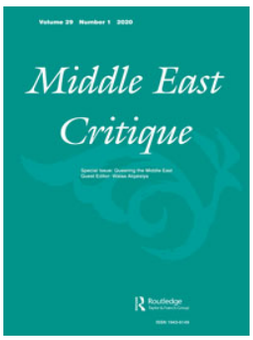

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Duffs and Puffs: Queer Fashion in Iranian Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT *In Iran, the politically sanctioned discourses of embodiment and body management are based on binary notions of gender and sexuality. These discourses are contested by social trends that reflect political dissent. This article uses a combination of content and visual analysis of three Instagram profiles dedicated to fashion to answer the question: 'Is queer fashion present in Iranian cyberspace' and if so, 'How does it persist against the existing queer-phobic political forces?' The article explores aesthetic and fashion categories called 'duffs' and 'puffs' that offer queer embodied extravaganza in Iranian cyberspace, which is a more relaxed geography of morality and leisure in comparison with offline public spaces. The analysis includes duffs and puffs' life style and performance that entails excessive deployments of femininity and masculinity, and exploration of their political significance and potential to undo gender norms in Iran. While they do not explicitly reject heteronormativity and/or capitalism, their non-participation in the conventional modes of money-making, and their erotic and sexual performance contributes to transformative politics. They offer antagonism to the normative power of mainstream gender and sexual ideologies by staining their heterogeneity through performances of fun, shock and failure.*

KEY WORDS: *Body; Class; Fashion; Gender; Instagram; Iran; Queer*

In the contemporary political context of Iranian society, where bodies are subject to control and policing in public spaces, many forms of bodily practices, such as beauty practices, fashion choices, physicality and muscularity, have become sites of political resistance to disciplinary state-enforced social control.[1] However, fashion trends and different forms of body management that reflect dissent are on the rise among young Iranians, and they are used in online and offline spaces where visual self-representations are a form of rebellious self-expression. While some of these fashion choices bear gender differences, unisex body management practices that entail similar beauty, fashion and grooming trends for all genders exist as well. It is not possible to consider all popular cultural activities as conscious or disguised

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[1] Ladan Rahbari (2019) "Pushing Gender to Its Limits: Iranian Women Bodybuilders on Instagram," *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28, no. 5, pp. 591–602.

politically motivated acts,[2] however, some forms of resistance against and disobedience of the politically sanctioned body management practices in Iran – that are based on binary notions of sex, gender and sexuality – could be interpreted as defiant political resistance.[3]

Asef Bayat defines Iranian youth as a social category, as collective agents, an essentially modern, mostly urban, phenomenon.[4] They experience and develop a particular self-consciousness that connects them as young people to contextual politics and makes them "transformative agents,"[5] with a potential to rebel against the existing structures. These agents are considered a group of largely well-educated youth who increasingly are connected through cyber technologies to each other and to transnational cyberspace. Their activities have clear implications for Iranian society and subsequently politics and political identity.[6] As an alternative to the controlled public spaces, these groups of Iranian youth prefer cyberspace as well as some private spaces such as homes, youth parties and gatherings where they can produce alternative bodily displays. They adopt different gender performances as they navigate through the relatively free private spaces and the more strictly monitored public spaces.

Cyberspace has developed into the most prominent site of representation of social and political dissent in Iran. Despite its rising popularity, however, cyberspace does not offer entirely uncontrolled and free spaces. In fact, the Iranian state implements an extensive and elaborate internet censorship that limits access to social media, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, as well as many other online content. This censorship ranges from banning access to certain topics and themes such as pornography and sexually explicit content, to blocking specific websites and news channels such as YouTube, VOA and BBC. The censorship is part of the state's project of fighting Westernization.[7] Despite these attempts and widespread limitations, the state has not been able to control cyberspace entirely. Many tech-savvy Iranians use anti-censorship and filter-bypassing programs to access the banned media, while others – especially Iranian celebrities – use social media and online platforms for personal as well as political and social activities. In cyberspace, many practices which traditionally were associated with femininity (e.g., wearing make-up, facial and bodily depilation, long hair styles, cosmetic surgeries, belly dancing …) or masculinity (e.g., short hair styles, tattooing, smoking, bodybuilding …) increasingly are subverted, as women and men pose in ways that defy the mainstream gendered norms of embodiments. Fashion trends in this way, whether intentionally or not, have the potential to create political defiance. Fashion does not become political only through acts of its consumers. The politicization of fashion takes place in different processes of production, consumption, and presentation, and on bodies in

[2] Mahmoud Shahabi (2006) "Youth Subcultures in Post-Revolution Iran: An Alternative Reading," in Pam Nilan & Carlos Feixa (eds), *Global Youth? Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds* (London: Routledge), pp. 111–129.

[3] Azadeh Moaveni (2007), *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: Public Affairs).

[4] Asef Bayat (2007) 'Is There a Youth Politics?' in *Middle East Topics and Arguments,* 9 Youth, pp. 16–24.

[5] Ibid, p. 22.

[6] Shabnam J. Holliday (2016) *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate).

