

Study the Internet Users' Reliance on the Contents Published in Virtual Social Networks

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research is to study the internet users' reliance on the contents published in virtual social networks such as face book and cloob. The research method is survey type and researcher-made questionnaire used for data collection. The population of this research includes all facebook and cloob members in Tehran which estimated 340,956. The samples include 345 users who have membered to these social networks. About fifty questionnaires have been pretested to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient which showed a high Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.90. The research findings indicated that these two social networks' users have little confidence in the news and announcements published in virtual space. However they have much more trusted in the news contents circulated in the Facebook. Besides, there is a meaningful relationship between the reliance internet users place on profile data provided by members of Facebook and Cloob and sorts of news and information these members could have been published. A majority of internet users have confidence in the profile information of Facebook and Cloob's members.

Keywords: Virtual social network, Facebook , Cloob

Introduction

Virtual social networks have obtained a remarkable influence among internet users around the world as well as in the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to statistics released, more than 80 percent of internet users are member of a social network. Facebook is the most influential among global virtual social networks while some domestic virtual social networks such as Cloob enjoy vast users. However, Cloob social network is mainly used by some particular lines of internet users.

The fundamental question of this research is that how much the Internet Users' Reliance on the Contents Published in Virtual Social Networks, especially facebook and cloob. And that how much these two networks have managed, in comparison to the press and formal sources of news, to function as a resource of information and news for internet users in Iran? Is there any meaningful relationship between the users confidence in social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the way their reliance on the news circulated through these networks? Indeed, the researcher actually seeks an answer to this question: for what reason internet users in Iran have confidence in these networks and consider them as a reliable source of information?

By reviewing previous researches, the researcher faced with these cases:

Ziaei-parvar in 1388 conducted a research titled "Studying influence of virtual social networks on Iranian users". The main purpose of this research has been evaluating the penetration of virtual social networks through the Iranian audience. He has also tried to

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find answers to some questions about the extent of impact various virtual social networks brought about and their effects on political and social developments, particularly on 1388 presidential election and its consequences. Another goal of this research was to compare various social networks and their popularity among internet users in Iran, a goal which was achieved to a great extent. The research was conducted based on survey method with online questionnaire as the main tool and a population of 1750 participants. The findings suggest that 78% of internet users in Iran are member of a kind of virtual social network. A majority of the participants had blogs and were familiar with the space of virtual social networks. Most of the participants agreed that by utilizing virtual social networks, they managed to find and communicate with their real-life friends whom they knew before. For the most internet users in Iran, social networks have additionally served as a source of information and news. The research also shows that Facebook definitely have the edge over other virtual social networks and played the most influential role in covering the 1388 presidential election and its sequential developments in Iran.

In her PhD thesis in 2006, "Role of collaborative discourse in formalization of online society", Margharitta Rasolo has addressed the internet discourse, referring to differences between speech and discourse in online societies while explaining the concept and characteristics of this kind of society. She recognizes lingual structure, social behavior and interaction as the most effective factors in process of generating internet discourse. She selected the population of her research from Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, Japan and Spain while tried to find groups which share similarities despite their cultural differences. Then she studied messages, behavior and the way these people interact via video based on her defined model. She concluded, according to her findings, that the Japanese was very enthusiastic to share their opinions about inter-cultural differences. In case of the role lingual structure plays in formation of discourse, her research indicates that using the pronouns "I" and "We" were initially common in the discourse while they have been gradually replaced by collective vocabulary which represents collective identity and replication better.

In his master's thesis, entitled "Studies of social networks and lifestyle", Mohammad Sadegh Afrasiabi has addressed the impact of social networks on the youth lifestyle. In the first chapter of his thesis, where the concept of internet social networks is discussed, Afrasiabi provides a definition of internet social networks and suggests that "According to Peris, people hold different perceptions about a virtual society. For some people, these societies bring about intimacy, trusted chatting and an opportunity to help others while for many, virtual societies represent nothing but a dark conception of conspiracy and criminal behavior and aggression against privacy. The second chapter starts with a short history of virtual social networks. In this chapter we read: "The phrase of Social Network in modern context was initially introduced at Illinois University in the USA. In Iran, however, it was in the year of 1383 that social networks were widely brought up due to expansion of Orkut among Iranian users". In the third chapter, we are introduced with the concept of lifestyle according to thinkers. It states: "Depending on which approaches and theories we choose to study the concept of lifestyle, we would reach different definitions. Having scrutinized about various definitions, it can be said that lifestyle is a series of our attitudes, values,

