Investigating Cyberspace (Facebook) Users' Perception and Experience during Their Membership Period: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT: Using internet social networks like Facebook has turned into a part of many people's private life worldwide. This study aimed at interpreting users' outlook toward Facebook social network. It was done using a qualitative approach on 8 participants (3 males and 5 females) in 2014 through semi-structured in-depth interviews in a four-month period. The data were collected, noted down, and then encoded. They were categorized under major categories and a core category was extracted from them as the basis of this study. The categories of New Place, Search for Truth, Body Satisfaction from All Aspects of Life, and Desuperstition were extracted and Seeking Diversity was selected as the core category.

Keywords: Facebook, Identity, Foundation Research, Cyberspace, Seeking Diversity

INTRODUCTION

In the present conditions, no one doubts that man has entered into a new age whose main index is significance of information. Many Social science experts think that converging information and communication technologies as well as restructuring capitalism in recent years have made man enter into a new environment and society which is referred to as network society by Castells and information society by Ome Sao. Since the effect of mass media such as the internet and social networks is widely increasing, the information society has taken a global dimension. In other words, it is no longer limited to certain countries. Globalization is a phenomenon influencing various aspects of cultural life such as people's identity (Estermacwist and Monkman, 2000). Growing development of the internet, satellite, and digital technologies, although inharmonious, has made instant communication in vast parts of the world possible (Held and Macgrow, 2002). New communication–information technologies have given new identity to people and societies in new forms by providing the possibility for the emergence of network society (Castells, 2000). Extension of new technologies has coincided with the formation of new cyberspaces; spaces that are different from past tangible spaces in terms of identity and function and somehow rewrite past values, concepts, and beliefs (Budriar, 2003). The youths are most users of the internet (Bowlen and Hareh, 2000; Kuo, 2005). The internet and other world information technologies have the world welcome them (Freedman, 2008). Cyberspace provides the best opportunity for individuals to share their ideas regardless of real world considerations (Soler, 2007). Unlike face to face interactions, cyberspace provides many opportunities for interpreting and illustrating thoughts and suppositions of both sides of the interaction (Stone, 1991). Participation in cyber gatherings reduces the pressure resulting from adopting oneself to group expectations in real world and gives one more freedom to reach his ideals and interact with others (Goodwin, 2004; Ringold, 1993). Cyber identity frees a person from constraints and strengthens his different aspects which he was not able to exhibit before (Kia, 2007). In the new age when internet and electronic communication are dominating the society, it is the cyber gatherings that form people's identities (Poster, 1997). An important aspect which is affected by information–communication technologies is identity. Identity, as a source of cognition, is an important issue of human societies. Undoubtedly, one can say that identity is one of man's psychological requirements and prerequisites for any social life (Ghasemi and Ghaderi, 2008). It should be noted that online social networks do not have a long record and the first online social network started working in 1997 (Salawy et al., 2008) and the number of these networks has been increasing up to now. However, the effects of these networks on the routines of Iranians should not be neglected. Citing the examples mentioned, it can be assumed
that most of the world's population is somehow in touch with these developments and their lives are affected by
modern media the outcomes of which are hard to ignore. Iran is neither out of this rule and has undergone such
developments in a way that it has changed many aspects of Iranian people's lives. One of the most important
aspects of human life is the aspect of identity. Changes made internationally have also influenced Iran's identity
indices and caused them a great challenge. It might also be said that, among all, the youth have been most
affected; in a way that they have faced deep challenges regarding identity. In fact, the youth, as one of the most
important age categories, have the most connection with mass communication media because of having
particular characteristics of their youth. Therefore, investigating online social networks is considered as an urgent
requirement. Here, facebook is one of most liked social networks in the cyberspace; as a result, the present study
was conducted emphasizing facebook. Thus, this study aimed to understand and interpret the viewpoints of the
youth toward cyberspace (facebook social network).

