Evaluation of Insight of Students of Payame Noor University (Gonbad Kavoos Branch) into Virtual Social Networks

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Abstract: Providing a basis for the formation of new communities of users based on the Internet, virtual social networks have gained a high degree of popularity among people, especially the youth. The present research evaluates the insight of those students of Payame Noor University (Gonbad Kavoos Branch) who have joined social networks. This is a qualitative research where the required information are collected via semi-structured interviews. Taken via snowball sampling technique, a sample of 100 students, each of which being a member of at least one social network, participated in this study. The results indicated that, even though most of the participants have joined social networks just recently, but they are well-familiar with these networks. Furthermore, most of the students mentioned that they were looking for some entertainment and leisure in these networks with the rehabilitation of old relationships along with maintaining friendly communications comprising the next main reasons for their presence and activity within such networks. Although the users have admittedly welcomed these networks, they often complain about the security level provided by these networks. Even though the users recognized both domestic and foreign-based networks as of lower than satisfactory, but they evaluated the foreign-based networks as of higher level of security than the domestic counterparts.

Keywords: Payame Noor University, Social Networks, Student'sInsight,.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual social networks (VSNs) have enjoyed an unparalleled global popularity, so that millions of people around the world have joint these networks within which they seek for their human, social and even economic communications [1]. Accordingly, some researchers believe that a new social texture is on its way to be created [2]. Social networks refer to a set of online services which allow individuals to have their own profiles, introduce themselves to others, share their information and communicate with other people within the framework of a well-defined system. In this way, users can maintain their relationships with others and form new social connections at the same time [3]. Indeed, VSNs were first designed to enhance and promote social interactions across virtual space. In general, with the information posted in terms of the user profile (user photo, personal information and interests – all together releasing some information on the personal identity of the user), it becomes easier to communicate. Users are able to see other's profiles and get connected to each other via various applications such as email clients and chat-based platforms [4].

One may see ever increasing presence of the users in such networks which, indeed, enjoy distinctive attractiveness and diversity with the users spending a lot of time on these social networks [5].

Today, in 21st century which is also referred to as the information technology millennium, mass communication media play an important role, so that they serve as many other roles. Meanwhile, the need to inform the people and

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especially youth (particularly for the third world countries, such as Iran, with high shares of young population) and fill-in their leisure times obviously work toward homogenizing local and even global societies - some role commonly referred to as the hidden task of mass communication media [6].Countless number sites have been established in Iran and in different ways they can show themselves between the net users and attract them [7].

Joining social networks have been seen to induce unprecedented changes in community member's interactions along different dimensions; from a natural point of view, these changes have implications for both individuals and organizations from macro to micro levels [8]. Even though an increasing number of people are using these networks, but the fact is that not much information is available on the reason why this increasing trend has been developed [2]. As such, the present research may of concern by the researchers in the field of social sciences, media and information technology. On the other hand, lack of researches undertaken in this regard and the immature nature of the researches on this topic have led policy-makers and decision-makers to go through pessimistic and defensive approaches with respect to virtual social networks, so that virtual social network environment has been introduced as of more of political and threatening functions [9].

Based on the above discussion, the main research question in the present paper is that: What is the insight ofstudents of Payame Noor University (Gonbad Kavoos Branch) into social networks?

2.   VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS, DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

Social networks websites are web-based portals where informations are shared across the Internet as people or groups communicate with each other. Boydand Ellison [10] believe that virtual social networks are web-based services which allow the users to: 1) within a well-defined framework, develop public and semi-private profiles, 2) communicate with other users within the system, and 3) view the list of links between the user himself/herself and other users within the system [2]. Once finished with creating the profile and completing the sign up process, users may participate in this environment, through multimedia capabilities of the website such as posting new photos, texts, web contents or links to external contents, to further develop the environment. Right now, there are hundreds of social networks with a variety of different features. They provide public profiles where system users are listed and millions of users have their attentions focused on, so that visiting these sites have been well-incorporated into their routines [11].

One can classify these networks based on the type of use (training, entertainment, political, commercial, etc.) or type of access (limited or unlimited) [12].

3.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research where the required information are collected via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The statistical population is composed of all those students in the Payame Noor University (Gonbad Kavoos Branch) who were a member of some virtual social networks. Snowball sampling technique was used to take a sample 100 students with social network memberships to participate in this study. The questionnaire was

Table 1
Cronbach's alpha calculated for each part.

Part	Cronbach's alpha	Range of Questions
Time of usage and login time	0.570	1-6, 10
The safety and satisfaction of the domestic network	0.637	12, 23, 34
The safety and satisfaction of the foreign network	0.623	13, 24,35
Fields of use	0.508	7-9, 20-27
Goals	0.650	22, 28, 29, 32, 33
Parents deal	0.692	30, 33

organized in 35 questions (in six parts) asking for some information on the time spent per day, the sign up date, user's opinions about the domestic networks, user's opinions about the foreign-based networks, usage contexts, social network objectives, and the way parents have dealt with the issue of social networks. Utilizing SPSS statistical software, the questionnaire reliability was obtained via "Cronbach's alpha" test and the results of each part are reported in Table 1. Table 2 provides the gender distribution of students signed up to social networks.

Table 2
Gender distribution of students signed up to social networks

Gender	Number	percentage
Male	38	38%
Female	62	62%
Total	100	100%

Now, working on the student's responses to different questions, the results are investigated.

