Iranian Youth Online: Identity between traditional and modern lifestyles

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Abstract

Presence in, and use of, online environments enabled by the Internet, especially continuously or repeatedly as opposed to leisurely or sporadically, has deep effects on the social, psychological and cultural aspects of Iranian youth. The aim of this article is to report on study findings into the social impacts of Internet use on young people in Iran. The findings generated through qualitative methods, including interviews with ten Iranian youth as well was direct observation and analysis of some Internet texts (in particular blogs), imply that the continuous presence of Iranians online – including interaction and information exchange with other users – has led them to form a modern Iranian identity.

Introduction

In today's media-saturated world, we encounter numerous experiences online that are not accessible through conventional media. The Internet of the present day is a meeting space for the world's citizens, a junction point where millions of people can be found interacting. It is an engaging environment with a broad range of activities: playing games, researching, watching films, listening to songs, conducting business and so on. The general principle of the Internet is that it is designed for open transfer and usage of information; the Internet is a global medium that is relatively open, diverse, dynamic, personal and, simultaneously, universal. This has created numerous reactions in the world of conventional media.

The Internet is not a mere database, rather it is a digital world parallel to the real world. It is a door to an electronic society, and entry does not require a passport. For most of us, as online denizens, even imagining a world without online access is now becoming difficult. The Internet is an inseparable element of the modern era. As a communication tool that has bestowed new qualities and properties to our world and vice versa, it has been under the influence of economic, political, social and cultural structures and systems which in return empowered or weakened these structures (Mohseni, 2008). What differentiates the Internet from other media is the multiple and diverse opportunities that it offers. The Internet is an interactive, reciprocal, spatiotemporally independent multimedia infrastructure that connects local and global dimensions, personal and network qualities. The Internet is not only a medium, it is a space that provides special opportunities that can lead to intimate relationships, sincere and informal friendships, and access to a wide range of information with fewer restrictions and direct experience without a mediator and face-to-face interaction. Two unique aspects of the Internet are virtuality and anonymity; these have created a more dynamic world (Spears *et al.*, 2000).

This paper poses the question: What are the socio-cultural effects of regular online presence and interaction on young users in Iran? If we define identity as our considerations for our personal qualities which are shaped through social interactions, there is no doubt that engaging in online interactions with others who are not known personally has deep influence on the users' mind, especially younger users.
Sherry Turkle, the contemporary socio-psychologist and one of the famous commentators in the field of online sociology, asks 'how is it that computers change us

without changing our life conditions?' (Turkle, 1996, p. 27). The Internet as the most encompassing information and communication technology shows characteristics that reflect modern lifestyles.

Internet access and usage can be considered the cornerstone of a country's transformation from a traditional existence to a modern. The Internet enables people to become acquainted and familiar with new experiences and opportunities. Users encounter people and places that are far from them in terms of time and place. As they interact online and without physical mediators they experience modernity from different and distinct viewpoints, as Giddens (1991) points out.

Internet users in developed countries, because of the seamless connective tissue between real and online worlds, are under the influence of both in parallel. But in Iran as a modern-traditional country – in which many aspects of society are traditional – online access and presence is an opportunity to experience modern lifestyles and societies outside Iran. Because of the Internet's relatively low significance for economic and commercial use in Iran, it is more a space for social interaction and cultural, social, and political debate.

Iranian users, especially young users, gravitate towards the Internet to avoid cultural and political obstacles in their lives and expectations to follow social norms, as well as to appreciate and connect with the world outside their immediate physical locale. Depending on the depth and breadth of their presence on the Internet, users rethink their identities and this in turn changes their lifestyle choices.

The goal of this paper is to understand the social effects of Internet use on Iranian youth. The principal hypothesis of this study is that Internet use and online engagement is a key conduit for Iranian users, particularly young users, to generate, develop and strengthen a modern identity. Further, in our research, the effects of internet use are explained, examined and analysed based on the quality and quantity of internet usage data we collected.

The rationale and analysis of our research activity is informed by social and communication theories that are based on three specific concepts: social and self-identity; online presence; and, the presentation and management of self. Moreover, our conceptual framework is shaped by some of the more significant concepts of modernity and modern identity developed by Giddens (1991) and Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994). Generally our research has lead to the understanding that throughout Iran – a country still reconciling traditional ways of life with modern existence – young Internet users, in particular heavy Internet users – spend a lot of time on the Internet creating, producing and transferring content through the use of blogs, personal websites, chat rooms, online community and social networking sites, and discussion forums. As a result they are little by little becoming more modern, and straying further from some of the key elements of traditional Iranian identity.

The continual use of the Internet that accompanies inhabiting online environments impacts heavily on youth identities and, as a result of this, youth lifestyles. The identities of young people become more reflexive, more changeable, and, more ephemeral through online interaction.