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

**Empirical Literature of the Study**

Abbasi Ghadi (2006) investigated the effect of using the internet on people's religiosity by selecting 200
people above age 15 who were clients to Tehran café nets in different regions. According to the research
hypothesis, the longer internet use record, the more internet use hours, the more active participation in online
environments, the more internet use motivation oriented and practical, and finally the more real the content of
the messages considered, the more reflexive the user's religiosity. The findings of the study confirmed all his
research hypotheses. In a study entitled "On the Relationship between Using the Internet and Female Students'
Social Identity: A Case Study on Ilam Islamic Azad University Students", (Almasi , 2007) investigated the
relationship between using the internet and identity among 100 students. The findings of Almasi's research
indicated that the youth who had stronger religious identity were less willing to chat with the opposite sex. The
high percentage of responders' religious identity and the reverse relationship between religious identity and
chatting as entertainment shows the determining role of religious in using the internet. In fact, it can be said that
as using the internet might affect users' religiosity, users' religiosity might also affect the way they use the
internet. The findings of (Ahmadpoor and Ghaderzadeh's research ,2009) entitled "Interaction in Cyberspace and
Its Effect on Religious Identity of the Youth" indicated that religious identity can be affected in five aspects of
experiment, outcome, belief, rite, and cognition in cyberspace. Such an effect proves that globalization of culture
and interaction in cyberspace has somehow influenced students. The result of such globalization and interaction
is noticeably observable in the Iranian society which is in transition. The mentioned status indicated traumatic
nature of interaction in cyberspace on students' religious identity. (Farhangi and Jame , 2009) conducted a study
entitled "Media and Religion". Having used survey method on 700 students of Urmia University, they found out
that religious contents on the internet would affect users' religious beliefs to a great extent.

Nejati Hosseiini (2001) did a research entitled "Representation of God in Persian Blogfa (Analysis of Online
Cyber Popular Theology in Iran)". It was indicated from the findings of Nejati Hosssini's study that weblogs, based
on their distinctive media and virtual entity, managed to challenge traditional assumptions and pre-virtual readings
of God and his theology. Instead, they allowed the emergence and presence of textual and virtual hegemony of
"God of Popular Religion". In their research study entitled "Religious and Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual
Reality" (Schroeder et al., 1999) investigated social interaction among participants of a church ceremony in an
online multi-user virtual reality environment. They also investigated some of the main characteristics of
worshipping gatherings in the virtual world focusing on religious issues and factors that differentiate such
gatherings from other virtual worlds. (Khaled,2007) did a research entitled "Globalization and Religion" in which
he pursued several basic objectives. First, he presented a definition of globalization conditions and then
discussed the relationship between globalization and religion through studying the interaction as well as positive
and negative outcomes of them on each other. Finally, he discussed the relationship between globalization and
religion from religious view, especially Islam's view as well as discussing positive points which are determining
for creating uniformity within globalization process.

**Theoretical Literature**

What is known as mass communication theory is mostly a reaction to the wide application of media for
political and commercial advertising as well as selling mass information and culture. Mass communication
theorists are mostly academicians who have been distant from practical employment scope and who are usually
watching media performance from a negative critical stance. These theorists have not shared the same view in
different time periods concerning media productions. In regards to the background of theoretical opinions related
to the effect of media, three historical steps can be considered:
1. The step of decisive and very strong effects which considered a determining role for content factors in
creating productions
2. The step of limited effects, which considered the important role of psychological factors as well as individual characteristics of the audience in how to use the media
3. The step of strong effects, which emphasized content factors and personal – social processes simultaneously

A. Levels and Types of Media Effect on the Audience

The influence of media is complex, multiple, and multi-leveled. In terms of influence, the media can affect each of the triple levels of minor, medium, and major. In terms of type of influence, the media may: 1. Make predicted changes according to communicators’ will; 2. Provide the ground for change unwontedly; 3. Provide the ground for facilitating change in wider social change processes by acting as interface; 4. Stop change by changing the status quo; 5. Stop the creation of change among the audience by intentionally offering biased and ideological content.

B. Influence Theories

This approach considers media not a simple and single unit, but a very wide collection of messages, images, and thoughts which are most of the time extracted from the society, not from the media itself, and returned to the society. Accordingly, media is not thought of as the single or basic reason for personal and social influences. On the contrary, it is believed that the messages of media affect the audience by triggering personal qualities or social – structural conditions. Some theories of media influence are as follows:

- Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Theory
- Use and Satisfaction Theory
- Highlighting Theory
- Spiral of Silence Theory
- Planting Theory

