Zina of the Eye: Pornography among Male Cairene Youth

by Sarah Michelle Leonard

Pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry, and its presence has become ubiquitous across the globe, in part due to changes in technology and new patterns of interplay between globalized media and consumer behavior. Reflecting these trends, one finds pornography circulating widely within the Middle East North Africa region today. However, given the influence of popular, governmental and religious treatments of pornography and other forms of “unsanctioned” sexual behavior and expression in moral and religious terms, the region’s increasingly high levels of consumption and amateurist production of pornographic video clips may come as a surprise to some. In order to demystify and understand these dynamics in the region, this essay provides an ethnographic account of how one cohort of male youths in
Cairo interact with pornography, information technology and various moral discourses. In doing so, the work aims to support the production of more nuanced and more diverse research with regard to gender and sexuality studies in the region. Beginning with an overview of regional discourses surrounding sex and sexuality and general statistics relating to its consumption of pornography, the work then moves into a set of interviews with five unmarried male friends between the ages of 18 and 22 who interact heavily\(^1\) with pornography, in order to help contextualize those statistics for the Cairene environment. The analysis of literature, statistics and interviews presented here will be balanced out by original research relating to emerging local negotiations of sex, gender, and Islamic purity practice in Cairo, Egypt.

In laying a conceptual groundwork for understanding Cairo as space, I depart from Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) argument that, “itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others” (1991, 73), as Cairo’s social space is indeed both suggestive and prohibitive with regard to matters of sex and sexuality. This work aims to highlight the ways in which the social and ritual space(s) of Cairo become refashioned, not just by various global dynamics and socio-political conflicts, but also internally through engagement with information technologies and commodity practices like pornography, creating a landscape where actions widely construed as “profane,” normative Islamic rituals and legalistic Islamic precepts meld into a unique and seemingly contradictory bricolage of practices. With an eye on the statistics of pornographic consumption in Egypt, this work ultimately argues that the pornography consumption practices performed by this particular group of respondents reflect an increasingly normalized set of practices and values among Cairo’s male and female youth, and that through such practices Cairo’s youth culture is able to test the parameters of well-established traditions and norms regarding sex, sexuality and gender constructions. Ultimately respondents’ practices of engagement with pornography, which in many ways mirror the pornography consumption practices of youth around the world, are presented here as part of the complex and ongoing interweaving of the everyday and the extraordinary, rather than as something extraordinary in of itself.

Of Masculinities and Men
Whereas women and femininities were long ignored as categories of study in the anthropological literature until the pioneering voices of Western and Islamo-Arab feminists of

\(^1\) “Heavily” is defined as consisting of at least three to four sessions of engagement per week.
the 1980s and 90s helped to bring women and femininities more fully into the academic spotlight, the present cannon of Arab and Islamic works on gender and sexuality tend to highlight women’s postcolonial voice and narrative (Sabbah 1984; Mernissi 1987; Ahmed 1992) at the expense of keeping men and masculinities elusive and far removed from the stage of critical inquiry. Men and masculinities in the Middle East are still generally regarded as static, even default, categories in the regional literature, and continue to be subjected to the bias of a gender binary paradigm which prioritizes women and femininity while accepting a monolithic formula for the gendering process among men. As Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne note in Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies (1994), “It is ironic that the logic of feminism as political position has often required the notion of ‘men’ as a single, oppositional category” (1994, 1). This positioning of men as an “oppositional, homogenous category” which obstructs the production of new knowledge concerning not just masculinity, but also femininity, sexuality and power (Melhuus and Stølen 1996, 56-7). In attempting to depart significantly from these stagnations in the regional literature, this work follows the works of Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (2000) and Lahoucine Ougzane (2003) in asserting that the existing analytical paradigms for the region, in focusing exclusively on women and femininities, ignores the rather obvious fact that patriarchal modes of subjugation can be just as harmful to men. As Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb (2000) argue:

Work on masculinity has shown that patriarchy is both more complex, for being more implicated in the structure of social relations than sometimes been admitted, and at the same time not as monolithic as has been suggested. Focusing on masculinity should not be seen as a shift away from feminist projects, but rather as a complementary [endeavor], indeed one that is organically linked (2000, 8).

This work argues further that the existing fixation in praxis and literature with patriarchal modes of oppression and their interruption of women’s quality of life reinforces an essentializing and Orientalist\(^2\) rendering of patriarchal hegemony as an inherent, even necessary, component of Arab culture and, in doing so, advances the harmful stereotype not only that “Muslim women need saving” (Abu Lughod 2001) but also that the men and masculinities of the region are devoid of complexity and immune to change. Within this preset framework, men of the Middle East tend to be lumped haphazardly under the archetype of the

\(^2\) I am referring, of course, to Edward Said’s profound and enduring concept of Orientalism (1978), which characterizes a comprehensive set of discursive techniques which generalize, feminize and stigmatize Asia and the Middle East as a geopolitical monolith of erotic, exotic and irrational places and peoples, inherently “other” to the West.
despotic patriarch, religious martyr or sexual deviant, all of which take root and are most succinctly captured by Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978).

Though Edward Said coined these remarks over thirty years ago, the need for more diverse ethnographic work on men and masculinities in the region is urgent, as stereotypes about Arab and Islamic notions of maleness become increasingly disconnected from the realities of the region itself, yet increasingly visible in the farthest reaches of media technology. This work supports the view that masculinity and gender more broadly are not monolithic constructs, as authors like Judith Butler (1993) have written fervently to make clear, arguing that gender must be understood not as a static and inherent human characteristic but rather a fluid and dynamically shifting performance which can change to reflect different contexts and different times, continuing that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (1993, 15). Simply put, gender is an act of performance, ritually produced and reproduced through “a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (1993, 95). Adding an important regional dimension to Butler’s framing of gender performativity, Thomas Walle (2006) makes a useful point about the specific gendered performance of masculinities in Pakistan, noting that, “masculine prestige lies in crossing that border [between permissible and forbidden behavior] intentionally, but only temporarily” (2006, 51), a point this work will return to and play upon throughout.

