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# Facebook under Censorship

A survey study on motivations of use

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## Introduction

Facebook has demonstrated its charm as a social networking website all over the world. Yet, for some reason, it has been banned by the governments of certain areas. Interestingly however, there are a significant number of people who are still choosing to use Facebook even if due to local prohibition, they cannot directly access the website. Iran, as one of the countries which have prohibited Facebook for its users, is facing an increasing traffic of data to Facebook since the rise of this popular social network. There is no official statistic that would show the actual number of Iranians which are involved in using Facebook, but according to Iranian officials, seventeen million of Iranians have Facebook accounts by October 2011, many of which are actively using Facebook. A referenceable example of users growth in this area could be the Facebook page of a satirical TV show called "Parazit", broadcasting on a weekly base, and mocking politicians and high-ranked people in the Iranian government. Since they started their Facebook page in 2009, well over 700,000 Facebook users have become a member of it, and according to the reports, it has 17 million times visit in month. Considering the difficulties that users should go through to access this prohibited website, the stats above raises several questions among the most important ones are the effectiveness of Internet censorship, and users' motivations in accessing the restricted websites. Having understood the potential research in this topic, we decided to conduct a survey on the topic Iranian users' reasons and motivations in using Facebook, hoping to find a different set of motivations in using of this social network under censorship, than those studied universally with users that have an easy and care-free access.

In order to understand the general reasons for which users use Facebook, we looked into some literature studies done with an inclusive sample under study. In one recent study, Joinson (2008) by applying the Uses and Gratifications theory conducted a two-stage survey. He asked the participants to generate and later on rate a list of their motivations of use, and formed a set of profiles of specific users and gratifications.

Uses and gratifications theory is an approach that is used to understand mass communication. Katz's et al., (1974) postulate that individuals mix and match uses with goals, according to specific context, needs, social backgrounds and so on. More recently, Joinson (2008) states that "uses and gratifications" refers to the motivations of specific uses and the satisfaction of people gain from such uses. Other similar studies also show the convergence in the conclusion that users play an active role in choosing and using the media. With the rapid development of new media today, many researchers are making effort to extend the theory to adapt the new technology. Ruggiero (2000) believes that uses and gratifications have always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communication medium. According to (LaRose & Eastin, 2004), the uses and gratifications approach has been extended to explain the Internet usage.

Facing the time limitation and access issues to the target audience, we decided to use Joinson's created profiles or the gratifications under those to find out if users in Iran would have the same usage habits. However, we modified some of the uses and gratification by adding details

to them, so to better understand the participants' motivations. For example, we modified Organizing or Join Events, by dividing events into three categories of public political and public social events, and the private social events, knowing that political event could have different uses and gratification among Iranian population.

We also conducted the survey with a similar sample of Indian users of Facebook, so that we would have an idea of how the results could make a difference in a country where Facebook is not banned.

Besides the questions about the Iranian participants' frequency of use of Facebook, we also asked their opinions about the change that came about by the access restriction imposed by the government, in both frequency and the form of use. Out of no surprise, the majority of participants stated that the ban had not had affected their use of the social network.

The reasons for which Facebook is blocked in Iran was another question we asked our from the participants in Iran. The use of unreal names was also a question answer to which could give us some ideas about the gratifications in both countries.

## Method

Since our target population was those Iranians who use internet facing censorship, we decided to publish the survey only to a sample of those respondents. However due to the fact that most of these user if not all would be using bypassing methods, filtering them out based on IP was impossible. Therefore we published the survey on a few pages in Facebook , Google+, and Google reader, where participants could be among friends of non-friends. We also contacted those friends that we were aware of them being in Iran during and before the time of study, using messengers, and other social networking means.

The survey was open to participants during a three-day period starting on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2011. The questionnaire was translated from an originally written in English to Persian so that we would eliminate the possibilities of misinterpretation due to respondents' different translation capabilities.

Participants in India were also selected through a similar method. However they responded to the English survey during a single day that it was open online. Although 40 participants responded to the questions, we omitted the records for three participants that were over 34 years old to have a similar sample with regard to the age distribution and number of respondents.

The whole process of designing questions and accepting responses was done using Google documents provided forms.

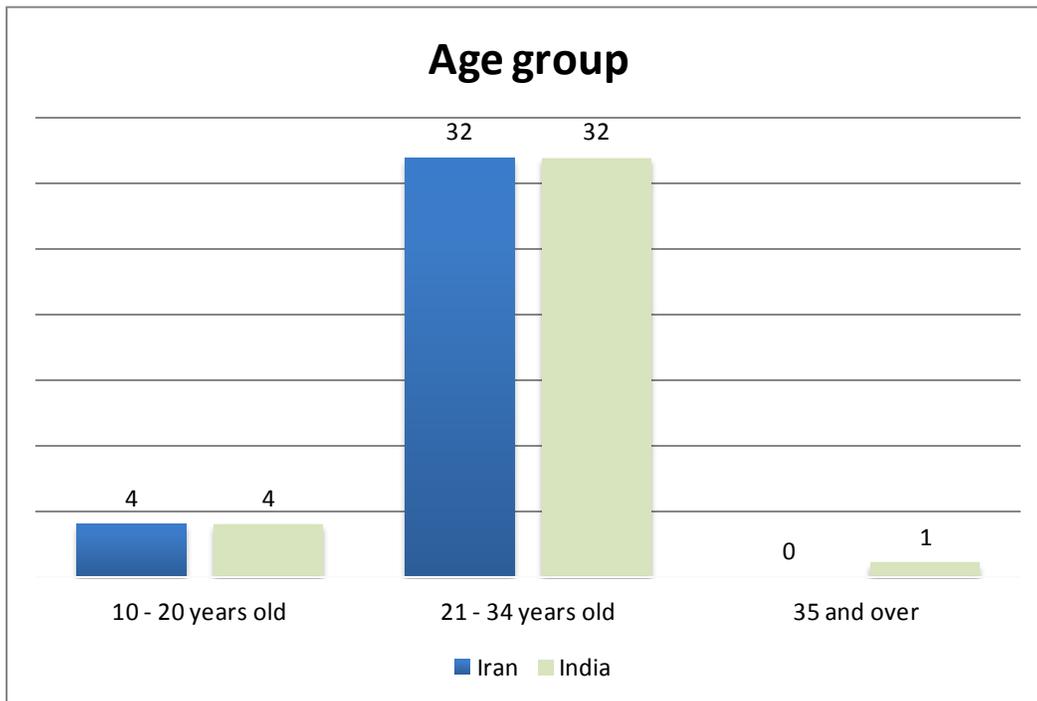
Respondents were assured that their identities would not be discovered neither to the research team or any other third party. We also provided them with an email address in case they would need to contact us.

