

**Review of “Virtual Life in Iran:
Emotions and Subcultures in Online Social Networks”
Authored by Mohammad Saeed Zokaei and Simin Veisi**

Abdollah Karimzadeh

Virtual Life in Iran: Emotions and Subcultures in Online Social Networks authored by Mohammad Saeed Zokaei & Simin Veisi. Tehran, Iran: Agah Publication, 2020. 528 pp., ISBN 978-964-416-442-2.

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Abdollah Karimzadeh: The Iranian Institute for Social and Cultural Studies, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Department of Communication and Cyberspace Studies, Tehran, Iran | Email: akarimzadeh@ut.ac.ir

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If the success of a book is measured by the amount of thoughts it generates, *Virtual Life in Iran: Emotions and Subcultures in Online Social Networks* penned by Mohammad Said Zokaei and Simin Veisi (2020) is definitely a breakthrough. Although its theoretical paradigm may not seem an avant-garde in the eyes of western scholars, it is certainly a forerunner and a gap filler within the intellectual milieu of Iran, with its innovative account of virtual life in Iran through the lens of “affective turn”. Together with the book *Emotions in the Iranian Society and Culture* edited by the same author-Mohammad Saeed Zokaei- in 2019, this work is an insightful source for understanding the emotional life of the Iranians as the authors argue in the introduction to the book that online social networks merely constitute the context and pretext for analyzing significant slices of the Iranian emotional culture. They reiterate the fact that in the digitalized world, affective turn cannot be separated from digital turn and it is against this backdrop that the approach of affective turn is applied to the analysis of the Iranian online social networks.

So, what is affective turn? In the introduction, the authors discuss it as a new paradigm in Cultural Studies by virtue of which the structure of feeling and emotional developments in a given culture are scrutinized as the main focus of analysis. The central argument in affective turn is that collective emotions should be conceived as discursively constructed, in the sense that they are not originally natural, rather, they are subject to manipulation and naturalization by the discourse of power. It is within this theoretical paradigm that the authors discuss the emotional developments of the Iranian culture through the lens of online social networks. In their view, the online social networks have changed the Iranians emotionally by pushing them from the position of symbolic castration to that of self-subjectivity. To support this argument, they explore the digital expression of basic collective emotions by Iranians including hope, love, pride, compassion, dysphoria, anxiety, rage, violence, hatred, and humor.

The book is focused on the experience of affective turn within the Iranian context. Its main objective is investigating Raymond Williams’ notion of the structures of feeling in the virtual life of the Iranians. In fact, the authors argue that the online social networks in Iran have made the Iranians more emotional than ever through giving them a space of possibility for their self-actualization. Accordingly, their emotional self-expression in online social networks should be associated with politics of resistance and self-reflective subjectivity. This subjectivity sometimes becomes subversive and counter-discursive in nature, in that the online communities no longer regulate their emotional practices according to

the norms of the dominant discourse, rather, they subvert the dominant discourse by giving voice to their counter-discursive emotional practices and subjectivities. Some examples of such subversive emotions discussed in the book are the Iranian-style masculinities/femininities, sexual discourses, sexual love, body representations, taboos and the like. Based on de Certeau's concepts of 'strategy', and 'tactic, the book problematizes the newly emergent subversive subjectivities in the virtual life of the Iranians, arguing that there exist complicated relations of power/resistance and strategy/tactic in their online social networks. These power-resistance relations have been explored in depth throughout the book which consists of 9 well-balanced chapters.

The book is analytical and structured in nine chapters. It begins with a lengthy introduction (15-40 pp) in which the authors present a selective literature review and discuss the conceptual framework and the methodological considerations of their study. Furthermore, it outlines the authors' general arguments about the discursivity of emotions. The main bulk of the book is about 500 pages, revolving around the central theme of emotions in online social networks, however each chapter has its own theoretical paradigms. Chapter one "Social Hope" (41-100 pp) broadly explores the strategies for cultivating social hope against the backdrop of power/resistance dialectics. Chapter two "Love" (100-180 pp) gives an account of the discursive construction of love in virtual space together with such digital phenomena as Don Juanism, hedonism and Luxurization of love within the context of the Iranian online social networks. Chapter three "Collective Pride" (180-215 pp) discusses the mechanisms through which collective pride in online social networks can give rise to the discursive practices of scapegoating and stereotyping. Chapter four "Compassion" (215-250 pp) is an elaboration of in depth of how compassion in social networks can give the users a false sense of agency and thus resulting in castrated subjectivities. Chapter five "Boredom" (250-293 pp) discusses the idea of how online social networks act as a way out from boredom by enabling the users to take refuge in nostalgia, hedonism, making memes and faking luxurious lifestyles. Chapter six "Fear and Anxiety" (295-355 pp) elaborates on the digital reactions of the Iranians against collective anxieties and traumas. Chapter seven "Anger, Violence and Verbal Insults" (355-405 pp) gives an account of the discursive mechanisms of anger in the virtual life of the Iranians. Here, the discussion touches upon verbal taboos including swearwords in the Iranian cyberspace and the mechanisms through which they get gendered and embodied. Chapter eight "Hatred, Spite and Resentment" (405-445 pp) is focused on the digital expression

of the Iranians' social hatred. In line with affective turn, the argument here is that hatred in the virtual space is structural in nature, i.e., it is associated with macrostructures, being digitally expressed through carnivalization of the space, intertextuality and such binary oppositions as good/evil, self/other and so forth. Chapter nine "Humor" (445-478 pp) investigates the subversive power of humor in Iranian online social networks through the lenses of Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival-Grotesque. Finally, the book ends with a 25-page long epilogue where the authors present their concluding remarks concerning the discursive mechanisms of emotions in Iranian online social networks. It is a general sketch of what has been fully discussed in the main bulk of the book.

One striking feature of the book is its broad scope and encyclopedic content concerning the main subject. I found this feature to be the main drawback of the book for it may entail the risk of being reductionist and incoherent due to its hastily detailed information overload. Although it is a well-focused book, the problem of scope has overshadowed this advantageous quality. But all in all, it is a must-read and thought-provoking book in which theory and practice has been integrated very insightfully. The strength and cogency of its arguments, the profoundness of its explanations, the innovativeness of its methodology, the novelty of its ideas and last but not the least, the richness of its ethnographic data have made it a strongly recommended book for all scholars, researchers and practitioners who are concerned with academic studies about cyberspace in general and the Iranian cyberspace in particular.