behaviors, moods and tastes”. Chapter four is dedicated to the relationship between social networks and the youth lifestyle. As we read in it, “Irrespective of any researches, proving a kind of relationship between membership and presence in virtual social networks and the youth lifestyle within “Ameli’s” theory of Dual Globalizations and “Castell’s” Social Networking is possible. In the chapter five, we are introduced with survey poll as a method of research and finally in chapter six, the research is given results of a survey poll launched among users of the biggest Iranian social network (Cloob) about the relationship between membership of internet social networks and various attributes of lifestyle. Additionally, studying the connection between membership of internet social network and the individual virtual lifestyle, the impact which membership of internet social networks has on the way people wear and their routine conversation while discussing about the relationship between membership of social networks and the way people find their future spouse are all discussed in this chapter. “Ali Pour Zarabian” conducted a research under the title of “Studying the influence of social networks on social communications among high school students in Tehran” in 1390. According to the results of this research, virtual social networks have intense impacts on moral norms, mental skills, entertainments and religious beliefs of their users’ members. In other words, any changes in quality and quantity of utilization of these networks would be followed by relatively numerous changes in these variables. Thus, alignment or non-alignment of the contents provided by social networks in regard with the purposes specified for moral norms, mental skills, entertainments and religious beliefs can determine alignments or non-alignments of the youth. The extracted results of the research indicate a meaningful, positive and intense connection between using virtual social networks and social communications of high school students in Tehran. The research proved this meaningful connection, using 10 variables including: moral norms, quality of relations with family, relations with friends, educational activities, social skills, religious beliefs, innovation, mental skills, entertainment, leisure and social communications.

Methodology

The research method is survey type and researcher-made questionnaire used for data collection. The population of this research includes all facebook and cloob members in Tehran which estimated 340,956. The samples include 345 users who have membered to these social networks. About fifty questionnaires have been pretested to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient which showed a high Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.90

Results and Discussions

In this section, the most important findings of the research, including results of testing hypothesizes and theoretical analysis of them is provided.

Table 1: Using one-sampled T test in order to Study the Internet Users’ Reliance on the Contents Published in Virtual Social Networks

Abundance – Average – Standard Deviation – Lower Bound – T Statistics – Level of Meaningfulness

51	55.6	28.5	48.9	1.4	0.082
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Given the quantities noted in the table, Average (M=55.6) and Statistics (t=1.4) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.082), the null hypothesis is verified and the research hypothesis is rejected. Therefore we can conclude that internet users place rather little reliance on the news in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Second hypothesis: Internet users have a considerable confidence in announcements circulated in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Table 2: Using one-sampled T test in order to study intensity of the trust which internet users have in announcements circulated in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob

Abundance – Average – Standard Deviation – Lower Bound – T Statistics – Level of Meaningfulness

50	51.3	23.6	45.7	0.37	0.355
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Regarding the quantities given in the table 2, Average (M=51.3) and Statistics (t=0.37) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.355), the null hypothesis is verified and the research hypothesis is rejected. So we can reach this conclusion that internet users have rather low confidence in the announcements circulated in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Third hypothesis: Internet users place great reliance on photos and videos shared in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Table 3: One-sampled T test in order to study quality of reliance which internet users place on photos and videos shared in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob

Abundance – Average – Standard Deviation – Lower Bound – T Statistics – Level of Meaningfulness

51	53.2	21.5	48.1	1.06	0.147
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According to the quantities provided in the table, Average (M=53.2) and Statistics (t=1.06) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.147), the null hypothesis is verified and the Statistics hypothesis is rejected. Thus, it can be concluded that internet users place quite little reliance on photos and videos shared in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Fourth hypothesis: There is a meaningful relationship between the trust internet users have in the profile information provided by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the sorts of news and information published in their profiles.

Table 4: one-sampled T test in order to study the trust internet users have in the profile information provided by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the sorts of news and data that they publish.

Abundance	Average	Standard Deviation	Lower Bound	T Statistics	Level of Meaningfulness
50	59.0	20.5	54.1	3.1	0.002

Concerning the quantities given in the table, Average (M=59.0) and Statistics (t=3.1) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.002), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 99%. Accordingly, we can conclude that there is a meaningful relationship between the trust internet users have in the profile information given by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the sorts of news and data published by them. Besides, the amount of confidence interval is 94% for the average of 54.1% for the population, indicating the high trust internet users have in the profile information provided by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the sorts of news and data they share.

