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## A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL HARMS OF VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

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### ABSTRACT

The Usage of Virtual social networks has triggered challenges for the users and has caused or intensified social harms during recent years. Identifying these damages would be the first step towards studying the origins, preventing further damages and adopting appropriate countermeasures. The present research is a qualitative study trying to identify the social harms of virtual networks by adopting the grounded theory as the main method and by using in-depth interviews on a purposefully chosen sample of the population. According to the findings, the negative effects of virtual networks on users could be divided into several main groups that include: exposure to cyber harassment, psychological and mental disorders, physical disorders, educational disorders and sexual misconduct. Users' reactions are divided into three categories including positive (reasonable) strategies, negative (irrational) strategies and inability to adopt any strategies. The results show that social isolation, intensive forms of violence (self mutilation or committing suicide), running away from home and divorce, are the main social harms related to the usage of virtual social networks.

**Keywords:** social harm, virtual networks, grounded theory, users

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The information revolution, Increased Internet penetration and the developments in web 2.0 technologies have facilitated communications, increased the demand for media accessibility and triggered new types of networked social communication based on the digital or cyber space at the same time. Individuals, who communicate internet-based and on-line in these digital networks, develop an on-line society in which users are allowed to share any kind of information such as pictures, videos, multimedia files and software to start communications and discover communication addresses of new members. These advantages have probably been the main cause for the rapid advancements of virtual social networks (VSNs) and various types of instant messaging software in Iran like any other countries.

As the statistics demonstrate, the number of VSN users has increased at a very steep slope during recent years. By October 2018, more than 2 billion internet users used digital social media worldwide and the number is increasing rapidly<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>. <https://www.statista.com>

VSNs are very popular in Iran and according to the official records; there were more than 29 million users of digital social media in Iran by July 2018. In the northern province of Mazandaran, 2,200,000 users (more than 68 percent of the whole residents) were connected to the internet by their smart phones and had the potential access to the social media within the same time.

Joining VSNs has triggered challenges for the users and has caused or intensified social harms in Mazandaran during recent years (Razeghi, 2016; Paziresh, 2015; ...). As the official Cyber Police statistics reveal, a considerable portion of the whole non-financial cyber crimes in 2014-2015, was somehow related to VSNs.

According to the above, identifying the social harms related to the VSNs, would be the first step towards studying the origins, preventing further damages and adopting appropriate countermeasures. The present study is trying to identify the main social harms related to VSNs in Mazandaran, the main motivations and intentions of the users joining them, the influential factors affecting users' behavior in VSNs, their reactions to the possible challenges relating to their behavior in VSNs and finally the consequences of risky and damaging behavior in VSNs.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Regarding the social nature of VSNs as the most recent forms of media, the direct influence of the psychological characteristics of individuals on their tendencies towards VSNs, and the undeniable impact of the environment and society on the actions and behavioral habits of individuals, a combination of communication models, as well as sociological and psychological theories are considered in his study. Furthermore, some of the most related theories of social deviances are also reviewed.

Models and theories of communication could be well applied to explain the function of new virtual media. Cultivation Theory<sup>2</sup> predicts that the more time a person spends watching television and being immersed in this mediated world, the more likely that person's views about reality will reflect what is seen on television. Some scholars explore the cultivation effects of different media other than television (e.g. Beullens, Roe, & Van den Bulck, 2011; 2012) in view of the rise of different media and argue that virtual media portrayals affect people in long term, causing some harmful personal behavior and affecting interpersonal relationship. Regarding the popularity of virtual media in the communication era, VSNs could more affect the audience' ideology and value systems.

According to Agenda-setting theory<sup>3</sup>, the media sets the public agenda by telling the audience what to think about. With the huge advances in technology, there are now many new types of media available which can potentially influence the audience in many more ways. In such a situation, there is more chance of individuals' choosing the dominant and frequent paradigms In the VSNs as priorities in their real life.

