

Gulf lovers use smartphones to beat segregation

June 28 2013, by Wissam Keyrouz



A woman holds her mobile as she walks past a coffee shop in the Saudi capital Riyadh on June 17, 2013. In the United Arab Emirates and all across the conservative Gulf countries, dating is unacceptable while arranged marriages are the norm, so to beat the segregation imposed by a stern society, young men and women meet virtually.

Jaber and his girlfriend flirt the day away, never wasting a minute to sweet-talk and dream of a future together, but like most Gulf Arab

youths they can only do it virtually.

In the United Arab Emirates and all across the conservative Gulf countries, dating is unacceptable among nationals while arranged marriages are the norm.

To beat the segregation imposed by a stern society, young men and women meet through chatting applications available on smartphones.

Sitting in a coffee shop in a luxurious Abu Dhabi mall, the love-struck Emirati young man holds a tea cup in one hand while the other one is busy typing love messages on the keyboard of his BlackBerry.

"I saw her at the movies. I asked an employee there to hand her my BlackBerry PIN code," Jaber recalls with a grin the day he met his girlfriend.

"I didn't really expect her to add me to her contact list, or for such a love story to evolve between us," said Jaber, who is in his 20s.

But it did and the first cyberspace encounter took place two months later when the young woman mustered enough courage and linked up with Jaber via Skype.

It was a short meeting, said Jaber, who staunchly refused to reveal his girlfriend's name because making their relationship public would trigger a scandal in their conservative society.

That first Skype date was enough "to affirm our love," said the university graduate.

Eventually he convinced his beloved to meet him in secret and now the couple are considering the next step—namely should Jaber request a

meeting with her father in line with tradition and formally ask for her hand in marriage.



Men look at a mobile as they sit in a coffee shop in the Saudi capital Riyadh on June 17, 2013. In the United Arab Emirates and all across the conservative Gulf countries dating is unacceptable while arranged marriages are the norm, so to beat the segregation imposed by a stern society, young men and women meet virtually.

"Despite the modernisation in the United Arab Emirates, families still hold on to their traditional conservative values," says Jamila Khanji, adviser of research and studies at the Family Development Foundation in Abu Dhabi.

"Families still arrange their children's marriages, even though they have now become more flexible by allowing the engaged couple to meet, or

accepting longer engagement periods to give the couple better chances to get to know one another," she said.

But while this is the case in the UAE, considered one of the Gulf's most liberal countries, it is nearly impossible for couples in neighbouring Saudi Arabia to meet as the ultra-conservative kingdom strictly prohibits mixing between the sexes.

In a cafeteria at the entrance of a shopping mall in Al-Tahliya street, one of Riyadh's most vibrant districts, dozens of young men look on as fully veiled girls in high heels and designer handbags walk past and head towards the seating area reserved to women and families only.

In oil-rich Saudi Arabia it is nearly impossible for men to openly approach a woman but thanks to an easy access to the latest technologies including mobile phone applications, they can indeed meet.

By switching on WhosHere, a smartphone application which is popular in the kingdom, a young man sitting at the men's section of the cafeteria could contact girls sitting in the families' section.

"I can see that 16 girls have showed up on WhosHere and I can connect with any one of them," says Ahmed, who like Jaber declined to give his surname.

Before such applications, men would throw at the girls pieces of paper with their telephone numbers scribbled on them.

But the Saudi telecom authority warned in March that it would ban applications like Skype and WhatsApp if providers failed to allow authorities access to censor content, according to an industry source.

Internet messenger application Viber was briefly blocked in June in

Saudi Arabia, while BlackBerry nearly got banned in 2010. Authorities cite security concerns to justify their actions.

Although smartphones have become an integral part of dating in the kingdom, the relationship does not develop into marriage, users say.

"None of my friends has married a girl he met in this way," said Ahmed.

Qatari Alanood has fallen in love with a friend of her brother, but could not reveal her story in a society that shames women who dare voice their feelings.

"I communicate with him on Skype," she said, speaking to AFP via Twitter. "It's a hopeless love story."

A 16-year-old student at a girls' school told AFP that Emirati classmates—not allowed by their families to talk to boys—use BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) to contact members of the opposite sex.

On BBM, users randomly add contacts whom they start talking to. "Then they move on to Skype and Facebook."

They sometimes get to finally meet face-to-face, but in most cases the short-lived relationship ends with a click, she said.

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Citation: Gulf lovers use smartphones to beat segregation (2013, June 28) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-gulf-lovers-smartphones-segregation.html>

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