Fifth hypothesis: Internet users have great confidence in comments and viewpoints given by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Table 5: One-sampled T test in order to study the confidence internet users have in comments and viewpoints given by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Abundance	Average	Standard Deviation	Lower Bound	T Statistics	Level of Meaningfulness
51	55.9	25.7	49.9	1.6	0.054

Taking the quantities above into account, Average (M=55.9) and Statistics (t=1.6) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.054), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 95%. Therefore, we can say that internet users hold a high confidence in comments and viewpoints given by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob. Additionally, the confidence interval is 95% for the average of 49.9% for the population, illustrating the average confidence internet users have in comments and viewpoints given by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Sixth hypothesis: There is a meaningful connection between the reliance that internet users place on the released content in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the way they share them in their own pages.

Table 6: One-sampled T test in order to study the reliance internet users place on comments and viewpoints published by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Abundance	Average	Standard Deviation	Lower Bound	T Statistics	Level of Meaningfulness
50	53.5	23.6	47.9	1.06	0.149

Regarding the quantities provided by the table, Average (M=53.5) and Statistics (t=1.05) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.149), the null hypothesis is verified and the research hypothesis is rejected. So, this conclusion can be drawn that there is no meaningful connection between the

reliance internet users place on the released content in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the way they share them in their own pages.

Seventh hypothesis: Internet users have a considerable trust in data and news released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of applying them in real life.

Table 7: One-sampled T test in order to study the trust internet users have in data and news released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of applying them in the real life.

Abundance	Average	Standard Deviation	Lower Bound	T Statistics	Level of Meaningfulness
50	59.7	25.2	53.7	2.7	0.005

Given the quantities above, Average (M=59.7) and Statistics (t=2.7) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.005), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 99%. Thus, it can be concluded that internet users have a great trust in data and news released in virtual social networks in terms of applying them in real life. Besides, the confidence interval is 95% for the average of 53.7% for the population which illustrates the average trust internet users have in data and news released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of applying them in real life.

Eighth hypothesis: Internet users have more confidence in the news circulated through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob rather than the news published by formal sources.

Table 8: One-sampled T test in order to study the confidence internet users have in the news circulated through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in comparison with formal news sources.

Abundance	Average	Standard Deviation	Lower Bound	T Statistics	Level of Meaningfulness
50	58.3	23.9	52.7	2.5	0.009

According to the quantities in the table, Average (M=58.3) and Statistics (t=2.5) and Level of Meaningfulness (sig=0.009), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 99%. So, it can be said that internet users have more confidence in the news released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob than the stuff published by formal sources. Besides, the confidence interval is 95% for the average of 52.7% for the population which shows the average confidence internet users have in the news circulated through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob comparing with formal sources of news.

Ninth hypothesis: Internet users place notable reliance on the information distributed in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of being screened, controlled and supervised.

Table 9: One-sampled T test in order to study the reliance internet users place on information distributed in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of being screened, controlled and supervised.

Abundance – Average – Standard Deviation – Lower Bound – T Statistics – Level of Meaningfulness

52	56.8	20.2	51.9	2.4	0.011
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Taking the quantities above into consideration, Average ($M=56.8$) and Statistics ($t=2.4$) and Level of Meaningfulness ($\text{sig}=0.011$), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 99%. Therefore, we can conclude that internet users place notable reliance on information distributed in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of being screened, controlled and supervised. Besides, the confidence interval is 95% for an average of 51.2% for the population which displays the reliance internet users place on information distributed in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of being screened, controlled and supervised.

Tenth Hypothesis: Internet users hold a considerable trust in the news and information published through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of lifestyle function.

Table 10: One-sampled T test in order to study the trust internet users hold in the news and information published through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob from basis of lifestyle function

Abundance – Average – Standard Deviation – Lower Bound – T Statistics – Level of Meaningfulness

52	55.8	22.5	50.6	1.9	0.035
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Given the quantities in the table above, Average ($M=55.8$) and Statistics ($t=1.9$) and Level of Meaningfulness ($\text{sig}=0.035$), the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is verified with a confidence of 95%. Therefore, we can say that internet users hold a considerable trust in the news and information published through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of lifestyle function. Besides, the confidence interval is 95% for an average of 50.6% for the population which indicates the average trust internet users hold in the news and information published through virtual social networks from basis of lifestyle function.

Conclusion

After studying and summing up the findings of research, the researcher concluded that aggregation of Facebook and Cloob under the title of social networks brings about different consequences. In other words, for instance while most of internet users place reliance on the news released in Facebook, they show little confidence in Cloob. So aggregation of the negative responses about both Facebook and Cloob will lead us to a disproportionately bigger fraction of the users who have little trust in the news published in social networks in comparison with the ones who hold a positive viewpoint in this regard. In this research, from 10 hypothesis considered by the researcher, 4 hypotheses were rejected and 6 ones were verified.

Internet users have rather little confidence in the news published in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob, though they place more reliance on the news circulated through Facebook. Internet users have rather little trust in announcements released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob, though they have more confidence in announcements released in Facebook.

