence surrounding homosexuality in the UAE means laws criminalizing it are seldom discussed. Most men I interviewed did not know that homosexual acts are punishable by execution and lengthy prison sentences. Being unaware of potential ramifications allows some men to express their identities or engage in homosexual acts more freely than strict application of the law or fear of such enforcement would permit. Enrico said he is not apprehensive about anti-homosexuality laws because he is white, European and works for a large American corporation. "People give me privileges they don't give other people. They have positive stereotypes and biases toward white people and negative ones against others." Such perceptions shape some men's realities, bolstering their agency and emboldening them to take risks when the chances of being caught and arrested are assumed to be slim.

While ignorance of the laws is bliss for some, it provokes others to assume the worst. Paul characterizes enforcement as unpredictable. "If I were kissing a man in public, I could get arrested and thrown in jail or [the police] could just say 'stop it'. You always have to expect the worst possible punishment." Despite having lived in Dubai for more than ten years and never meeting another queer man who has faced trouble with police, Adam still fears the rule of law. "This doesn't mean be a saint, it just means be respectful of where you live." Mourad has taken the laws more seriously after an ex-boyfriend threatened to tell the police he was gay. "I don't feel safe. I'm scared of being blackmailed again and being arrested or deported." Nadir compared my *wasta* as a white

American Oxford student to his limited clout, demonstrating how perceived enforcement disparities shape his behavior. “I come from India, the third world. You come from the U.S., which the [UAE] Government sees as quite strong. Your embassy can do wonders. Plus there is the skin color and language difference. It all boils down to racism.”

These sentiments highlight the diversity of perceptions concerning anti-homosexuality laws in the UAE and show how perceptions shape behavior. Many men expressed a belief that *wasta* and the ‘right’ demographic profile keep queer men out of jail, whereas others cited proactive measures used to escape punishment. Four interviewees knew queer men who claim to have had sex or relationships with UAE policemen. Jay said queer men sometimes agree to have sex with male police officers to escape punishment if caught breaking UAE laws. He said knowledge of such agreements alleviates his fears of using queer SNS illegally. “I heard some CID were representing themselves as gay in GayRomeo, but I was never scared at all. I have already experienced how to deal with the police,” he said, alluding to sexual favors. Enrico believes his punishment if arrested would likely hinge on how he interacted with officers. Corruption and demographic biases that influence the inconsistent enforcement of anti-homosexuality laws are the micro-level manifestations of macro-level politics, which are primarily rooted in the state’s economic and reputational concerns.

### **Money, Reputation and Identity**

Achieving its reputation for opulence and ambition has fundamentally altered not only the UAE’s urban topography and demographic profile but also the very core of its self-identity. Ahmed Kanna (2011) relies on Rennie Short’s notion of ‘wannabe cities’ to categorize Dubai’s self-conception. ‘Wannabe cities’ have “an edgy insecurity about their roles and position in the world that gives tremendous urgency to their desperate scramble

for big name architects, art galleries and cultural events” (Ibid: 7). Abu Dhabi’s planned Guggenheim and Louvre museums coupled with its local New York University campus prove Dubai is not the only Emirate engaging in ‘cultural boosterism’. Kanna also describes Dubai as “an eminence of global marketing” (Ibid: 5) and hails its “adaptability to the economic and ideological currents of the global economy” as one of its rulers’ greatest talents (Ibid: xiii). Such adaptability sometimes requires compromising social values that stand in the way of financial gain.

Democracy is limited and political parties banned in the UAE meaning important decisions are left to each Emirate’s rulers. The country is managed like a corporation, concerned first and foremost with profit and brand management. Kanna’s entire book, *Dubai, the City as Corporation* operates on this analogy. The country’s stakeholders are not only Emirati citizens but also foreign trade partners, tourists and expatriates. The interests of these stakeholders strongly shape how the UAE addresses and enforces social and legal issues, including homosexuality, within its borders.

Makarem, who grew up in Dubai, said in an interview that he believes the UAE permits the existence of some unofficial queer-coded spaces that can easily be controlled or shut down as part of the country’s “black hole strategy to keep people in Dubai so they spend money.” He calls this arrangement “commercialized freedom,” adding that “gay men can meet as long as it’s in a bar or a restaurant and they’re spending money, not on the street where everyone can see.” An expensive entrance fee is often a convenient barrier to control which expatriates are permitted to occupy and interact in such spaces.