We have also found that users whose online identity reflects their offline identity are more likely to change more often and more deeply than users who maintain anonymity online and/or who use different pseudonyms and characters. Professional users who allow their virtual life and real life to intertwine as if they were inseparable worlds are more likely to experience a deep and lasting impact on their identity and lifestyle.

Research methods
Choosing an appropriate research method for social research depends on several factors. The choice of every research method is dependent on the researcher's beliefs in certain theories, his understanding of the facts and finally, the research subject itself. In certain cases the research method is chosen during the research topic's conceptualisation process.

In this research, given the particular characteristics of online environments, the complexity and novelty of the topic, and the fact that online sociology – especially in Iran – is an abstract subject, qualitative methods, extensive interviews, observation with participation, and content analysis for some Internet texts (specifically, blogs) were performed. The reason for applying qualitative methods in this research is to study the topic in depth and to visualise its detailed but important aspects. We do this in order to obtain a deep understanding of the impacts of Internet use on identity formation. For the empirical data collection component of our research we utilised different research methods in order to generate, and test our hypothesis. Firstly, using quantitative social research methods as a basis we developed a social survey online that was completed by a sample of 305 Iranian Internet users between 18 and 35 years in age. The sample of the population includes heavy users with more than two years experience using the Internet and residents of Iran for whom Internet access is an inseparable part of their everyday lives. All those who participated in our research lived in Iran at the time of the research and completed our online questionnaire voluntarily. Secondly, we conducted a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of ten young users who were regular users of the Internet. These primary methods were complemented with direct observations and content analysis of some Internet texts and young user's blog postings. The key characteristics of those users interviewed in-depth are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key characteristics of study participants

No.	Gender	Ed	Years online	Online presence and rationale	Occupation
1	Male	Msc	7	Photoblog with social and cultural reasons	student
2	Female	Msc	5	Photoblog with social and personal reasons	student
3	Male	Bs	4	Photoblog with social and political reasons	journalist
4	Female	Msc	5	Professional title and general usage	student
5	Female	Bs	4	Blog with social and personal reasons	student
6	Male	Dipl.	7	Photoblog with social, cultural, artistic reasons	photographer
7	Female	Msc	2	Professional title and general usage	employee
8	Female	Bs	7	Blog with social, political, cultural reasons	journalist
9	Male	Bs	7	Art and cultural website	designer
10	Female	Msc	5	Art and literal blog	researcher

The Internet and everyday life

The interviews in this research phase can be divided into two classes. The first is high frequency users who spend most of their time online engaged in Internet chat. The second is a regular user who in addition to spending long periods of time online, also spends notable periods of time maintaining and expanding their relations and interactions with other users. They also try to create a space for expressing views, thoughts, and opinions in scientific, cultural, political and social fields. Thus the Internet is a place for these users to express their views, and represent and compare themselves with others both formally and informally.

For the first group of study participants online interaction media, such as social networking sites, have only recently started to be attractive. At the beginning of use the Internet is still a separable part of their life and they can live without it. However, in later stages the novel experience of being freely exposed to globally-connected online interactions can become more important than the interactions that real life in Iran offers. It should be noted that this kind of usage is mostly associated with very young users, especially teenagers, who have only recently been acquainted with the Internet. As these users grow older their use of the Internet is reduced. They then tend to adjust Internet usage according to their personal needs and find ways to seamlessly shift between online and offline interactions in their everyday life.

The interviewees in this research were long-time users of the Internet. All stated that at the beginning they were occupied mostly with chatting and other interactions on social networking sites, and that later their focus shifted to other web applications and services. Some of their explanations are summarised below.

> The type of my usage has changed, at first it was all chatting, but later I understood there are lots of other applications.
>
> In the beginning the Internet was not for me, just a communication tool for chatting and email.
>
> The type of my consumption has altered, at first I just wrote blogs...
>
> When I first used the Internet, I was 18 years old and only chatting...

It should be noted that the Internet as a communication medium has always been important to young Iranian users. This large extent of Internet usage by Iranian youth can be, at least partially, explained by the lack of social cohesion in Iran – in terms of both quality and quantity. Besides this, online environments transcend geographical boundaries thus providing the possibility of communication with a broad range of other people outside the country. However, online interaction is not only suited to close and intimate friendships through Internet chatting and email but is shaped by more abstract and unified methods like membership in social networking sites and online sub-cultures through posting content on various websites, blogs and electronic magazines. We can see some of the benefits of engaging with an online identity by exploring the comments below:

> So many benefits, first I am a bashful person as a lady, and the Internet provided me the opportunity to communicate with the opposite gender. I can hide behind my online identity, speak and represent a picture that I

want. Communicating with different people helped me much in improving my social skills, becoming familiar with the viewpoints of people who think differently... it's not possible in the real world. Even today when many restrictions have been removed, the real world is not like what I can achieve online. (female, 27, employee)