[7] Matthew Carrieri, Ali Karimzadeh Bangi, Saad Omar Khan Saffron Suud (2013), *After the Green Movement: Internet Controls in Iran, 2009–2012* (Citizen Lab: OpenNet Initiative), p. 3.

public spaces.[8] The latter not only intervene with gender – as is the case in Iran – but also with class.[9] As Nima Naghibi argues in the case of Iranian women, by mocking and parodying the form of modest dress that the state imposes on women, the fashion and beauty practices, threaten one of the regime's most important political aims, which is the homogenization of public appearances to eliminate signs of class and status difference in society.[10]

This article carries out a literature review on queer fashion in Iran and conducts a content and visual analysis on three Instagram accounts to answer the question: 'Is queer fashion present in Iranian cyberspace?' and if so, 'how does it persist against the existing queer-phobic political forces?' The first online search was conducted using the Google search engine with Persian terms equivalent to queer, fashion and gender both separately and together, as well as using the terms in hashtag form where possible.[11] Initial content analysis revealed two trending fashion and beauty categories called 'duffs' and 'puffs.' Although these categories were present in multiple platforms, three Instagram pages were specifically dedicated to representing these categories.[12] The content of the three Instagram pages dedicated to duffs and puffs was used as data for a discourse analysis to further investigate modes of existence, representation and argumentations pertaining to queer fashion in Iranian cyberspace.

An online systematic search method, used on Persian-language blogs and run on Iranian channels, was used to investigate Iranian bloggers' perceptions of duffs and puffs as aesthetic expressions. All the collected, analyzed and studied material in the cyberspace were in Persian, the official language of Iran. It is important to note that Persian is a genderless language. In genderless languages (e.g., Persian, Finnish or Turkish) neither personal nouns nor pronouns signal gender. Here, gender is only expressed through attributes such as 'male/female [teacher]' or in lexical gender words such as 'woman' or 'father.'[13] The translations from Persian to English thus carefully were conducted keeping this important factor in mind. The article also excluded diasporic cyberspace. While diasporic cyberspace is also an important site of inquiry, the objective of this article is to investigate how fashion and queer topics cross paths within the local Iranian context, in its political, socio-cultural, religious and economic specificities.

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[8] Daniel Miller & Susan Küchler (2005), *Clothing as Material Culture* (New York: Berg).

[9] Alexandru Balasescu (2007), "Haute Couture in Tehran: Two Faces of an Emerging Fashion Scene," *Fashion Theory,* 11, no. 2–3, pp. 299–317; Faegheh Shirazi-Mahajan (1993), "The Politics of Clothing in the Middle East: The Case of Hijab in Post-Revolution Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 2, no. 2, pp. 54–63.

[10] Nima Naghibi (2007) *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 68.

[11] There are different ways to use the term queer in Persian. While some adopt the English word queer and write it using the Persian Alphabet, there are Persian translations for it as well, such as *Degarbashi* (equivalent to queer and a general term for LGBTQI), *Degarjensbashi* (equivalent to queer), *Tarajensi* (a general term for transgendered people).

[12] These accounts are: (i) dufpuf2018 with more than ten thousand followers: https://www.instagram.com/dufpuf2018/ (accessed 6 August 2019); (ii) Tehran_dufpuf with about three thousand followers: https://www.instagram.com/tehran_dufpuf/ (accessed 6 August 2019) and (iii) duf_puf_irani, with about three thousand followers: https://www.instagram.com/duf_puf_irani/ (accessed 1 August 2019).

[13] Sabine Sczesny, Magda Formanowicz, and Franziska Moser (2016) "Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination?," *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, no. 25, pp. 1–11.

Queer in Iran

As groundbreaking scholarly works on gender and sexuality in Iran have shown,[14] historically, gender fluidity and non-binarism had characterized gender and sexuality in the Persian territories before the modern discourses of sexuality took over.[15] Non-binarist gender and sexual categories persisted in Persian public spaces until the nineteenth century.[16] It is only after that the heteronormative discourses gradually became predominant. These heteronormative discourses were formed in connection with Iranian nationalism and influenced by social and structural models, which were impacted by –sometimes Western– discourses that regarded pre-modern non-heteronormative tendencies in Iran as deviant behavior and a sign of cultural backwardness.[17] The prevalence of queerness and its conciliation with Islam in Iran's pre-modern history, countered the modern nationalist and colonial narratives that rejected both queerness and religion as signs of anti-progressiveness. Today, with the growing interest and scholarly work in post-colonialist narratives among Iranians, there is greater consciousness about this history.[18] Growing pop-culture and scholarly attention now is being given to gender and sexuality issues in Islam and in Iran's history.

Contemporary Iranian cultural discourses typically reject the legitimacy of queer identities, categories and performances.[19] There are no official statistics regarding the size of Iran's homosexual population[20] and queer gender or sexual identity is mostly invisible to the Iranian public. Iran is well-known for its strict sexual and gender policing.[21] Under the country's penal code, which draws on a specific interpretation of Twelver Shi'i *shari'a*,[22] same-sex relationships are considered a crime punishable with penalties ranging from flogging (one hundred lashes) to harsher forms of punishment[23] depending on the circumstances of the 'crime.' Iranian authorities, however, do not actively seek out queers and homosexuals, making the risk of prosecution for homosexuality minimal as long as their identities are kept strictly covert, and their activities such as expressions of intimacy, socializing, partying and rallying are carried out discretely.[24]

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[14] See, for example, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

[15] See Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*.

[16] Ladan Rahbari (2018) "'Their Beastly Manner": Discourses of Non-Binary Gender and Sexuality in Shi'ite Safavid Persia," *Open Cultural Studies*, 2, no. 1, pp. 758–770.

[17] Sina Kiani, "Language and Rights in Iranian Queer Community," https://www.dissidentblog.org/en/articles/language-and-rights-iranian-queer-community. Accessed 12 February 2019.

[18] Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008), "Transing and Transpassing across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4, pp. 23–42.

[19] Shadee Abdi and Bobbi Van Gilder (2016), "Cultural (in) Visibility and Identity Dissonance: Queer Iranian-American Women and Their Negotiation of Existence," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 9, no. 1, pp. 69–86.

[20] Arsham Parsi (2017), "The Iranian Regime Makes War on Queers," available online at: https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/238465/iran-war-on-queers. Accessed 8 September 2019.