The UAE’s balance between harsh social laws and weak enforcement is also maintained as an astute exercise in brand management. Like Disney World, the UAE aims to provide a magical experience for every tourist. 7.3 million tourists visited Dubai in 2008, helping place the UAE atop the World Economic Forum’s list of competitive

travel and tourism destinations in the Middle East (Blanke and Chiesa 2011: xv). Push factors draw many economic migrants to work in the UAE for a few years, but Dubai's pull factors also bring in highly skilled workers. On top of tax havens and tall buildings, these factors include a reputation for social tolerance. Heavy-handed prosecution of homosexual or heterosexual displays of affection would undermine the UAE's perceived tolerance and destabilize the finely cultivated reputation on which much of its economic underpinnings rest.

Noman (2011) reflects on commercialized freedoms in the case of prostitution. Escort websites are blocked, but prostitutes are ubiquitous in bars across the UAE. "This inconsistency suggests that social considerations such as appeasing conservative families browsing the Internet at home, and economic factors like keeping the money-generating hotel rooms and bars busy, play a role in developing those policies" (Ibid: 11). Paul, one of the men I interviewed, echoes Noman, believing the UAE's rulers are "slightly accommodating" toward Western and Arab expatriates because "they need the foreign workforce to be happy." This explains his belief and my assertion that *Underground* would have been permanently shuttered long ago were the Government "serious about keeping gays out." The UAE's rulers seem to conceptualize prostitution and gay bars as necessary evils. Such institutions are publicly derided as vices that taint the state's Islamic foundations yet privately tolerated to maintain its capitalist foundations and steady revenue streams.

Money also supersedes conservative social values at the upper echelons of the UAE's business world. Some of the senior businessmen I interviewed said Arab and Emirati work colleagues knew of their sexual orientation yet ignored it. Most men, however, tried to conceal this aspect of their private life for fear it would affect business deals. According to Latif, a common sentiment around homosexuality in the workplace

is, “We’re open for business, but shut the fuck up,” echoing the ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ mentality cited in Chapter Three. This mantra reflects a tolerated division between one’s business and private life, which allows cisgender queer men to achieve great financial success in the UAE if they tacitly agree to keep their sexual acts and identities quiet.

National identity is another factor influencing how homosexuality is conceptualized and homosexual acts prosecuted in the UAE. Gendered notions of patriarchy and masculinity as outlined in Chapter One heavily influence how Emirati identity is interpreted and expressed. Other Gulf countries might view the UAE as effeminate and too eager to please the West were it to decriminalize homosexuality, thus weakening its perceived authority in the region. For similar reasons, few queer-related prosecutions occur in the UAE. To prosecute such activity would be to admit its local existence and risk destabilizing the foundations of national identity.

The same logic applies to reporting cases of HIV/AIDS, a disease Emiratis and many in the world still mentally link to homosexuality. A World Health Organization (WHO 2008) report on HIV in the UAE between 1996 and 2007 is inexplicably blank. When three Emirati men raped a French boy in the Dubai desert in 2007, authorities concealed the fact that one of the rapists was HIV positive, presumably to avoid admitting the disease was present in the UAE (Grew 2008). The U.S. State Department (2011) reports systematic discrimination against prisoners with HIV/AIDS and notes that noncitizens who contract the disease are denied health benefits, quarantined and deported. Bruce Dunne (1998) reported that Egyptian physicians he interviewed in 1993 claimed AIDS was not a problem in Egypt because “neither prostitution nor homosexuality exist in an Islamic country.” Similar claims, expressed by many Emiratis, constitute ahistorical and inaccurate categorizations of the disease’s prevalence and causes. Mourad said these erroneous portrayals often stem from local rhetoric about the

disease, which many people in the UAE still refer to as GRID (Gay-related immune deficiency).

