

Motivations and concerns of Facebook users in Iran

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POLICY BRIEF

Since the Facebook was blocked ahead of the 2009 presidential election, Iranian citizens need to use proxy servers to access Facebook. Therefore, being an active Facebook user in Iran requires extra expenses on purchasing VPN and also high speed internet.

In contrast to many developed countries, in Iran people do not benefit from a free flow of information in Facebook, and as it is blocked, joining the website means doing a political action. Furthermore they feel the pressure of religion and customs in virtual space. Gender norms are a considerable part of customs. There is a big "gender gap" in Iran. Iranian Facebook users may experience this site in a different manner from many other users around the world.

In this study, we try to provide a deep understanding about the experience of Iranian Facebook users. To achieve this goal; we need to figure out: How government's control over social and virtual worlds, affect people's intention of joining Facebook. How customs and cultural norms affect the usage of Facebook by Iranian females, and whether there are any points of concern that hinder Iranian Facebook users or not.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. With regard to 50 Facebook users aged between 15 to 42 tow types of motivation are apparent in the sample:

-Pleasure-seeking motivations such as engaging in Jokes and jests, sharing and looking images, writing and reading comments, games and applications, enjoying music and videos, and finding new girl friends.

-Benefit-seeking motivations consist of having social relations and acquiring social capital, Acquiring information, news and cultural capital, strengthening matrimonial life (mostly as a male motivation), benefiting for Identification process

(sharing real personality or ideal self, Maintaining ethnic identity, and joining Facebook groups), idealistic goals (political changes and moral reforms), And at last Monetary motivations.

2. Iranian Facebook users' concerns are categorized into two groups:

-Written laws-oriented concerns; in three fields: political persecution, career deprivation and education deprivation.

-Social unwritten rules-oriented concerns: such as threats to the user's privacy, reputation concerns, and family life concerns.

THE RESEARCH

Background

Motivations: In this study, motivations refer to any factors that persuaded people to join Facebook. It includes all kinds of usages from Facebook.

Concerns: In Iran, Facebook as a network society is important in both political and socio-cultural dimensions. This means Facebook is controlled by both government and people. Joining Facebook as an active user, may lead to threats including losing employment, deprivation of education, being arrested by FATA, scandal, blemished character, etc. In this study, concerns refer to any unpleasant feelings

of fear or caution that affect the Iranian Facebook user.

Method

The exploratory nature of the inquiry lead the authors to use inductive techniques used in qualitative research. Data for the study were obtained from 30 to 45 minute semi-structured interviews, with 50 Facebook users aged between 15 to 42 years. We used snowball sampling to find Facebook users for interviews. The sampling process was started by some student friends and relatives. In this study "theoretical saturation" determines the final

sample. "Thematic coding" was used to analyze the interviews.

Discussion

Our findings show most users prefer relatively passive viewing, reading on Facebook, and do not wish to make their own contributions. It appears that feeling of being controlled by a pair of invisible eyes, government and people, is the most important reason for passive membership on Facebook. Studies have shown that social network-related factors appear to have had a positive impact on political changes in Egypt (Attia, Aziz, Friedman & Elhusseiny, 2011), Colombia and Guatemala, and mobilizing voters in the United States (Harlow & Harp, 2011). Citizens are interested in using Facebook in political communication (Alujevic, 2012; Bode, 2012). Facebook as a filtered media is still sufficiently attractive for Iranians to join. People want to experience things that are forbidden. Joining Facebook is a way to struggle with government politics.

Participants all spoke about other users exercising control on Facebook. They said despite their inclinations, they have to make contributions on Facebook according to others' desires and thoughts. People have a strong urge to judge others on Facebook. All photos, comments, friends, and status, face others' judgments. Facebook users in Iran experience a sphere of insecurity and distrust.

Females experience monitoring much more severely than males do, as they also experience in social spaces. They believe Facebook does not provide an equal free social network for males and females. And male behaviors are dominant on Facebook. Males benefit from the advantages of virtual space, as they benefit from social space. Females should

be more concerned about the risk of stigma and blemished reputation. Also for some men, Facebook is a masculine space replete with deception and lust. If their female family members are exposed to deceptive men, their masculinity will be hurt. All these factors lead men to deprive women of the advantages of cyberspace.

Although both political norms and social norms actuate Iranians to join Facebook, but joining Facebook does not compensate the social world's limitations. Political insecurity and moral considerations are two significant concerns that plague users.

For some participants, joining Facebook means following the current fashion as an identity resource. Being a Facebook user provides them with a means of knowing new people, things, and news which in turn increases their confidence to speak with others. They enjoy talking about Facebook and its secrets as a virtual communicative network and inviting others to join it. Our interviews show that we can speak about the role of an identity vacuum in actuating Iranians to join Facebook. Identity crisis in Iran is a consequence of major value changes and multiple identity resources. Studies show offline relations may be replaced by Facebook, especially by "Rejection Sensitive Persons" and low self-esteem persons (Farahani, Aghamohamadi, Kazemi, Bakhtiarvand & Ansari, 2011; Jahanston, Tanner, Lalla & Kawalski, 2011). Also according to Lehdonvirta and Rasanen (2011), Facebook users identify as strongly with their online communities as they do with their own families.

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