Liking Facebook in Tehran:
Social Networking in Iran

Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania

Center for Global Communication Studies

Iran Media Program
پژوهش رسانه در ایران

ABOUT THE IRAN MEDIA PROGRAM

The Iran Media Program is a collaborative network designed to enhance the understanding of Iran's media ecology. Our goal is to strengthen a global network of Iranian media scholars and practitioners and to contribute to Iran's civil society and the wider policy-making community by providing a more nuanced understanding of the role of media and the flow of information in Iran.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mass protests in Iran in 2009 and the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 and 2012, many scholars have sought to understand the role of new media technologies in fueling grassroots social movements across the region.[1] Previous attempts had been made to study the relationship between new information communication technologies (ITCs) and political change.[2] However, in 2009, prominent Western media outlets hailed social media as a panacea for democratic reform, labeling the post-election uprisings in Iran as the "Twitter Revolution"[3]—a notion that has been challenged as vastly over-simplified.[4]

In 2009, prominent Western media hailed social media as a panacea for democratic reform, labeling the post-election uprisings in Iran as the "Twitter Revolution"—a notion that has been challenged as vastly over-simplified.

There is no doubt that social networking sites (SNSs) and new media platforms have globalized communications: today, nearly one billion users around the world use Facebook on a common platform. While this has encouraged a plethora of research on new media technologies and their impacts on state-society relations, there are still key gaps in our knowledge and understanding about how these technologies are being mobilized in, and shaped by, different cultural and political contexts.

Although social networking sites and online media in general are indeed creating new modes of communication that can potentially foster social and political change, it is unclear how and in what capacities these platforms are being moblized to enhance civic participation in the public sphere. As such, key questions remain over what role social media and social networking technologies played, and are playing, in the democratization and political reform efforts in Iran or across the Middle East.

It is therefore necessary to examine more closely the national and regional dimensions of new media use in order to better understand how users in different geographical and political contexts are interacting with these platforms and their various features in practice—particularly in societies in which media and communications are heavily state

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1 Sean Aday et al., *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics* (Washington D.C.: Institute of Peace, 2010); Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 363–379.

2 R. Kelly Garrett, "Protest in an Information Society: A Review of Literature on Social Movements and New ICTs," *Information, Communication & Society* 9, no. 2 (April 2006): 202–224; Patrick Meier, "Do 'Liberation Technologies' Change the Balance of Power between Repressive States and Civil Society?" (PhD, Tuft University, 2011); Wim van de Donk et al., eds., *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens, and Social Movements* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004).

3 See for example, "Editorial: Iran's Twitter revolution," *Washington Times*, June 16, 2009; Andrew Sullivan, "The Revolution Will Be Twittered," *The Atlantic*, The Daily Dish, June 13, 2009; Nathan Hodge, "Taking to the Streets — and Tweets — in Tehran," *Wired*, June 13, 2009; "Tweeting Iran: Elex news in 140 characters or less," *Associated Press*, 15 June 2009.

4 Early critics of the "Twitter Revolution" include: Jack Shafer, "Doubting Twitter: Let's not get carried away about its role in the Iranian demonstrations," *Slate*, June 17, 2009; Maximilian Forte, "America's Iranian Twitter Revolution," *Zero Anthropology*, June 17, 2009; Anne-Marie Corley, "The Web vs. The Republic of Iran: Twitter gives Iranians a voice, but the government still controls the Internet," *MIT Technology Review*, June 18 2009; Evgeny Morozov, "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution'," *Dissent*, Fall 2009; Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010.

controlled. This is especially relevant in the Iranian case, as social networking sites are facilitating communications between Iranians, and between Iranians and the global community, despite extensive efforts by domestic authorities to impede access to these platforms through filtering and throttling internet speeds.[5]

While social networking sites are creating new modes of communication that potentially foster social and political change, key questions remain over what role these platforms played, and are playing, in the democratization and political reform efforts in Iran and across the Middle East.

Although Facebook has been blocked in Iran since 2009[6]—accessible only with illegal circumvention tools—this has done little to thwart its popularity. While there is no available data on the number of Iranian Facebook users, social media and social networking sites in general have been avidly embraced by a broad spectrum of Iranian society—from the young cyber-savvy majority to Iran's political and religious elites. On a policy level, there are conflicting perspectives regarding the state's position on social media use, as reflected in contradictory comments from officials. The recent uptick of high-profile political officials and ministers maintaining active Facebook and Twitter accounts highlights the inherent contradictions and paradoxes of the regime's stance on social media.[7]

It also demonstrates the complexity and dynamics of online communications policies and culture in Iran more broadly. The dramatic rise of internet and social media usage in Iran since the early 2000s has reconfigured communication and information flows not only among Iranian citizens but also between citizens and elites. While utilizing social media and social networking sites to carry messages to mass audiences, authorities have at the same time have sought to curb access to these platforms in an effort to quell possible anti-government citizen activism. This was especially evident in the post-2009 context, when authorities cracked down on social networking sites and bloggers, and intesified its filtering and blocking of websites deemed to promote social and political unrest.

Yet beyond the dominant focus on social media use in the political context, it is equally important to look at social media within the broader Iranian media ecology, as well as to get a closer read on how Iranians use and re-purpose these platforms under particular social conditions.

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5 Along with introducing a cap on high-speed broadband for residential internet connections in 2006, authorities often slow connection speeds as a form of censorship. See Collin Anderson, "Dimming the Internet: Detecting Throttling as a Mechanism of Censorship in Iran," *arXiv*, June 18, 2013.

6 Facebook was initially filtered in Iran in 2008 and then briefly removed in early 2009. During the 2009 presidential election campaigns, Facebook was filtered for three days (May 23-26, 2009) and has been filtered since June 12, 2009. See "Iran's Facebook Access Restored," *BBC Persian*, May 26, 2009.

7 In many cases some of Iranian officials have commented that Facebook is not illegal and filtering might be removed but in response other officials have rejected these statements. See: "Negotiation about removing Facebook filtering in Iran, criticized by members of Parliament," *BBC Persian*, November 23, 2013. "Facebook is an espionage site, played a role in the 2009 unrests," *BBC Persian*, December 9, 2013.

This report, based on an online survey of Iranian Facebook users, contributes to a small but growing body of scholarship on social and new media use in Iran. Our findings offer new insights into the Iranian Facebook ecosystem, including patterns of Facebook usage among Iranians, why and how Iranians are using Facebook, what types of content they are sharing, as well as perceptions of privacy and security associated with using Facebook. In addition, the survey addresses the key question of whether Facebook is being used as a tool for political engagement and civic activism among Iranian internet users, as initial assessments suggested.

Additional Research on Social Media Usage in Iran

Morteza Erfanian et al., "Iranian Students and Social Networking Sites: Prevalence and Pattern of Usage." *2nd World Conference on Educational Technology Research,* 83 (2013), 44-46.

Hojjat A. Farahani et al., "Examining mental health indices in students using Facebook in Iran," *World Conference on Educational Technology Research.* 28 (2011), 811-814.

Younes Nouri Moradabadi et al, "What is the Motivation Student of Iranians for using Facebook?" *4th World Conference on Educational Sciences*, February 2012, Barcelona, Spain, 46(2012), 5192-5195.

Elahe Shabani et al., *Motivations, Concerns, and Strategies of Facebook Users in Iran,* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2013).

Magdalena Wojcieszak and Briar Smith. "Will Politics Be Tweeted? New Media Use by Iranian Youth in 2011," *New Media & Society*, March 2013.

Magdalena Wojcieszak and Briar Smith. "Finding A Way: How Iranians Reach for News and Information," *Iran Media Program, Center for Global Communication Studies*, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 2011-2012.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Our findings are based on 188 responses to an online survey of Iranian Facebook users conducted in October and November 2012.

The survey addressed the following areas of inquiry:

- → **ACCESSING FACEBOOK:** How Iranians access Facebook, including internet connection speeds, hardware, and use of circumvention tools.
- → **FACEBOOK ACTIVITIES:** Why Iranians use Facebook and what are their primary Facebook activities.
- → **SECURITY AND PRIVACY:** Concerns about private information and potential risks associated with Facebook use.
- → **ADDITIONAL SNS ACTIVITIES:** Additional social networking and social media usage, including blogging.

Few respondents rely on Facebook primarily for political activism: most use Facebook to socialize.

Respondents more often follow than share content, particularly materials related to politics.

Adding nuance to widespread notions about the SNS usage in Iran as a means for political engagement, our findings show that while Iranians do indeed use Facebook for social and political activism,[8] its main use is as a vehicle for socializing. This reinforces more recent studies demonstrating that Iranians use Facebook as a virtual space to socialize, especially with the opposite sex.[9] However respondents also cite accessing news and information unavaible through official channels as one of their main reasons for using Facebook.

Our research reveals a difference in patterns of content-following and content-sharing behaviors among Iranian Facebook users: respondents more often follow rather than share content, particularly politically-related materials, which may demonstrate the perceived security risks associated with using Facebook. In light of our data showing that fewer individuals use Facebook as a means of political engagement, this may also indicate that that more respondents are passive rather than active Facebook users. Notably, respondents are least interested in sharing or following religious content.