[21] Ladan Rahbari (2016) "Sexuality in Iran," in *Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, ed. Constance L. Shehan (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell), pp. 1769–1772.

[22] Twelver is the largest branch of Shi'a Islam and is based on the belief in twelve infallible Imams, descended from the Prophet of Islam through his daughter, Fatima, and believed to be the rightful and divinely ordained Muslim leaders.

[23] Arwen Swink (2005) "Queer Refuge: A Review of the Role of Country Condition Analysis in Asylum Adjudications for Members of Sexual Minorities," *Hastings Int'l & Comp. L. Rev.*, 29, pp. 251–266.

[24] Ibid. p. 261.

Despite being driven out of the public eye, queerness has been a subject of artistic representation, especially in Iranian cinema.[25] There are also some queer-private and semi-private spaces in larger cities.[26] The queer population in these specific spaces is visible, especially in several of Iran's larger urban areas such as Tehran, Esfahan, and Shiraz. In the capital city, Tehran, there are spaces known for being meeting places where Iranian queers may meet or gather.[27] Some of these spaces, such as cafés and restaurants, are associated with the middle class or the affluent; queer people of all social backgrounds who often have been rejected by their families, frequent other places, including several well-known parks.[28]

Due to the possibility of medical gender transitioning, the Iranian state is sometimes described as being open and accepting toward gender confirmation, especially in the Western media.[29] There are reports claiming that Iran has the second highest gender confirmation surgery numbers,[30] but there are, in fact, no statistics published in Iran to support this claim. It is important to note that the state's support for gender transitioning is far from accessible to all and is based on the exclusive acceptance of heterosexual relations. Gender transitioning is seen to lead transgender people into heterosexual relations and into binary gender categories.[31] This is not to claim that as a general rule, transitioning from one to the other side of the gender binary spectrum is non-revolutionary or somehow reinforcing binaries. Rather, in the specific context of Iran, this is the only option that is partially accessible and acceptable by the authorities because it helps maintain binary heteronormative boundaries. The practice of gender confirmation is highly concentrated in larger cities and is extremely medicalized. There is also a large gap in juristic and legal regulation of gender confirmation.[32] Consequently, the state's legislation is very vague and has remained silent on the legality of gender confirmation surgery and transgender, except on matters relating to the practical processes of transitioning.[33] Moreover, in a generally heteronormative context, most Iranians are not exposed to the intricacies of gender identity and sexual orientation or given the opportunity to express their non-mainstream sexual identities.[34] These conditions highlight the role of cyberspace as a medium to seek out information, connections and networks as well as a space for expressing identities.

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[25] Shadee Abdi and Bernadette Marie Calafell (2017) "Queer Utopias and a (Feminist) Iranian Vampire: A Critical Analysis of Resistive Monstrosity in a Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 4, pp. 358–370.

[26] Parsi, "The Iranian Regime Makes War on Queers," Accessed 8 September 2019.

[27] Ibid. Accessed 8 September 2019

[28] Ibid. Accessed 8 September 2019

[29] See, for example, Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska (2019), "Transsexuality in Iran: A Liberal Law in a Conservative State," available online at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/transsexuality-iran-liberal-law-conservative-state-1887443646. Accessed 8 February 2019.

[30] Vanessa Barford (2008) "Iran's 'Diagnosed Transsexuals'," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7259057.stm. Accessed 15 August 2018.

[31] Antti Saastamoinen (2017) "Iranian Queer Refugees' Thoughts About Home" (Master Theiss in Border Crossings Master's Degree Programme, University of Eastern Finland,), p. 5.

[32] Zara Saeidzadeh (2016) "Transsexuality in Contemporary Iran: Legal and Social Misrecognition," *Feminist Legal Studies* 24, no. 3, pp. 249–272.

[33] Ibid., p. 260.

[34] Shadee Abdi (2014) "Staying I (Ra) N: Narrating Queer Identity from within the Persian Closet," *Liminalities* 10, no. 2, pp. 1–20.

Queer Fashion in Iranian Cyberspace

To position the topic of queerness in Iran within the international literature, I draw on queer theory in which the concept of queer represents gender and sexuality as notions within postmodern fluidity and fragmentation, while others such as transgender theory focus on a grounding and stabilizing 'subjective experience.'[35] This article relies broadly on the notion of queer and applies Jack Halberstam's definition of queer and non-normativity and Judith Butler's analysis of queer performance as transgressive practice. The queer in this view is therefore not equivalent to homosexual, or any other specific gender or sexual identity. For Halberstam, there are a variety of queer and gender-outlaw bodies under the sign of nonnormative/queer masculinities and femininities. The task at hand, according to Halberstam, is not to decide which of these identities offers more resistance but to begin the work of documenting their distinctive features.[36] To Halberstam, queer is not represented as a singularity but as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock.[37] Halberstam and Ira Livingston also discuss queerness in relation to posthumanism defined as an interruption to the linear continuity among gender, heterosexual norms and human sexuality.[38] Halberstam's discussions in *Skin Shows*, complement the picture by emphasizing the significance of skin, the material body and its appearance.[39]

Similarly, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler emphasizes the transformative potential of embodiment, and how fantasy and creative imagery could give reality to new modes of gendered existence.[40] Then, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler discusses the flawed nature of gender performance, discussing that while the practice of gendering – through fashion or otherwise – and the embodying of norms is a compulsory social assignment, it is never quite carried out according to expectations and never quite inhabits the ideal that people are compelled to approximate.[41] These two arguments highlight the significance of both imagination and materiality in discursively constructing gender. Halberstam's discussions on gender-outlaw and nonnormative embodiment and Butler's transformative embodiment reveal the capacity of body – not only the flesh but what it reveals, conceals, represents, and carries – to transgress normalized imaginaries of gender.