The Uses and Gratification theory<sup>4</sup> assumes that audience members are not passive consumers of media; rather, they have power over their media consumption and assume an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. The theory holds that audiences are responsible for choosing media to meet their desires and needs to achieve gratification. According to this approach, it can be predicted that today, people use the cyberspace with different motivations. Furthermore, various sociological and psychological variables affect their motivations to choose VSNs.

On the other hand, some sociological theories can also efficiently explain different aspects of virtual media functions and influence.

<sup>2</sup>. G. Gerbner and L. Gross; 1976

<sup>3</sup>. M. McCombs and D. Shaw; 1968

<sup>4</sup>. E. Katz and J. G. Blumler, 1974

According to Bourdieu's<sup>5</sup> theory, new digital media could provide the background for the formation of new habits and thus, change the previous habits' field of actions. Based on Bandura's<sup>6</sup> Social Learning Theory, new media can introduce new behavioral patterns to their users. Regarding the theories related to deviations and crimes, theory of Anomie<sup>7</sup>, states that deviational behaviors are the consequences of lack of ethics or standards in society which eventually leads to anomie. Accordingly, the cultural goals are learned as a result of socialization and in the lack of acceptable sociological options, there is a probability to choose other ways which lead to deviations. The idea is that social connections can prevent deviations and it seems that despite the remarkable effects of virtual media on increasing the social interactions, they could also weaken the sociological connections to a large extent.

Psychological theories can also provide explanations regarding the issue. Considering Maslow's<sup>8</sup> Hierarchy of Needs Theory, it could be supposed that people join VSNs, trying to fulfill the needs for love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization. On the basis of the Psychoanalysis theory, it can be assumed that new media can help users to evacuate negative excitations and on the other hand, trigger fake or damaging excitations. According to Behaviorism, users' continuous activities in VSNs can be related to their needs for rewards such as escape from reality, finding love and entertainment. Based on Cognitive Behavioral Theory, users' psychological conditions such as depression, social anxiety and mental disorders, could lead to problematic usage of cyberspace facilities.

### 3. Literature review

So far, numerous studies have been conducted to verify the effects and consequences of virtual social networking activities. Some of the most recent and most related researches carried out on the subject inside and outside Iran are introduced hereby.

Gholamzadeh Bafghi and Jamalzadeh Bafghi (2018) demonstrated that marital satisfaction in social media members is less than non-members and social media activities increases marital dissatisfaction in the long run. Sharifi and Shahrestani (2017) discovered that there is a meaningful relationship between using Telegram social network and variables damaging family relations, problematic sexual relations, lack of courtesy and lack of real self. Sadeghi and Ameri (2017) concluded that unsafety, aggressive behavior, propagating uncommon norms and values and deviational thoughts are some of the undesirable outcomes of virtual social networking. Razeghi (2017) found that loss of social trust and increased misunderstandings in families, cultural and informational gaps amongst the generations and lack of necessary skills to control children in the cyber space have decreased family safety and caused damages. Thus it is necessary to educate families in such cases. According to Alizadeh (2017): the primary motivations of joining VSNs are curiosity, peer pressure, showing off, being up-to-date, passing and filling leisure time and entertainment and reconstructing communities. The secondary motivations included recovering older relationships, self demonstration, sense of being, release (from something undesired), open discussion, seeking and sharing information and joining virtual communities. Rathore et al (2017) introduced disclosure of private information, cyber harassment, intellectual property infringement, disgrace and threatening social and professional reputation, as the negative effects of social media. Akram and Kumar (2017) figured out some of the negative effects of VSNs namely: loss of real communications, wasting users' time, cyber harassment, virtual addiction, sexual misbehavior, cyber bullying and threatening individual and social safety. Kian et al (2016) also found that most users join VSNs seeking entertainment and amusement and devoting much time in cyber space is the main negative effect of VSNs which can damage the educational process of students. "The

<sup>5</sup>. P. Bourdieu

<sup>6</sup>. A. Bandura

<sup>7</sup>. Anomie

<sup>8</sup>. A. H. Maslow

influence of social networks in suicidal behavior" (2015) is another related research in which the authors concluded that VSNs can enhance the depressed state of the individual which can lead to suicide especially when there is a lack of social support in family, friends and school. Valenzuela et al (2014) who explored the relationship between using social network sites, marriage satisfaction and divorce rates, discovered that using social media is negatively correlated with marriage quality and happiness, and positively correlated with experiencing a troubled relationship and thinking about divorce.