**Pornography and Performativity**

This work identifies and approaches pornography consumption and production among male youths in Cairo as an aspect of masculine performativity in an attempt to reflect the self-perceptions of respondents. It is not the intent of this work to name and shame male engagement within pornographic material as somehow inherently debased or exceptional, but to understand it within the context of local norms and performative constructs experienced and enacted by the young Caïrene males interviewed for this work. This treatment allows for an understanding of male youths’ interaction with pornography as an embedded mode of gendered performance that intersects with sexual expression. As such, this work attempts to highlight the particular subjectivities at work in respondents’ perceptions of self and of self-behavior with respect to pornography—subjectivities shaped both by Islamic discourses and by Western debates on pornography. Respondents indicated a high degree of internal conflict

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3 In *Desiring Arabs* (2007), Joseph Massad, as informed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist leanings, presents a game changing analysis of deviance as a sexual categorization and discursive stigma applied to Arab males and emerging debates on sex and sexuality in the Arab world before the 1980s as part of the colonial process of deciphering West from East (Chapters 3-5).

4 Pakistan is arguably not the Middle East, but shared norms and values with regard to sex, sexuality and gender propriety, somewhat similarly derived from Islamic precepts, justifies the inclusion of Walle’s observations here.
between their own perceptions of sexually explicit content and deeply ingrained mainstream treatments of pornography as morally deviant content. Many thus evaluated their own acts of engagement with pornography within and through mainstream terminologies and systems of value. By allowing respondents to depart from an understanding of their own actions as transgressive or deviant, this work calls into question notions of “proper” or “Islamic” social conduct and gender propriety for masculinities in Cairo, and questions the extent to which mainstream views equating pornography and moral deviance help to further isolate local masculinities along the margins of Cairo’s broader and more complex gender landscape.

This work is part of an ongoing investigation into the relationship between pornography and youth in Cairo that started in January 2008. Information and perceptions have been gathered largely through qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations in and around Cairo, Egypt, although data from other regional countries has been used to illustrate certain findings. The work focuses heavily on the responses of five respondents from a larger pool of 15 males between 18 and 37 years of age, who reside in urban areas and are currently exchanging, producing and/or disseminating pornography. Of the five primary respondents referenced here, all are unmarried and only two claimed to have had formal girlfriends. Within the wider pool of 15 respondents, three are married, two had been previously engaged, and a majority attested to having had girlfriends at various points. Eleven respondents self-identified as Sunni Muslim, and two as Coptic Christians. All are native speakers of Arabic, and most also speak English or French. All but a few respondents were interviewed in person, with some requesting that all interviews be conducted via e-mail due to privacy and security concerns. A limited series of semi-structured and informal interviews with Cairene women were also conducted in order to get a more balanced gendered reading of how pornography is viewed. Seven of the 8 women interviewed are married, all identified as Sunni Muslim and ages were staggered between 22 and 42 years old.

I did not find gender or status as a non-Egyptian and non-Muslim to be problematic either in conducting these interviews and gathering information, or in terms of influencing the respondents’ sense of comfort and candor. On the contrary, my status as an outsider appeared to render me both safe and attractive to confide in—safe because I was removed from the normal social contexts and rules, and attractive because, as a Western woman, I was perceived as being both more familiar with and more open to discussing issues considered locally to be taboo and morally unsound. The scope of this research is limited both by class, as respondents here hold an exclusively middle or upper class status in Egyptian society, and by an urban understanding of the social and moral landscape, which naturally differs in various ways from a rural perspective on the intersections between sex, sexuality and gender. Finally, it should be noted that the working definition of pornography employed here is informant-driven, meaning that anything and everything the respondents considered pornography has been included in the sample.

Both engagements have since been broken off, however, and in case the informant’s habits with respect to pornography were the direct cause of the split.
Enter Pornography

Just as there have been gradual shifts in the region’s understandings of gender and sexuality over time, pornography, in its many intersects with popular conceptions and constructions of gender and sexuality, has similarly undergone change. The earliest feminist critiques of pornography in the West, led by authors such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon in the 1970s, were largely concerned with the negative “effects” of pornographic consumption on men. Dworkin and McKinnon argued (1988) that pornography reinforces sexual and cultural attitudes that demean and objectify women, and sought to legislate sexually explicit content as a way to mitigate perverse behavior and thus minimize pornography’s affect. While the concerns of these early Western feminists broke new ground in their day and in many ways paved the course for certain streams of feminist thought more broadly, I argue that their framing of pornography is ill suited for an understanding of how sexually explicit content takes on meaning and mobility in Cairo today. In their willingness to dismiss a wide range of sexually explicit content as inherently misogynistic, these critiques assume an overly simplified causal interplay between words, images and behavior (Attwood 2002, 92), while severely undermining men’s capacity for complexity in matters relating to sex, sexuality and the performance of masculinities.

By the mid-1990s, the binary gender and sexuality paradigms through which pornography had been consistently recast was being challenged increasingly often by second wave feminists and emerging queer theorists in the West, who were more interested in contextualizing pornography in terms of women’s agency and straight and gay sexual pleasure than in legislating it out of the public’s reach. Debates around representations of sex, gender and class as increasingly articulated subjectivities took center stage, “in particular, an insistence that sexual politics are not reducible to gender politics and an emphasis on the instability of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ …[and a consequent] rethinking of the possible significances of pornographic production and consumption” (Attwood 2002, 93). In taking this evolution in Western pornography debates seriously, this work approaches its inquiry with an interest in trying to contextualize the interplay between pornography and pornographic consumption on the one hand and use of information technology on the other within the cultural and socio-political framework of Cairo. In doing so, the work explores pornography transfer in Cairo as a conduit through which forms of sexual expression and everyday technology impact the production and reproduction of local masculinity norms.