Within these frameworks, queer is used in a broad sense of the term as something that describes mismatches or is incoherent between sex, gender and sexuality.[42] This concept colludes with body management and modes of performance, including fashion. Fashion is the interaction between garments, ornaments, artifacts and objects carried

[35] Jay Prosser cited in, Jack Halberstam (1998) "Transgender Butch: Butch/Ftm Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2, pp. 287– 310.
[36] Ibid., pp. 291–292.
[37] Jack Halberstam (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), p. 29.
[38] Jack Halberstam & Ira Livingston (1955) "Introduction." In: Halberstam, J. & Livingston, I. (eds.) Posthuman Bodies, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 1–22.
[39] Jack Halberstam (1995) *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press).
[40] Judith Butler (2004) *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge).
[41] Judith Butler (2011) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge).
[42] Niall Richardson (2004) "The Queer Activity of Extreme Male Bodybuilding: Gender Dissidence, Auto-Eroticism and Hysteria," *Social Semiotics,* 14, no. 1, pp. 49–65.

on the body and a specific conception of the self, taking place in a space that bases its usage on an elevated attention according to visibility: the public space.[43] Iranian public spaces are not perceived safe for queer fashion due to the limitations of dress code on the one hand, and the limitations of queer expressions and performances on the other; this is however experienced very differently by heterogenous sexual minorities in Iran based on their social position[44] as well as gender and sexual identity. As Afsaneh Najmabadi has discussed, the legal and social conditions for gender and sexual categories are also highly dependent on the political environment. For instance, while homosexuality is outlawed, transsexuality is tolerated and even partly subsidized.[45] The cyberspace is, however, at least to some extent, safe, free and accessible by the public. While there is of course a constant fear of Iran's systematic censorship machine, the threat of Internet police is mostly directed toward users who have a very large following or express sharp political commentary. This means that much of the public life of the Iranian queer, including activities regarding fashion, are by necessity routed through cyberspace.[46]

Internet in general, and particularly visual and textual blogging, have become an important part of Iranian youth's lives. There are local channels and platforms as substitutes for the censored channels.[47] Blogging is widespread and there are local service providers that support Persian language blogging for free. This has encouraged hundreds of thousands of Iranian bloggers who make Persian language one of the most popular languages of the global blogosphere.[48] Internet platforms that are not banned, such as Instagram, have massive popularity. Instagram currently is the most prominently used social media in Iran. Although there are on-going attempts by conservative political powers to ban it,[49] the platform is still open and accessible by the public. For its visualizing capacities, Instagram is especially popular for fashion blogging and is the most used media for displaying fashion items, modeling and other fashion-related activities.[50]

Social media such as Instagram have the double potential to serve as ways of strengthening existing power relations and to serve as means of giving voice to the unheard and power to those outside the social and political elite.[51] Iranian openly queer cyberspace is mostly run by the Iranian diaspora, a large proportion of whom

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[43] Alexandru Balasescu (2003) "Tehran Chic: Islamic Headscarves, Fashion Designers, and New Geographies of Modernity," *Fashion Theory*, 7, no. 1, pp. 39–56.

[44] Jón Ingvar Kjaran (2019), *Gay Life Stories: Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Cham: Palgrave).

[45] Najmabadi (Year), "Transing and Transpassing across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran."

[46] Mani Mostofi (2014) "Iranian's Queer Internet Human Rights Successes and Setbacks," in *IGLHRC Conefernece Proceeding* (Dusseldorf), pp. 96–112.

[47] For example, Cloob.com that replaces Facebook and Twitter; and Aparat.com that is a substitute for YouTube.

[48] Gholam Khiabany & Annabelle Sreberny (2007) "The Politics of/in Blogging in Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, no. 3, 563–579.

[49] Sahere Chamani (2018) "The Instagram Filtering Is on the Agenda of the State Attorney General's Office," available online at: https://www.zoomit.ir/2018/7/4/283840/instagram-filtering/ Accessed 12 January 2019.

[50] Evette Dionne (2017) "Iran's Fierce Fashion Bloggers Are Shattering a Harsh Dress Code," https://www.revelist.com/religion/iranian-fashion-bloggers/6741/all-of-this-resistance-is-part-of-an-attempt-to-reframe-the-greater-cultural-understanding-of-iran–as-it-should/10. Accessed 11 February 2019.

[51] Stephen Coleman (2005) "Blogs and the New Politics of Listening," *The Political Quarterly*, 76, no. 2, pp. 273–280.

are highly educated.[52] The diaspora itself is a highly heterogenous group and is made up of people of diverse socio-ethnic backgrounds and political orientations. Although diasporic Iranian communities have shown tolerance and even celebration and support of Iranian queers in online spaces,[53] this celebration is, according to Sima Shakhsari, not always a sign of inclusive political standpoints, but sometimes a reproduction of colonialist standpoints. This is because their supportive attitudes could arise from the envisioning of diaspora as an emblem of unrestricted mobility and the glorifications of the emancipatory potentials of the Internet as a haven for Iranian queers inside Iran awaiting rescue within the liberatory and civilizational discourses.[54]

It is also misleading to imagine Iranian bloggers inside Iran as a unified oppositional force against the Iranian state, which itself consists of unstable power dynamics and cannot be imagined as a unified 'regime.'[55] Some of the elements of the Iranian state have defended the youth's right to access new technologies and have been much more tolerant toward cyber-activities than others.[56] Therefore, the political hegemony and political resistance are both spread in different social groups, channels and ideologies that do not speak as a unified social identity or purpose.