Its best facility is blogs, which I can use to find friends which is not possible in the real world... in fact, it is much easier online. (male, 23, website designer)

The Internet for me is a great tool, I always loved different people and different cultures... blogs provide amazing communication options which I never thought about. (female, 24, journalist)

For me its best function is creating new relationships with others... I mean the Internet enabled me to do what was not possible before. (male, 24, journalist)

Communicating with people with whom in real world I could never make the acquaintance... (male, 24, student)

The best thing is the communication itself... I believe our development is due to this communication. All my friendships are through the Internet. (female, 22, student)

Online activities and identities
In this section the type of usage and the kinds of online activities are discussed to paint a more nuanced picture of Internet usage in Iran. Here, we also seek to review the differences between the users' online identities and real world identities.

We found two general classes of users, and two ways to discuss the presentation and management of self by these users. The first group is attracted to online chatting. This is because, by virtue of its nature, chatting allows the user to remain anonymous. There is no direct physical representation of the user either through video or voice. These users may have several aliases used for a range of different online roles. The reasons for this may be security, comfort or participation in role playing adventures.

These different identities may be particularly different from the users' self in the real world, and because of the online environment's ability to remove undesirable personal attributes, for example facial features, voice, body shape, these identities are likely to be much closer to the ideal self of the users. It should be noted however, being unknown online and having multiple identities is troublesome in the long term for most users who participated in this study, and loses its attractiveness over time.

When chatting I am completely unknown and do not give my real name to whom I chat... I think Iranian users make a great deal of use of this possibility.

The best feature is being unknown, neither you nor the other side have a certain identity... a nickname gives me the opportunity to speak more easily.

The second group has a different way of using the Internet, and being unknown or having a nickname is not desirable to them, and there is seldom any concern for security. Therefore the virtual and real self become gradually identical. It should be noted that our users in this group have only accessed the Internet for a few years, and some of them later start to maintain an anonymous identity in order to freely express political views or discuss sex or other sensitive topics online. Some interview responses from these users are presented here:

> At first I preferred to be unknown, especially for chatting, but not now. In my blog I use my real name, I do not like anonymous identities. I like my real identity. I think the trend for online anonymity undermines security online. (female, 24, journalist)

> On my blog I was anonymous for a while... I started a blog because I wanted to write, but when I hid my identity I wrote differently... in general I think being real is easier as it is more genuine, in spite of the fact that you may have to be a little conservative... (male, 24, journalist)

> Now I reveal my real identity more often... little by little it tired me and made the Internet untrustable to me. (male, 24, student)

> I usually use my real name... but younger people, they have 10 to 15 names online... (male, 23, website designer)

Because identities in online environments allow us to remove our undesirable attributes and obtain more personal control, independence and freedom, the online presence is created closer to the image of an ideal self. Therefore, a person's online identity is sometimes more desirable than their real identity.

> My online ego and real ego are not the same, as the considerations in real and online worlds are different. My place in the real world differs from the Internet. My online world is closer to my real identity. (female, 27, employee)

> My real ego is different from my online ego in some respects. These two have become identical during the years, but generally speaking my online ego is more comfortable, has more self-confidence and power and is more straightforward. I like it as it is closer to my ideals in my mind which I have not reached in my real... (male, 24, student)

Online environments provide certain spaces and applications for its users in which they can present identities that are close to their real identities or particularly different. The way a person presents their identity online is related to the quality and quantity of use. According to our observations and interviews in this study, it can be concluded that the more a user's real and online identities are similar to each other, the more online activities combine with real life activities, and consequently this has more impact on the user's identity and ultimately their lifestyle. Thus, their access to a modern identity is intensified.

Some views of interviewees that discuss the differences between online and real world interactions in the context of the degree of interdependence, social benefits and disadvantages are presented below.

> I have several interactions online, friends I chat with. I should add I did not have any preference. Just having a set of things in common was enough to chat. The benefit is that you can hide behind a shelter and not worry about others misunderstandings and judgements... but this is its downside, too, as face, voice, physical traits are absent and everything seems completely unreal. (female, 27, employee)

> Most of those I interact with online, are unknown to me. But I see most of them at some stage in the real world... Some of my online relations have changed into long and real friendships... but I have friends who have not seen them in real world because they are very different from me... the most important qualities of online interaction is that it begins with a topic, opinion or thought... (female, 24, journalist)

Personal and social benefits

In this section we discuss the socio-cultural changes that occur in different aspects of a user's identity as a result of regular online presence and interaction. The users we interviewed who have regularly accessed the Internet for a long time starting from their early teenage years – which is when their social personalities are significantly shaped and influenced – find it difficult to separate online and real world interactions. As these influences occur gradually, the users themselves are unconscious of these changes especially in some of the deep layers of personal identity which are not accessible and available explicitly.