Denialism toward homosexuality and HIV/AIDS accurately reflects how the UAE manages aspects of its national identity and international reputation. The country's economy is utterly dependent on low-paid migrant workers, high-paid expatriates and global trade. Its economic, political and social policies are thus tailored to optimize GDP. When a state closely resembles a corporation, as the UAE is often conceptualized, 'corporate social responsibility' means factoring in the social norms of all stakeholders. When stakeholders disagree over these norms, as is the case with international perceptions toward homosexuality, policy and reality (i.e. enforcement) diverge to maximize financial return. I emphasize the 'UAE as corporation' model not to diminish its legitimacy as a state or the nationality of Emiratis, but to stress that the country's bottom line is often profit. Any policies that stand in the way of profit must be reconfigured to permit growth, even if such shifts undermine the rule of law.

### **The UAE and Homosexuality as Proxy Battlegrounds**

The UAE has become a symbolic rhetorical battleground for the U.S. and Iran's longstanding diplomatic feuds. In 2007, hours after U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney left Dubai, Iranian President Ahmadinejad arrived to extol the "mighty bond between Iran and the Arab countries across the Gulf" and to warn the U.S. to leave the region (Krane 2010: 284, 285). U.S. governmental agencies have implemented sanctions against Iran since 1987, preventing U.S. companies from trading or investing in the country (GAO 2007). This ban is often circumvented when products are first shipped to other countries. The UAE has become the major entrepôt for U.S. goods heading to Iran. In 2007, the UAE was the largest importer of U.S. products in the broader Middle East, 80 percent of

which it reshipped, one quarter of which to Iran. This route is a primary reason trade between Iran and Dubai tripled to \$12 billion between 2005 and 2009 (Forohoo 2010). The UAE is now Iran's largest trading partner, representing \$14.65 billion in 2010 (CIA 2012). An estimated 400,000 Iranians live in the UAE and 12,000 Iranian trading companies operate in Dubai alone (Forohoo 2010). These numbers represent critical ties for the UAE's economy.

Social issues inevitably play into this economic relationship. As Iran is a primary component of its economy, the UAE must accommodate the country's policies, including social policies toward homosexuality. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has implemented the death penalty for homosexual acts, most recently in 2011. Ahmadinejad notoriously assumed a position of denial when in 2007 he told a group at Columbia University that Iran does not have "this phenomenon" of homosexuals (Reuters 2007). The UAE is in a delicate position vis-à-vis Iran and its other Gulf neighbors. In order to maintain strong trade relations and to minimize the threat of retaliation from Islamic fundamentalists, it must preserve anti-homosexuality and decency laws. But to harshly enforce such laws would alienate the UAE from strategic trade partners in the West, most significantly the U.S. and the EU.

Hillary Clinton declared in late 2011, "gay rights are human rights," and vowed that the U.S. will fight sexuality-based discrimination abroad with foreign aid and diplomacy (Clinton 2011). Were the UAE to implement its federal anti-homosexuality laws and begin systematically executing queer men en masse, the country would face condemnation from international rights groups and possibly harsh economic sanctions. Theoretical sanctions might resemble those imposed against Syria in 2012, which include bans on oil imports and asset freezes (BBC 2012). These sanctions are intended to cripple

the Syrian regime and its economy unless Iran or another state steps in with financial aid. The same would be true for the UAE.

Yet high profile queer crackdowns and severe economic sanctions are highly improbable because both the UAE and the West know damages would be too great. The UAE is as dependent on economic relations with the U.S. and the EU as the latter are dependent on the UAE and other Gulf countries for their strategic geopolitical positions in the Middle East. The UAE's unique and valuable alliances with the West and Iran can also be labeled a delicate balance, one that heavily influences the balance between criminalizing and prosecuting homosexuality in the country.

Since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UAE and the U.S. have maintained a strategic relationship on economic and security matters. This relationship has been partially responsible for radical groups' terrorism threats directed at the UAE. "Dubai's hedonistic excesses have offended Muslims for years...People point to its social freedoms, its boozy brothels, and its welcome for U.S. warships as red flags that could trigger an attack" (Krane 2010: 274). If what Krane describes as "hedonistic excesses" also contribute to terrorism threats, decriminalizing homosexuality would likely increase radical calls to bring down the UAE, but such words would probably remain rhetoric given other competing interests in the state's status quo. Ironically, many terrorists and smugglers consider the country too integral a hub to attack. Mike Davis (2007: 68) writes, "Dubai's burgeoning black market economy is its insurance policy against the car bombers and airplane hijackers."