### Demographic:

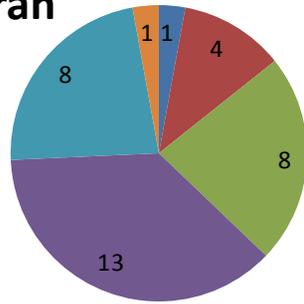
We had around 75 participants, among which 4 took part in the pilot study, 2 from each country. Out of them 36 were from Iran and 37 from India. Our demographic questions started with gender question and for that from Iran we had maximum of females participating and from India we had maximum of males participating in the survey.

The next demographic question was regarding age group. From Iran and India we had maximum participants in between the age group of 21-34. The third demographic question asked was regarding the level of education. Among 36 Iranian participants 13 had done bachelor's, 8 had master's degree, 8 had some other degree. Among 37 Indian participants 21 had bachelors, 12 responded for master's degree, 4 were in higher secondary.

The penultimate demographic question was about marital status. From Iran 25 participants were single whereas 32 responded being single in India. We had 7 married Iranian and 4 married Indian participants. The last demographic question was about Job description. We had around 10 students, 7 engineers, 8 employees from Iran whereas from India there were 23 private sector and 12 students' participants.

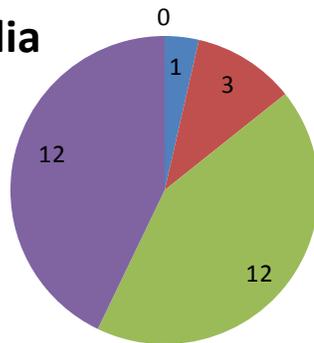


### Iran



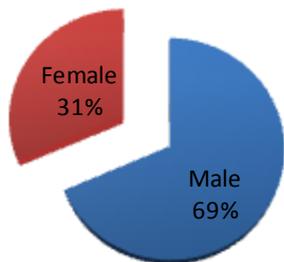
- high school diploma
- Diploma
- some university degree
- bachelor
- masters
- phd or higher

### India

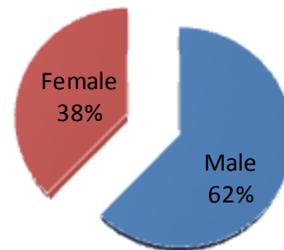


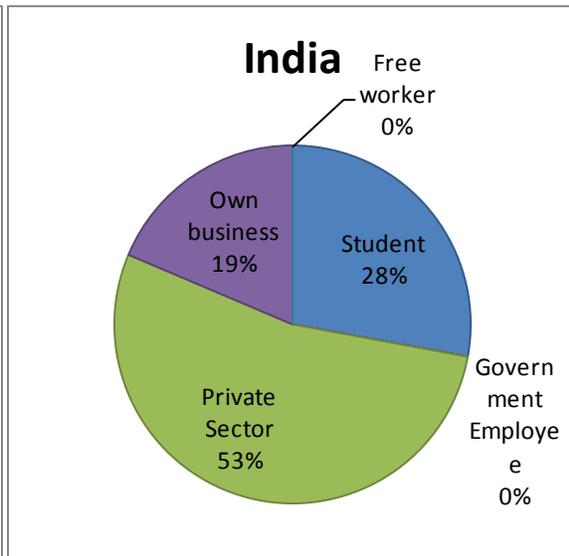
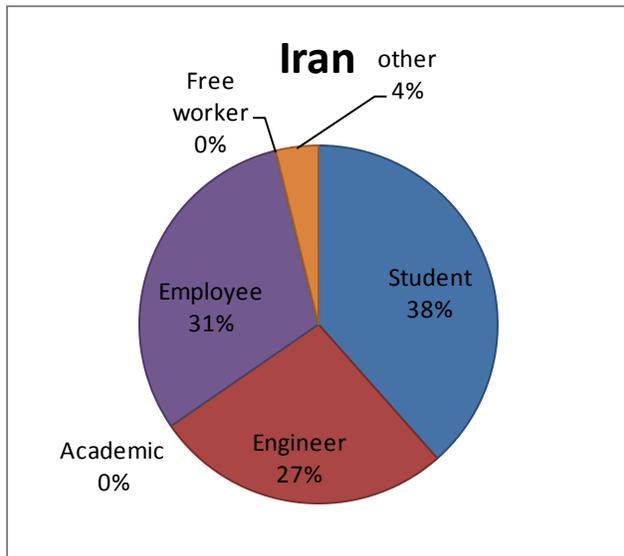
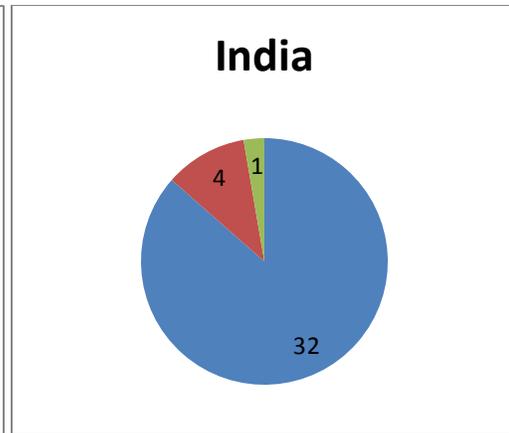
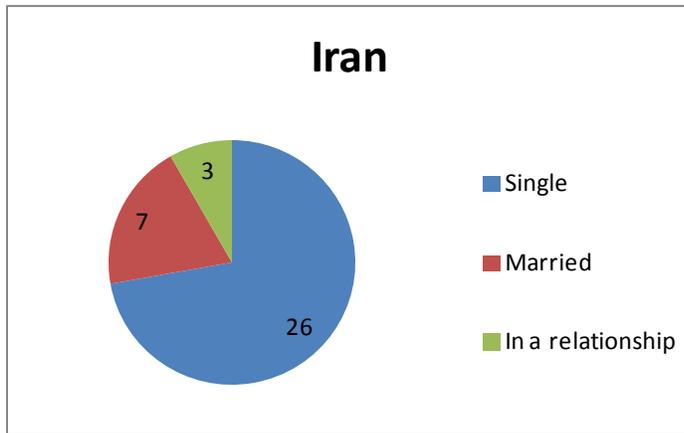
- high school diploma
- Higher secondary
- bachelor
- masters
- phd or higher