An examination of personal identity requires consideration of social interactions with others to be useful. Social interaction helps to establish and form personal identity. Internet access enables social ties to different and varied people, and fostered by this interaction, users come to know themselves more deeply and intimately. Moreover, it allows users to become acquainted with new meanings and philosophies of life, the world and different meanings. This results in easier communications with others and expands their range of interactions with other people both in the real world and online. Therefore they get acquainted with different thought paradigms and lifestyles. The Internet, as a diverse space for users whose real world is monotonous and traditional, encourages an accepting and tolerant *Weltanschauung.*

The Internet transcends geographical, cultural, social and economic boundaries, and allows users to feel less constrained by their real world existence and even encourages them to look beyond it. Supported by online interactions, our study participants expressed feelings of personal independence, liberty, and self-efficacy that affected their lives in the real world. It should be noted however that these impacts differ depending the type and degree of online access.

> The most important impact of the Internet is the fact that I am more social... now I know that despite of people's differences, I can relate to them about values and beliefs... The Internet has opened up a new viewpoint of thinking and acting for me and provided me with two things: more self-awareness, and discovering the hidden aspects of my personality... (female, 27, employee)

> It is difficult for me to grasp how the Internet had changed me, as I am
> not aware of it, but I have achieved a multi-dimensional perspective... I
> have discovered interesting things about people... direct communication
> with people from other cultures has raised the degree of accepting change
> in me... it has opened my mind to new viewpoints... my identity has
> become dynamic and borders are vanishing little by little... (female, 27,
> student)

> My identity has changed, the Internet has transformed my values, my
> family is religious and when I first entered university, I faced numerous
> religious conflicts, but the Internet changed me and reconciled my
> conflicts... facing different and diverse opinions and beliefs... especially
> for me it was a difficult experience and I first resisted it, however the
> Internet changed everything... my blog allows me to receive feedback
> from others, getting influenced by them, and the capacity to appreciate
> this feedbacks. (male, 24, journalist)

> My online presence has changed my social personality. I am nothing
> without the Internet. Through the Internet I have found friends and
> communicated with some groups of people who I could not have talked
> to before due to my level of education... reading blogs daily has taught me
> how to speak with them... (male, 23, website designer)

Responses like these indicate the importance of presence and action online for these
groups of young users. These users, given the amount of time and energy spent on the
Internet, should have a great degree of trust in the online space and its content.
Considering the particular characteristics of the Internet and the fact that all physical
attributes are removed through being anonymous, all kinds of misuse may happen, for
instance forged identity. In this space the specifications of the modern world, that is the
blend of trust and trick is observed. Although it should be noted that comparing to
threats in the real world there are far fewer online threats. Therefore our study
participants find that trust in online spaces, and especially its social interaction qualities,
is much easier to establish than in the real world in Iran.

> Well, I was always frightened... as I did not know who I was chatting to...
> when people are anonymous, these problems always exist, but I trust
> them because I have to... I don't know, maybe because this space is
> something you feel you can trust... (female, 22, student)

> I'm anxious and frightened, because I was close to losing my job and my
> relations with all those who are important to me in the real world because
> of my Internet use... after posting blog entries, I faced many frightening
> issues... but I have to trust in it as I want to use it (female, 24, journalist)

> Every activity online is risky, as you do not know who is the other party...
> I almost trust in nothing online... I trust in it as an information source,
> but in people no, I don't... (male, 23, website designer)

Conclusion

Considering the observations and interviews conducted for this study, it can be concluded that the attributes of online presence and interaction – removal of physical attributes, anonymity, social interactions with people from virtually limitless geographical locations, self-representation through communicating with others and facing unfamiliar spaces – provide Iranian youth with opportunities for transcending geographical borders and social boundaries. Additionally, the Internet enables them to gather a broad range of local, international, general and specialised information not easily accessible any other way in the real world of Iran.

The Internet enables young people in Iran to become aware of micro and macro experiences of modern communities and therefore be influenced by them. These experiences include intimate friendships with various different partners and trust in them, liberty, independence, personal power, and continuous self-reflection. The blend of these experiences between the online and real world has two key outcomes: First, social interactions expand, and second, access to a broad range of information and personal efficacy increases, and thus, little by little transforms the Iranian young users' attitude towards their identity and helps them formulate dynamic and diverse identities. In general, users' attitudes towards their identity change depending on their Internet usage. This indicates the appearance of some key indicators of modern identity as the result of online presence and the use of information technology. Users who spend more time on the Internet, especially those who are likely to share and exchange their views and experiences, are less likely to be limited to prefabricated identities imposed by traditional Iranian values, but are able to transform their identities according to their personal preferences and experiences.

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