The Basics: Sex, Lies and Video Clips

Understanding norms and perceptions of sex within the Middle East is vital to any discussion of pornography in the region, as normative mainstream discourses surrounding sex, sexuality and gender performance are heavily underscored by both Islamic and masculinist state narratives, both of which contribute to an overwhelmingly hetero-normative and marriage-oriented social-sexual landscape (Ali 2003). Frank and informative dialogue regarding sex and sexuality in the region is often undertaken within the rubric of state-advised or development-
sector family planning research (DeJong et al 2005). Family planning studies from across the region provide the most methodologically transparent and sometimes only analysis of sexual practices and relations, highlighting once again the urgent need for substantive data and critical analysis concerning sexual mores in the region (El Nawawy 2008; El Noshokaty 2006; DeJong et al 2005; Farag 2001). In a 2008 nationally-representative study of adolescents aged 16 to 19 in Egypt, for example, 30 percent of girls and almost 20 percent of boys could not name a single STD or could (or would) attest to having knowledge about HIV and AIDS (DeJong et al 2005, 2). Among respondents with limited schooling, those figures went as high as almost 38 percent for girls and 31 percent for boys (DeJong et al 2005, 2). These figures reflect a lack of national-level sex education curriculum and infrastructure in the Middle East generally, as in most countries across the region, sex and reproduction are often omitted from human biology curriculum, as teachers tell students to read “that chapter” at home (DeJong et al 2005, 48; Farag 2001, 138).

Since 2007, several high profile satellite television shows have attempted to bring sex and sexual fulfillment in marriage back into the public eye by incorporating it into the broader genre of “Islamic living” movements. Shows like Dr. Heba Kotb’s Kalaam Kibeer [Big Talk] use Islamic scriptural discourse, precepts and methods of reason and justification as tools to provide sexual education and to encourage couples to be more aware of their partners’ needs and desires as they move toward the principle that “being a good Muslim means having good sex”, as the popular and controversial Kotb coined it (Swank 2007, 1). Shows like Kotb’s serve to reorient popular perceptions and discourses regarding sex and sexuality in Muslim society by moving away from the sex-for-reproduction norm in a culturally sensitive manner, and by presenting new, Islamically sounds ways for thinking about sexual health and fulfillment for both men and women (DeJong et al 2005, 27). Yet even within these discursive spaces where sex and sexuality can be discussed in terms of sexual pleasure without stigma, moralistic prohibitions on non-heterosexual behavior and practice, premarital engagements and sexually explicit content still persist and inevitably exclude large segments of the population from participating in the evolving dialogue on sexuality and sexual health. The vacuum of information created by this public unwillingness to address certain trends despite their visibility in cultural sphere has resulted in greater knowledge seeking among Cairene youth about sex and sexual matters in non-traditional and often less than factual sources, like friends or on the Internet. Pornography enters into this scenario as a readily available forum for gaining access to information about and familiarity with sex and sexuality, and enjoys the added bonus of taking on a high commodity value in local informal social networks.

In her study of sex education programs on Arab satellite channels, Mai El-Nawawy (2008) cites Egyptian academics and government officials in their readiness to identify Egyptian youths’ engagement with pornography as one of the greatest threats to youth and to the nation. Feeling a natural curiosity for knowledge about sex upon reaching a certain

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6 Only Algeria, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia and Bahrain have nationally sponsored sections on family planning or reproductive health (DeJong el al 2005, 3).
biological age, many respondents interviewed for this work found pornographic films offered more “useful” and judgment-free information than their parents or peers in school. The tension between these two readings of pornography in Cairene society lays at the heart of current local debates on blogs and talk shows, newspaper editorials and government discourses, much of which tends to either deny pornography’s wide circulation in the Arab world outright or frame pornography’s rapid dissemination as Western cultural encroachment. Popular opinion observations for this research seemed to echo that unwillingness to treat pornography consumption and production as a tangible reality with a well-established local culture surrounding it. The notion that “Muslims do not watch porn” was a recurring utterance in my casual conversations with Egyptian adult men and women during this research, and conveyed an overarching view of pornography as an exclusively Western, or sometimes Christian, problem.

Among Egyptian youth canvassed for this research, including respondents of upper class backgrounds, there was little reluctance to confirm that Muslims and Arabs consume, and in some cases produce, pornographic material. This discrepancy can be understood in several ways, an important one being a generational difference in perceptions of what society is and how social phenomena should be evaluated. Indeed several respondents considered their parents, particularly their mothers, to have purposely cultivated an ethos of ignorance about *buram* [prohibited within Islam] behavior and material. A 2008 poll at Kuwait University, just one example of local efforts at data gathering around social-sexual phenomena like pornography, further the point that pornography in the Arab world is here to stay. The Kuwait University poll found that only 2.2 percent of female students and 4.7 percent of male students reported never having looked at pornography. Although the Middle East does not yet have a professional pornographic industry of the same scale as the US or Europe, this research suggests that pornography consumption and amateurist production, including mobile phone and webcam content, are rapidly becoming far more accessible in urban areas like Cairo than a review of the mainstream and institutional literature in Egypt and the Middle East more generally would suggest.

### Sex on the IT

The acquisition and distribution of pornographic material as a form of entertainment media in the Middle East has been greatly assisted by an increase in access to information technology through Internet and mobile phones. Egypt’s Internet usage has boomed from only 120,000 users in 1998 to over 10 million users in 2009 (Budde 2009). Similarly, Egypt’s mobile phone

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7 Of the respondents interviewed for this paper, all claimed to have retrieved the majority of their information about sexual practices from pornographic materials. Within this broader research project, that finding was consistent among male respondents under the age of 30, whereas older respondents tended to cite friends, family members and personal experience as their primary sources of knowledge.

8 The survey, whilst incredibly limited in both scope and content, did suggest some interesting trends. Friends were most likely to introduce other friends to pornographic material, while 3.4 percent of polled males admitted to looking at pornography daily, while 12.9 percent of women reported having viewed pornography “many times in the past” (Abbas and Fadhli 2008).
market has grown steadily by about 30 percent per year, and the introduction of the 2g and 3g high-speed networks prompted growth of nearly 70 percent in 2006 alone (Budde 2009). An approximated 20 percent of people in the region have access to Internet, but a growing plethora of Internet cafes in urban settings across the region has positioned the population for impressive accessibility growth in the coming years.\(^9\) Quality and regularity of access to modern information technology is still sharply divided along class and gender lines in Middle East and a vast majority of users residing in urban areas are male and under the age of 35 (El-Nawawy 2008, 54). Mobile phones are widely held by all classes, although mobile capacities may vary depending on type of phone and service provider.