### Iran



### India



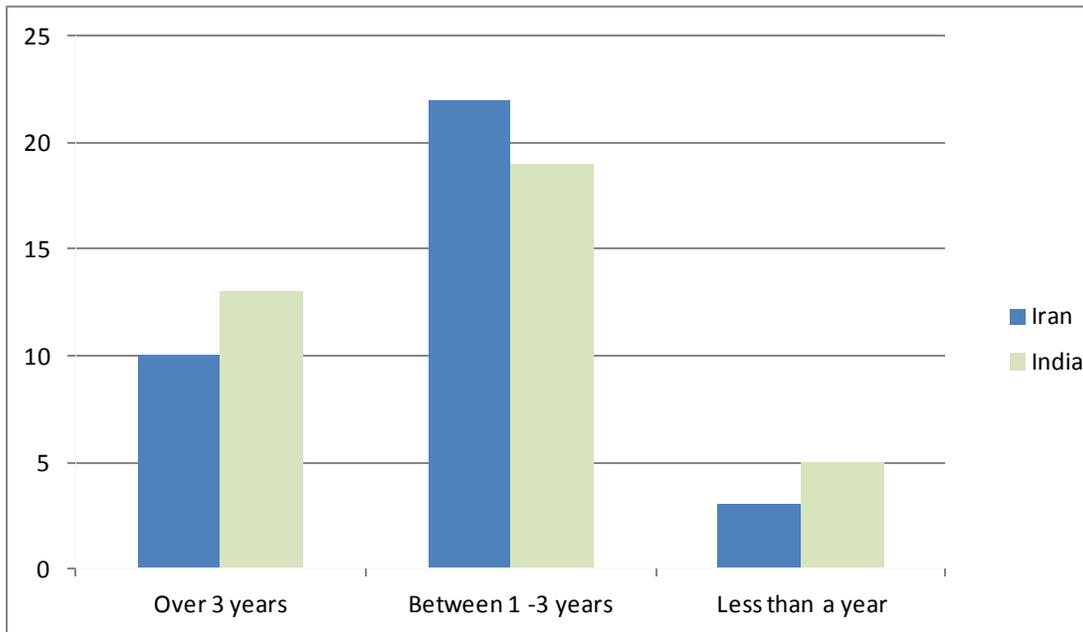


## Results

We asked 11 questions of our participants in Iran, and 10 questions from the Indian participants.

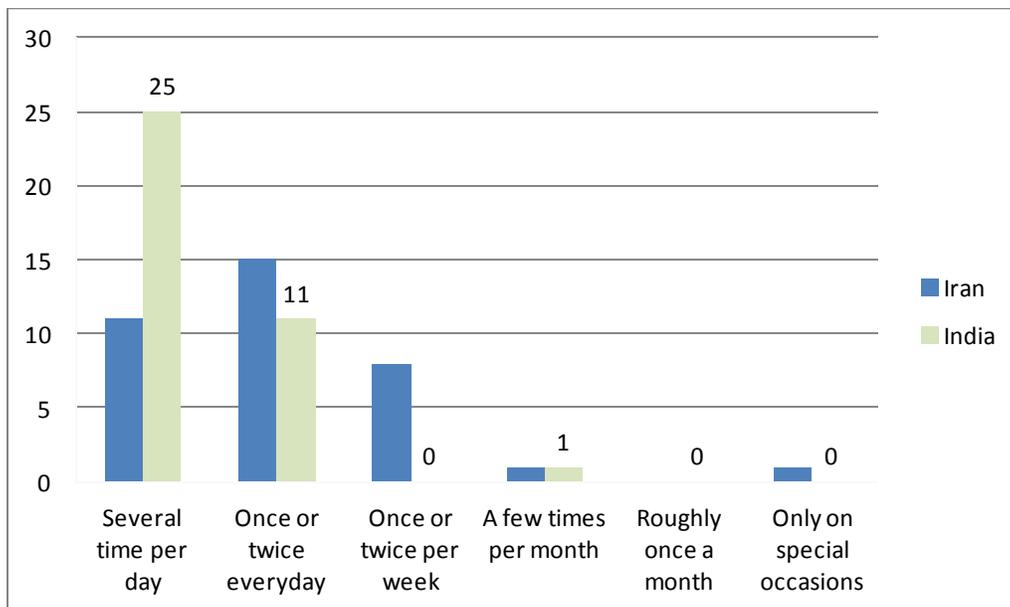
### 1. For how long have you been actively using Facebook?

10 out of 36 Iranian participants, claimed to be a user of Facebook for 3 year or more, while 22 said to be Facebook users of between 1-3 years. Only 3 participants had newly joined Facebook. A similar pattern of usage can be found with Indian participants answer to this question.