8 Only 5% of respondents report that their main reason for using Facebook is as a platform for social and political activist; See Chapter 2, "Facebook Activities," page 14.

9 Emad Khazraee and Kristene Unsworth, "Social Media: The New Opiate of the Masses?," *International Review of Information Ethics* 18 (2012): 49–59; Magdalena Wojcieszak and Briar Smith, "Will Politics Be Tweeted? New Media Use by Iranian Youth in 2011," *New Media & Society* (March 25, 2013).

Most access Facebook with high-speed internet from home, despite the 2006 ban on residential DSL broadband.

Respondents use a number of circumvention tools to access Facebook, with a large majority preferring Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

Despite security concerns, most respondents spend a considerable amount of time on Facebook.

Female respondents are less concerned than males about posting photos on Facebook in which they are engaged in illegal, taboo, or impolite activities.

According to our data, a majority of respondents have managed to bypass the state's 2006 ban on high speed broadband for residential internet services.[10] A large majority of respondents access Facebook with high-speed broadband from home, which could indicate a loosened approach among ISPs toward enforcing this regulation.

Our findings also show that survey respondents use a variety of circumvention tools to access Facebook. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are overwhelmingly the most popular solution. Younger demographics are familiar with a more diverse set of tools in comparison to older generation, especially those requiring more technical skills. Despite being illegal, there is no clear consensus on the security of using these tools: the sample was almost evenly divided between whether these tools are secure, not secure, or "neither."

Respondents have major concerns about security and privacy in the Facebook environment and are not very trusting of others in general, according to our data. A majority of survey participants report that they believe that using Facebook could pose risks to their security, and to their job prospects and reputation. Nevertheless, despite security concerns and obstacles accessing Facebook (e.g. filtering and slow internet connections), results reveal that respondents spend a considerable amount of time on Facebook on a daily and weekly basis.

In addition, our data reveal both generational and gender differences in Facebook usage among respondents. It is not surprising that younger survey participants (ages 20-25) are more fluent in digital technology use than older respondents. Younger users, however, prefer to use Facebook for sharing personal ideas and opinions, and are less interested in sharing and following political content than older age groups surveyed. Younger respondents are also are less concerned about possible security risks and professional consequences associated with using Facebook than older respondents.

According to our research, females more often share content related to cultural issues, domestic news and events, societal/civic issues, gender, and the environment than male respondents. Males tend to share more content

10 In 2006, authorities introduced a cap on broadband speeds faster than 128 kbps for residential internet services. Faster internet connections are available for commercial users, and at universities and internet cafes. However, in the past home users often bypassed these restrictions by obtaining certifications for high-speed internet from friends or business associates. More recently, there is evidence that ISPs may no longer be enforcing the 2006 decree.

Most respondents are active on at least two other social networking sites, and about two thirds report that they maintained a blog at some point.

related to the economy, science/IT, and sports. However, female and male respondents share content on domestic politics, foreign affairs, international politics, and religion with similar frequency. Survey results also demonstrate that female respondents are *less concerned* than male respondents about posting photos on Facebook in which they are engaged in activities that could be considered illegal or impolite (such as drinking alcohol or dancing)

In addition, our survey results suggest that social networking sites and social media are very popular among respondents: a majority are active on at least two other social networking sites besides Facebook, and about two thirds report that they maintained a blog at some point. Younger respondents more actively use social media, according to our data.

SURVEY SAMPLE

Our sample consists of 188 Iranian Facebook users,[11] a large majority of which (85%) have been using Facebook for more than two years. This indicates that most survey respondents were likely using Facebook during the 2009 election.[12]

▶ **A majority of the sample is comprised of respondents younger than age 30. Most hold at least a bachelor's degree. Roughly a third is female and two thirds male.**

Figure 1: Age Group of Respondents

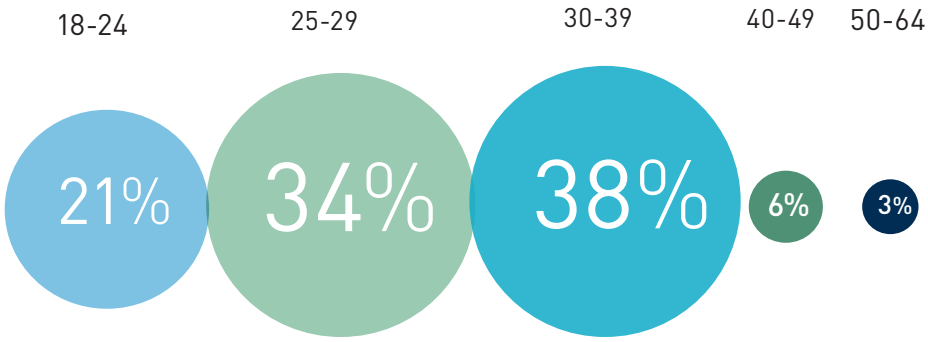


Figure 2: Respondents' Education Level

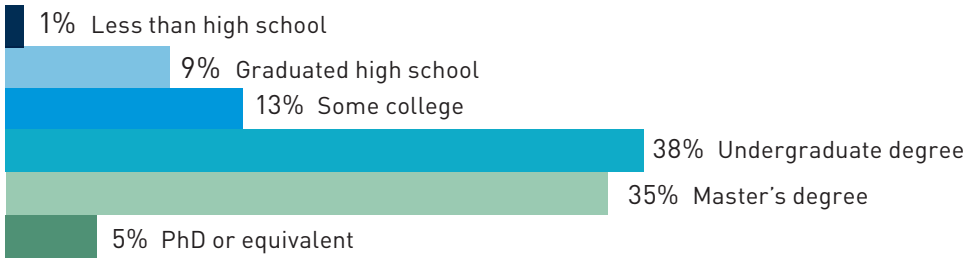
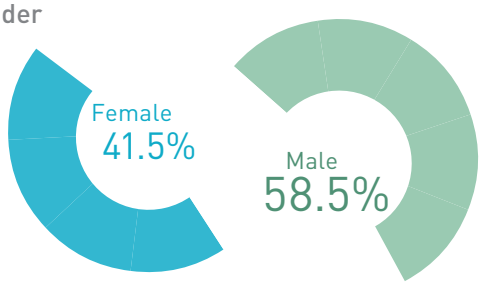


Figure 3: Respondents' Gender



11 There were 129 fully completed questionnaires and 59 partially completed questionnaires (completion rate 69%).

12 The online surveys were completed between October and November 2012. A link to the Persian-language survey was distributed using Facebook's advertising system, as well as by using additional snowball sampling methods to spread the link on Facebook (for more information on survey methods, see Annex).

1. ACCESSING FACEBOOK

1.1 Internet connections, hardware, and access locations

Iran's notoriously slow internet speeds are a major impediment to accessing Facebook and other sites with multi-media or media-rich content. Along with a 2006 ban on high-speed broadband for residential internet services,[13] authorities often throttle web traffic as a means of censoring and blocking access to internet content, as was the case during the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections in Iran.[14] Hence, our survey asked respondents what types of internet connection speeds and hardware they typically use to access Facebook, as a means of understanding how survey participants contend with basic technological barriers to accessing the social networking site.

KEY FINDINGS:

A majority of respondents report connecting to Facebook with high-speed broadband from home, which indicates that these users have secured fast connections despite the state's 2006 ban on broadband DSL for residential internet services. In addition, most respondents report using personal laptops or mobile phones to access Facebook.

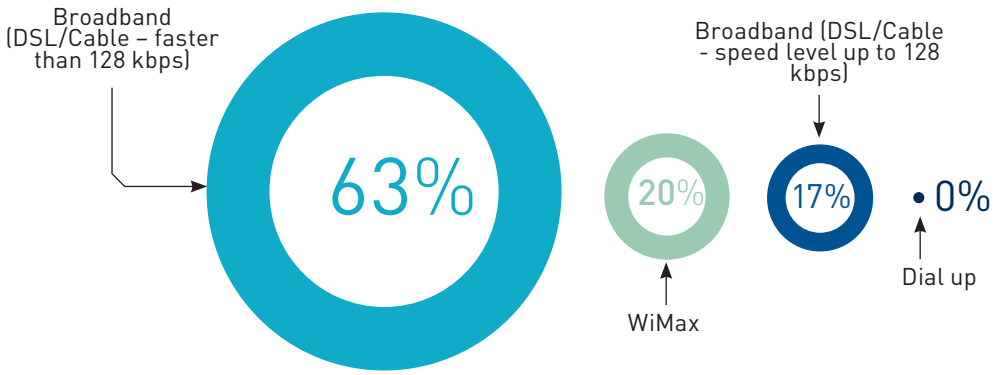
▶ Connection types and speeds

Our data show that the most common internet connection used by participants is high speed broadband over 128 kbps, followed by WiMAX connections, and slower broadband up to 128 kbps, respectively. No one surveyed uses a dial-up connection. It appears that WiMax is very well-received among respondents, which shows the potential growth of satellite-based wireless technologies in Iran.

