

## Virtual Social Networks as A Social Capital in Iran (Case Study: Sardasht Young Adults 2011)

Maryam yarmohammad touski<sup>1</sup>, Mostafa sahraii<sup>2</sup>, Noushin Jafari<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant professor in sociology- Islamic Azad University Iran (Arak branch)

<sup>2</sup>Master science in sociology

<sup>3</sup>Architecture student in master degree of Ecole National Superior d'architecture Paris Lavillete.

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### ABSTRACT

Virtual social networks are subcategory of New Communicational and information technologies (ICT's). These networks have caused tremendous changes in the whole structure of contemporary developing societies. Also Social capital had been influenced by these changes. According to some thinker, social capital is the lost chain in social, economic, political and cultural development in nowadays developing countries. This sociological study tries to analyze and consider the relationship between virtual social networks and social capital among Sardasht's young adults in 2011 (This city is a Kurdish minority city). The overall goal of this research is to investigate that whether the virtual social networks community is to be recognized as part of social capital? Then, there's a review of the theoretical principles and various perspectives with regards to, Jurgen Habermas's theories of vision, especially in the public sphere and communicative action, has been used as theoretical framework. Assumptions of the research are designed in five hypothesis with the variables included social trust, sense of social accountability, social solidarity, and participatory decision -making and formation of Habermas's public sphere. The research methodology used in this study is survey with snowball sampling method. The sample size has been selected 105 young adults of Sardasht. The gained data have been analyzed using SPSS software, and descriptive tables and graphs. Finally, the findings of thesis research indicate that there is a significant relationship between membership in virtual social networks and social capital existence. Therefore virtual social networks could be considered as a channel for social capital produce in this society.

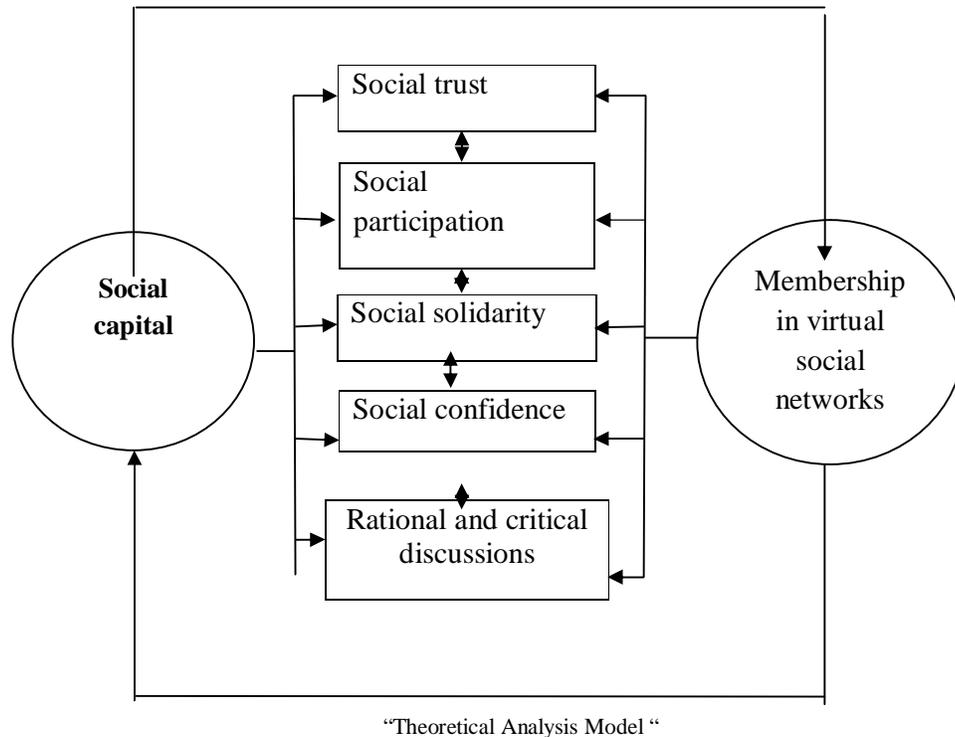
**KEY WORDS:** Virtual social network, Social capital, young adults, social trust, social participation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Emergence and spread of electronic communications as a major new technological breakthrough in communication. Data communication and the transformation in social interactions have been given a new meaning. Social virtual networks are extending the human achievements in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). [1]These networks are a new generation of Web sites that today's Internet users focus on and have formed a global network of online communities based on each category of Internet users with specific characteristics. These networks can provide a new way of communicating and sharing content on the Internet. Nowadays, hundreds of millions of Internet users have registered in hundreds of various social networks. For example, Face book is the largest currently social network from the view point of the virtual domain, that it has more than 750 million active users. This document is on the official website on 02/08/2011.[2] In particular, the role of the Internet and virtual social networking cannot be ignored in world's political developments, especially in the recent revolutions in the Middle East and Arabic countries. The role of the media has been confirmed by many reputable news sources around the world. For example, the Fars News Agency in Iran quoted the director of Google, Jerd Cohen, who has written about the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia "virtual social networks are accelerating this change." (Fars News Agency 29/03/2010). On the other hand, in the field of developmental studies, social capital is considered as the missing link and this hope is growing among many of the experts in developed and underdeveloped countries, that perhaps it would be an the end to the vicious circle of underdevelopment.[3] This study has tried to analyze and discuss the sociological relationship between virtual social networks and social capital. And Initial question: Is the virtual social networking (face book) be considered as a social capital among the younger generation? The theoretical framework and research model based on the public sphere theory of Habermas , social capital theory of Putnam, Baurdiou and Fukuyama and social trust in Giddens thinks. Public sphere particularly has non-cultural function and emphasize on the political, social and economic roles. These functions are public and must be immune against the governmental dominance. Haberrmas considers public sphere as a range between civil society and the government .Creating a public sphere in the realm social life is forming and its citizens exchange opinions freely and interact as a public structure. All citizens of the territory are ensured as equal participation and also