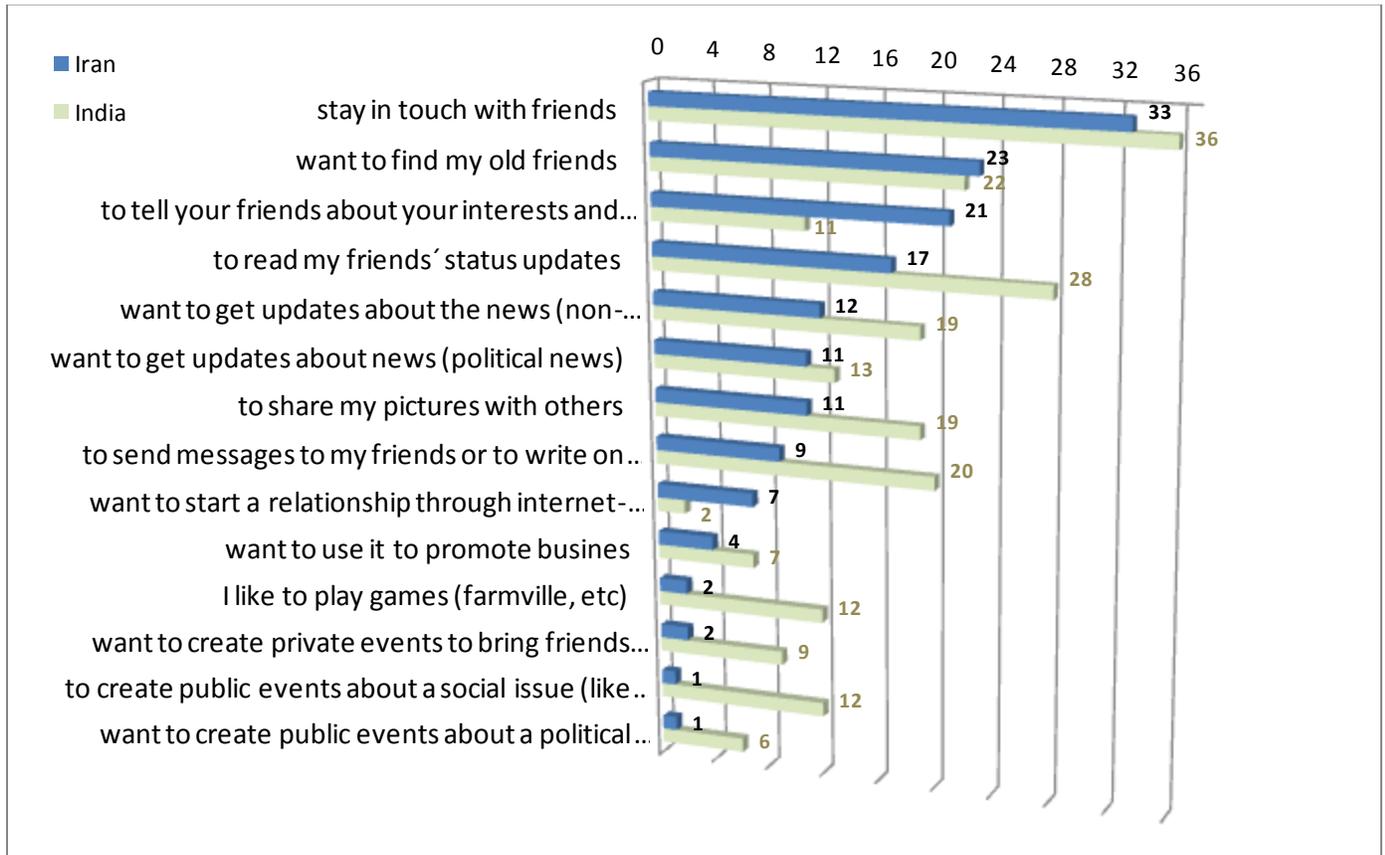
**2. How often do you log into facebook considering your recent years logging in habit?**

As it can be seen, the majority of participants are among those who use Facebook on a regular daily base. One reason for this distribution can be the limited time for which the survey was opened to collect participants' answers!





### 3. which of the following terms best describe(s) your motivations for using Facebook?



We asked users in both countries to select as many of those listed gratifications that can be correspond to their motivations of use. The similarities and differences on different criteria

The result shows that the most important uses and gratifications among both Iranians and Indian users are similarly what Joinson considers as "Social Connection". These are uses like staying in touch with friends, or the interest to find old friends. There are though, differences existed among lower-voted gratifications between the two countries. For example creating events, and playing games seem to be of the least popular usage among Iranian users, while "starting a new relationship" among indian users seems not to be so practical using Facebook.

We can supply different contingencies to these differences in uses. Lack of powerful and not-banned social networks in Iran that would be dedicated to Internet-dating could be a reason of Facebook users' tendency to use Facebook as a dating platform. The infrequency of use which could be a result of heavy filtering could in turn have resulted in users' reluctance in creating or joining events as they may not be notified in time about the event. The same factor could be the ground for users' lack of interest in playing games in Facebook; particularly when we consider that some games require the simultaneous presence of collaborative or competing users in Facebook.

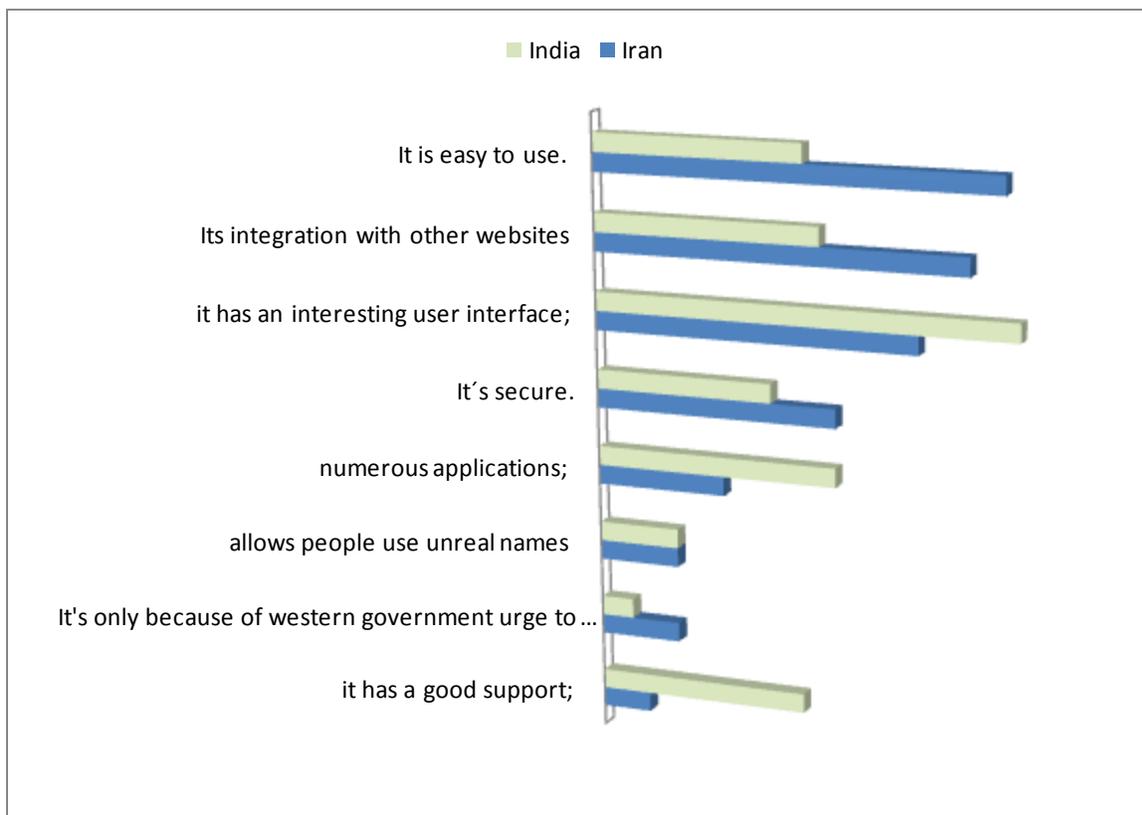
In spite of a general assumption that considers Facebook as a potential means to be the news discovery media, only one third of users in both countries seems to be interested to use Facebook to get updates on politic-related news. The situation gets even worse when we look for participants that organize Facebook events on political issues. Six participants of participants in India, and only one participant in