According to Google Trends for the year 2008, Egypt-based searches for the keyword “sex” far out numbered those from any other nation in the world\(^10\) and has since remained one of the top three origins of “sex” searches. A regularly cited statistic suggests that as much as 80 percent of total internet traffic from Arab countries is directed toward sexually explicit websites.\(^11\) Yet the difficulties in obtaining statics on regional internet usage other than public domain searches suggest that such data produced by outside sources should be taken with a degree of caution (Kettmann 2008). Respondents identified safety and ease as the primary advantage of using the internet to search for pornography and as the reason for such consistently high search rates in the region. The internet allows users to view sexually explicit content and information on sex more generally without the immediate stigma of shame or compromised personal security or social standing.

The types of sexual content being searched by users in the Middle East are striking in their diversity and various levels of sexual explicitness. Accepting that there is a certain deliberate logic to most pornography, that “transgressive can be sexy,” as many respondents in some way noted, this work is particularly interested understanding, through a consideration of the diverse range of content all classified generically as pornography, how certain boundaries around stigma and taboo are being re-fashioned through an increase in online searches for sexually explicit content. In 2008, for example, online searches for the terms “ass sex” and “man sex” or “gay sex” were highest among searches originating in Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.\(^12\) By contrast, searches originating in Western nations outnumbered hits from the Middle East for terms like “teen sex,” “porn,” “blow job” and “dead sex,” while searches originating in East Asian nations tended to rank highly for terms like “rape” and “forced sex.”

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\(^9\) This compares to slightly over 40 percent in the U.S. and Europe combined (“Internet World Stats” 2008).

\(^10\) Google Arabic searches for the term “sex” were higher than those performed by any other language-oriented Google engine in 2008. Interestingly, user searches for the English word “sex” (sometimes transliterated as ﺃﺱﺱ) rather than the Arabic term “ﺝﻥﺱ” were most popular. When using the term “ﺝﻥﺱ,” hits from Egypt were the fifth highest globally, with Alexandria, Cairo and Giza all among the top ten cities searching for the term (Reuters 2007 and Google Trends 2008).

\(^11\) This statistic was originally reported at a the International Summit on Internet and Multimedia in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. by Ramzi El Khoury in 2008, but may be an unreliable estimate based on scarce data for internet use in the region (Jacinto 2008).

\(^12\) All data used to support these claims comes from Google Trends under each search term indicated. The original search was conducted March 11, 2008.
Professional pay-by-use pornographic websites in Arabic are virtually non-existent. Several Israeli websites offering pornographic content have translated their content into Arabic after seeing how many hits they received from Arab countries (Jaafar 2007). A majority of locally produced pornography surveyed for this work came from free, open source websites featuring message boards on which users can post pornographic pictures, link to videos, read explicit stories, obtain sex-related medical advice or chat with other members. A majority of these sites also make space for non-sexual content including discussions centered on sports or music.

Still, internet is not the only venue through which pornographic material is disseminated. Mobile phones have become a popular way of sharing and creating sexually explicit content. A 2007 study commissioned by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia government found that, in one province, almost 70 percent of all files stored on mobile phones owned and operated by teenage users were pornographic in nature (Ghafour, 2008), findings which reflect the youth’s attempt to break through restrictive gender and social constraints with the help of mobile and information technology—a point this work returns to later. All respondents for this work admitted to having seen, created and/or stored content of a sexual nature on their mobile phones, while several admitted having created and distributed content the same way. Respondents for this work similarly conveyed that pornographic material is regularly traded among friends through mobile technology, and can be bought cheaply on the street in Egypt, with DVDs containing 8 to 10 explicit video clips selling for 20 to 60 Egyptian pounds each. When buying off the street, however, the consumer has remarkably few options as to the type of content, as the available supply can vary unpredictably in quantity and quality. Most of the supply I observed featured digital pornographic materials produced in the West, with at most one or two clips on any given video featuring Arab or non-western actors. Many respondents claimed to prefer internet or mobile transmissions of pornographic content, citing its higher quality, better selection and added bonus of anonymity and security. However, locally (or regionally) produced pornography has been gaining popularity and availability since this fieldwork began, and a significant percentage of my respondents’ collections were non-western in origin.

Adultery of the Eye
Sitting in a café one evening, an informant, Samir, pointed to the pornographic video clip playing on a friend’s mobile phone and said disapprovingly, “That’s zina al-‘ayn!” Zina al-‘ayn is an Islamic term that is translated most commonly as “adultery of the eye.”

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13 It is not easy for users to access the material, as several countries in the region have followed the lead of Saudi Arabia in banning all Israeli websites, and users must have filtering programs in order to view content.

14 Phenomenon like “sexting,” or the creation and transmission of sexually explicit material with a mobile phone, is a booming trend among youth worldwide, thus it should come as little surprise that youth in the Middle East are using technology in a similar manner.

15 In September 2008, that meant around US$3.50 to 11 per DVD.

16 The material often included trademark or other copyright markings that indicated that it was produced in America.
classified in various schools of shari’a by different levels of severity and includes actions like viewing pornography, thinking lustful thoughts, masturbation and pre- or extramarital sex as increasingly profane forms of zina. While Samir’s comment wasn’t the first time I had heard the term zina al-‘ayn from respondents, it suggested a change in the way he and the others had framed their arguments about pornography, using more typically the terms haram or ‘ayb [shameful]. By using the stronger term zina, the act of watching pornography became imagined as a much more religiously problematic behavior and carried with it harsher spiritual consequences. As several respondents at the table rolled their eyes in reproof at Samir’s quip, Samir gestured around to the clips playing on a mobile phone and television nearby, both displaying the same scantily clad Arab pop starlet in unison and said, “It’s all zina!”

