

# Cultural Context of Social Media Use: How Do Iranians Adapt and Use Facebook?

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## Abstract

It has been discussed intensively that technology can shape social and in return is being shaped and adapted by its social context of use. Social media technologies have become pervasive in the recent years. It has been discussed in the literature that even very rigid technological artifacts are subject to modifications in different socio-cultural contexts of use. Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become pervasive in the recent years. It is important to understand how technologies such as SNS are being adapted in different cultural contexts. This study concerns adoption, use and adaptation of Facebook among Iranians and reports the preliminary findings of a qualitative study of Facebook use among Iranians. We observed that the use of SNS helps maintaining parallel social realities among Iranians. Although, the use of SNS always involves concerns about security threats from the state.

*Keywords:* social media, social networking sites, cultural context, technology adaptation, Facebook

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## Introduction

The interplay between social and technical has been the subject of intensive studies (Bijker & Law, 1992; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). It has been discussed that technology can shape social and in return is being shaped and adapted by its social context of use. Social media technologies have become pervasive in the recent years. It has been discussed in the literature that even very rigid technological artifacts are subject to modifications in different socio-cultural contexts of use (Akrich, 1992).

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become pervasive in the recent years. Today, more than 840 million users around the world from different socio-cultural backgrounds use Facebook on a universal platform<sup>1</sup>. In some cases, technologies are used differently from the initial purpose of their design (Gordon & Killick, 1993). Thus, it is important to understand how technologies such as SNS are being adapted in different cultural contexts. The study of the adaptation and use of such technologies can reveal overlooked aspects of social media in distant cultural contexts. This study concerns adoption, use and adaptation of Facebook (as one of the most popular social networking sites) among Iranians. This poster reports on the preliminary findings of this study.

## Data Collection and Methods

Collecting data about online social practices on Facebook is not easy for two reasons: First, an important aspect of such social practices is considered private and cannot be observed publicly. Second, companies such as Facebook are reluctant to share data. In this study, qualitative interviews were utilized to understand how Iranians use Facebook.

Considering these limitations, this study followed a stratified quota sampling strategy which is a common practice in qualitative research especially when looking at a small number of subjects (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Patton, 2002). A recent major study on the General Media Use (GMU) in Iran (Wojcieszak,

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<sup>1</sup> S-1 registration statement: <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1326801/000119312512034517/d287954ds1.htm>

Smith & Enayat, 2012) provided general information about media consumption in Iran. The sample for the present study stratified based on the statistics and demographics derived from GMU data set. The aim was to reflect a similar socio-demographic population of SNS users as identified by the GMU study.

For this study, eight users were interviewed. Interviewees were selected from a list compiled through a snowball sampling strategy. The interviews followed a semi-structured model (one face-to-face and seven phone interviews utilizing Skype). Each interview lasted for about an hour. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The preliminary analysis then has been done using Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis software.

Table 1  
*Demographics of participants of the study*

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Education	Location
One	Female	23	Undergraduate degree	Outside Iran
Two	Female	27	Undergraduate degree	Iran
Three	Female	32	Undergraduate degree	Iran
Four	Female	21	High school	Iran
Five	Male	37	Undergraduate degree	Iran
Six	Male	29	Graduate degree	Iran
Seven	Male	23	High school degree	Iran
Eight	Male	22	High school degree	Iran

## Discussion

Given the size of sample and the exploratory nature of this study it is too early to claim about the findings; however the following themes have been observed during the analysis of the data from interviews:

**Parallel realities:** Facebook plays the role of an extension to the social life of many Iranians. This online social life makes it possible to practice those social norms and forms that have been repressed by the official dominant discourse in society. The possibility of maintaining these parallel realities creates very complex social relationships and affects the use of Facebook among users.