Globally, queer style and fashion platforms, blogs and social media have established their position in the fashion blogging scene. Platforms such as Qwear[57], Queering Style[58], and DapperQ[59] introduce fashion that is exclusively aimed at diverse gender and sexuality groups, including the queer-identifying market. My exploratory research in Persian language revealed that there are no platforms, websites, social media accounts or blogs that engage exclusively with queer fashion and are run from inside Iran. It also revealed that although there are Persian accounts, blogs and platforms that address queer topics and imagery in the cyberspace, especially on Instagram, they usually posted pictures of non-Iranian fashion, queer couples, or in some cases unidentifiable images. Considering the strict cyber-policing and the legal frameworks of punishment for non-heterosexual behavior in Iran,[60] these outcomes were expected. The online Persian content that had to do with sexuality was hyper-eroticized and engaged mostly with non-heteronormative eroticism rather than fashion and queerness. While fashion and queer motifs were identifiable, the crux of this content was erotica. Fashion and queer contents were also available in the Persian language, but there was very little content that engaged with both at the same time. The articles thus were oriented toward Instagram fashion blogging. The sampling objective was then set to

[52] Ladan Rahbari (2018) "Iranian Migrant Women's Shared Experiences in Belgium," in B. Maria Pirani (ed), *The Borders of Integration: Empowered Bodies and Social Cohesion*, pp. 203–217 (Cambridge, UK: Scholars Publishing).

[53] Sima Shakhsari (2012) "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora: Cyberspace, the War on Terror, and the Hypervisible Iranian Queer," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies,* 8, no. 3, pp. 14–39.

[54] Ibid. p. 17.

[55] Sima Shakhsari (2011) "Weblogistan Goes to War: Representational Practices, Gendered Soldiers and Neoliberal Entrepreneurship in Diaspora," *Feminist Review*, 99, no. 1, p. 6–24.

[56] Iranian president Hassan Rouhani's cabinet is known for a more liberal approach when it comes to social media; see *Radiofarda* (2019), "Rouhani: The Government Did Not Enact Telegram Filtering and Does Not Agree with It," https://www.radiofarda.com/a/rouhani-telegram-blokage/29209193.html. Accessed 11 November 2019.

[57] http://www.qwearfashion.com/ Accessed 20 August 2019.

[58] http://queeringstyle.tumblr.com/ Accessed 20 August 2019.

[59] https://www.dapperq.com/ Accessed 20 August 2019.

[60] Ingvar Kjaran, *Gay Life Stories: Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 1.

explore whether non-mainstream gendered content was available and whether it was possible to trace queer elements in it.

Under the realm of cyber fashion, a prevalent tendency toward modeling as the mainstream fashioning practice was recognized. The modeling trend engaged with the representation and the usage of the body or the face – of predominantly female users – rather than an artifact, a piece of clothing or an ornament. In this category, there was a focus on the model's body by using close shots and poses. While female models dominated the category, male modeling was also present. The Persian cyber fashion realm also seemed to be highly connected to body modifications and beauty practices. Two groups associated with body and beauty practices, extensive usage of make-up and features visibly modified by surgical practices were *duffs* and *puffs*.[61] They were widely present in the fashion scene, specifically on Instagram where they had multiple pages dedicated to them. Duffs and puffs and their relevance for the article's objective are discussed in the following section.

Queer Extravaganza of Duffs and Puffs

Duffs and puffs are non-mainstream aesthetic and fashion categories that are committed to shocking the audience. They perform bodily practices through which different forms of deconstruction take place and assumptions on gender and sexual embodiment are placed under scrutiny. The term *duff*, popularized by the youth in cyberspace, is generally used for a beautiful fashionable young woman. On the social media platforms and in cyberspace[62] it has a more specific meaning and is usually used for referring to a young woman who embodies certain excessive and extravagant embodied beauty characteristics, and/or has performed visible body modifications, and/or performs her femininity in aggrandized ways. The term also generally is used for women who have undergone plastic surgeries, which often include a 'corrected' nose, accented by using injectable facial fillers. Duffs are also known for excessive make-up usage and wear tight, figure-hugging, and stereotypically feminine clothing. They are considered exemplary in *sexiness* and perform gaze and bodily dispositions to accentuate their sexual appeal in images and selfies. A blog post explained duff as *a person who uses unusual body management and behaves with coquetry and is excessively flirtatious*.[63] Other blog posts explained a duff to be an *ignorant* and *trivial* character who was only interested in partying,[64] and who used injectable fillers.[65] Although less popular, the term *puff* is also used in the online youth subculture, and refers to the male equivalent of duff, meaning a young male who has exaggerated bodily characteristics, beauty and sexual charm. Like duffs, puffs often have undergone plastic surgeries, most importantly nose jobs, and perform exaggerated hair and facial beauty

[61] The article could not include images of puffs and duffs due to data sharing policies and ethics. Examples exist on Instagram profiles such as dufpuf2018, Tehran_dufpuf and duf_puf_irani, among others.

[62] On Instagram, the word "duff" when written in Persian, is often accompanied by a hashtag sign.

[63] *Avaliha* (2015) "What Is the Origin of the Word Duff and a Duff Girl or a Daf Woman in Iran and Abroad?," http://bit.ly/2KdnboErootsofduff. Accessed 6 May 2019.

[64] *Parsine* (2015) "Introducing the Term 'Duff', Duff Is a Female career!," available online at: https://www.parsine.com/fa/news/244998/. Accessed 12 May 2019.

[65] *Persian-day Rozblog* (2013), "Where Did Duff Come from and What Does It Mean?," http://persian-day.rozblog.com/fun/389/. Accessed 12 June 2019.

practices. They are usually muscular and wear tight clothing to reveal their muscles and fit bodies.