Iran and the U.S. are symbolic examples of similar complex relationships the UAE must maintain with neighbors in the Gulf and broader Middle East and trade partners in the West and around the world. This chapter has demonstrated some legal, cultural, political and economic factors maintaining the UAE's delicate balance between

anti-homosexuality laws and their enforcement to-date. At the moment, striking a balance between harsh laws and weak enforcement is the most neutral position the country can take on homosexuality without damaging strategic economic bonds. Given that 87 percent of the UAE is non-Emirati and much of its revenue is generated through tourism, these economic factors are as important internally as they are internationally. Yet amid political revolution in the Middle East, regional dynamics are changing rapidly.

## Conclusion

This thesis emerged from a simple research question: What role does the Internet play in forging relationships among queer men in the UAE? The four preceding chapters expand this focus to demonstrate the Internet's integral role in facilitating local queer interactions.

Queer men who congregate in the UAE's online and offline spaces of desire often identify with global gay identities that are shaped and influenced by online interactions. These men must overcome social, legal and technical barriers to codify their identities online and to form illicit networks. Their collective identities often merge to form online and offline queer communities. Such communities are fragmented by power, access and privilege dynamics based on race, nationality and class. Legal, commercial and social restrictions prevent queer men from meeting freely offline. These constraints mean communication patterns flow more commonly from the virtual to the physical realm, a direction that runs counter to many SNS interactions previously studied. Legal barriers also influence this flow pattern. Anti-homosexuality laws exist in the UAE but are seldom enforced. They are invoked unevenly based on one's nationality, race, class and clout. Such power relations affect queer men's perceptions of permissibility, which shape their lived realities.

The UAE's delicate balance between harsh legislation and weak enforcement is primarily maintained to optimize the country's economic and political status. I conclude by arguing that even amid regional revolution, this delicate balance will remain for the foreseeable future if the UAE continues to benefit from preserving the status quo.

## **An Emirati Spring?**

Will emerging regional dynamics and murmurs of dissent within the UAE topple the Government and delicate balance explored herein?

The so-called Arab Spring, which rippled through the Middle East in 2011, barely touched the UAE. Five Emirati bloggers were jailed for undermining public order, opposing the government system and insulting the country's rulers, but no mass protests ensued (Shah 2011). This lack of political mobilization against the ruling Government can largely be explained by money. As argued in Chapter Four, Emiratis are often subsidized into political complacency. When health care, education and housing are free and jobs reserved for nationals, democracy is of little concern to their daily lives. Only 12 percent of Emiratis were eligible to vote in the 2011 elections for the Federal National Council, a body largely considered politically toothless. Of those eligible, only 28 percent voted, emphasizing how little regard most Emiratis have for the solely symbolic process (Al Arabiya 2012).

Human Rights Watch (2011) warned after the five bloggers were arrested, "The UAE should take a long, hard look at what happens to governments that suppress the rights of its citizens to speak out or that think they can control the information people share," implying the protests that toppled regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya could bring down the UAE. Yet the UAE remains one of the most politically stable countries in the Middle East. This stability increasingly relies on slight government concessions of power. The bloggers were released from prison and pardoned after much international lobbying and negative press. A proposed BlackBerry ban was similarly scrapped following popular resistance in 2010. Both cases represent signs the Government is willing to tolerate slight dissent and make small concessions to maintain stability.

Although Emiratis lack democratic rights, exploited foreign laborers have perhaps the most reason to seek political reform. The UAE is dependent on them to erect and staff its skyscrapers. This dependence imbues the Government with immense control over their fates. Hanieh (2011) details how some migrant workers were repatriated during the 2008 global economic crisis, allowing the UAE to preserve social stability by shipping out the unemployed. In 2004, several thousand workers marched down Sheikh Zayed Road to protest unpaid wages and unsafe working conditions. They were met by riot police who threatened mass deportation (Davis 2010). Were wealthy expatriates to protest in solidarity with migrant workers, they would face the same. Even Emiratis fear rebelling. A 2011 poll conducted by YouGov showed more than half of Gulf respondents were scared to demonstrate against their governments. The majority of these respondents from Saudi Arabia and the UAE were twice as likely as Levantine and more than three times as likely as North African respondents to express such fears (YouGovSiraj 2011). Subsidies, minor concessions, deportations and fear combine to make an Emirati Spring highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