13 Collin Anderson, "Dimming the Internet: Detecting Throttling as a Mechanism of Censorship in Iran," arXiv, June 18, 2013.

14 Anderson, "Dimming the Internet."

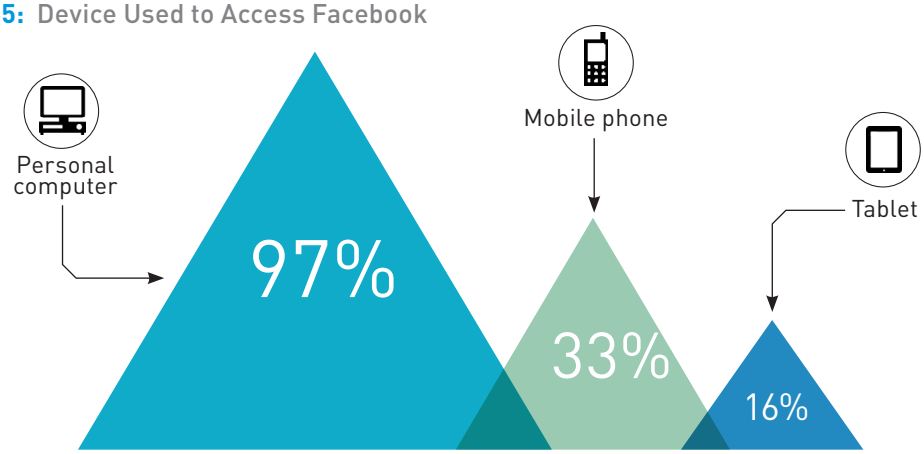
Figure 4: Internet Connections



Hardware

Respondents most often use personal computers to access Facebook. Mobile data plans are not very common or affordable in Iran and their connection speeds are not very fast; therefore, many Facebook users inside Iran tend to use mobile phones with Wi-Fi connections.

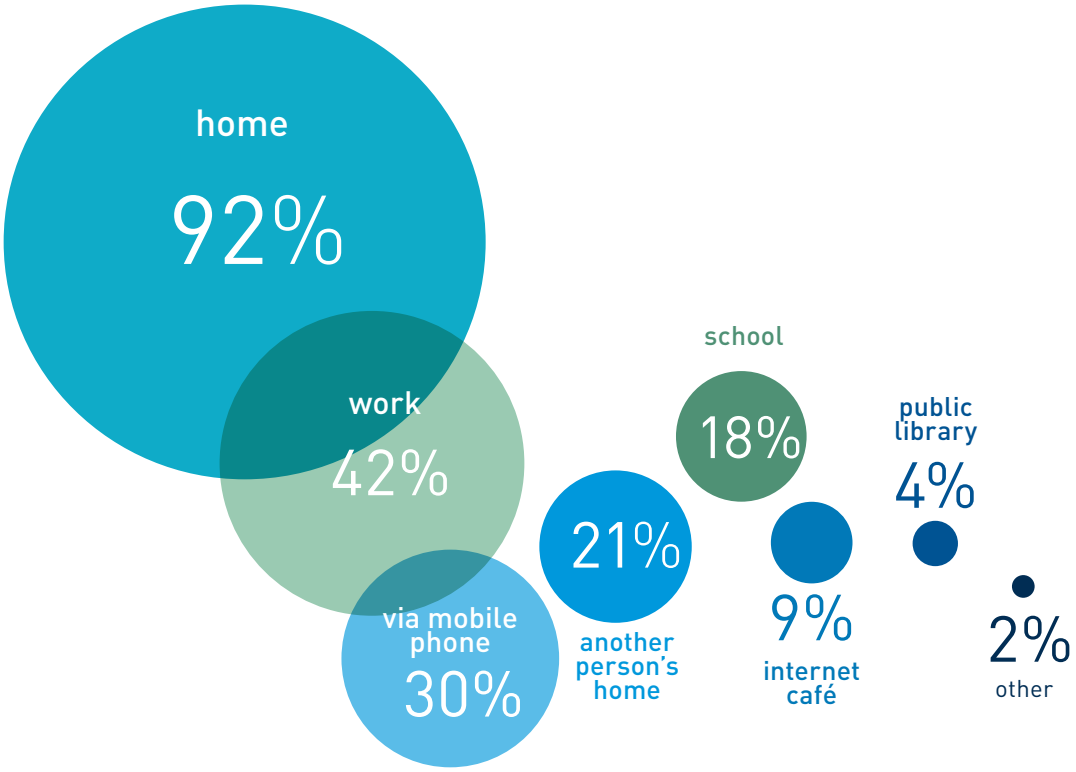
Figure 5: Device Used to Access Facebook



Access locations

Most respondents access Facebook from home, which is not surprising given that Facebook is blocked and accessible only with illegal circumvention tools. Although fewer report accessing Facebook in public spaces, the percentage of respondents who use Facebook at work is high, with roughly 40% saying they access Facebook from their workplace. This is likely due to the fact that businesses often have high-speed DSL connections. The least number of respondents report accessing Facebook at internet cafes, which may reflect the increased scrunity and regulations under which internet cafes operate.[15]

Figure 6: Locations Used to Access Facebook



15 "The Regulations and Conditions of Computer Information Networks," Approved by the SCRC 12/9/2001, http://goo.gl/sZAwT; For specifications related to internet cafes, see Internet Service Regulations at: http://www.cyberpolice.ir/page/3031, and Cyber Police Directive for Internet Cafes at: http://www.cyberpolice.ir/page/11631.

1.2 Circumvention Tools

In addition to slow internet speeds, internet filtering is a key obstacle to accessing Facebook inside Iran. With Facebook blocked since 2009, domestic users can access the site only by relying on illegal circumvention. Despite criminal penalties for using these tools, Iranians frequently rely on circumvention technologies to bypass the state's internet filter and access banned web content, including Facebook.[16]

KEY FINDINGS:

Respondents report using three to four types of circumvention tools to access Facebook. The overwhelming preference is for Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), although respondents also report relying frequently on other platforms, such as FreeGate, Ultrasurf, Tor and Socks. There is no strong consensus among respondents regarding the security risks of using circumvention tools. Although these tools are illegal, most respondents check their Facebook acounts several times a day and spend more than 10 hours a week on Facebook.

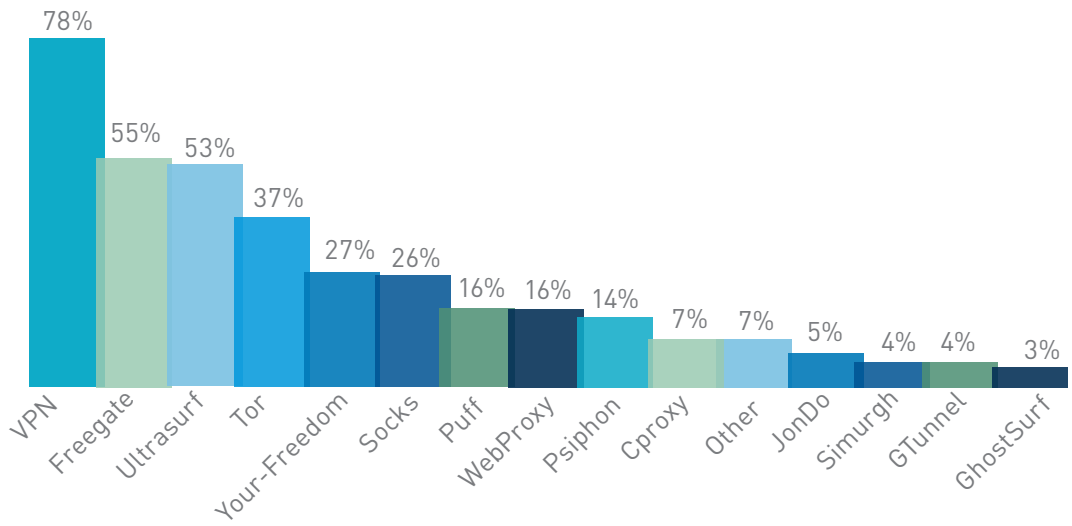
According to our data:

→Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are by far the most popular circumvention tool used to access Facebook, used by nearly 8 out of 10 respondents.

→More than half of participants report having also used Freegate and Ultrasurf to access Facebook, respectively.

16 The 2009 *Computer Crime Law* specifies criminal penalties for accessing filtered or blocked content through the use of illegal circumvention tools. See: *Computer Crimes Law*, in Farsi, at: http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/135717. See also, Ameneh Dehshiri, "Legality of Bypassing Internet Filtering in Iran," *CGCS Media Wire*, Center for Global Communication Studies, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, http://cgcsblog.asc.upenn.edu/2013/06/10/legality-of-bypassing-internet-filtering-in-iran/.