Iran which constitutes 2% of the whole sample, used Facebook to create or join political events. This of course may have confounded by factors like participants' unwillingness in revealing their political intentions, or other affecting factors that could not be controlled in a low-constraint study such as this one.

We also asked participants to add reasons and motivations they think exist aside from what we proposed. Comments were mostly some concrete ideas of gratification profiles discussed earlier. For example, a user said that he was "curious to know what has happened" during the time of his absence; or another participant mentioned about the large number of Iranians leaving abroad and that Facebook provides him an opportunity to get to know about the quality of their lives and studies.

#### 4. Which characteristic of Facebook could be the reason (s) for it being successful?

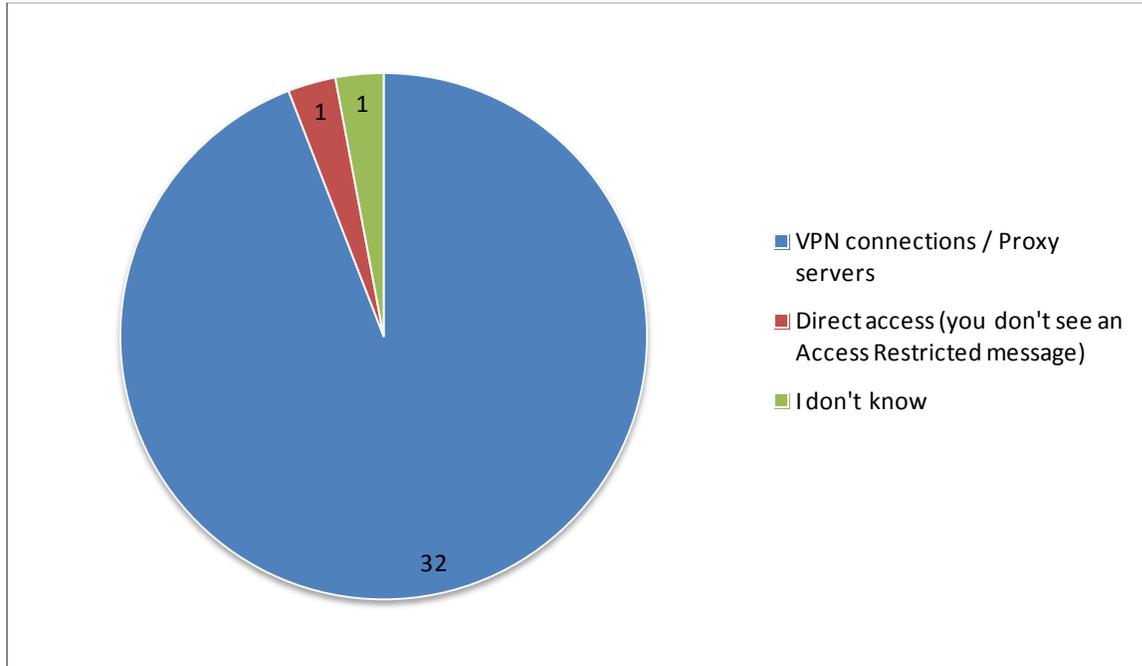
We asked this question to have an indirect understanding of what participants' concerns in using Facebook are.



Interestingly enough, the results for the Iranian population shows a similar pattern to that of Indian sample. Being "easy to use", having a "integration with other websites", and "an interesting UI" are all among the most important reasons in users' opinion for Facebook to have been successful. This implies upon a general tendency to those aspects of social design that promotes "usability".

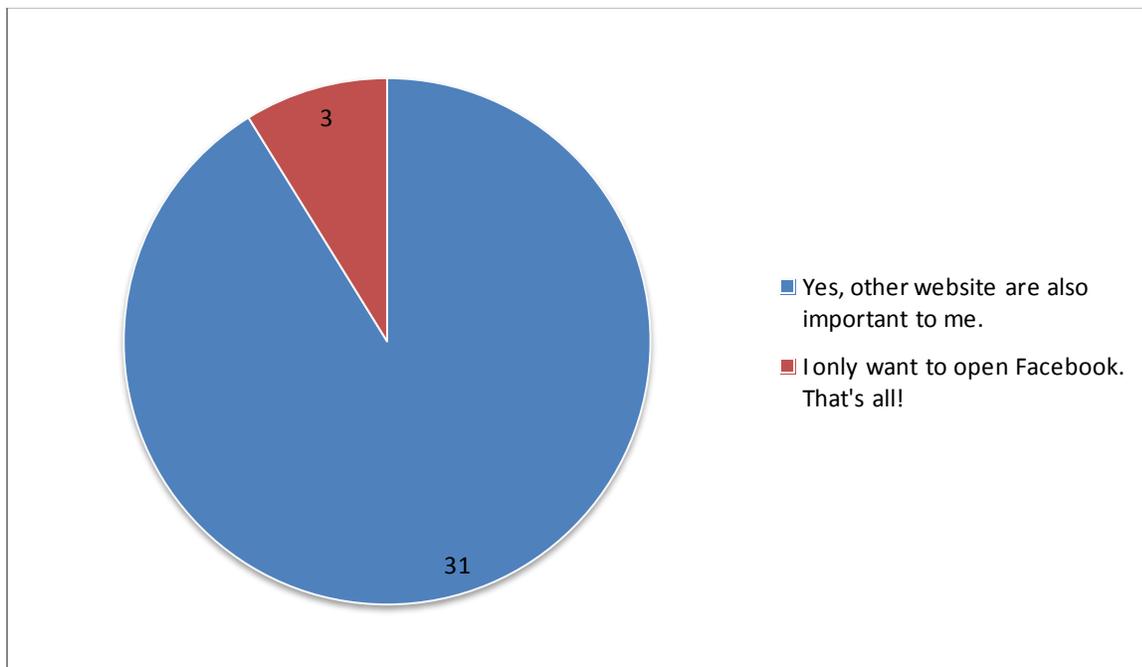
Although Facebook security is not among those prioritized aspects of success, it still is a concern to many users.