Internet users feel less secure about photos and videos shared in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob, though they feel more secure about photos and videos shared in Facebook. There is a meaningful relationship between the reliance internet users place on profile information provided by audience members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the sorts of news and information provided in their profiles. Besides, most of internet users have trust in the profile information provided by members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob.

Comparing the confidence internet users have in the news and announcements released through these networks and their reliance on the profile information provided by the audience, it can be concluded that due to a relative acknowledgement about real identity of members of virtual social networks, internet users have trust in the profile information provided by these members, however they show little confidence in the news and information the members release on their own pages. Just like that you know a member of Facebook and you are sure that their pages are authentic, but you place little reliance on the news they share on the page. This complicated behavior toward the content circulated through social networks indicates a kind of smart and critical reaction to the information and news provided by virtual social networks.

Internet users have a notable confidence in comments and viewpoints given by the audience members of virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob. This finding is also of a great importance since it illustrates the very reliance internet users place on these comments and viewpoints. Indeed, the main point of the finding is that the users differentiate between the data and news released by administrator of a page and the relevant comments other users leave. When you place your reliance on viewpoints, it does not necessarily mean that you are sure about their correctness, but you just implicitly indicate the authenticity of them and that whether they are stated by a certain user themselves.

Another finding of the research sounds quite complicated. Accordingly, there is no meaningful relationship between the trust internet users have in the contents published in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob and the way they share these contents on their own pages. It was surprising that the hypothesis of the researcher was rejected because it was based on this assumption that internet users would share only the content which they are confident about. However it was rejected. So we can conclude that some of the contents are just republished by social network users since they are apparently attractive, controversial, novel, etc. This finding can also illustrate that internet users do not place their reliance on the contents just because they are shared or redistributed by other members. Simply put, multiple sharing of a piece of news or a development in various pages in social networks does not necessarily mean the reliance users place on it.

Another finding of the research is even stranger. It states that internet users have a great confidence in the information and news circulated through virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of applying them in real life. In other words, while internet users have little trust in the information and news published in social networks at all, they consciously or unconsciously apply these contents in their real lives and make decisions based on them. This meaningful difference between these two findings may come from this fact that applying the information and news released in social networks in real life is due to the sort of news and information directly related to their livelihood and their economic and social lives. Besides, general nature of the concept of information and news in the questions raised by the researcher may explain this difference.

We can prove the certainty of our analysis through another finding of our research based on it, internet users place more reliance on the news released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob than the stuff published by formal sources of news. In other words, though internet users have little confidence in the information and news distributed in social networks, they place more

reliance on these sources than other media and formal sources such as radio, TV channels, the press and news agencies. Indeed, they consider social networks more honest than formal media which is implicitly of great significance.

We will realize the importance of this finding much more when we consider that based on our results, internet users have more trust in the content provided by virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of being screened, controlled and supervised. In other words, they believe that the information circulated through social networks are sufficiently refined and edited – due to be released in public sphere and consequently criticized by a massive population of users – to be represented as a sample of common sense and collective wisdom and subsequently enjoy more authenticity and correctness. In such an environment, any wrong or misleading content would trigger a huge pile of oppositions and criticisms when released.

Internet users are considerably confident about the news and information released in virtual social networks of Facebook and Cloob in terms of lifestyle function. In other words, these networks have succeeded to effect on their audience lifestyle. Of course, there is a difference in the extent of this influence, so that while Facebook enjoys a huge influence on the user lifestyle, Cloob has very little edge over it.

It should be said that from a theoretical point of view, we can analyze findings of this research from two perspectives:

Within the theory of “Uses and Gratifications”. According to the theory of “Uses and Gratifications”, the audience has power to actively choose media to meet their desires and needs to achieve gratifications and a main part of using media focuses on audience aims. The existing research also illustrated that most of the internet audience members chooses this new media due to their high confidence in it, while there are several media, i.e. the press, radio, TV channels and news agencies surrounding them.

Within the theory of “Network Society”. Based on Manuel Castells’ theory of “Network Society”, key structures of culture are changed around virtual social networks and communications via electronic media. Our research also suggests that our audience member’s culture has been fundamentally transformed due to spreading of these technologies and most of the audience have even made changes in their own lifestyle under the influence of these networks. Castells claims new, democratic functionalities and capabilities for modern networking media in terms of communications and social participation. The existing research also indicated that place more reliance on the news and information distributed in virtual social networks than formal news sources. It means that internet audience have been seeking to replace formal information sources due to their inappropriate approaches and have chosen virtual social networks in a reaction against.

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