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Muscovites World's No. 2 Online Flirts

By Alexandra Odynova

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Maybe Russia really is keeping abreast with state-of-the-art technology, as the Kremlin proposes — at least when it comes to flirting.

"How expensive is the underwear you have on at the moment?" read a playful message at a dating community on Vkontakte.ru. "I don't understand girls who like wearing drawers," runs the coquettish reply.

This is a perfectly typical exchange, to be found everywhere on the pages and in the chatrooms of Russian social networking sites — whose audience numbers in the tens of millions and counting.

World Flirtation League: Top 10

Rank	City	Score
1.	Athens	25.7
2.	Moscow	25.5
3.	Kuwait City	25.4
4.	Baku	24.9

5.	Tunis	24.7
6.	Kiev	24.5
7.	Beirut	24.0
8.	Turin	23.7
8.	Rome	23.7
10.	Bari	23.5

Badoo.com

The Russian middle class's love of online flirting was given statistical backing last week when a poll by the Badoo.com social networking site ranked Moscow No. 2 for Internet flirtatiousness among world capitals, second only to Athens.

Research by the World Flirtation League examined 12 million flirtatious online conversations initiated over a month by users from 200 cities across the world and found that Muscovites were more enthusiastic at it than most.

"Moscow's figure is 25.5, slightly behind Athens," which has a score of 25.7 online flirtations per average user per month, Badoo.com's director of marketing Lloyd Price told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

Kuwait City came the third, trailing close behind with 25.4 monthly bouts of flirting per user.

Online flirting is popular throughout the ex-Soviet Union, it seems, as two more post-Soviet cities made the top 10, with the Azerbaijani capital Baku placing fourth at 24.9 flirtations and Ukraine's Kiev coming sixth, clenched between Tunis and Beirut with a score of 24.5.

Moscow effortlessly out-flirts reputed European capitals of romance such as Paris and Rome, the first of which ranked eighth and the latter a dismal 38th, the study showed.

Social networks, which are all the rage among Russians, especially the young, may be behind Moscow's high score, Price said.

"One theory why Moscow is ranked second in our global study is that the use of social networks in Russia overall has grown faster than any other European country in the last 12 months," he said in e-mailed comments.

"Another theory is that Moscow acts as a hub for Russian people, like Paris or London," Price said. He did not elaborate on why it did not help the French or English capitals score higher.

The reach of social networking sites in Russia jumped 21.5 percent year on year in December — more than in any other European country, Price said, citing data by ComScore, a global Internet marketing research company.

The two most popular Russian social networking sites, Odnoklassniki.ru and Vkontakte.ru, currently boast 30 million and 28 million accounts, respectively, though most people register at both. Privet.ru, which has some 2.1 million users, is also popular with online flirts, Price said.

The actual explanation for the popularity of online flirting, however, may be that Russians

simply find it difficult to strike up a real-life conversation with a stranger.

"Abroad, in cities like New York, it's very easy to come up and start talking to someone because people are more open, and establishing the first contact is just easier there," said Pavel Frolov, a psychology specialist who teaches "pickup" — the much-touted skill of guaranteed seduction.

"In Russia, people have more barriers for starting the first contact, which can lead to a flirt," he said.

"It's easier to overcome the psychological barrier" online, said Alexander, a 24-year-old photographer who is fond of online flirting.

"Not everyone can come up to you in the metro and start talking. It needs at least some pretext," he said. "If you just come up and say 'hi, nice to meet you,' in 90 percent of cases, you will be sent away."

Alexander asked not to be identified by last name to avoid problems with his steady girlfriend — but he admitted he has met some 20 women in real life after striking up online conversations.

The online method is preferable for women as well because it gives them a chance to find out whether a guy amounts to anything more than a fool, he said.

"It's all done in private online, without strangers looking, and so people fear less," pickup artist Frolov chimed in.

Office workers may be particularly prone to using social networking sites as the primary means for private conversations — including flirting — because many of them fear the regular means of communication, e-mail, may be checked by their bosses, Frolov said.

Anna Artamonova, vice president at Mail.ru, which controls Odnoklassniki.ru, could not specify to what extent the social network's users indulge in online flirting, but she said their activities are definitely not limited to it.

"On the whole, Russian social network users are the most active in the world," Artamonova said.

She cited research by ComScore that showed Russians are "the most engaged" social networkers in the world, both by the number of hours spent online and pages visited.

Still, the World Flirtation League may be on to something, as Russians are active not just online, but also in their sexual lives — which is also borne out by hard statistical data.

Russia ranked second in the Durex Sexual Wellbeing Global Survey of 26 countries, with 80 percent of the respondents admitting to having sex weekly. Again, only Greece had a better showing, with 87 percent.

This does not mean Russian flirting is necessarily immodest, though. A Badoo.com poll in November revealed that the best compliment a flirt can tell a Russian woman is the chaste

line "You have a beautiful nose."

But, admittedly, this is hard to do online.

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