4.   DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 3 reports, in percentage, the extent to which users are familiar with how to use social networks. Knowing that all participants were members of some social network(s), the obtained results seem to be reasonable and indicate that most of the users are well-familiar with how to use these networks.

Table 3
User's level of familiarity with the network.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Very Low	2	2%
Low	28	28%
High	32	32%
Very High	48	48%

The user's membership durations are reported in Table 4. According to the table, 44% of the users reported that they have been a member of some social networks for 1 to 2 years with just 8% of them been a member of such networks for more than five years; this suggests that most of users have joined these networks just during the recent years.

Table 4
The user's membership duration.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Less than one year	24	24%
One to two years	44	44%
Two to five years	24	24%
More than five years	8	8%

Regarding the user's durations of membership in domestic social networks (reported in Table 5), it was evident that 40% of the users have joined domestic social networks since less than 1 year ago while 34% of them have joined such networks since 1 – 2 years ago. Although the first domestic social network was established about ten years ago, first established in Iran, but most of now active domestic social networks have been set up within the recent years, so that the obtained results concerning the user's durations of membership seems to be reasonable.

Table 5
User's durations of membership in domestic social networks (in number of years).

Level	Frequency	percentage
Less than one year	40	40%
One to two years	34	34%
Two to five years	20	20%
More than five years	6	6%

According to the results, 64% of the users mentioned that they used to login into these networks at sometime between 5:00 PM to 12:00 AM with 1 – 2 hours spent per session; this suggests that the majority of the users login to these networks during off-work hours of the day for the sake of entertainment and leisure. The results are reported in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
The user's time login.

Level	Frequency	percentage
8 Am – 12 PM	2	2%
12 PM – 5 PM	14	14%
5 PM – 12 AM	64	64%
12 AM – 5 AM	20	20%

Table 7
Duration of each session (in number of hours).

Level	Frequency	percentage
Less than one hour	20	20%
One to two hour	34	34%
Two to three hour	16	16%
More than three hour	30	30%

Table 8 presents the reasons why users login to social networks. Based on the table, 34% of the users introduced entertainment and leisure as the main reason for using such networks, while 24% of them argued that they use these networks to rehabilitate old relationships. Of all users surveyed, 22% were looking for maintaining the communications with friends while the remaining 20% use these networks to spread their opinions and gain information. Based on these results, entertainment and leisure represent the main reasons for the users to login to these networks.

Table 8
The reasons why users login to social networks.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Maintaining the communications with friends	22	20%
Rehabilitate old relationships	24	24%
Entertainment and leisure	34	34%
Spread their opinions and gain information	20	22%

Reporting the social networks used by the users, Table 9 indicates that 50% of the users have joined all of these networks while 26% of them have been using foreign-based social networks. This suggests the curiosity and entertainment to be the main reasons for most of the users to join domestic social networks, while they used to utilize reliable foreign-based social networks to serve their communications.

Table 9
Social networks used.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Domestic	22	22%
Valid foreign	26	26%
Other foreign	2	2%
All items	50	50%

Table 10 reports the composition of the user's contact lists. It is evident that 50% of the list is occupied by university colleagues while virtually connected friends comprise 28% of the list. As the statistical population is composed of university students, it seems reasonable to see university colleagues as the main contributors of the contact lists; however, expected to represent a large portion of the contact list, virtually connected friend were seen to be the user's close relatives for most of the cases.

Table 10
Composition of the user's contact lists.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Relatives	14	14%
University colleagues	50	50%
Non-university colleagues	8	8%
Virtual friends	28	28%

Table 11 indicates the level of user'ssatisfaction with the security level provided by domestic social networks. As reported in the table, 50% of the users are not as satisfied with the level of security provided by these networks; however, this low satisfaction level seems reasonable considering the fact that these networks are relatively new. Indicating the level of user's satisfaction with the security level provided by foreign-based social networks, Table 12 shows that 38% of the users are still not as satisfied with the security level provided by these networks, while 30% of them have been highly satisfied. Comparing the results of domestic and foreign-based social networks, one can suggest that foreign-based social networks, rather than domestic one, have provided more acceptable level of security.

Table 11
Level of satisfaction with the security level provided by domestic social networks.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Very Low	34	34%
Low	50	50%
High	14	14%
Very High	2	2%

Table 12
Level of satisfaction with the security level provided by foreign-based social networks.

Level	Frequency	percentage
Very Low	26	26%
Low	38	38%
High	30	30%
Very High	6	6%

5.   CONCLUSION

According to the results obtained from the questionnaires distributed among the students, users were proved to be highly familiar with how to use social networks with 1–2 years of membership in these networks. Most of the users confirmed that they have joined domestic social networks just within the last year. The users spent 1 to 2 hours a day discovering these networks with most of the logins undertaken from 5:00 PM to 12:00 AM. Most of the users recognized their university colleagues as the main contributors of their contact lists. Most of the users referred to entertainment and leisureaspects as well as rehabilitation of old relationships as the main reasons for them to join these networks. Half of the users reported that they have joined and actively use all social networks considered in this study. Even though the users were not as satisfied with the level of security provided by either of domestic or foreign-based social networks, but a comparison on the results indicates that the users have evaluated the foreign-based social network as being slightly more secured compared to their domestic counterparts.

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