Facial beauty practices such as daily make-up usage and grooming hair and eyebrows are common practices in Iran.[66] The beauty practices are influenced by the globalized beauty standards that rely on local, regional and international beauty ideals and can be habitual and not necessarily self-consciously decided upon.[67] While in most of the modern period, it is mostly Iranian women who have used beauty practices, contemporarily men and women perform some similar beauty practices. Facial beauty practices of a puff, however, differ from those of a duff. Puffs depilate their forehead and cheeks and groom their eyebrows like duffs. They wear mascara and use facial creams and powders. These activities are extremely frowned upon in Iran and practicing men could be subject of sexual slurs.

The most distinctive characteristic of duffs and puffs' beauty regimes is their indifference to appear as 'natural' beauties. For duffs and puffs, the goal is exaggeration and pretentiousness. Acquiring a visibly modified look is much more desirable than a 'natural' one. When it comes to plastic surgeries, the Iranian beauty seekers in plastic surgery and beauty clinics usually choose between 'natural looking' corrections, and 'doll-like'[68] corrections, and many go for the latter.[69] The visibly corrected faces, bloated lips and cheeks, surgically reduced noses, bleached hair and eyebrows obviously do not attempt to attain or mimic a natural state; quite the opposite, they are intentionally exaggerated. As Halberstam discusses in *Gaga Feminism*, some performances contain innovative and excessive deployments of femininity, ecstatic embrace of loss of control and a sense of bodily identity, such as those of Lady Gaga.[70] According to Halberstam, in these performances of excess and crazy unreadable appearances of wild genders, an unbecoming of gender takes place.[71]

The ideal body – for both duffs and puffs – is a body that is curved. An exaggeratedly thin waist and hard and curved buttocks are desirable for both men and women. The ideal upper body for duffs consists of full breasts and for puffs, large broad shoulders and a pumped-up chest. Although not always present, hyper-muscularity acquired through bodybuilding is a desired attribute for puffs. Bodybuilding is sometimes interpreted as a queer activity with the potential of challenging the hegemonic sex–gender–sexuality continuum. While gender is generally considered a natural state, emphases on modifications undermine the presumed heterosexuality.[72] In the context of Iran, digital representation of women's muscular bodies in bodybuilding has been

[66] Ladan Rahbari, Susan Dierickx, Chia Longman and Gily Coene (2018) "'Kill Me but Make Me Beautiful': Harm and Agency in Female Beauty Practices in Contemporary Iran," *Iran and the Caucasus,* 22, no. 1, pp. 50–60.

[67] Ibid., pp. 57–58.

[68] In Farsi, *Tabi'i* (natural) and *Aroosaki* (doll-like).

[69] Deni Kirova (2013) "Iran Is the Nose Job Capital of the World with Seven Times More Procedures Than the U.S.," available online at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2287961/Iran-named-nose-job-capital-world-SEVEN-times-rhinoplasty-operations-U-S-Iranian-women-strive-western-doll-face.html. Accessed 20 September 2019.

[70] According to Wikipedia, Lady Gaga is an American pop and electronic singer, songwriter, and actress, who is known for her unconventionality and provocative work as well as visual experimentation and performance. See Wikipedia. Provide web address for Lady Gaga entry and date of your last access.

[71] Jack Halberstam (2012), *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

[72] Jack Halberstam (1998) *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

shown to have the potential to distress the mainstream discourses and transgress gender norms.[73] Building extremely muscular bodies destabilizes appropriate forms of both feminine and masculine embodiment and is furthermore not a conventionally gendered or sexual subject, classifiable within the "normal" matrix of sex, gender and sexuality.[74]

The clothing and attire choices might, at first glance, make the most difference between men and women. The realm of clothing is where the gender politics in Iran most visibly forces itself up on the bodies. Based on state laws, women should observe the compulsory hijab in public spaces. The types of hijab are however very diverse as the female fashion makes the best of this piece of cloth and creates different styles of headwear. Multiple forms of headwear such as *roosari*, *shawl*, *maghnae* and *kolah* are worn depending on the norms and regulations of different public spaces.[75] The *manteaux*,[76] another exclusive garment for women, also has been the subject of creative fashioning. From *manteau kootah*, *manteau koti*, *manteau jelo-baz*, to *majlesi*, and *chasban*,[77] *manteau* has had its own life course and has adapted to international and regional trends. Despite the stark differences in female and male clothing, there still are attire categories that are genderless. Iranian men in general and specifically puffs prefer colorful, skin-showing and figure-hugging clothing that, according to the popular perceptions, are typically not desirable for heterosexual men.

Moreover, the queer aspects of fashion in the digital sphere are viewed as going beyond body management practices, since the perceptions of gender include attitudinal and behavioral elements[78] as well as stereotypes, roles, and embodiment. In the visual imagery of duffs and puffs, the male and female selfie styles often bear stark similarities. The literature on body disposition has shown that there are some gender differences in non-verbal representations of mainstream masculinity and femininity.[79] Not only do the photographic trends followed by professional photographers portray women as sexy and submissive and men as grounded, dominant, and confident, but also the selfies contain such gender differences.[80] Head-canting, smiling and gaze aversion are considered predominantly female gestures[81] in traditional photography and in social

[73] Rahbari, "Pushing Gender to Its Limits: Iranian Women Bodybuilders on Instagram.", pp. 8–9.

[74] Richardson, "The Queer Activity of Extreme Male Bodybuilding: Gender Dissidence, AutoEroticism and Hysteria."