In general, most studies related to the VSNs harms, are quantitative and descriptive and much less qualitative research is conducted on the topic. Furthermore, not much research has been done with the same method, scope and goal of the present study.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Grounded theory is a systematic research method in social sciences which was first articulated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. In order to come up with a grounded theory on the social harms of VSNs in Mazandaran province, first, the main research objectives were set after reviewing available resources, consulting experts and interviewing the officials in related organizations. Thus, the statistics and data needed were collected. Next, it was planned to interview the individuals who confront challenges in VSNs and affected by the related social harms. To do so, a set of open, semi structured interview questions were raised and the research samples were chosen during a period of about four months using theoretical purposeful sampling method. Finally 18 in-depth interviews were conducted. Then, data analysis was done using three open, axial and selective coding processes and the initial themes, categories were extracted and based on the connections, main categories of causal conditions, the central phenomenon, strategies of action and interaction, context, intervening conditions and consequences were identified based on Strauss and Corbin's coding paradigm (1990). Finally, the main story line was drawn and a comprehensive data-based theory was created.

Technically, the qualitative research is evaluated based on certain criteria including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Additionally, authenticity is another factor for evaluating qualitative researches. All these criteria is tried to be considered in the present study by precise documentation of the whole process.

#### **5. FINDINGS**

Totally, 13 women and 5 men accepted to contribute to the present research none of whom had any information on how to use the virtual social media before joining them and had not gone through any kind of educational training on the subject either.

42.8 percent of the respondents had heard about the VSNs from their friends, 28.5 from their friends and family members, 14.2 percent from their family members and 14.2 percent from friends and relatives.

At first, a set of concepts, themes and categories were extracted from the raw data at two primary and secondary coding levels using the open coding technique. Next, at the axial coding stage, one of the categories was selected as the axis of the process based on Strauss and Corbin qualitative coding paradigm (1990). According to the paradigm, the axis or the core category is the category to which all the other categories are somehow related theoretically. The other selected categories are: casual conditions (factors), actions and interactions, context, the intervening conditions and the consequences. Thus the categories were identified as demonstrated in table 1.

**Table 1.** concepts, categories and the core category

Concepts (primary coding)	Concepts (secondary coding)	Main categories	Core category	
Curiosity/ seeking	Curiosity	Users motivations to join VSNS	Joining/ increasing the activities in the VSNS	
entertainment	Entertainment and filling leisure time			
Fill leisure time				
Relieve loneliness				
Following friends and classmates	Peer pressure			
Seeking scientific and imaginative information	Seeking scientific information			
Seeking technical legal information				
Getting the latest scientific and cultural news				
Using new technologies and facilities	Using new information technologies			
Using multimedia technology				
High-speed data transmission				
Reconnecting distant relatives	Making new connections and reconstructing old relationships			
Reconnecting old friends				
Demonstrating capabilities				Self demonstration
Demonstrating achievements and success				
Showing off and drawing attention				
Friendship with the opposite sex with the intention of marrying				Relationships with the opposite sex
Experiencing friendship with the opposite sex				
Membership in technical groups (artistic, cultural, ...)		Joining virtual communities		
Getting access to supernatural and imaginative information				
Joining the groups with the intention of criticism				
Mental and psychological characteristics	Individual limitations	Users' limitations		
personality	Family limitations			
Parents' strictness regarding friendships				
Parents' strictness regarding study materials				
Parents' strictness regarding associations	Social limitations			
Difficulties in making and maintaining connections with the opposite sex				
Impossibility of numerous friendship relations with the opposite sex				
Prohibitions on relations with the opposite sex outside marriage				
Radio & TV networks limited to IRIB	Media limitations			
Satellite Jamming				
Web filtering	Lack of information about the cyber space	Lack of media literacy		
Unfamiliarity with the cyber space				
Lack of needed skills to use VSNS	Lack of healthy relationship with the family			
Parents' excessive strictness				
Lack of healthy relationship with parents				
Lack of healthy marital relationship	Severe mood and psychological disorders	Negative effects of virtual social networking		
anger				
Too much sensitivity and obsessions				
Pessimism and distrust				
Depression				
Regrets, disappointment and guilty conscience				
Scary and annoying thoughts				