**Parallel realities require parallel social representations:** An interesting theme appeared in the interviews is that because of two parallel realities in Iranians' social life they need multiple social representations. For example, in workplace one has to follow the mandatory rules to wear hijab or specific dress code, but in the familial relationship and more private spaces one do not follow those rules. This subtle issue has been ignored in the Facebook design. You can have just one profile picture at a time based on this assumption that you have one social representation. This can be extended to other Muslim cultures as well. Females in Islamic culture have two level of presentation. One should wear hijab in public but can be more relax in the familial settings.

**Security concerns and spying stories:** All of the participants confirm that they know about Facebook surveillance by Iranian authorities. Seven out of eight interviewees indicated that they knew stories that friends or acquaintances faced threats from the state because of using Facebook.

**Security concerns and disguised identities:** Because of the concerns about the use of Facebook, Iranian users become more conscious regarding adding people to their friend lists, they try to confirm the authenticity of the request via other routes such as phone call or email. The number of mutual friends seems not to be a valid strategy to accept friendship requests anymore. Also, many users to protect themselves experienced the change of their name, use of non-distinguishable profile picture and restrict their account search-ability.

**Concerns about Facebook design and violation of privacy:** While most of users were optimistic about improvements in Facebook privacy settings still there are complains about the violation of privacy by Facebook, for example some users consider the side tracker feature in Facebook as a violation of their privacy by revealing their activity that they are not willing to share with others.

**Facebook can be used for business in Iran:** Some users mentioned business uses of Facebook such as fashion design, wedding ceremony services, wedding make-up services, photography services, and information dissemination about events such as music concerts and public events. Considering Facebook as an illegal venue it is interesting how people use Facebook for these purposes and overcome the risks of use.

**Facebook as a source of tension among generations:** Facebook can create tension among younger and older generation mostly based on the image propagated by the state. Due to GMU report 92% of Facebook users are below 40 years old, thus few people over 40 are on Facebook and have a clear image about it. Especially, religious families are more pessimistic about the use of Facebook.

**Facebook as an important channel to stay connected with expatriates:** One of the main functions of the Facebook for all users is to stay connected especially with friends and family abroad. This platform provides a rich channel of information without having direct contact that you can follow your friends, their photos and achievements. Also, it provides a rich channel for young Iranians to learn about living abroad via looking to the expatriate's life on social media. However, people mostly share their special moments on Facebook (vacations, parties and travels) which may create a biased unrepresentative image of joyful lives abroad.

Table 2  
A Summary of Facebook Use among Interviewees

Interviewee	No.1*	No.2	No.3	No.4	No.5	No.6	No.7	No.8
<b>Gender</b>	F	F	F	F	M	M	M	M
<b>Spy Story</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
<b>Circumvention Tools</b>	Proxy tool**	UC Browser	Proxy tool	Proxy tool	VPN	Proxy tool	UC Browser	Proxy tool
	-	VPN	VPN	VPN	Proxy tool	-	-	VPN
<b>Approx. Time spent daily on Facebook</b>	Always Online	2 hours	2 hours	1.5 -2 hours	30-40 min	30-45 min	Always Online	30 min
<b>Connection Type</b>	Broadband	ADSL 256 Kbps	ADSL 512 Kbps	ADSL 256 Kbps	ADSL 128 Kbps	ADSL 256 Kbps	3G	ADSL 1 Mbps
<b>Searchable</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	-	No	-
<b>Using groups to share content</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Writing language***</b>	Pn En	Fa	Fa	Pn En Fa Tu	Fa	Fa En	Pn	Pn En
<b>Mobile access</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No

\* Interviewee No. 1 is living in the US now

\*\* Proxy tools mentioned in the interviews are: Freegate, Sciphone, Web freer, Ultrasurf, Your-freedom and Cocoon

\*\*\* Pn: Penglish (using English alphabet to transliterate Farsi), En: English, Fa: Farsi, Tu: Turkish

## Future Works

To confirm the findings of this study it is necessary to test the observations by a larger sample. This study provided the basis to design a survey to confirm the findings. The next step to pursue this study will be administering an online survey among Iranian Facebook users to collect quantitative about their use of Facebook.

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