[75] *Roosari* is a type of headscarf in the form of a square cloth that often is folded into a triangle and tied under the chin. *Shaw*l is a long rectangular cloth that is worn around the head and neck. While *roosari* and *shawl* are worn in many public places, the official form of veil that is sanctioned in schools, universities and governmental spaces is *maghnae*. *Maghnae* is a tighter headwear that is meant to cover the shoulders and the neck as well as the head.

[76] Borrowed from French, with the same meaning, *manteau* (pronounced manto) is a long jacket that comes in different lengths. It is the daily attire of most Iranian women in public spaces.

[77] Different forms of *manteaux* characterized by their length, tightness and quality have become trendy in different periods.

[78] Clare Chambers (2008) *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press).

[79] Nicola Döring, Anne Reif, and Sandra Poeschl (2016) "How Gender-Stereotypical Are Selfies? A Content Analysis and Comparison with Magazine Adverts," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, pp. 955–962.

[80] Janet Mills (1984) "Self-Posed Behaviors of Females and Males in Photographs," *Sex Roles*, 10, no. 7–8, pp. 633–637.

[81] Amanda Willson and Barbara Lloyd (1990) "Gender Vs. Power: Self-Posed Behavior Revisited," *Sex Roles,* 23, no. 1, pp. 91–98.

media pictures.[82] These gendered trends were found in duffs and puffs' imagery. However, many differences existed as well. While feminine shots used silliness, failure and duck face poses to look cute-sexy, men's shots were mostly serious-sexy.

Even though both groups could be understood as non-conventional, puffs and duffs maintained certain stereotypical feminine and masculine traits. They also often were portrayed as matching categories. They often were portrayed as heterosexual couples who dated each other. Duffs looking for puffs and puffs looking for duffs was a recurring online theme. This representation was indicative of a hetero-couple-oriented binary.

Discussion

The Duffs and puffs phenomenon is a fashion and lifestyle trend that brings beauty, embodiment and unruliness together. The transformations of fashion, beauty practices, cosmetic surgeries and pop culture in Iran, with examples such as duffs and puffs, show how men and women in Iran are transgressing bodily gendered norms and entering the realms of queer fashion. By practicing these forms of beauty and embodiment, duffs and puffs embrace a notion of self-representation that is expressed through extreme sexualization and sometimes gender-ambiguity. Using practices of body management and performing sexiness, sexual freedom and promiscuity, duffs and puffs stretch the limits of the legitimized gender norms and mainstream moral codes of behavior.

For duffs and puffs the acquired beauty traits do not imitate a natural state and are comparable to practices of plastic surgery icons such as human Ken doll, Rodrigo Alves.[83] Similar to him, puffs and puffs are not only beauty and bodily ideal categories, but with their consumption and lifestyle representations, they are also representative of lifestyle and class choices. Forename Shahabi has also identified a group of cosmopolitan or subcultural youth, who are upper- and middle-class of the post-Islamic revolution generations.[84] Uninterested or distancing themselves in ideology and politics, this group tends to be materialistic, hedonistic consumers of mass popular culture.[85] Despite the Iranian government's pedagogic efforts, the state youth policies are not deeply embedded in their minds and a significant number of young people in urban areas have their own definitions of normality. As a blogpost explains, duffs are considered materialistic and interested in activities such as excessive shopping for clothes and accessories and partying.[86] Another blog explains that being a duff also can be considered a 'career', since the duffs do not have jobs or an education.[87] While their activities are expensive, duffs rely on others to cover their expenses. This classed aspect of their lifestyle becomes clear

[82] Jessica Rose, Susan Mackey-Kallis, Len Shyles, Kelly Barry, Danielle Biagini, Colleen Hart, Lauren Jack (2012) "Face It: The Impact of Gender on Social Media Images," *Communication Quarterly*, 60, no. 5, pp. 588–607.

[83] Alvarez is a British-Brazilian celebrity and TV personality.

[84] Shahabi, "Youth Subcultures in Post-Revolution Iran: An Alternative Reading.", pp. 114–115.

[85] Ibid., p. 114.

[86] Blogfa Post, "What Is Duff? Who Is Duff?," http://unforgiven666.blogfa.com/post/58. Accessed 17 August 2018.

[87] Parsiblog post, "What Does Duff Mean?" http://bit.ly/2rBnl2twhatdoesduffmean. Accessed 22 August 2018.

online since duff and puff hashtags often are accompanied by other hashtags such as #luxury and #rich.

In the blogosphere, puffs and duffs generally are perceived as a decadent, trivial, consumerist and a generally odd outcast subcultural phenomenon. As Halberstam discusses in *Posthuman Bodies*, the queer posthuman hyper-stylized bodies thrive in subcultures.[88] Based on the observations of the online comments and reactions to them, puffs and duffs are sometimes mocked, degraded and considered people with loose morality and sense of responsibility by other online users. Halberstam's account of queer as rejection of achievement, fulfillment, and success-oriented social norms, and associated with inauthenticity and inappropriateness[89] can be used to explain the unpopularity of duffs and puffs. In their discussions in the *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam delineates how failure is embedded in queer creativity, and how it is a way of criticizing heteronormativity and capitalism.

The puffs and duffs, however, do not show any interest in explicitly criticizing any form of politics; in fact, they even embrace being portrayed as ignorant and indifferent toward social and political issues. This is the opposite of the general international portrayal of online Iranians (especially women) as overly educated, politically active and freedom-seeking subjects.[90] While political and social activism are parts of Iranians' online activities, lifestyle, fashion and beauty are significant parts of it as well. The duffs and puffs phenomenon is one that does not show direct interest in political activism or freedom-seeking political discourses, but in the leisure and lifestyle narratives.[91] They do not intentionally resist political and religious conservatism, but rather reject them by welcoming excessive banality. This seemingly apolitical attitude of duffs and puffs could explain the tolerance of the Iranian hyper-vigilant cyber police against this phenomenon. It is thus possible to think that their political apathy might be a conscious decision to avoid repercussions.