Continuous crying					
Meaninglessness of life					
Lack of enjoyment of life					
Inability to concentrate					
Anxiousness and unrest					
Fear and hatred of males					
Aggressiveness and bad temper					
isolation					
Suicidal ideation					
Sleep disorder					
Chewing finger nails and injuring fingertips					Severe Physical disorders
Growing gray hair					
Tremors in hands and feet					
Predisposing to the development of MS disease					
Relationship with the opposite sex in VSNs					Sexual misbehavior
Exhibitionism					Social isolation
Weak connections or Disconnections with the family					
Weak connections or disconnection with friends					
Educational failure					Educational disorders
Sharing the problem with police consultants in schools	consulting	Positive (sensible) solutions	Users' reactions to the challenges and problems related to their virtual social networking		
Consultations with parents					
Referring to the police consulting service					
Referring to cyber police and setting official complaint					
Consulting with private psychologists and consultants					
Decreasing or stopping activities in VSNs					Changing behavior in cyber
Behaving more carefully in cyber connections					
Spending less time in VSNs					
Avoiding to share private information in VSNs					
Using VSNs under parents' supervision					
Inability to identify the reason for the problem and continuing the previous activities in VSNs	Inability to find solutions to the problems				
Inability to find the solution					
Verbal conflict with parents, partner or other family members	violence Verbal/ physical	Negative (unreasonable) solutions			
physical conflict with parents, partner or other family members					
Physical punishments from parents					
self mutilation					
Committing suicide					
Threatening to escape/ running away from home	Escape from home				
Threatening to divorce	divorce				
divorce					

Joining/ increasing the activities in the VSNs



## 6. RESULTS

As described formerly in Strauss and Corbin qualitative coding paradigm (1990), six different categories were identified based on the collected qualitative data. Accordingly, Negative effects of virtual social networking were identified as "the main category (core)", Users' motivations to join VSNs were identified as "the causal conditions (factors)", Users' different limitations as the "context", variables such as "gender", "age", "family connections", "media literacy" and "the amount of time spent in social networking" as the "intervening conditions", Users' reactions to the challenges and problems related to their virtual social networking, as "actions and interactions", and finally, the consequences of harmful social networking (social harms) were identified as "the main Phenomenon".

Accordingly, the social harms related to the virtual social networking in Mazandaran province was theoretically modeled as shown in figure 1.