#### 4. Which method do you use to access Facebook?

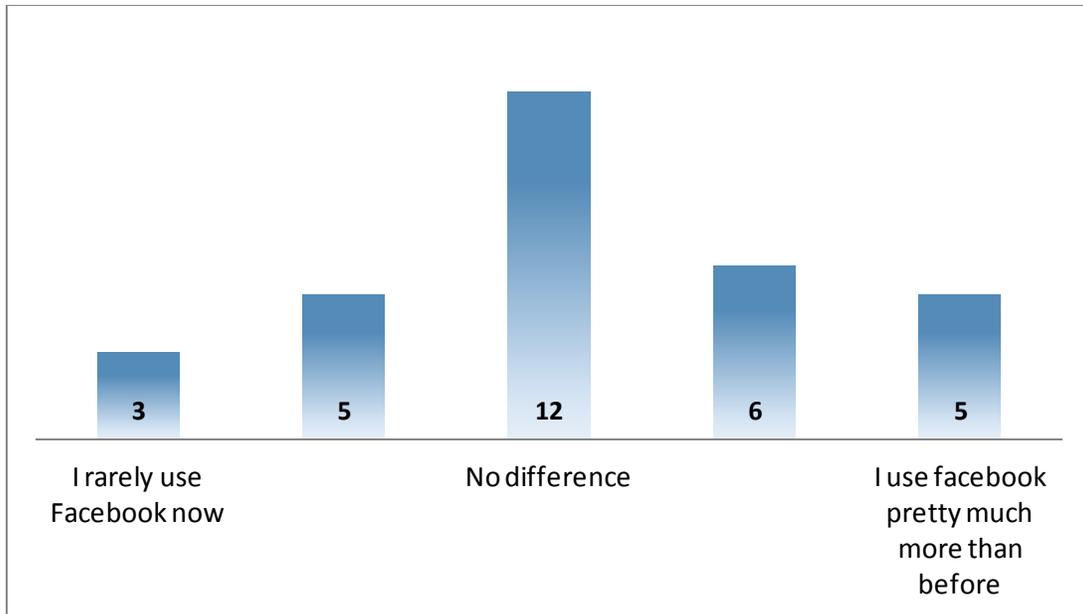


#### 5. Do you use proxy methods to bypass other blocked websites as well?

We wanted to know if users' main activity among those prohibited ones was only to access Facebook, or were it merely a part of their use of Internet.

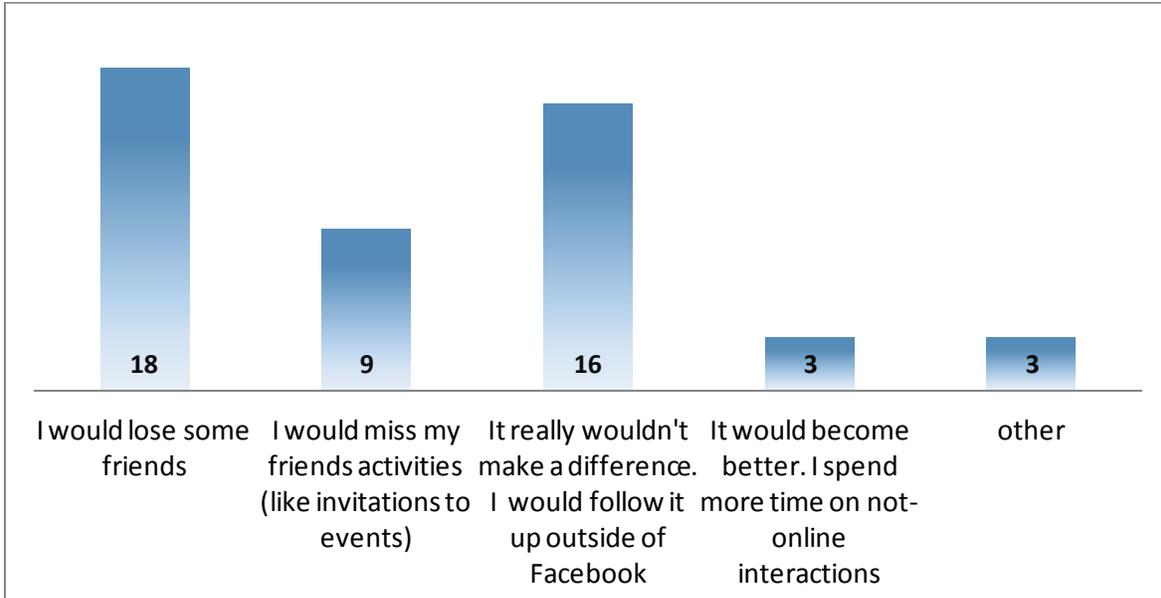


#### 6. If you have been using Facebook since before it was banned, how do you think the access restriction has affected your surfing habits?



In answering the question above, a majority of 12 participants that access restriction has not affected their patterns of use.