Due to the fact that pornography is either formally or informally treated as illegal substance throughout the Middle East, there remains wide variation as to what might be considered “pornography,” and notions of what constitutes sexual content can vary depending on the country and even the city in question. In Egypt, for example, civil laws are still relatively vague as to what constitutes pornography. Article 178 of Egypt’s Penal Code (Law No. 58 of 1937) states that “printed materials, manuscripts, advertisements, relieves, engravings, manual or photographic drawings, symbolic signs or any other material or photographs violating public morals” can all be considered pornographic. As the previous example involving Samir and his circle of friends points out, different viewpoints of pornography exist within even the most seemingly cohesive social milieu. Worth noting is that, although class and wealth play an important role in determining how freely pornography and other sexually charged materials may circulate in an area or group, low income and religiously conservative communities are not necessarily more prohibitive with regard to the circulation of sexually explicit content than their wealthier counterparts, and generalizations concerning degree of religiosity are hard to make. Indeed the growing “piety movement” in the broader Islamic community, as profiled by Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), suggests that middle and upper middle classes have responded most visibly to a “conservative” or “Islamist” message, in many ways contradicting general assumptions both inside and outside the Islamic community that lower income or lower class necessarily coincides with religious conservatism.

Still, relatively recent changes in digital technology and consumption behavior in the Middle East are vital for an understanding of how various forms of institutional authority are being reshaped in the region itself and in the wider Islamic community. Information technology and mass media have led to drastic changes in the various ways Islamic values are produced, disseminated, negotiated and understood, as religious knowledge production and moral evaluation are no longer limited to a select few ‘ulema [Islamic scholars or knowledge authorities] or even exclusive to speakers of Arabic. The “average” Muslim now has the ability to evaluate and consume sources of religious information as they please through information

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17 As the lesser classifications of zina are seen as making a person more likely to commit actual adultery, it is considered best to refrain from all such activity. The reasoning comes from a popular Hadith, narrated by al-Bukhaari, that states, “zina of the eyes is looking, the zina of the tongue is speaking; the heart wishes and hopes and the private parts confirm that or deny it.”
technology, and this very side-stepping of traditional religious authority has helped to create the piety or da\'wa movements. Information technology has thus opened up more than just new spaces and venues for religious discourse and identity-formation, offering also an ability to diversify debates on politics, science, and social phenomena like pornography.

Samir and the other respondents in many ways exemplify the dangers of framing engagement with pornography and religious observance as incompatible behaviors in that, whereas all members of the group participate actively in da\'wa movements, they also collect, distribute and produce pornography. Hence this work grew interested in the ways by which information technologies enable both religious movements and more seemingly “profane” acts such as pornography consumption and production. For Samir and the other respondents, engagement with sexually explicit content and sound Islamic observance are neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible when viewed through the lens of information technologies in that the same technology which facilitates the Muslim call to prayer also facilitates information gathering and social exchange through transmissions of pornographic material. Respondents’ willingness and ability to receive and process inflows of such diverse content raises important questions about the power of information technologies to transform content through the process of transmission and the conceptual shifts taking place in Cairene youth culture which tolerate and make meaning from the coexistence of seemingly incompatible information. Such questions in turn suggest that a more complex interplay between Islamic discourses, shifts in knowledge about sex and sexuality and the technology heavy practices of daily modern life (Lefebvre 1991) is the reality experienced by Egypt’s youth of today. In its ability to tolerate and synthesize these poles of Egyptian life, the youth’s engagement with information technologies calls into view the malleability of sex and gender as livable concepts and the mediating role pornography plays as a commodity with significant implications for both.

Accumulation, Exchange and Gift Giving

Youssef, age 22, is the nominal leader of a sub-group of the respondents, consisting of his two cousins, ‘Alaa and Ahmad, both 21 years old, and long time neighbors Belal and Samir, aged 18 and 20 respectively. These young men live in a lower middle class suburb outside of Cairo, where all have been enrolled in secondary school or university, speak some English, and are unemployed. Having recently dropped out of university, Ahmad and ‘Alaa have begun their mandatory military service. Their parents are public sector employees, employed in state agencies such as Egypt’s Ministries of Education and Agriculture, and several respondents’ parents hold additional part time jobs to supplement family income. For Youssef and the others, contact with women is limited to brief interactions with classmates or to the confines of their family networks and outings. During the interview stage of this research, only Belal and Youssef acknowledged having had girlfriends in the past, both relationships that lasted for short periods of time.

18 Unless noted, all names have been changed.
Respondents explicitly and repeatedly cited the lack of sexual activity or outlets for sexual energies as the reason for watching and collecting pornography. As Youssef reasoned:

I’m 22. I don’t have job. I’m not going to get one. Even if I do, it’s going to take me a long time to save up enough money to get married, assuming I find someone that everyone [in the family] agrees to. And this isn’t America, I can’t just get a girlfriend and have sex. So what can I do? I watch porn. My life is bad enough without having something to get rid of my energy. Yes, it’s wrong, yes I shouldn’t do it. But my father got married at 20, his father at 19. They didn’t have to worry about being 30 or 35 and still unmarried and not having sex.

For all but one of the respondents, pornography collection habits escalated once private internet access was secured, and all respondents except Samir attested to viewing pornography at least four times a week. Samir claimed to have become increasingly religious over a period of about six months, causing him to get rid of his pornography collection and to stop viewing pornographic materials. This contrasted starkly with the habits of ‘Alaa and Belal, as both admitted to looking at pornography everyday and had rather extensive and eclectic collections. Respondents’ collections of pornographic materials were facilitated by personal computers, as all attested to spending several hours a day searching and downloading music, spending time on social networking sites, doing homework, or searching for pornography. Prior to having secured private internet access, respondents’ contact with pornography had been limited to the occasional online foray in internet cafes, the sometimes unscrambled pornographic satellite channel, and the inheritance or barter of pornographic material from other friends.

The ways by which these respondents receive and transfer pornography underwent a rapid shift during the course of my fieldwork. Whereas in the beginning of the research period (January 2008) the respondents had been primarily copying material onto CDs and flash drives or sending it via e-mail, by the summer of 2008 and the introduction of the 3G network in Egypt, the group had begun searching for and sending pornographic videos and pictures via mobile phone. Previously, the group had been using limited cellular technology to send pornographic still pictures or sound files. But just as having private internet access increased their consumption of pornography, the mobile phone increased and intensified the way in which these respondents shared and interacted both with the pornographic material itself and with each other. No longer was the interaction with pornography limited to the private space...