political issues is conducted through dialogue. In this zone, conversation is done based on the criterion of rationality; and the nature of collective wisdom and liberation is revealed. Public sphere provide citizens with a critical and rational debate about the "common good" and lead this series of measures in the interest of public affairs. In this case media's attention is focused on news and critical analysis of government's functions. [4] Habermas has also interests in communicative action. In his opinions, the actions of people involved are coordinated not by selfish calculation of success but also through the actions of mutual understanding. He considers communicative action as the most obvious and most pervasive human phenomenon. Habermas shapes his work based on undistorted and unforced communication. One of the important elements of this action is speech. In his opinion, undistorted elements could be found in any of the contemporary communicative action. Thus his belief the rationality of communicative action leads to a free and open communication [5]



"Characteristics of social capital in the social organization such as networks, norms and trust refers to the cooperation and coordination for facilitate the mutual benefit "[6] Also Fukuyama believes," Social capital can be as simple as a certain set of informal values or norms, That define the group members are allowed in the cooperation are shared among them. Norms that produce social capital, they should basically include rituals such as honesty, communication and mutual obligation commitment. "[7] Social trust is the most important indicator for social capital measurement. According to Giddens, trust divides to two sections: trust to individuals and trust to organization. [8] He Guarantees for the special position of trust. Perhaps he is the most political-social scientists who clearly sees the move toward development with trust.

### Hypothesis

- 1 - There is relationship between virtual social networks users and existence of social trust
- 2 - There is relationship between virtual social networks users and strengthen sense of social responsibility among the Members.
- 3 - There is relationship between virtual social networks users and promotion of social solidarity among Members.
- 4 - There is relationship between virtual social networks users and participatory decision making among the Members.
- 5 - It seems the virtual social networks can act as a public sphere channel that produces social capital.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

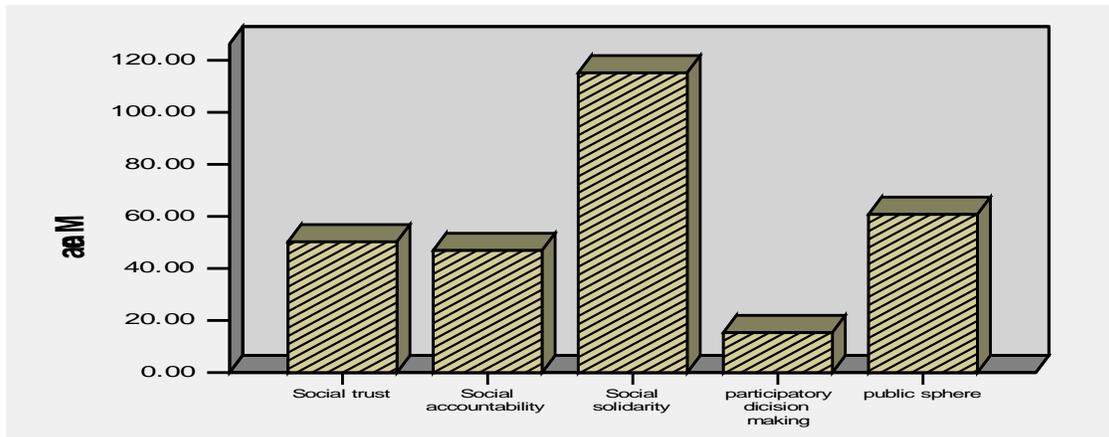
In this study is used survey method to examine the relationship between social networks and social capital between the sardasht city's youth. The survey data analysis with descriptive statistics (frequency tables – graphs and percentages) and inferential statistics (chi-square test, chronbach alpha, reggression, pierson Correlation). The statistics population is the young people Sardasht with 29848 people Due to the nature of the study population is selected the non-random sample and chain sampling (chain-snowball). Also sample size was set through saturation sampling approach. So 105 people were interviewed and the questionnaire. Research techniques are including: questionnaires, interviews, documents, libraries and the Internet.

