An Explanatory Analysis of the Relationship between Facebook Usage and Social Capital (Research Subjects: Tehrani Users)

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between social capital and using Facebook social media. In order to tackle the issue, it should first be noted that according to the latest statistics the total number of Facebook users in the world has passed the threshold of one billion in September 2013. And, based on the latest statistics, Iran ranks 13th among all countries in terms of the total number of internet users in proportion to the total population. There is no official statistics depicting the total number of Facebook users in Iran but we calculated the proportion of internet usage and Facebook usage in various countries and realized that we can also use that proportion to estimate the number of Facebook users in Iran. It seems to be around 17 million. This indicates that both the internet and social media have penetrated into Iranian homes in an interesting rate, something that needs to be addressed scientifically. Accordingly, we approached the issue from a sociological point of view and used Ellison's theoretical framework to analyze the issue. To be more specific, we used Ellison's hypotheses to explain the positive correlation between a rise in the intensity of Facebook usage and a concurrent rise in social capital. We talk about bridging social capital to mean those relations that are weak and do not necessarily involve personal and emotional elements in relationships. These types of relations are quantitatively enormous and contribute to dissemination as well as acquisition of information but they cannot function as familial relationships (Ellison et al. 2007). Bounding social capital is also another concept by which we mean relations that are very intimate, especially where there is an exchange of emotional support (Steinfield, 2008). It should also be added that Robert Putnam considers displacement and social-geographical mobility to be one of the causes of the decline of social capital in the USA (Ibid). We consider maintaining social capital as the capacity to preserve connections with friends and old acquaintances (Ellison et al. 2007). We take social capital at an individual level.

Material and Methods

This paper assumes a mixed-method approach in which both qualitative and quantitative tools are used. It should nevertheless be emphasized that we used survey method as the major methodology of the study. In addition, we also used focus group interviews and participatory observations as auxiliary methods. Data gathering for the survey section took place in both online and offline environments. In order to select the necessary samples, we used cluster sampling for offline sampling in some selected boards of educational zones in Tehran and repeated a similar survey after 11 months using a random sampling method only to make sure that the reliability of the sampling method is achieved. For the online survey we used an online targeted cluster sampling to select subjects from among boys and girls who are high school in Tehran. We also used a general sampling method in online survey applying Abdollahyan's sampling technique which he calls it reverse sampling. In such a technique, sampling and survey are launched at the same time through Google drive.

In order to evaluate the reliability of the scales we used Cronbach's Alpha test and the results scored more than 0.7 for all scales indicating a desirable reliability level. We also used factor analysis and Promax rotation test in which the KMO coefficient scored higher than 0.75,

meaning that the scales are reliable enough to meet the requirements of the reliability criteria. We also repeated this survey 11 months after the initial survey and the results confirmed the reliability and validity of measurement tools used in this research. For data analysis, we used Fuzzy and quantitative methods. We considered internet users as our unit of analysis and for the offline part we considered Tehran's high school students to be our unit of analysis. The final sample size taken from our units of analysis reached to 2437 subjects, on whom the whole study was conducted.

Discussion of Results and Conclusions

We examined the research hypotheses in the following three methods: 1- we evaluated the correlation between intensity of Facebook use and a rise in three types of social capital, 2- we evaluated the differences of mean among three types of social capital in two groups, i.e., control group including those who are Facebook users and experimental group including those who do not use Facebook; and, 3- we also used a qualitative and comparative analysis of comments offered by non-Facebook-users and Facebook users using focus group discussions.

Some of the findings indicate that as using Facebook increases, the bridging social capital and maintaining social capital also increase. There is also a difference between those who use Facebook and those who do not, in terms of the level of social capital. It should be noted that the results indicate that the mean level of all three types of social capital among Facebook users are higher than the same level among those who are not Facebook users. Of other contributions of this paper we can refer to the fact that online environment does not necessarily weaken social relations. In some cases, it can even lead to the strengthening of those social relations that have been weakened by urban lifestyle.

The results of the focus group discussions and participatory observations (Abdollahyan and Sheykhansari, 2012) indicate that working within Facebook environment leads to the generation of new vocabulary (lingo) which is then introduced to new generations of Facebook users. Also, the information turnover and its extent among Facebook users is so much, so that every time that users login in their account they have to face new information about various events. In contrast, those who are not Facebook users, would use other tools of mass media to update their information, based on personal interests. This comparison drags our attention to a very critical phenomenon, i.e., the rate of information exchanged among Facebook users about various socio-political events have grown drastically. The friendship circle of Facebook users becomes expanded because it includes all people that such a user might know during his/her course of life. Whereas the friendship circle of a non-Facebook-user is limited to those with whom the individual is acquainted with in his/her real life and can have a face to face interaction. The level of trust among Facebook users for promoting friendship is high and they accept friendship invitations very easily. They do not have to go through a lot of evaluations to choose their virtual friends. The non-Facebook-users, on the other hand, protect their private spheres and are cautious about new friendships, if they are to choose new friends. We also discovered that there is a prominent difference between Facebook users and non-Facebook users in terms of getting intimate or close with a friend. Nevertheless, taking maintaining family relations as criteria, we noticed that almost all family members in the same age had a tendency to get connected through Facebook. It is possible therefore that if a familial connection is somehow cut off in the real life, reconnection happens through same-age groups in Facebook. Generally, Facebook functions in two ways for families, i.e., on the one had it preserves connections at a minimal level and on the other hand, it is a means of monitoring one another without having any real connections. The results also indicate that using Facebook can improve psychological health of a person. Those Facebook users who have a low level of self-esteem, use Facebook as a means of strengthening their social relations. We also discovered that Facebook users have a higher level of satisfaction from their friendship relationships and like to be with their Facebook friends, even more than the company of friends in actual space.

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