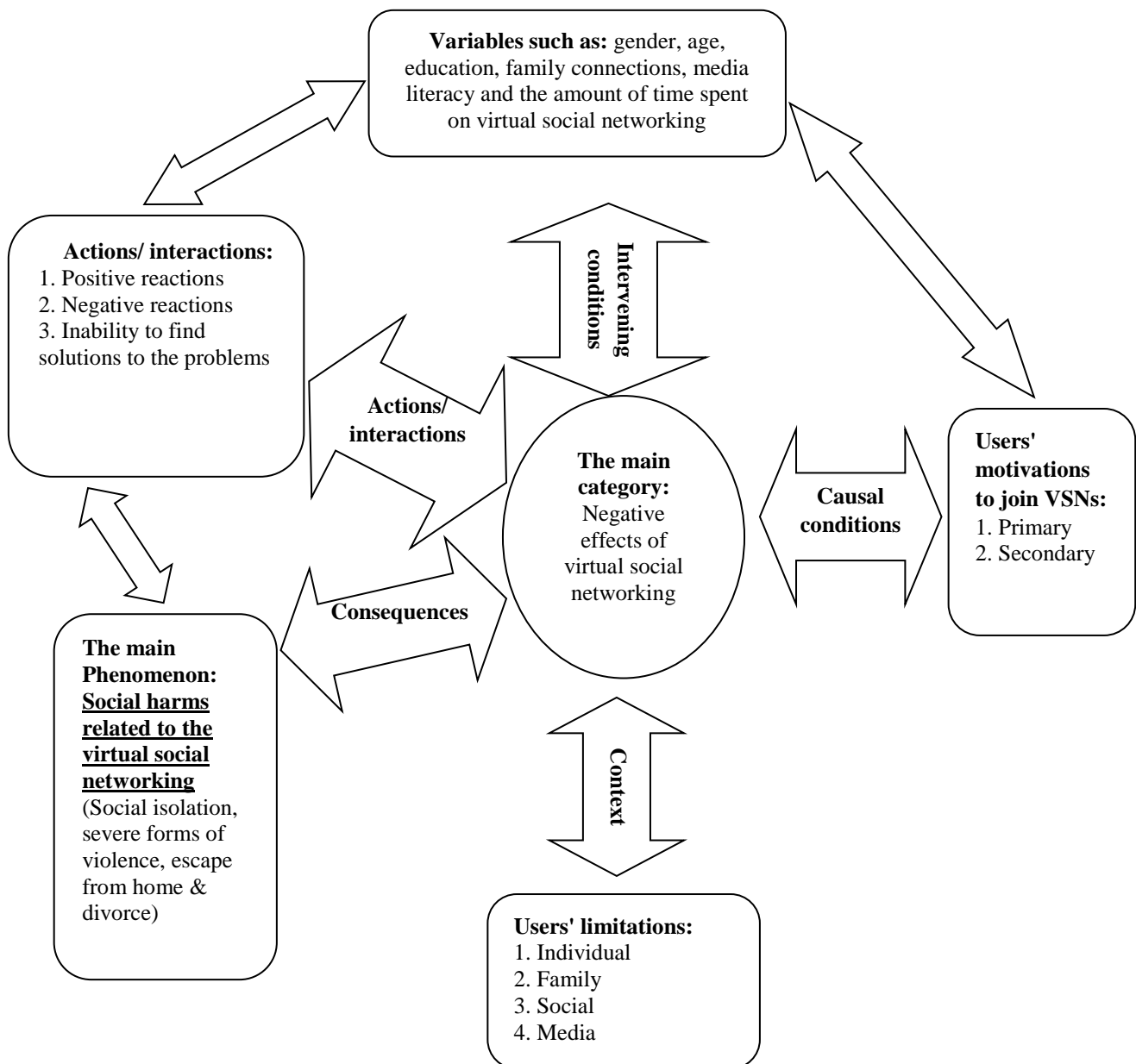


Figure 1- theoretical model of the social harms related to the virtual social networking

As demonstrated in table 1 and figure 1, social isolation (due to Weak connections or Disconnections with the family and/or friends), severe violence (including self mutilation and/or

committing suicide), escape from home and finally, divorce, are the main social harms related to VSNs in Mazandaran province. Furthermore, Users motivations to join VSNs, can be divided into primary (curiosity, Entertainment and filling leisure time, Peer pressure, Seeking scientific information and Using new information technologies) and secondary (Making new connections and reconstructing old relationships, Self demonstration, Relationships with the opposite sex and Joining virtual communities). On the other hand, Users' different limitations, closely connected with their motivations, provide certain conditions (as the context) for the users to join the VSNs. These include: individual, family, social and media limitations. Furthermore, variables such as gender, age, educational background, family relationships, media literacy and the amount of time spent in social networking, affect users' reactions to the challenges in VSNs. Eventually, users, with different motivations and affected by the mentioned factors, join VSNs in order to confront their limitations and fulfill their needs.