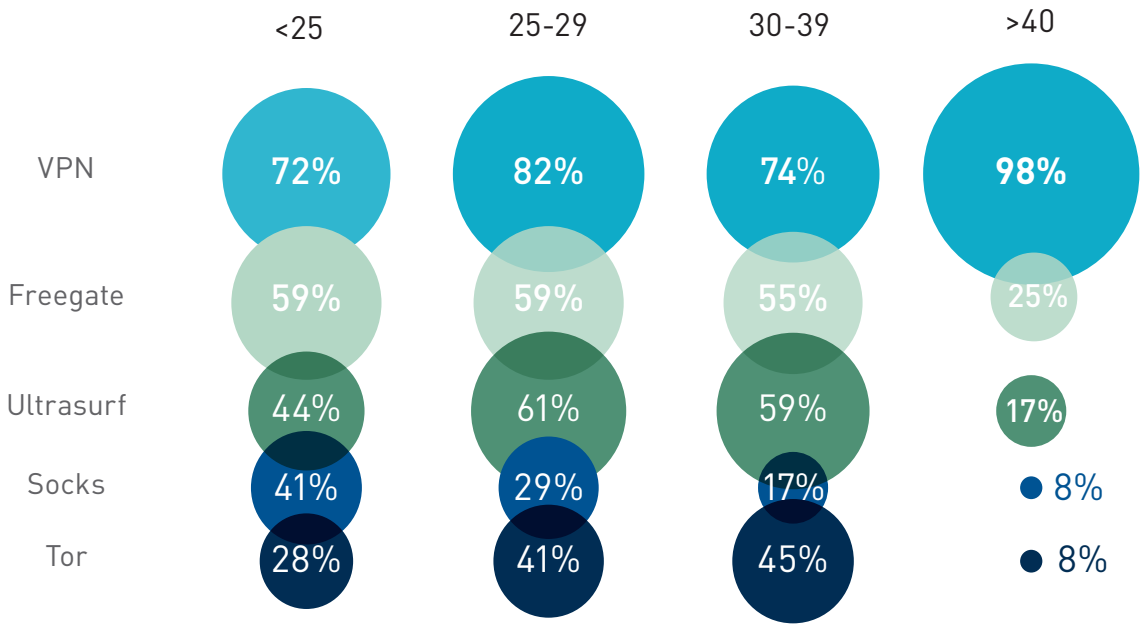
Figure 7: Most Popular Circumvention Tools



→VPNs are most popular among respondents over age 40. This may be due to the fact that VPNs are easier to use, while tools like Freegate and Ultrasurf require more technical expertise.

→Socks is more often used by respondents younger than age 25 as compared to other age groups surveyed. Again, this may be due to the higher digital literacy level among younger respondents.

Figure 8: Frequency of Circumvention Tool Usage (by age group)

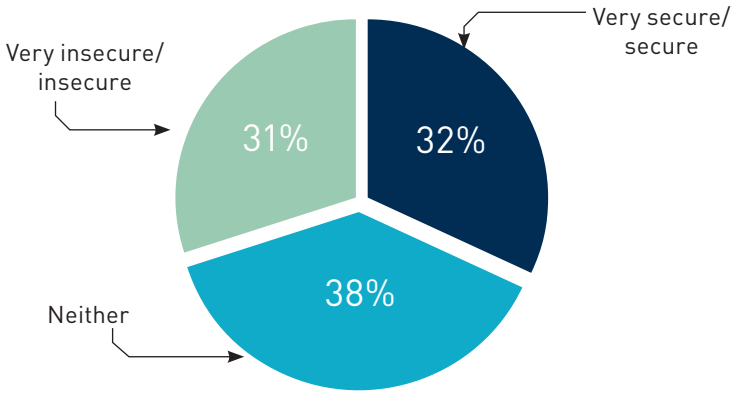


We also asked respondents about their perceptions of security risks associated with using circumvention tools.

According to our data:

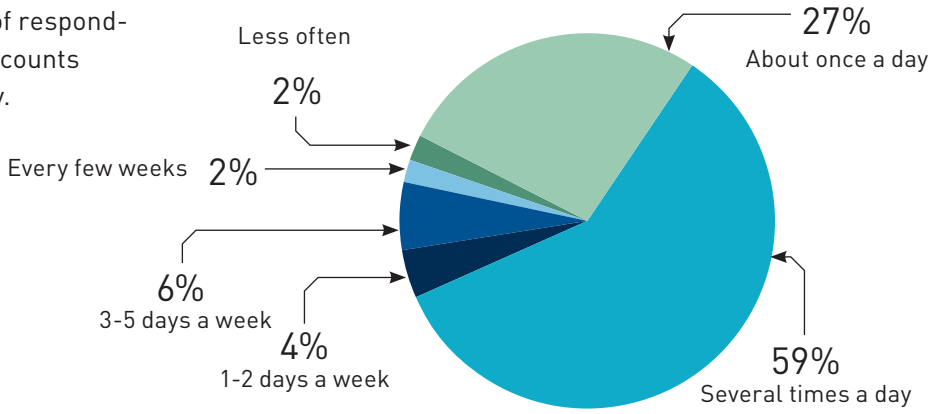
→There is no strong consensus among respondents regarding the risks of using circumvention tools. The sample was nearly evenly split between those who believe these tools are secure, not secure, and those who said "neither."

Figure 9: Security of Circumvention Tools



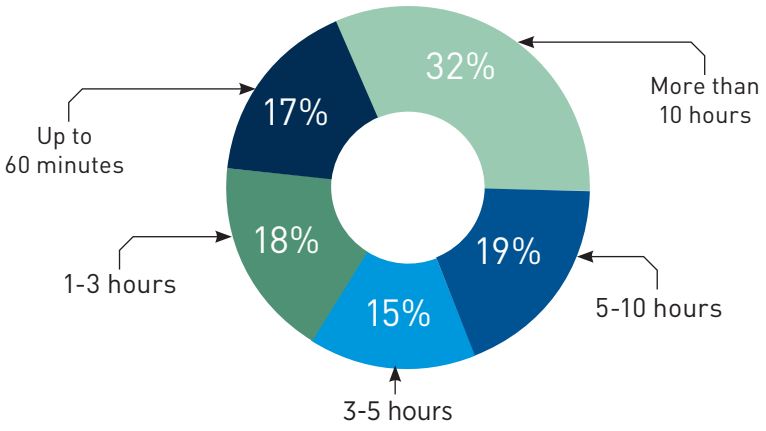
→Despite that these tools are illegal, a majority of respondents check their accounts several times a day.

Figure 10: Frequency of Checking Facebook



→Most respondents spend more than 10 hours a week on Facebook.

Figure 11: Time Spent (per week) on Facebook



2. FACEBOOK USAGE AND ACTIVITIES

Given the regulatory and technological restrictions to accessing Facebook in Iran, our survey sought to better understand the broader Facebook environment among Iranian users, and address questions regarding what motivates Iranians to use the social media site, what their primary Facebook activities are, as well as patterns of liking, following, commenting on, and sharing content.

2.1 Primary Reasons for Using Facebook

In an effort to assess how Facebook is being utilized—including what role, if any, Facebook plays as a platform for political activism in Iran—our survey asked respondents about their main reasons for using Facebook.

KEY FINDINGS:

Respondents mainly use Facebook to communicate with friends and family, to access alternative news and information, and for entertainment purposes, respectively. A smaller percentage of those surveyed report using Facebook as a platform for social and political activism. This indicates that while users do indeed rely on Facebook to access information and for political communication, a larger majority use the social networking site to socialize.

According to our data:

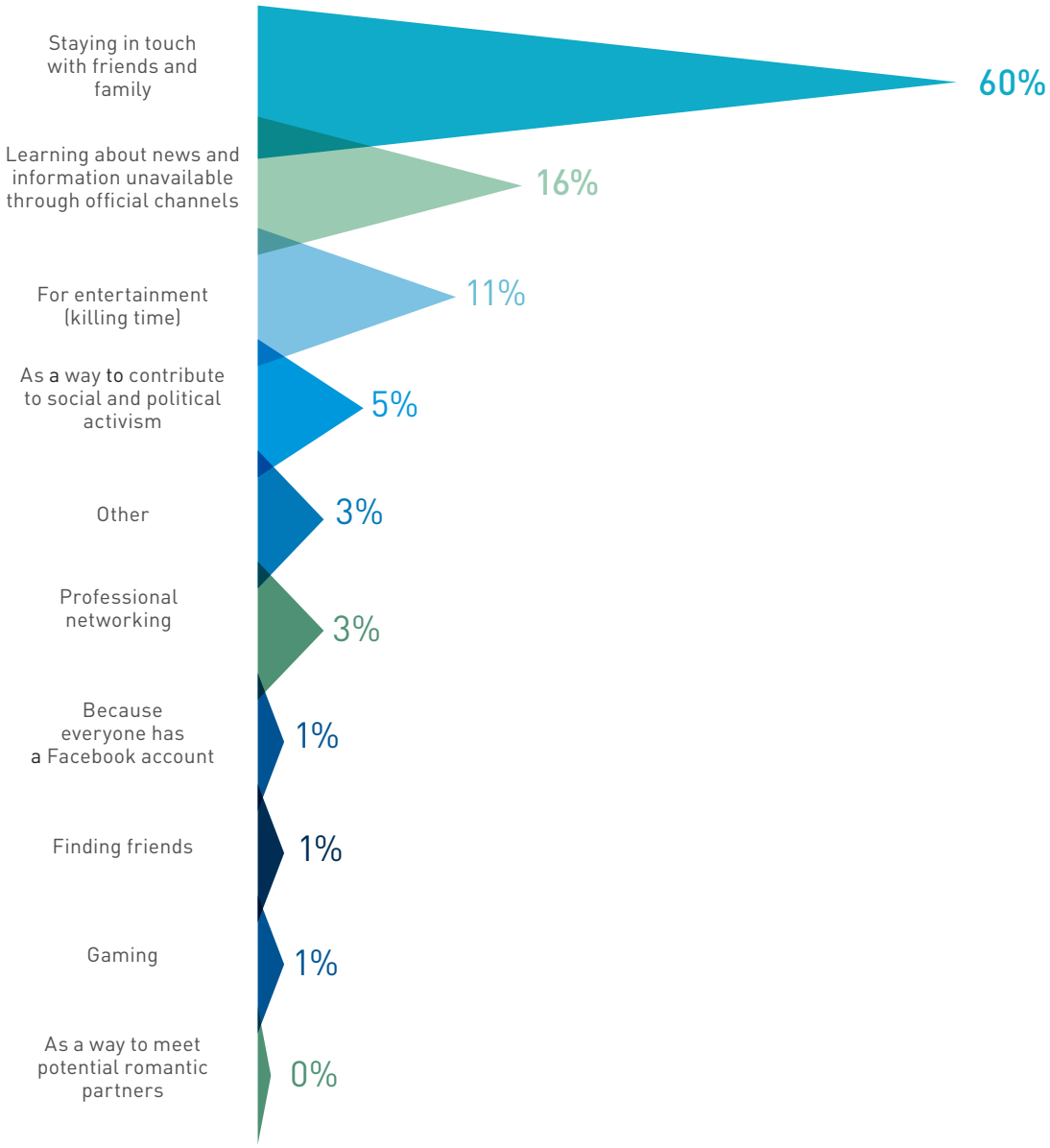
→Staying in touch with friends and family is the top reason for using Facebook, cited by six out of ten survey respondents.

→Accessing news and information not available through official media outlets is the second-most popular reason for using Facebook, cited by roughly 15% of our sample.

→Entertainment ranks third among the top reasons for using Facebook, according to more than 10% of respondents surveyed.

→Only 5% report relying on Facebook to promote social and political activism as their main reason for using the social media site.

Figure 12: Primary Reason for Using Facebook



2.2 Liking, commenting, following and sharing

Our survey also asked respondents more detailed questions about their Facebook activities in order to gauge levels of participation and interactivity among users, as well as to investigate patterns of liking, commenting on, following and sharing content.

KEY FINDINGS:

Most respondents appear to be "passive" Facebook users: they tend to follow more often than share content, and "like" more often than comment on others' posts. In addition, a majority share more personal content than materials related to domestic and international politics and news. Respondents are least interested in sharing and following religious content compared to other types of materials.

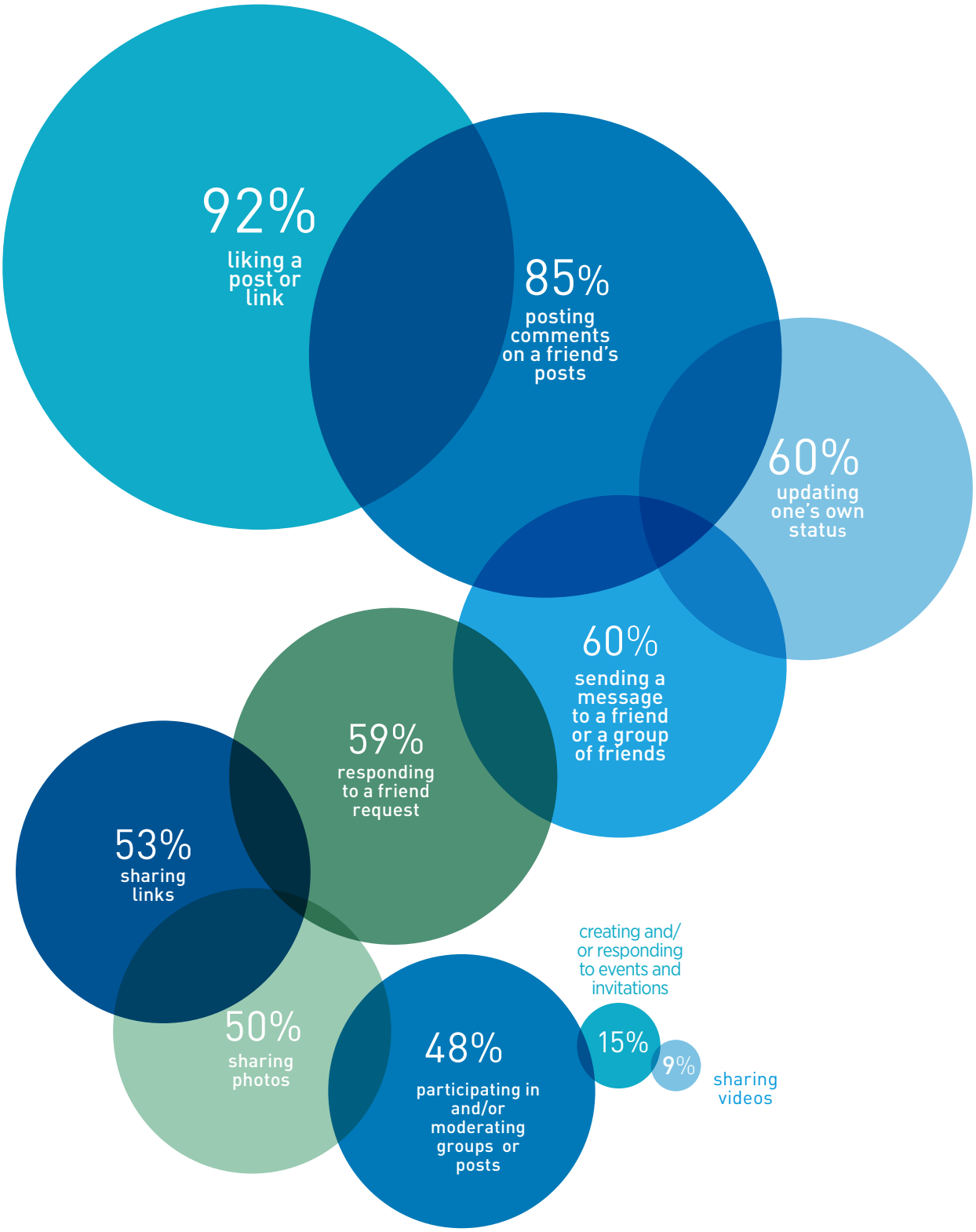
According to our data:

→"Liking" and commenting on their friends' posts are among respondents' most popular Facebook activities.

→Respondents less frequently update their own status or share links, photos, or videos, respectively.

→Only a small percentage of respondents engage in more participatory activities, such as moderating groups or creating events on Facebook.

Figure 13: Respondents' Primary Facebook Activities



Our research also reveals interesting patterns in content-following and content-sharing behaviors among respondents.

According to our survey:

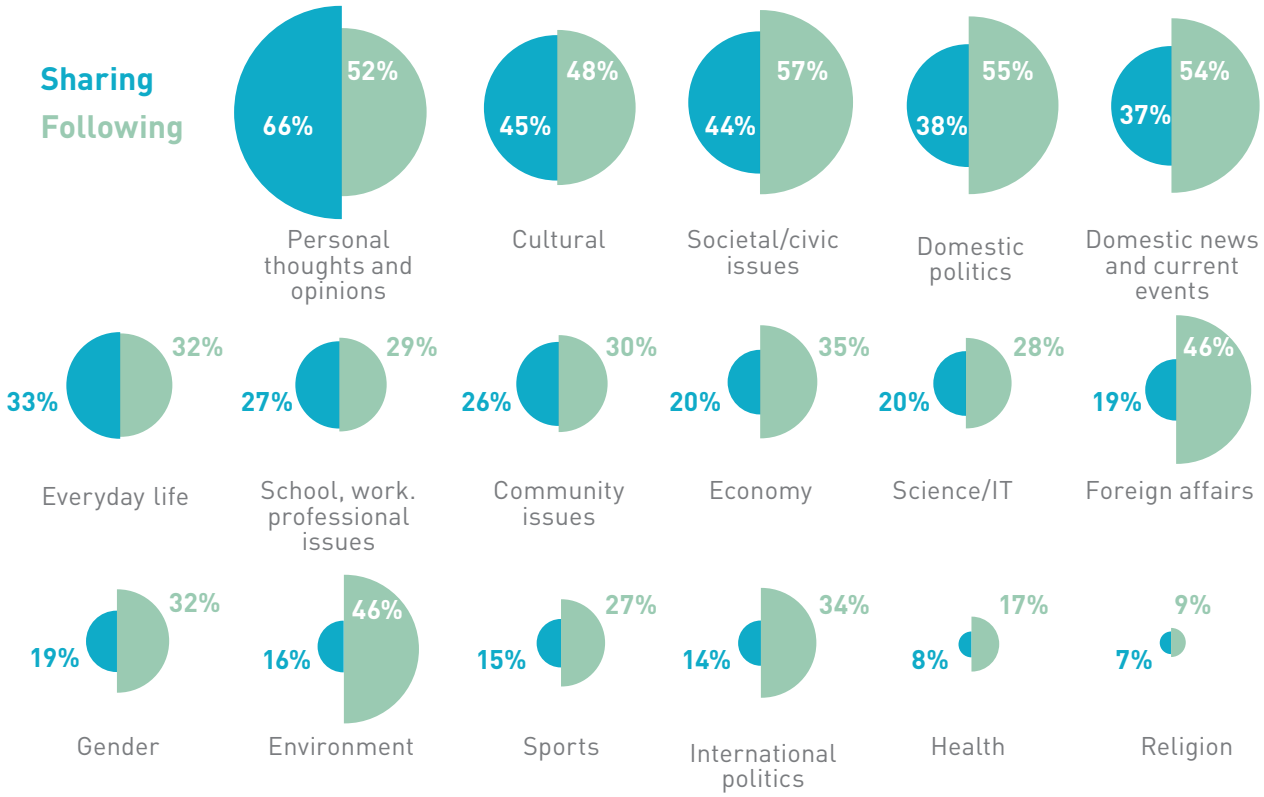
→Respondents more frequently share content related to personal thoughts and opinions compared to any other types of materials.