### **Toppling the Delicate Balance?**

Another group with reason to protest in the context of this thesis is queer minorities. Latif said he was the first Emirati to successfully gain asylum in Canada on the grounds of sexual orientation after his family threatened reparative hormone treatment. In 2011, he started a Facebook group to support LGBT rights in the UAE. By mid-April 2012, the page had nearly 1,300 'likes' and served as a community forum to discuss the UAE's policies toward homosexuality. Although Latif is based in Canada, many of the group's users and admins live in the UAE. Latif has transferred this online activism to offline human rights marches in British Columbia, but the prospect of local

members doing the same is unlikely given harsh punishments for political dissent and homosexuality within the UAE. Latif does not expect rapid change. “I’m not pushing for gay marriage in the UAE. We have to take this one step at a time. I just want men to be able to hold hands and not face a lynch mob,” he said hyperbolically. Whether online initiatives like Latif’s will be effective in pressuring the Government to change anti-homosexuality laws or enforcement policies will depend largely on the local and international support they receive.

Whitaker said in a personal interview the discrepancy between these laws and their enforcement is a good thing. When anti-homosexuality laws are not enforced to their fullest extent, they begin to lose traction. The two primary ways these laws could change in the UAE and across the Middle East are through rapid political upheaval, as was the case when homosexual acts were decriminalized in post-Apartheid South Africa, or after decades of debating and voting, as occurred in Britain and Israel. Imminent political upheaval in the UAE is unlikely and voting does not count for much, so both scenarios seem improbable. More probable would be a shift in local and regional sentiment or among the UAE’s ruling circle that would repeal anti-homosexuality laws as part of broader human rights reforms. Given the economic and political considerations outlined in Chapter Four, this scenario remains unlikely. Yet given how much unilateral power these rulers yield, any scenario is unpredictable. If the UAE’s ruling sheikhs decided to overturn anti-homosexuality laws tomorrow, they would face backlash from Emiratis and regional governments, but the laws would nevertheless be overturned.

Gay rights were on few agendas during the Arab Spring. As Islamist parties dominate post-revolution elections in Egypt and Tunisia, their policies toward human rights are promising. Troubling is the fact that most do not consider sexual orientation a human right. Tunisia’s first human rights minister said as much in February 2012, adding

that homosexuality is a perversion that requires medical treatment. Treatment is perhaps an improvement over criminalization, but shows Tunisia's ruling *an-Nahdah* party and Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party still need to formulate a clear stance on sexual minorities. Changes to government policy do not mean social positions will change. Whitaker (2012) wrote, "attitudes towards gay rights are an important measure of how far, or not, a society has moved from authoritarianism." The UAE Government should keep this benchmark in mind as it continues to promote itself to international investors and tourists as a diverse and tolerant utopia.

### **Further Research**

The limited scope of this study highlights further areas of potential research. My focus on queer men's digital lives precluded research into women and low-paid migrant workers in the UAE. Queer women and female homosocial environments should be further investigated, along with how queer men in labor camps express and fulfill their sexual desires offline and with the assistance of inexpensive mobile technology. This thesis could serve as a model for similar studies in neighboring Gulf countries, which would provide useful comparative frameworks for understanding homosexuality and Internet usage in the broader Middle East. Media portrayals of homosexuality in the Gulf would also prove a rich focus for critical discourse analysis.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

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Title of Project: (Working Title) Online and Offline Community Identity Formation Among Queer Men in the UAE.

Purpose of Study: This research project aims to gather information about Internet and mobile usage among queer men in the UAE. The study hopes to determine the Internet's role in facilitating interactions among different groups in an online and offline context.

Procedure: We will engage in a semi-structured interview that consists of pre-determined questions or topics and a majority of unstructured conversation related to the topics at hand. If the participant consents, the interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. Typed notes will also be taken during the interview.

Risks: This project is not commissioned by or directly affiliated with any government, nation, or political group. It is solely for academic use and should not pose any further risks than those associated with interviews in other settings. Names of some places and participants interviewed will remain anonymous in any published documents unless participants request otherwise, in which case the interviewer may still choose to anonymize names to maintain the participant's safety and security.