**7. If your access to Facebook was completely blocked, how do you think your social Interaction would change?**



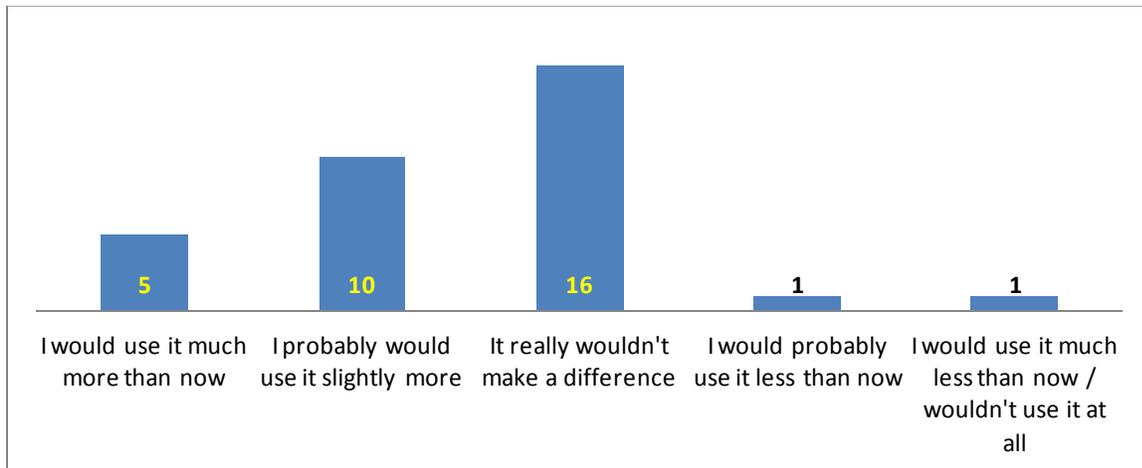
Well under 50% of participants stated that in case of a full-restricted access to Facebook, they wouldn't feel any change in their social interaction. This could have at least two interpretations:

1. the group are so "not active" on Facebook so that they would not feel a piece of puzzle missing.
2. The friends they have on Facebook, are the same one they interact outside.
3. Three participants replied to the question by their own words:

- *In an enclosed scope like what we have in Iran, Facebook can simplify the So if it got blocked, I wouldn't have a chance to get to know the people around social interactions.*
- *The possibility of discussing and receiving constant feedback would be gone. The level of my relationship with friends would noticeably sink .*
- *The communication would be limited to people I interact in a face-to-face method.*

**8. If the prohibition of Facebook was removed, how do you think your frequency of using it would change?**

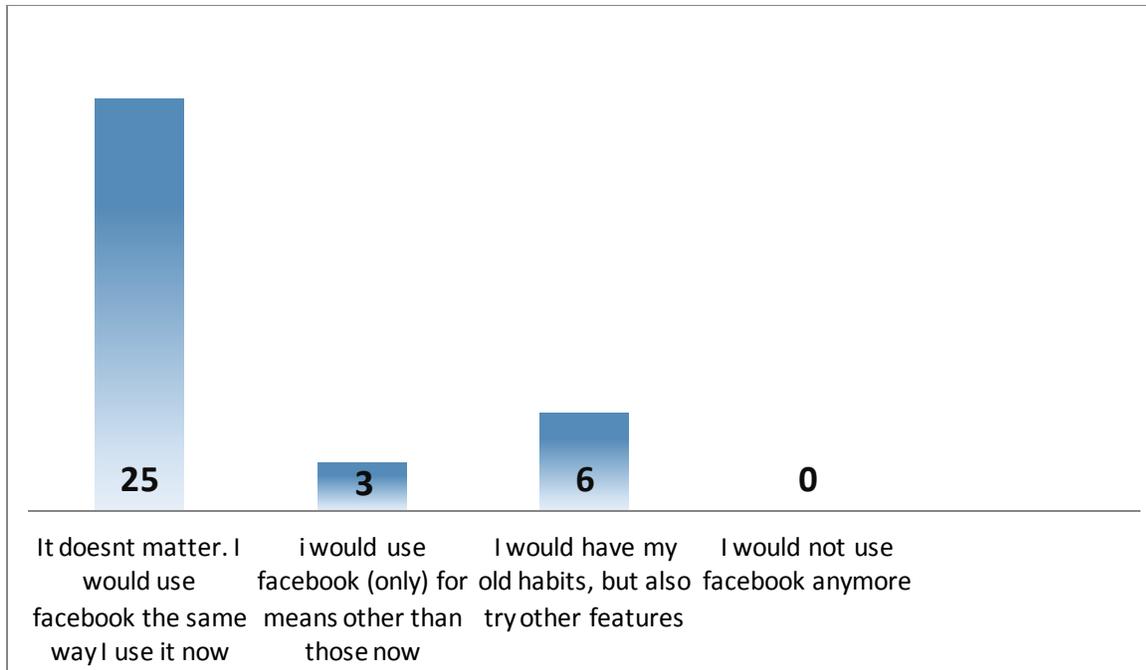
This question which was asked only from Iranian participants, designed to see how participants evaluate the frequency of their own use of Facebook in compare to a prohibition-free situation. What we thought we would achieve by this was a subjective measurement of the how the current ban has affected users' use of Facebook. This of course could not be very accurate as there exists certainly a subset of Facebook users who have not ever experienced surfing a free Facebook, and consequently would have no clear idea of the possible changes in their use of it.



Taking into considerations the limitations above, seeing that the majority of participants, – almost 45% of them – have voted for the “no difference” answer, could give us the idea that users suppose that they spend enough time on Facebook even when they use the cumbersome method of using proxies, and bypassing software (which usually leads to more time wasted struggling with the slow loading of contents on Facebook).

**8. If the prohibition of Facebook was removed, how do you think the form of your usage would change**

Along with the previous question, we also asked if removing the prohibition would change the way users use Facebook. For obvious reasons, the answer to this questions is also can be confounded by those users that have no idea of Facebook under no-prohibition policy, and therefore could not truly reflects the actual decision-making.



The factor above could be the reason that more than 25 participants out of 29 have chosen the neutral reply of "it doesn't matter"! But relying on participants' current response, we could conclude that users are mostly satisfied with what they can do on Facebook, despite filtering.

However, to our surprise, three participants said that they would use Facebook "only" to perform the tasks they cannot/prefer not to do. This group of students could be somehow bound to use Facebook in its traditional way.

Also, 6 participants said that they would be interested to use Facebook known features, as well as those uses and gratifications which they didn't want/were not able to work with. This in turn could be the result of social/political restrictions, or simply because of technical limitations to easily access Facebook.

In addition to the affecting factor stated for the previous question, we can discuss that users may be satisfied with what they do, they may not be aware of all Facebook capabilities, and how powerful and efficient it can be.

Next, we asked Iranian participants to provide their votes for the reason behind the ban. A 5 level Likert Scale was used.