→Respondents more often follow than share content in general. This is particularly true for materials related to domestic news and politics, the economy, foreign affairs and international politics.

→There is little difference in the frequency of following and sharing habits on cultural, community, professional issues and religion, respectively.[17]

→Religion is the least-frequently followed and shared topic among survey respondents.[18]

Figure 14: Frequency of Following and Sharing Content



17 Within a 3 percentage-point range.

18 This demonstrates a difference between the interests of Iranian social network users and those in Middle Eastern countries. According to a recent study published by Pew Global Attitude Project more than 60% of SNS users in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia share content about religion. See: Andrew Kohut et al., *Social Networking Popular Across Globe: Arab Publics Most Likely to Express Political Views Online* (Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project, 2012).

Our findings also reveal some notable patterns in content-sharing behaviors between male and female respondents.

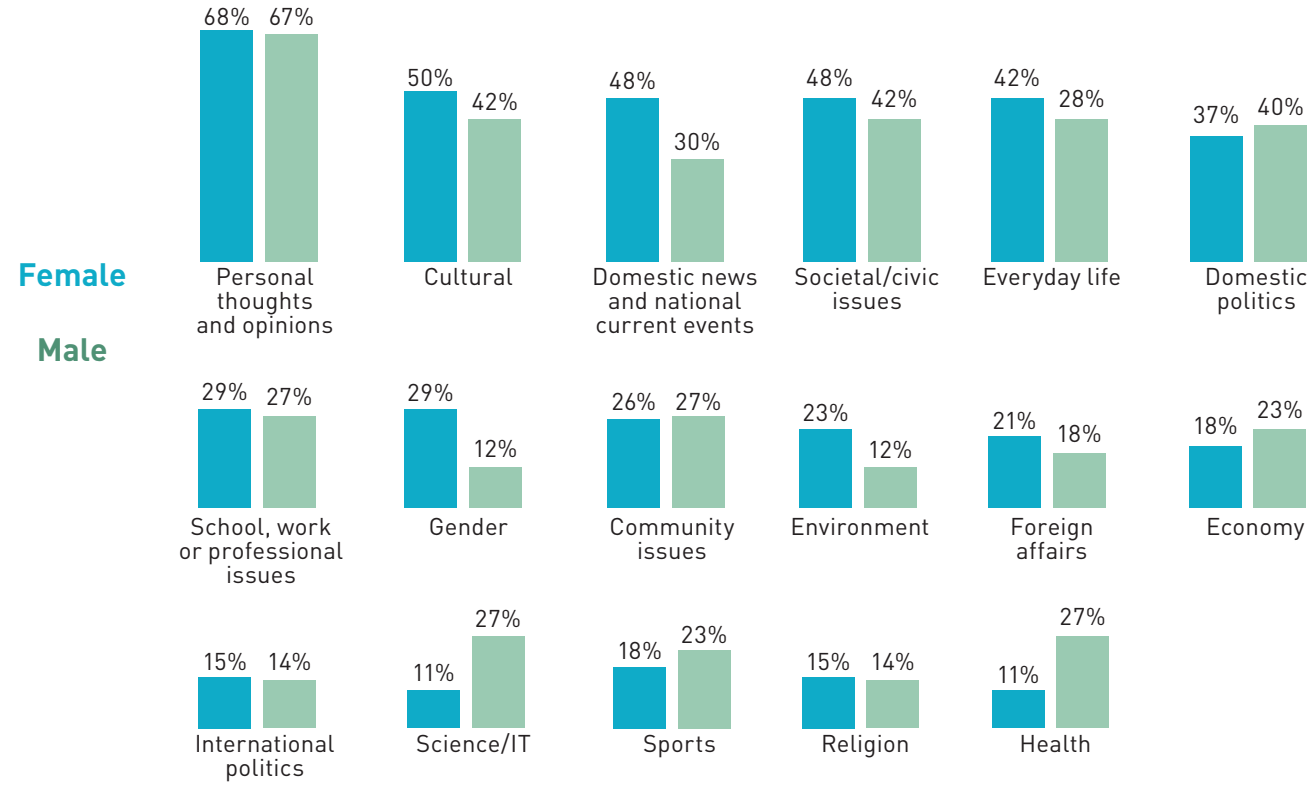
According to our results:

→Female and male respondents share content with similar frequency[19] in six of the 17 categories surveyed, including: personal issues, domestic politics, work/professional issues, community, foreign affairs, international politics, religion, and health, respectively.

→Females more often share content related to cultural issues, domestic news and events, societal/civic issues, gender, and the environment.

→Males tend to share more content related to the economy, science/IT, and sports.

Figure 15: Frequency of Topics Shared (by gender)

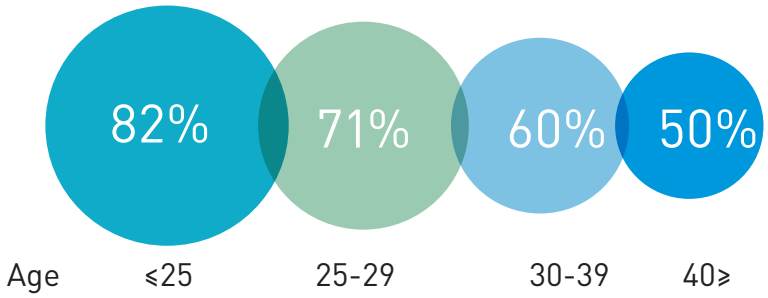


19 Within a 3 percentage-point range.

Likewise, sharing behaviors differ according to the respondents' age.

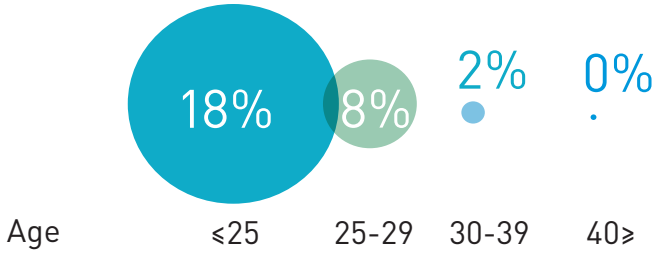
→Younger respondents (ages 25 or younger) tend to share their personal thoughts and opinions more frequently than all other age groups.

Figure 16: Frequency of Sharing Personal Content (by age)



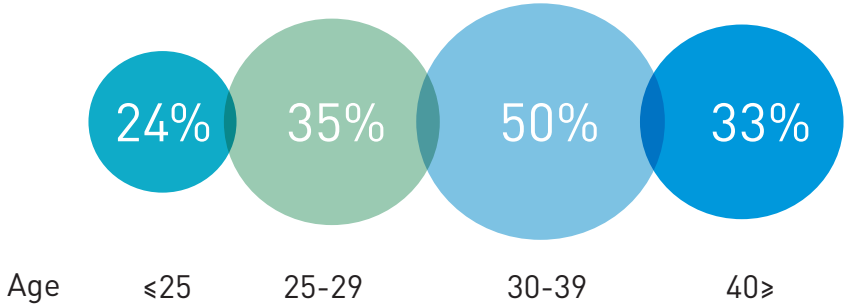
→Younger respondents also share more news about about religion than other users.

Figure 17: Frequency of Sharing Religious Content (by age)



→Respondents ages 30-39 tend to share more domestic news content than other age groups surveyed.