Conclusion

Although duffs and puffs might not be considered conclusively as a force of conscious social critique, their type of political apathy is not only a characteristic of duffs and puffs, but a sentiment prevalent among many Iranians. With the failure to reform the state's politics effectively, many Iranians' sentiments have increasingly moved toward frustration and apathy.[92] Once situated within the political and social context of Iran, it can be deduced that while being a survival strategy, this seemingly apolitical attitude could bear political significance. Even though not voicing explicit critique, their online activities push further the boundaries of legal and illegal as well as socially legitimate and illegitimate everyday practices.

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[88] Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "Introduction," in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith M Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 1–22.

[89] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

[90] Shakhsari, "Weblogistan Goes to War: Representational Practices, Gendered Soldiers and Neoliberal Entrepreneurship in Diaspora."

[91] Ibid., p. 10.

[92] Elliot Hen-Tov (2007), "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, no. 1, (2007). pp. 163–179.

In the Iranian context, survival strategies are part of the minority groups' everyday life. Survival is a major concern for those outside the realms of majority and mainstream sexual culture. The notion of survival is relevant to other minority experiences. José Esteban Muñoz explains how queers of color survive and transform their experiences of a homophobic public sphere.[93] This notion of survival does not mean only outliving or accommodating the normative, but also creating – through performances of difference – blueprints for future possibilities.[94] For Muñoz, minoritarian performances, even though temporally and spatially limited, make it possible for the performer and the spectator to imagine transformative politics and possibilities, so surviving is not only an act of maintaining existing realities, but creating new ones.[95] Additionally, as Butler has discussed, it is not possible to ignore that embodiment denotes a contested set of norms governing who will count as a viable subject within the sphere of politics.[96] This means that even without a clear political project at hand, simply by persisting and surviving in online spaces, duffs and puffs create unruly bodily representations and imaginations. Although these representations are currently outside of the legally or socially legitimized norms, they visualize future possibilities.

Furthermore, as Deeb and Harb discuss, fun and leisure activities are considered a threat to moral as well as political orders and power regimes, and authorities actively shun fun in contexts that are potentially subversive.[97] This is certainly the case for activities of young people in the Iranian cyberspace that offer a more relaxed geography of morality and leisure compared to its offline counterparts. Leisure – especially in forms of consumption that duffs and puffs demonstrate – works as a marker of class in its display of free time to spend in leisurely pursuits and in relation to consumption.[98] The class aspect of the performance of richness is too complex a picture to address fully in this article, as it is a subject that requires further inquiry. The classed identities of duffs and puffs are important to scrutinize their queer subversions vis-à-vis capitalism, state sexual politics and gender normativity. However, it is not possible to determine through online research whether the duffs and puffs perform richness, or if they are actually members of rich or middle-upper class who have the time and means to maintain online presence with displays of fun and ambivalence. What can be said is that the display of higher class and wealth are problematized in the Iranian political context[99] as forms of immoral decadence, but as long as they do not entail critical elements that would be perceived or prove challenging to the dominant political discourses, they are tolerated. The fact that duffs and puffs reject, or are not interested to join, the ranks of critiques of the Islamic Republic's gendered laws, heteronormativity and capitalism could be considered politically effective strategies to maintain the position and

[93] Ivan Ramos (2016) Muñoz, José Esteban, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press), pp. 1–17.

[94] Boundary2, "Survival and Then Some," available online at: http://www.boundary2.org/2014/03/survival-and-then-some/. Accessed 19 August 2018.

[95] José Esteban Muñoz (1999) Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 133–135.

[96] Butler, *Undoing Gender*. p. 28.

[97] Lara Deeb & Mona Harb (2013) *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi 'ite South Beirut*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 14.

[98] Ibid., p. 14.

[99] Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996), "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran," in Haleh Afshar (ed), *Women and Politics in the Third World* (New York and London: Routledge).

visibility of the small subculture within such a strictly monitored sexual and political context.

This article's exploratory approach and methodological choices aimed to trace queer fashion in Iranian cyberspace. The article neither intended nor attempted to make general claims about the prevalence of queer topics, representations and identities in Iran. These topics are very hard to assess considering the political suppression of public identification. The article rather tried to show the potential of fashion in the cyberspace to demonstrate queer motives and create visibility, as well as to explain the possible political relevance of queer fashion in contemporary Iran. The centrality of the shapes, poses, and gestures of the body in the discussions made in this paper pointed toward the importance of the discursive and performed representations of gender.

To conclude, while it might seem that the realm of queer fashion in Iranian cyberspace is small, fragmented and unorganized, it is possible to trace queer expressions, embodiment and performance especially in visual social media. Duffs and puffs as an example, offer aesthetic and embodied extravaganza that sometimes hyperbolically do and undo gender. By using excessive visibility and intentional exaggeration in beauty, muscularity and body modifications, puffs and duffs make new gendered and classed identities possible. They do not pose any explicit threat to capitalism or heteronormative gender and sexual politics and they present themselves as non-working consumers and non-entrepreneurial actors. These outwardly apolitical elements guarantee their survival. However, their non-participation in the conventional modes of money-making, besides their equally unconventional gender representation and sexual imagery contributes to transformative possibilities and politics. Despite this potential and even though duffs and puffs could be perceived as personifying homoeroticism, their representations remain couple-oriented and heteronormative. Their potential to offer strong antagonism to the normative discursive power of mainstream gender and sexual discourses thus is limited, but it nonetheless stains the heterogeneity of the ideologies by offering moments and performances of fun, shock and failure.

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