Challenges and negative effects associated with the users' social networking, identified as the main phenomenon in the present study, can be divided into several categories according to the findings. These categories include: exposure to cyber harassment, psychological and mental disorders, physical disorders, educational disorders and sexual misconduct. Facing mentioned challenges and troubles, VSN Users respond in three different ways which can be categorized as: positive (sensible) reactions, negative (irrational) reactions and inability to react.

As the findings demonstrate, insensible and troublesome activities in VSNs could gradually create a type of mental dependency or addiction, violate users' privacy, threaten the families and prepare the grounds for a variety of individual and social deviations and anomalies. Other related harms include reducing face-to-face communications, breeding distrust in couples' relationships and threatening identities. These findings are consistent with the previous studies.

## **7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

According to the findings, curiosity and entertainment-seeking are among the primary motivations for joining VSNs. Obviously, it should be one of the first priorities for the authorities and those involves in policy making to provide contexts for satisfying the social needs related to recreation and entertainment. All levels of society should be provided with a great variety of options for entertainment; amusing options which could create moments of fun while satisfying their curiosity, helping them to get rid of negative energy and providing mental and physical refreshment much needed to continue their routine life. Unfortunately, people are currently under severe mental and physical stress caused by the unstable economic and social conditions and usually, there are no equal opportunities for affordable entertainments such as sports and artistic or cultural activities for everyone in the society. Meanwhile, everybody can much more easily and affordably find various entertaining opportunities in VSNs which is one of the main reasons for troublesome and addictive uses of virtual networks and could have irreversible harms and consequences. Thus, enhancing social networking awareness among families is an essential need to prevent the problems and social harms related to VSNs. Duo to the nature of new media, the audience are bombarded with information and thus lose their concentration and often unconsciously focus on certain concepts intended by the media. In such situations, increasing the critical thinking among the audience is an essential need to protect them against the potential threats by focusing on their own purposes and demands.

Moreover, the relationship with the opposite sex is restricted to a great extent in the current situation in Iran, by the traditional Iranian culture and the Islamic law. In this context, providing the potential opportunities for unlimited interactions and unrestricted relationships with the opposite sex, the VSNs can easily turn in to means of uncontrollable and harmful relationships for the uneducated audience. In other words, as admitted by the scholars and the official authorities, while many of the users suffer from a lack of essential media literacy to manage their social networking, the VSNs can provide them with the opportunities to release their possibly repressed individual and



social complexes in inappropriate modes which may lead to different social harms. Doing more professional research, applying efficient methods to control the social networking esp. for young users, increasing social tolerance and media literacy, and paying more attention to educating VSNs users are some of the solutions to the problems mentioned.

The virtual social networks provide their users with proper situations for attracting attention and getting support. While any user may potentially suffer from loneliness, depression or many other mental and psychological disorders, and concerning the inevitable influence of such problems on people's behavior in VSNs, it is of great importance to increase the media literacy of all users including these groups and help them to manage their cyber activities while providing the social media users with the means to identify unsafe or problematic situations and avoid them.

Furthermore, according to the findings, preparing the situation for healthy and friendly relationship among family members, esp. between the parents and children, is a major factor in reducing the amount of users (at least children and young adults) affected by unsafe virtual activities and consequent individual and social harms. As previously mentioned, since Iran is a family oriented country, enhancing the awareness of families about the new media, and their functions, opportunities and threats, would be an essential supplementary action. Evidently, other related institutions and organizations responsible for education and broadcasting play an important role in this case.

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