Figure 18: Frequency of Domestic News Content (by age)



3. TRUST, PRIVACY AND SECURITY

Social networking sites constantly produce digital traces of a users' activities. Moreover, many social media users provide personal information on their profile pages which make them easily identifiable. One major concern for SNS users around the world is to what extent this may violate their privacy and what security risks this may entail—a concern heightened for SNS users living in media-restrictive environments in which access to these platforms is banned or limited.

3.1 Trust in Online Networks

The issue of trust within social networks has become a key area of inquiry for scholars looking to measure the strength of online relationships and to understand the differences between online and offline social networks in general. Recent studies suggest that SNS users are more trusting of other people compared to non SNS-users.[20] The issue of trust among Iranian users is more complicated due to Facebook being prohibited. Hence, in our survey we asked participants whether or not people, in general, can be trusted.[21]

KEY FINDINGS:

Survey participants are not very trusting of people they do not know, yet most say they "friend" people they have never met or have only met once. Younger respondents are the least trusting group compared to other groups in this survey.

20 Keith Hampton et al., *Social Networking Sites and Our Lives* (Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 2011).

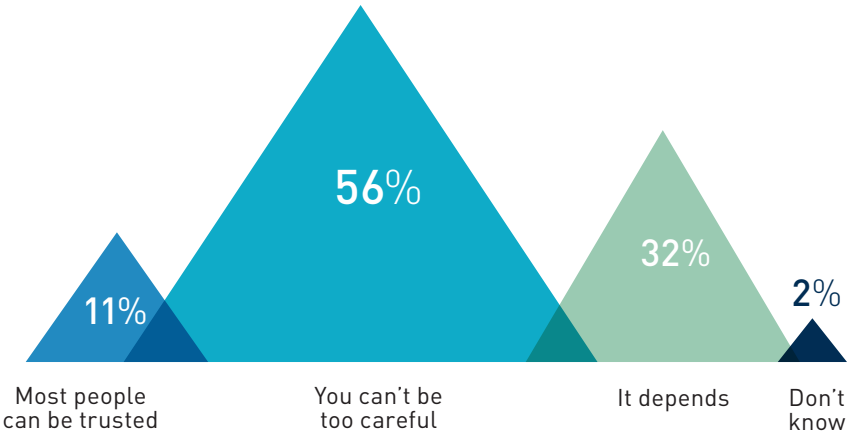
21 The question of trust in people is drawn from the Pew SNS and Facebook Survey 2010, See: Keith Hampton et al., *Social Networking Sites and Our Lives* (Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 2011).

According to our data:

→Respondents are not very trusting in general, with a majority reporting that "you can't be too careful" or "it depends."[22]

→Younger respondents (ages 25 or younger) are the least-trusting group in comparison to other age groups surveyed.

Figure 19: Trust in People



At the same time, a vast majority reported they have Facebook friends who they have never met or have only met once. Although this seems like contradictory data, it appears that respondents may consider other contextual cues to decide about the trustworthiness of other people, as nearly one third (31%) indicated that trusting other people depends on other factors.[23]

22 In comparison, 45% of American SNS users "agree that most people can be trusted," Hampton et al., *Social Networking Sites and Our Lives*, p. 33.

23 In contrast, just 3% of the respondents in the US indicated trusting other people depends on other factors, Hampton et al., p. 33.

3.2 Facebook Privacy

We also asked respondents about how satisfied they are with Facebook's privacy options, as well as what specific privacy settings they use to protect their Facebook activities and profile from the general public and/or from members within their own friend network.

KEY FINDINGS:

Just one third of respondents say they are satisfied with Facebook's privacy options and policies. A majority of survey participants report setting their profile visibility on "private" so that only their friends can see their profiles. More than half of respondents with "private" settings also apply limits on what certain friends can see.

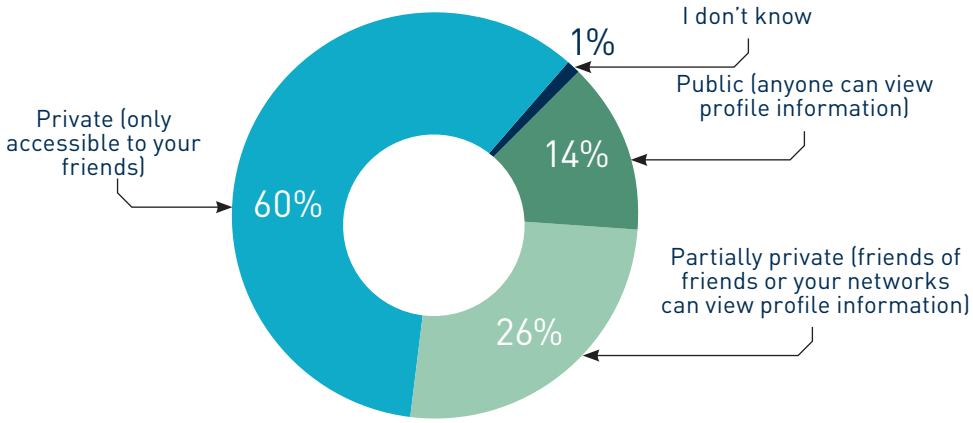
According to our data:

→Only a small percentage of respondents use completely public Facebook privacy settings.

→Six out of ten respondents set their accounts on private, allowing only those in their friend networks to access their profiles.

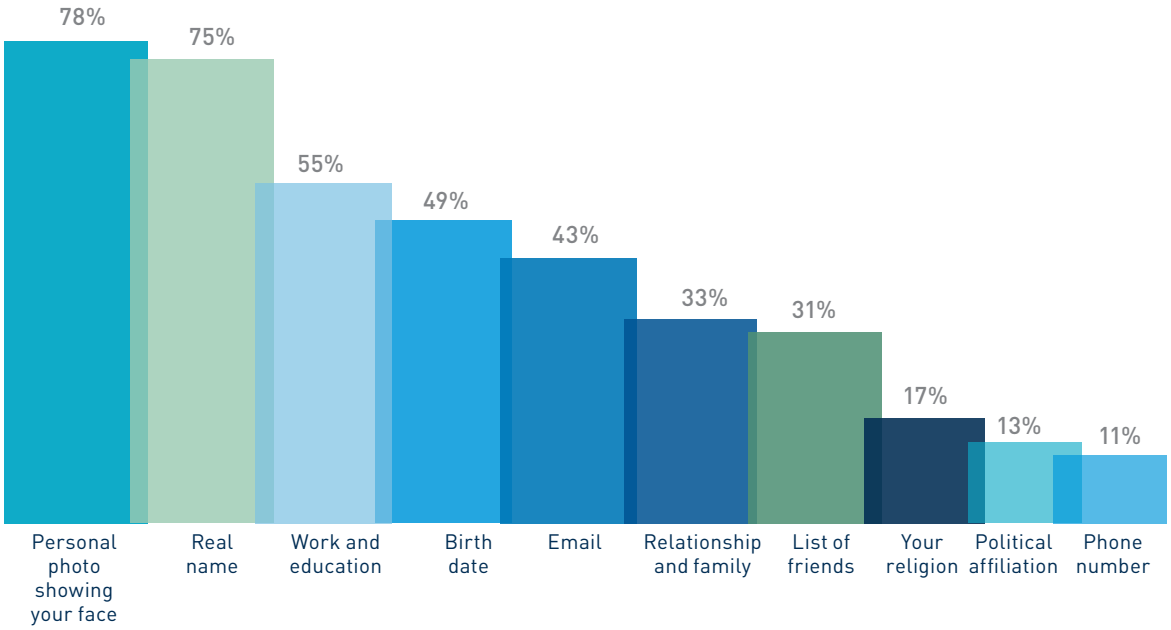
→Roughly a quarter of respondents use "partially private" settings that allow a broader network of Facebook friends to access to their account profiles.

Figure 20: Facebook Profile Privacy Settings



In addition, our data shows that respondents are reluctant to publicly reveal information about a range of personal information, including: their relationships and family members, their friend networks, their religion, and their political affiliation.

Figure 21: Access to Profile Information



We also asked participants about what they consider when posting pictures of themseleves on Facebook.