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19 The 3G network allows simultaneous use of speech and data services and higher data rates than with the previous network infrastructure, and made it possible for my respondents to use their mobile phones to access the internet for example.
of home; it could now be consumed anywhere, and became a part of daily life outside of the home. In other words, as pornography became increasingly consumed and transmitted in public and private life, it gradually became both normalized and part of the ordinary experience of every day (Lefebvre 1991).

Each informant except Samir attested to having sent an average of two to three gigabytes of pornographic matter, including pictures, video and audio clips, to each other each month through mobile phones and computers. Significantly, pornographic materials were not offered between friends in the group in exchange for money or payment of any kind, but rather gifted in exchange for the prestige of being able to share unique content and the reinforcement of social bonds which could, in the logic of Marcel Mauss’ work on gift exchange and reciprocity in *The Gift* (1922) enable reciprocity in the form of future content. Mauss’ notion of the gift and several of its later renderings provide a useful framework for an analysis of pornography consumption and production in this community in the sense that the exchange of pornography among my respondents served the primary function of furthering social bonds, not just among the group profiled but in their wider peer group. For example, each time Belal received a pornographic video from one of his friends, he would either send one of his favorite pornographic video clips or text a thank you message in return. Belal also felt pressure, as someone known for his large and diverse collection of pornographic materials, to one-up any gift of a new or different kind, saying, “If I get something *tahfa* [really cool or amazing], I have to send [it] to my friends right away.” In this way, pornography is treated within this group of respondents as a form of social currency rather than simply a means to sexual gratification.

Within the wider confines of their social peer group, composed primarily of school and family contacts, the notoriety associated with possessing a collection of pornographic materials appears to be a double-edged sword. Conversations with several of the respondents’ classmates elicited a series of conflicting sentiments toward respondents’ efforts to obtain, exchange and, as Belal’s example conveyed, compete in subtle ways for the best pornographic collections. While several male classmates and one female peer considered the boys’ efforts “cool,” a majority of the classmates interviewed considered their engagement with pornography to be objectionable, perhaps reflecting an almost robotic averseness to behaviors still widely perceived as *haram*. As one male classmate put it, “[Pornography]’s wrong. It’s wrong in Islam, it’s against Egyptian culture, and it’s bad for women. They are stupid for looking at it, they should study the word of God [Qu’ran], and study at school because looking at sex pictures isn’t going to do anything but make them go to hell.” One mother of another classmate more or less took the same view, saying, “I would never let my son go out with
them. They have no morals. They are bad [and] they are what is wrong with Egypt. It didn’t used to be this way, but now people just don’t care, so they let them do whatever, no consequences. But I raised my son to be different, to act good.”

Other classmates conveyed different positions on the subject. A female classmate, Fatima, was much more openly critical than her peers. Perhaps less cautious in airing her opinions for having spent considerable time living outside of Egypt and being of mixed Egyptian and Kuwaiti heritage, she boldly said, “Fuck them…[the classmates who denounce pornography] are a bunch of liars, everyone here looks at porn, the only difference is that some talk about it and the rest lie about it.” When asked if she really meant “everyone,” she said:

Yes, even the girls. It’s not like the boys. We don’t have the same need, but yeah, they’ve all seen it at least once. The thing about Egypt is that it’s all about face, about pretending to be correct. As long as you don’t get caught, as long as you don’t embarrass your family it’s okay. It’s all bullshit, all lies, especially if you are a man.

Belal echoed some of Fatima’s feelings, saying bitterly, “[those who profess to never have seen pornography] are just jealous and afraid. We all have computers [and] we all have cell phones. If they say that they haven’t ever looked at sex, then they are worse liars than me. At least I am honest about what I do.” “What about your family?” I asked him, “Do they know what you look at?” He responded:

Yes. My father knows and doesn’t care. He feels the way that I do, that I am a man [and thus have a man’s “need”]. The first time that my mom found out she got really mad, screaming and crying. She made me swear on the Qur’an that I wouldn’t do it again. But what am I going to do? So now I am careful, more than before. And when she found some [pornography] on the computer, my father told her it was his.

When asked whether he and his father ever discussed pornography or sex, he replied, “No. Never. But I know that he looks at it a lot too. Father like son, right?”

While the production, consumption, dissemination and exchange of pornographic material in this context can be considered a social activity in the sense that respondents frequently copied materials or sent internet links to favorite content to other members of the group. Important to note, however, is that the respondents did not sit and collectively view pornography together as a group. Hence individual collections, which ranged in size from three or four to several hundred gigabytes, contained a great deal of overlap from informant to informant. When asked about the significant difference in collection size, ‘Alaa recounted
certain notions of stigma, guilt and fear of punishment, which affected him emotionally as a self-identifying Muslim, saying “Ahmad and Samir are always destroying their stuff because they feel that it makes them bad men.” When asked whether Samir had ever disposed of his collection, ‘Alaa responded, “Yes, once, right after Samir got religious. He wanted us to be better Muslims. But it didn’t last long. There is nothing else for us to do.” 

The group’s use of internet and mobile phone technology highlights the complicated relationship Egyptian male youth have with information technology, as it can be argued that greater access to pornography through information technology serves to simultaneously undermine and reify certain “patrimonial and patriarchal structures” (Glavanis 2008, 7-15) which complicates known paths of gender and sexual identity formation as they would be otherwise learned alongside other cultural and social behavioral norms. As Pandeli Glavanis (2008) notes for the Arab world more broadly:

> Arab Youth seem to have best use of this form of communication technology primarily to enhance and deepen patrimonial and patriarchal structures as well as a means of overcoming gender separation. In other words, the communication technology has contributed to the rooting of contemporary Arab Youth in traditional social systems which they are not challenging. As the mobile enabled males and females to communicate in societies were direct contact is forbidden they have not seen the need to challenge the status quo…Arab Youth have appropriated technology to their own end and objectives and not as a means of challenging restrictive social norms (2008, 15).