Given the subject and purpose of this research, Planting Theory is the most suitable theory that can be regarded in relation to the subject of this study. Gerbner Planting or Training Theory is based on interactions between media and media users as well as the way media affects the audience. The main hypothesis of this theory is that there is a direct relationship between the rate of exposure to media and the rate of media use. It means that long hours of exposure to certain media will cause attitudes and views compatible with the content of media. In fact, Gerbner Planting or Training Theory studies the influence rate by determining the frequency and type of using media programs to achieve mechanisms and forms of influence (Abbasi Ghadi and Khalili Kashani, 2010). Gerbner Planting theory is one of the forms of media influence in cognitive level which is related to the question that "to what extent exposure to the media can form public beliefs and considerations about external reality?" The Planting Theory has been explained to be distributed for presenting a pattern of analysis; so that it may indicate long-term influence of the media which basically operate in social understanding level (Ahmadzadeh Kermani, 2010). In fact, the core of Gerbner Theory is that historical significance of the media is mostly based on creating mutual methods in selecting issues and subjects as well as selecting outlooks on events and incidents. These mutual methods are the results of using technology and message presenting system which act as interface. Such methods may lead to mutual viewpoint and perception about the surrounding world. Gerbner calls the product of such a process "Planting Fixed Mental Patterns". In his view, the media tend to offer similar and more or less equal viewpoints of social reality. Thus, their audience will welcome culture as a result of such a mechanism. Gerbner goes further saying: The media, due to their uniformity and arrangement in offering messages in the course of time, are strongly influential; in a way that they must be considered as constructors of society. Later, in reaction to criticisms on Planting Theory about not including other overlapping variables for users, Gerbner revised the theory. He added to terms of "Main Stream" and "Intensification" to this theory. With these terms, these truths are taken into consideration that the rate of exposure to certain media brings different results to different social groups. The "Main Stream" occurs when the rate of exposure to media results in the symmetry of viewpoints in groups and "Intensification" occurs when the effect of planting increases in a certain group of the population (Sorin and Tanka, 2004).

Research Questions

1. What is Facebook users’ idea about the atmosphere of this social network?
2. How do Facebook users interpret membership in this social network?
3. Is membership in Facebook compatible with the youth’s identity?

Research Methodology

The subject of the present descriptive qualitative research study was the perception and mental concept of Facebook users in confrontation with this social network. The participants of this study were Facebook users in Dehloran, Iran. The sampling was done based on the purpose oriented method (theoretical sampling). In this study conducted in 2014, 8 participants (5 males and 3 females) were involved whose ages ranged from 20 to 25 years. The data were collected through open and semi-structured interviews. Since the purpose of the
researchers was to gain a deep description of the so-called phenomenon, they tried to advance the interviews through designing open questions concerning the sacred and cyberspace. In order to resolve probable ambiguities during the interviews and try to clarify misunderstandings, the researcher got the interviewee's approval for participating in the following sessions at the end of each interview.

Finally, in order to prove the accuracy of his interpretations, the researcher would share with the responders his conclusions and interpretations about their responses so that the responders would review their remarks. He would also complete this task with the help of professors and colleagues by asking their opinion about the responders' responses and the researcher's interpretation of them. Therefore, two criteria were used to ensure the accuracy of the present study: 1. the interviewees themselves 2. The colleagues

Of course, the researcher followed the following points to ensure the accuracy of the study:
1. Avoiding interruption while the interviewees were talking
2. Taking precise notes from the talks

Providing the interviewees with exact and unambiguous data and information

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings
It can almost be said that the whole research is replete with the concept of seeking diversity which was greatly pointed out by all of the participants. In this study, the core subject was seeking diversity and the main subjects obtained were: new place, adventure, seeking the truth, desuperstition, and enjoying life.

1. New Place
Facebook is thought of by its users as a real new place where a large amount of information from all ranges is present. Person A says: "Facebook is a really good place to pursue our favorite subjects. It is good because we can only see our favorite subjects and those we had already marked." Person B also says: "Facebook is a place to talk and exchange ideas with those people who are impossible to meet in the real world." In the same regard, Mitra also says: "I had been tired of people, but when I found Facebook, I was very happy to find such a place which made me forget my bitter views toward people."

2.1. Humiliation is a subset of "New Place". Most users felt humiliated because they didn't have a chance to reach their favorite places and environments. Saman says: "I always liked to talk with a couple of girls and boys in a quiet place to feel happy, but since I never found this chance, I felt humiliated. I felt that I was good for nothing."

2.1. Another subset of "New Place" is running away from home. Persons C, D, and E remarked that they were tired of home and found it of no help to satisfy them mentally. Therefore, they liked to enter new places. D says: "Believe it or not, I sometimes wanted to run away from home and be homeless. I was really sick of living with my family. However, since I was connected to Facebook, I noticed that I had found my special place where I could spend all my time. I finally got rid of bickering with my parents."

2. Seeking the Truth
Seeking the truth was another subject that pointed out and discussed by experienced users: "Social networks like Facebook provide their users with a large amount of information. One of the main reasons for membership in Facebook is seeking the truth." A says: "Before this, we were told something that we now understand were all lies. I am closer to the truth now." B also says: "From the time I read great scholars' views about God on Facebook, my opinion about religion has changed and I feel have been mistaken so far." G also says: "Before the emergence of internet and satellite, we had to study certain books sold in the market. These books constantly made us believe certain things the shared. However, today one can understand the truth much better on websites like Facebook."