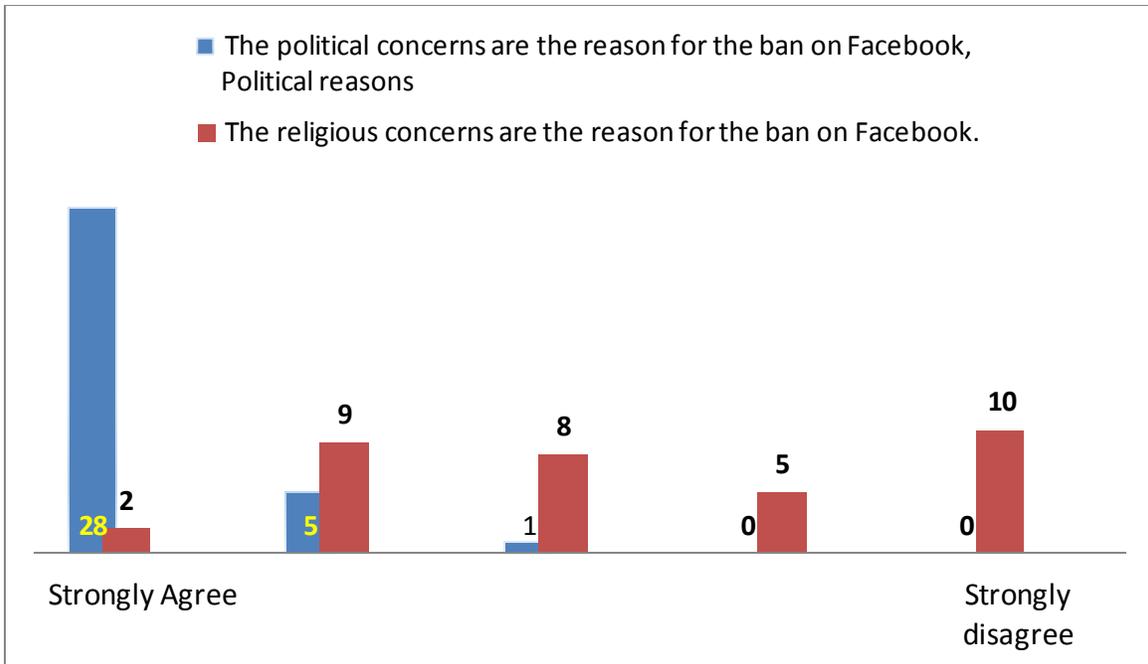
Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the statements. Choose No.3 if you are neutral on the statement.

**9. The political concerns are the reason for the ban on Facebook,**

**10. The religious concerns are the reason for the ban on Facebook.**

Reactions to this statement produced a positively skewed histogram where 28 participants showed their strong approval of the political reason being the reason for ban on Facebook.

However, when asked for their opinion on the role of religion in the prohibition, there was not a similar alliance in responses. Still, 10 participants believed that religion has absolutely nothing to do with the prohibition, and 9 agreed that religious reasons could have caused the ban on Facebook.



This distribution of opinions on religious reasons presents a level of doubt among Internet users in Iran on if the ban on Facebook is not only due to political reasons. However, one can argue that the different interpretations of what users believe to be the red lines of religion and what the government considers as offense to religious values are the main reasons for such disparity in votes.

**11. Do you use a fake identity on Facebook?**

(If yes) **What are your reasons for using a fake identity?**

Before this study, we had this notion that ignoring governmental prohibition on Facebook and using it through proxy methods, would be accompanied by some acts of caution from users' side. Protecting their identities from being revealed could be one of these cautious methods. However, the responses we received from our users in Iran were surprisingly against this assumption.



## What are your reasons for using a fake identity?

■ What are your reasons for using a fake identity?

other	0
I don't use facebook to involve in political activites but I ...	2
I don't want a social network to have information about...	0
I use the fake identity to get involved in political activities	0
I don't want my family and friends know that I use ...	0

Out of 36 respondents, only two said that they had been using fake identities on Facebook. Both of these respondents mentioned that they would not use Facebook to involve in political activities, but they thought that it is wiser to use fake identity under the current political condition. The fact that users are not generally concerned about the revelation of their identities could be justified by their main motivations in use of Facebook which are not political either. In fact, many of these participants are probably users of other social networks like twitter, Friendfeed, Google reader, etc, where use of nicknames instead of real names are quite common. Therefore we could say that Facebook provides these users to present to their real friends, who they really are.

### Conclusion

According to the result, people in Iran uses Facebook regularly in spite of its ban. Their usage in number of hours has not reduced even considering that they have to access the Facebook using proxy servers (which reduces the surfing speed and causes other difficulties). This survey could reach a different result if the survey was conducted in an earlier time period, for example a year before the election unrest before the ban was removed temporarily, perhaps taking into account the fact that people were able to express their opinions with more courage than the period after the election without having concerns on the consequences. Besides, the long weary period of online dispute between internet users and government may have confounded the results. From the result we also found that the though there is slight difference in usage pattern between the countries, the main uses and gratifications are the same and similar to those globally accepted. In the comparison of the countries, Indian showed more interest in creating public events than the Iranian people. The reason for their lack of involvement in creating the political and public events could be due to the negative social and technical effects of the ban even though users claimed their form and frequency of use of Facebook had not been affected by the prohibition.

Mainly the user gratification factors for using Facebook could be social interaction, having a substitute for real life companionship, finding out the relevant events and information, gaining a sense of belonging, entertainment. The gratifications of user have changed in Iran due to the ban of Facebook.

The people couldn't find way to use Facebook to satisfy their gratification. This study can be further improved by including many countries and their gratification can be found, which helps to enhance or improve the design and development of the social media. And this study also gives awareness to the government about the effectiveness of their filtering system.

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## Appendix

### Qualitative answers from Iranian population:

**Are there other reasons besides the ones above that motivate you to use facebook?**

- Use of the Facebook like button to share what I like.
- Availability of good privacy settings that allow me to choose whom I would like to share content with.
- Curiosity to know what has happened in the period of absence.
- Taking into consideration the fact that a large number of Iranians live abroad, I am interested to know about the quality of their living and jobs around the globe
- Facebook has provided a platform where people can get a feedback form others on their own thoughts and ideas.

### Qualitative answers from Indian population:

**Are there other reasons besides the ones above that motivate you to use facebook?**

- To get updates from people with whom i don't talk daily
- Pass time.
- I'm a gamer. During the strat time or Ready up Period, or in between rounds, i often happen to keep the facebook window open
- . get in touch with my company's HR which is quite helpful and useful
- Learn something new on the internet.
- With the kind of exposure facebook has, its easy to be in the thick of things
- .The way FB bonds the relationship among friends is awesome.
- It even keeps me updaed on my friend's birthdays.no