Inasmuch as Belal and his friends regularly used information technology to undermine certain social taboos concerning sex and gender norms, they did not intentionally seek to restructure or challenge the underlying discourses which render engagement with pornography one of many deviations from a normative, religiously-coded performance of masculinity. Rather information technology in this case allowed respondents to play with the boundaries of what they very clearly understood to be normative masculine performance in the course of seeking out more practically safe outlets for their sexual desire and inexpensive but highly mobile venues for gaining social prestige among peers. Whereas Youssef and Belal, for example, viewed restrictive gender rules, social constraints and biological drives as causes “forcing” them to watch porn, which in turn resulted in some feelings of shame and guilt for engaging in “wrong” behavior, neither expressed any interest in challenging or restructuring that the local secular and sacred norms which dictate permissible from prohibited behavior relating to sex and gendered relations. Still, there are some important signals of boundary pushing evident in
my respondents’ relationship to information technology as a means to securing sexually explicit content. As mentioned, the respondents sought out sexually explicit content online as a means of gaining information and familiarity with sex, finding it unavailable elsewhere without having to violate critical taboos and run the risk of compromising their social reputations. Though inadvertent, the respondents’ solicitation, collection and exchange of pornography does suggest alternative modes of value creation and knowledge seeking are being carved out by this new generation, which in turn point to new formulas for the performance of masculinity.

Butler (1993) and Walle (2004) converge around this point, as both call attention to the role gender “performativity” plays in negotiating and calibrating seemingly inconsistent behaviors and values. As Walle notes in his work on dating and sexual mores among Pakistani males:

Rather than renouncing the moral standards altogether—e.g., claiming that drinking alcohol is of no significance in judging a person’s character—it seems [according to Walle’s findings] to be important [for the men interviewed] to indicate to [their] companions where the boundaries of publicly acceptable behaviour are drawn, and that prestige lies in the fact that you are crossing them intentionally and temporarily. Labeling oneself a ‘bad Muslim’ clearly indicates this; the men are fully aware of the fact that certain activities are incompatible with good Muslim conduct, and they probably agree with this categorisation. It is also obvious that they have no wish to be permanently regarded as bad Muslims, but gain prestige as men, in certain social relations, by acting thus” (2004, 101).

For the younger men in the study, the pressure to be seen as a “man” and to prove he had “manly” needs was a strong factor in consuming pornography. The size and diversity of a pornography collection were considered indicators of masculine urge among respondents, in that pornography’s taboo status increased the risk involved in its possession and hence the value of that possession and the maleness of its possessor. Many of my respondents perceived masculinity as something characterized by an abundance of sexual need, and within that framework many respondents felt compelled to “perform” and hence prove their own masculinity through an extensive familiarity with and accumulation of pornography. As Walle (2004) notes, there is also a considerable amount of prestige in knowing when to break social mores, as Belal and ‘Alaa in particular took great pride in leading “double lives” between the family persona and as “porn kings” among their social cohort. Moreover, all respondents considered the lack of opportunities for sexual experience and intimacy with women and the total absence of private space20 to be legitimizing and normalizing factors which made

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20 The youth’s lack of social entitlement to an already small amount of private space in Cairo’s daily life was also an influential factor in respondents’ engagement with pornography. As Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe (2005) note in their study of Japanese adolescents, youth or peer groups often lack ownership and control over public
engagement with pornography less risky, even while understanding it as culturally and religiously *haram*. Significantly, many respondents noted a desire to conform to more traditional conduct when they marry, suggesting that the interest and willingness in pushing the boundaries of masculine gender propriety were considered temporary.

**To Wudu’ or Not to Wudu’**

Several months after I first met Ahmad and Samir, they started attending bi-weekly *balaaqat* [Islamic religious classes]. Within a two-week period, the two were able to convince the other respondents to destroy their pornographic collections and join in regularly at a local mosque. While Youssef, Belal and ‘Alaa eventually returned to their previous habits of collecting and exchanging pornographic materials, the group of friends continued to attend *balaaqat*, performed the daily obligatory prayers, and began to reference Islamic law and Qur’anic scripture and *iibadat* [worship] more noticeably in daily conversation. The dichotomy between the respondents’ new religiosity and the massive amount of pornography they continued to consume made me curious to understand both how they reconciled these seemingly contradictory behaviors on an intellectual level, and what ritual thresholds and preparations became necessary as respondents’ passed between these two spaces, the sacred and the profane. Of particular interest were the bodily, mental and spiritual preparations respondents felt obligated to undergo before entering religious observation after engaging with pornography.21

While sitting with Samir, Belal and Youssef one evening, I asked whether they did anything specific after watching pornography in order to pray. Youssef said, “No,” and Belal chimed in saying, “It depends…[hesitation]…yanni, it depends if I…you know…just look at it or do something else [like masturbate]. If I just see a clip, then I do *wudu*,”22 but otherwise I do *ghusl*.23 Samir, who claimed to no longer look or take part in anything related to pornography,

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21 Before a person can perform one of the mandatory five daily prayers, they must be in a ritually pure state; this typically requires a person to perform ablution.

22 *Wudu*, or the minor form of Islamic ablution, requires a person to form good *niyyah* [intent], and involves reciting “*Bismallah*” followed by a washing of the head, the hands up to the elbows, and finally the feet up to the ankles with ‘pure’ or flowing water (Ibn Rushd 1994, 2).

23 *Ghusl* is the major form of Islamic ablution, and requires a person to recite “*Bismallah*” and completely wash their body in ‘pure’ water, and finally perform *wudu* (Ibn Rushd 1994, 43-5).
nodded, saying “that’s right, [pornography] it’s shameful...da zina [it’s adultery], so you should always do ghusl.”