1.2. Truth Falsification is a subset of "Seeking the Truth", as Kian says: "Why do you think Facebook has been filtered? It has been filtered because they want to prevent the youth from realizing the truth. They want to fill our mind with certain mental concepts and wash it. They want to prevent us from understanding the truth the way it is. But they can't."

2.2. Censorship was another subset of "seeking the truth" against which the responders protested saying that the rulers are aiming for deceiving people. Otherwise, there is no logical reason for censorship. H says: "Well, they commit censorship because they don't want anyone to discover the truth. If they are cut red-handed, their power will terminate. The truth may not be concealed forever."

3. Desuperstition
Another main category extracted from the interviewees' remarks was desuperstition. All the users believed in the fact that membership in social networks like Facebook and encountering a large amount of information (for & against) refines their minds from superstitions and makes them feel indifferent toward issues that are not
scientifically provable. They believed that the presence of superstition in life causes an ever-lasting false sense of fear in people that always restricts them by preventing them from enjoying the beauties of life. In fact, it is a strong barrier against their seeking diversity. H says: "Is it possible to find a place better than Facebook where superstition goes out of one's mind in a short time in a way that he will no longer be worried if an elf may put his hand on his shoulder in any moment. In my opinion, it is Facebook that can provide the user with a large amount of information related to a certain subject in order to solve it." B also says: "When a person is active in Facebook for one year, he may never remain involved with the same superstitions he once used to believe. By reading scientific subjects, no one may believe in miracle and things like that anymore."

1.3. **Realism** is another subset of "desuperstition" about which the majority of responders shared similar views. H says: "When you see a lot of articles all on a single subject, your mind will find itself analyzing what is right and what is wrong. Given the conditions provided by most of Facebook pages, one can never remain superstitious. Realism is a gift from Facebook to its members." C also says: "In fact, Facebook has made me a realist regardless of chance, superstition, and nonsense stuff like that."

4. **Enjoying All the Aspects of Life**

Another category that was emphasized by the interviewees was seeking joy. The users under investigation in this study declared decisively that people should enjoy life and there is no reason to prevent the emergence of beautiful moments in life because of adherence to some worthless issues. The interviewees declared that the prerequisite for enjoying life lies behind seeking the truth and trying to remove the obstacles on this way like superstitions. Diversification requires that people peer into all the aspects of life and enjoy them if possible. E says: "What if those who waste their time discussing traditional issues or harm their body doing some works could join online social networks to discover what top joys they are missing." Yami says: "When I know that I'll live for at least 50 years half of which has passed, I don't have to involve myself all the time in illusions which I know are of no use."

1.4. A subset term of the category "enjoying life" is having fun. A says: "Come on! Life is too short. Those who are not having fun will lose the game." H also says: "According to the poet, "Imagine you were not in this world, so have fun when you are."

2.4. Another subset of "enjoying life" is disregarding religion. The responders believed in the fact that religious teachings are cumbersome for people and prevent them from attaining real joys. C says: "Someone may very much enjoy homosexuality. What should he or she do when homosexuality is said to be a deadly sin by religion? We should conclude that you can enjoy life if you disregard such things. But if you involve yourself in such things, you may only suffer." Koorosh also says: "I have seen no footprint of joy and happiness in religion, what I have seen is just restriction. As a result, I don't think of religion anymore. I have left it and begun to continue my life without it."

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<th>Proposition</th>
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<td>&quot;Like working with up-to-date programs that reveal the defects of the former versions, we realize as we go further that many things we used to believe in were absolute superstitions.&quot;</td>
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Discussion
In this study, all the responders were interested in diversification. They considered Facebook as a new place and they were satisfied for being familiar with this network. In fact, they liked to enter diverse places and atmospheres and would feel humiliated and think of running away from home if they had not found such an opportunity. This interest in diverse issues caused them not believe what is known as truth in the society and start to follow the real truths. They believed in the fact that the present political conditions in the society have made the majority of people believe in some certain things as truth which, in fact, were not truth. They thought of this action as a kind of truth falsification by the regime and raised the issue of censorship to prove their claims. They believed in the presence of superstitions across the society. In fact, believing in superstitions marginalizes peoples' realism and dominates the grass roots forever by spreading superstititious beliefs. As a result, it would prevent the beauty of peoples' lives and stop people from enjoying their lives as perfectly as possible. In general, they believed in the fact that diversification requires having fun, so the requirement for having fun is disregarding religion, which is repressed by some restrictions.

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