Benefits: Upon request, you will receive a digital copy of the final written product that results from this research and the opportunity to review transcripts of your interviews. You may use any information or conclusions obtained from the written work for your own information or for further informing the work of your group or organization.

**Duration:** This interview has no set time limit, although it will be a minimum of 30 minutes. Due to its semi-structured nature, the interview can last as long as the conversation is maintained and the participants have no pressing engagements. You can request to end the interview at any time.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured in a password-protected file. The University of Oxford, Department of Oriental Studies, the Oxford Middle East Centre, and the University's Internal Review Board or Human Subjects Review may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared, unless otherwise indicated.

**Right to Ask Questions:** You have a right to ask questions related to this study and the interview process both during and after the interview. You are encouraged to contact the Principal Investigator if you feel comfortable, but you may also contact the Supervisor or the Department of Oriental Studies with further inquiries. You can request that parts of the interview be "off the record" by stating "off the record" before any comments you would not like included in any report. You have a right to view a transcript of the interview after the fact and offer additional comments or concerns.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty.

You must be 18 or older to participate in this interview.

## Appendix B: Etisalat's Prohibited Content Categories

### **Prohibited Content Categories**

**1. Internet Content for Bypassing Blocked Content**

This category includes Internet Content that allows or assist Users to access Blocked Content.

**2. Internet Content for Learning Criminal Skills**

This category includes Internet Content that either provides instructions for or identifies methods to promote, encourage or provide the skills to commit illegal or criminal or unethical activities. These include bomb-making, phreaking (breaching phone security or phone service theft), scams and fraud, terrorism, evading law enforcement, stalking, lock picking, selling pirate material such as commercial software, music, videos or others.

**3. Dating Internet Content**

This category includes Internet Content that provides online dating or matchmaking which contradicts with the ethics and morals of the UAE.

*Exemptions: Chatting services, chatting groups, social networking and forums.*

**4. Internet Content for Illegal Drugs**

This category includes Internet Content that provides information on purchasing, manufacturing, promoting and using illegal drugs.

**5. Internet Content containing Pornography and Nudity**

This category includes Internet Content that contains material of a pornographic nature, or relates or depicts acts of homosexuality, nudity and sexual material (including stories, jokes, animations, and video) or Internet Content that promotes sexual activity. It includes Internet Content which promote the distribution of above material (such as Peer-to-Peer websites and links).

**6. Gambling Internet Content**

This category includes Internet Content that is relevant to gambling or such as gambling links, tips, sports picks, lottery results, as well as horse, car or boat racing.

**7. Internet Content for Hacking and Malicious Codes**

This category includes Internet Content that distribute information and tools for hacking (root kits, kiddy scripts, etc.) that help individuals gain unauthorized access to computer systems. Also include Internet Content

that distributes tools or information for producing and distributing malicious codes such as viruses, worms or Trojan horses.

*Exemptions: Information security including ethical hacking.*

- 8. Internet Content that are offensive to Religions**  
This category includes Internet Content that contains material which expresses hate to religions.
- 9. Phishing Internet Content**  
This category includes Internet Content where entities or persons falsely represent themselves as a “legitimate” businesses or enterprises for the purpose of deceiving and obtaining from Users, valuable information such as bank account or email account information including details such as usernames, passwords, credit card details or bank account details.
- 10. Internet Content that downloads Spyware**  
This category includes Internet Content that downloads Spyware which gathers private information of the users without his or her knowledge.
- 11. Internet Content providing Unlicensed Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service**  
This category includes Internet Content that allows access to services which are prohibited in accordance with the TRA’s Voice over Internet Protocol Policy.
- 12. Terrorism Internet Content**  
This category includes Internet Content of terrorism groups and related Internet Content that support terrorism and publish and distribute materials for terrorism or include material for training and encouraging terrorism or help to serve terrorism groups such as funding, facilitating communication and other direct and indirect services.
- 13. Prohibited Top Level Domain (TLD)**  
This category includes Internet Content under a Top Level Domain names which offends against, is objectionable to, or is contrary to the public interest, public morality, public order, public and national security, Islam morality or is otherwise prohibited by any applicable UAE law, regulation, procedure, order or requirement.