Youssef, at this point somewhat insulted, reentered the conversation, saying, “No it’s not... what do you mean zina? I’m not married! Porn, yeah it’s baram [forbidden], but it’s not zina. As long I’m only looking, it’s no problem!” Samir, strongly disagreeing, argued, “Listen, no matter what you do, it’s zina al-‘ayn...if you know its baram and you keep looking at it, it becomes a major sin, so you have to do ghusl!” Youssef added a further distinction, saying, “...If I don’t do anything, and my niyyah [intent] is good, then that’s all I need.”

The narratives above get to the heart of an impressive diversity of opinions and rationales which underscore individual attempts to mediate the interplay between purity and pornography, all of which can be and routinely are informed on some level by Islamic jurisprudence [fiqh] in the popular sphere. Youssef, for example, defended his claim that as long as he wasn’t masturbating to pornography, wudu’ and good niyyah [intent] would be sufficient to absolve his interactions with pornography by claiming he had “[gotten] a fatwa [an Islamic legal ruling],” to which Samir retorted, “I’ll ask Sheikh Mohsen about it,” as if to suggest some degree of competition between them as to the authority of each one’s source. Belal, deferring to religious observance rather than legal interpretation [qiyas], added, “The important thing is that you are praying, and not letting shaytan [the devil] take even that away from you.”

In questioning the respondents as to how each one had decided to negotiate and make sense out of his Islamic ritual obligations, sexual activities and engagement with pornography, each one cited a different source of knowledge for his justification. Samir and Belal preferred to ask advice of an imam or sheikh personally, or to seek advice from television shows dealing with matters of Islamic jurisprudence and purity. Telling why he preferred to consult religious figures, Samir said:

The sheikhs give hard talk. They’ll tell you that you are wrong, that your behavior is baram, and you better change before [the day of] judgment. But they also have heard the same story [about pornography] a million times. Face it: pretty much every man looks at it. And yeah, maybe it makes me a bad Muslim, but I am still a Muslim. Everyone has sins that they will be judged on. But better [the sin of] porn then sex.

By contrast, Youssef preferred to investigate matters on his own on the internet, satisfying his own particular curiosities about notions of jurisprudence and purity practices in Islam. Youssef

24 Ironically, when asked what would be considered the proper ritual response to a woman’s viewing of pornography, I was told that a woman would have to perform ghusl before she could be considered resolved of impurity, consequently the same purification practice she would be expected to perform after sexual arousal. Similar to men’s obligation to perform ghusl instead of wudu’ after ejaculation, a woman must find moisture to be obligated to perform ghusl (Ibn Rushd 1994, 47).
considered the internet a more authentic and unbiased way of gathering opinions and knowledge on the subject, saying, “A sheikh will tell you only half the story, and only what he wants you to know, but the internet has everyone’s opinions and you are more likely to know the truth. I’m not as trusting as Samir and Belal.” In all of these cases, the role of information technology in facilitating curiosities and drawing even unintended seekers casually and without great ceremony between content as diverse as Islamic jurisprudence and pornography is essential. Countless websites are now developed for and targeted to an Islamic audience with these very curiosities in mind and most websites observed for this research included sections devoted to matters of ritual purity and instruction on cleansing after interactions with sexually explicit content. Interestingly, whereas Islamic purity laws have long been among the more visible and accessible areas of Islamic law for average practicing Muslims, the recent resurgence of interest in such matters online as a result of the pornography explosion marks a significant change from even a decade ago (Bunt 2002).

Conclusion
This fieldwork attempts to convey narratives that highlight the ways by which seemingly transgressive acts like engagement with pornography become an integral part of ordinary and everyday behavior and gender performance. Given the available online statics for pornography consumption rates, a significant part of the region can confidently be said to interact with pornographic material on a regular, if not habitual, basis. Whereas the respondents in this group expressed an interest in cutting all ties with pornography once married, this work finds little evidence to suggest that pornography is a passing phase for the region as a whole. Conversations with older, married respondents outside of the cohort showcased here suggest that marriage does not necessarily change feelings of sexual frustration. One male informant, married for about one year, remarked, “I still watch porn. It’s a habit, just like coffee in the morning. I thought that I wouldn’t want to [after I got married] but it’s not like my wife will do all those things that they do in videos. Sex in real life isn’t like sex in video clips.”

A review of the known variables relating to why and how pornography consumption in the Middle East is so dynamic today results in a set of complexities. The view that young Egyptian men are “forced” structurally into a habitual relationship with pornography holds some merit, as the average age for marriage among men has risen by over a decade since 2000 resulting from low employment and lingering pressure on men to perform masculinity through demonstrations of financial security. As my respondents confirmed, moreover, pre-marital sex is not really a safe and realistic option in Egypt. Respondents for this work, time and time again, contrasted feelings of sexual frustration with the sexual freedoms they associated with Western countries, considering the latter more “natural” or “humane.” Many respondents nevertheless detailed an important distinction between desiring the freedom and access to sex and knowledge about sex on the one hand and wanting to live in a Western culture on the other. While many considered the sexual freedoms associated with Western countries compelling, many still perceived the societies of the East as belonging to a higher moral rank.

25 Most of my respondents conveyed a perception of the West as morally inferior to Islamic countries.
This research also attempts to show how pornography satisfies more than just biological urges for young Egyptian males. For these respondents, pornography is a tool to learn about sex and sexual relations, a form of social capital and entertainment, and an important set of behaviors which shape how masculinity is understood and performed. Respondents perceived their consumption and concealment of pornography as “normal” masculine behavior for their age and socio-economic standing and viewed it as an important component of self identity, alongside observance of religious practice, participation in religious functions and debates. This work has also tried to draw out the central role of information technologies in facilitating certain shifts, negotiations and coexistence of sacred and profane messages and content among youth. While sex and sexually explicit content as topics continue to be delineated within very specific forums and frameworks in Egyptian society, these trends suggest some attempts these respondents use to navigate around those restrictions without compromising their shared values stemming from religion, attitudes toward marriage and others. While it is not the intent of this work to argue, for example, that “Muslim women need saving” (Abu Lughod 2001) or to push for a similar argument for Muslim men, the findings presented here do aim to advance the body of critical research, inquiry and debate around issues of gender, sex and sexuality in the region, both within the literature and in more popular spheres of discourse.

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