Reliability statistics  
(Table of chronbach alpha test)

Number of questions	Chronbach alpha	indices
18	0.750	Social trust
15	0.800	Strengthen the sense of responsibility
20	0.877	social cohesion promotion
12	0.616	Participatory decision-making
20	0.830	Public sphere

### Research findings

- Membership in virtual social networks among men is 51% and women are 49% that this difference is not statistically significant.
- Facebook 80% .Twitter 1%, youtube 8%. Facebook& Twitter& youtube10%, another net.1%
- Academic education users 80%, diploma level education 17% and 3% high school
- 40% half an hour daily,31% an hour,22% two hours and 7% above 2 hours
- Sense of social responsibility between members (in men more than men) 67%
- sense of social accountability between members75%
- Sense of social solidarity between members (in men more than men) 70%
- Participatory decision making between members 65%
- Virtual social networks is confirm as a public sphere channel that produce social capital with 95% confident.



Mean averages of social capital indicators.

Social solidarity is the most value of social capital that there is in statistical population. Therefore the entire hypothesis was confirmed. There is meaningful relationship between membership in virtual social networks and existence of social trust, strengthen the sense of social responsibility, promoting social cohesion and participatory decision making with 95% confident. Also, virtual social networks can be assigning as a public sphere as Habermas said.

## Conclusion

According to Castell's *The Information Age*, new world is formed in the electronic networks. The Internet and new technological achievements have given new meaning to the communication and has led to changes in human interactions. Social capital also has been affected by these changes. In this research some efforts has been made to consider the relationship between social networks and virtual social capital [9]. According to some theorists, and the results of many researchers who have studied in this area, online social networking and different ways of communication creating new forms of engagement. And all of them increase the social capital in the society.

- There is a good confidence in the members in cyberspace but it has not radiation to real world. Because there isn't suitable communication space for the youth out of the virtual network.
- There is emphasizing on the sense of social responsibility between the respondents. In the cyberspace there is responsible between the members. Because they see and answer about the letter, News, Polls and every call of friends with honestly and interest
- There is promotion of social solidarity between members. They feel belonging to the community with a range of personality, different ages, views, opinions, races and nationalities. This model of social solidarity spread through the virtual social networks to groups of the people outside the cyberspace.
- There is relationship between virtual social networks and participatory decision making between members. According to respondents the virtual social networks is good channel for receiving new information and promotion awareness.
- It seems the virtual social networks as a public sphere can act a social capital channel and produce many communication values. Such as: public interaction, conversation, discussion and solution of public problems without the least external domination power especially in the Sardasht minorities.
- Social networks in this area not only are communication media but also they are alternative media.

According to Habermas public sphere categories are including: public interaction, conversation, discussion and solution of public problems without the least external domination power. These items are in the virtual social networks in this study. Finally there is a significant relationship between the virtual social networks and social capital. And the virtual social networks can be as part of social capital among the youth of Sardasht(IRAN).

### Research limitations:

- Governmental Prohibiting the use of virtual global social networks
- Lack of easy access to virtual social networks users
- Generalization from virtual relationship to real society

### The actors Suggestions:

- Individuals and groups that they feel unable to express ideas in the real world and everyday life and they are prevented to do so, it is suggested that social networking is a virtual space and opportunity to represent and defend well and can express themselves and to take advantage of it.
- According to the results, it is suggested that the argument which are raised in the virtual world is oriented from the real world so that the community will benefit from the results.
- Based on the research results, there is advantage of virtual social networks for members and groups. They do not to waste their time and energy.

### The researchers' future Suggestions:

- More research on the relationship between virtual social networks with any of the indicators of social capital separately.
- Longitudinal and case studies and compare their results over time, in connection with any of the virtual social networking, social network Face book.
- Comparative studies in different places and communities in relation to the subject.
- Providing more confidence between the researcher and accountability issues.

### The relevant institutions and agencies Suggestions:

- Emphasis on culture and education forming on how people use and interact with a virtual social network.
- Avoiding to filtering in virtual social networks.
- Establishment conferences, seminars, ceremonies and collective society for more understanding of the features and functions of virtual social networks.

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