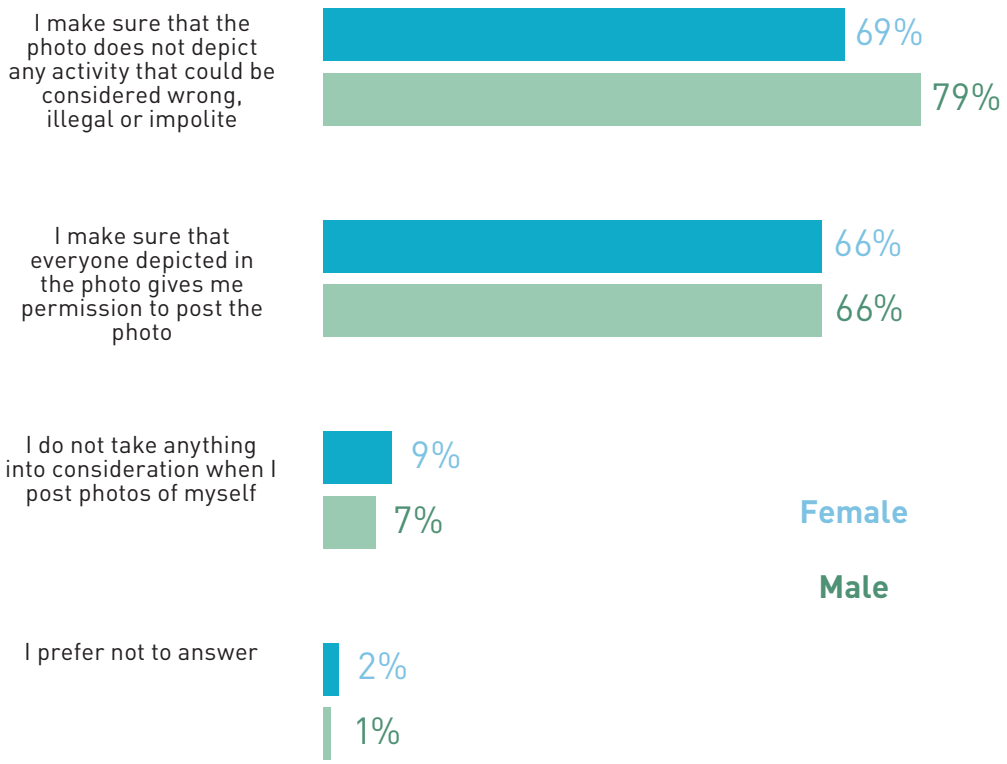
Survey results show:

→Only a small percentage of female respondents (15%) are concerned about whether their hijab is correct in the photos they publish on Facebook.

→A majority of female respondents are, however, concerned about posting photos in which they are engaged in activities considered culturally taboo or illegal (for instance, socializing with friends of opposite sex, drinking alchohol, dancing).

→Male respondents are more conservative than females in this regard, with nearly eight out of ten males surveyed saying that they avoid posting photos in which they are depicted doing something considered culturally taboo or illegal.

Figure 22: Considerations When Posting Photos (by gender)



3.3 Security Concerns

Given that Facebook is blocked in Iran and only accessible with the use of illegal circumvention tools, our survey sought to understand the perception among respondents regarding the security risks associated with using Facebook.

KEY FINDINGS:

A majority of respondents believe using Facebook could risk their security to some extent and may pose risks to their job prospects and reputation. Nearly half say they are "somewhat familiar" with stories about Facebook causing security threats to users.

According to our data:

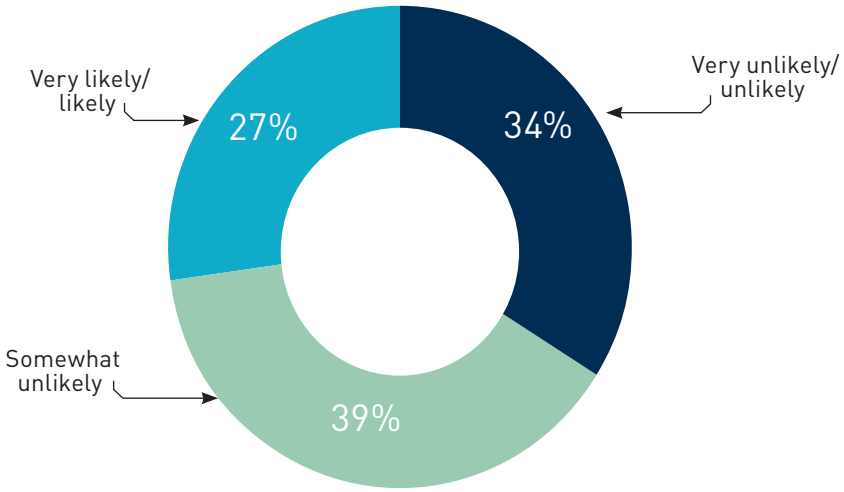
→More than 65% of respondents surveyed believe it that using Facebook could pose some risks to their job prospects and reputation.

→Respondents also reported being familiar with security issues through the personal experiences of their friends and acquaintances and through international news sources, respectively.

→Facebook users with higher education levels are more concerned about the potential impact Facebook could have on their job prospects.[24]

24 A Mann-Whitney test indicated that the risk of Facebook use for someone's job prospect was perceived greater by the participants who has a higher education degree than among less educated participants (U = 4905, N=302, p = .001).

Figure 23: Perception of Risks of Facebook Usage on Job Prospects and Reputation



4. ADDITIONAL SNS ACTIVITIES

In an effort to better understand the broader social networking environment in Iran, our survey asked respondents about other platforms they use in addition to Facebook.

KEY FINDINGS:

A majority of respondents are also active on at least two other Social Networking Sites. Google+ is by far the most popular social networking platform, followed by Twitter and LinkedIn. In addition, well over half of respondents say they have had their own blog.

Our survey results show:

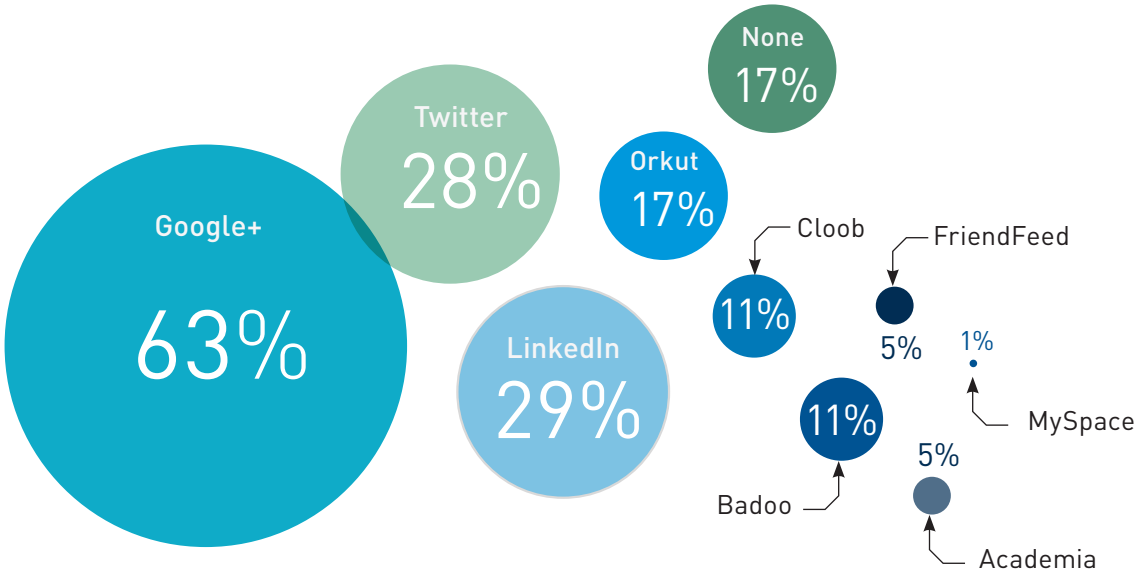
→Facebook was listed as the sole social networking platform by just 17% of respondents.

→Nearly two-thirds of respondents use Google+, while roughly 30% use Twitter and LinkedIn, respectively.

→About a fifth of respondents (17%) have a profile on Orkut, which was one of the first social networking sites in Iran, launched in 2004.[25]

25 In January 2005, the service was filtered inside Iran, which sparked debates between members of the reformist government and the judiciary. See "Judiciary filtered PersianBlog and Orkut." *BBC Persian*, January 9, 2005.

Figure 24: Additional SNS Usage Among Respondents



Our survey results also confirm findings from other scholars about the popularity of blogging among Iranians.[30]

→About two thirds of survey respondents (61%) confirmed that they have managed their own online journal or blog.[31]

→Generally, blogging is more popular among the younger respondents, with more than 69% of users younger than age 30 reporting that they have managed their own blog.

These findings coincide with the Iran Media Program's survey conducted among young internet users in Iran which showed that 54% of respondents wrote their own blog.[32]

30 Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005); Elizabeth M. Bucar and Roja Fazaeli, "Free Speech in Weblogistan? The Offline Consequences of Online Communication," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 03 (2008): 403–419; Philip Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; John Kelly and Bruce Etling, "Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere," *Berkman Center*, 2008; Antony Loewenstein, *The Blogging Revolution* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2008); Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

31 In contrast, in the US as of 2010, 14% of internet users reported having ever managed their own online journal or blog. See Hampton et al., *Social Networking Sites and Our Lives*, 64.

32 This trend may also mirror other examinations of Iranian bloggers which demonstrate how many bloggers have migrated to Facebook and other SNSs to post and share content. See, Laurent Giacobino et al, "Whither Blogestan: Evaluating Shifts in Persian Cyberspace," Iran Media Program, Center for Global Communication Studies, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, March 2014.

CONCLUSION

The 2009 election in Iran and the Arab Spring that followed put a spotlight on the democratizing potential of social media and social networking sites, particularly in societies in which communication flows are restricted by state authorities. Scholars, policy makers and media outlets at the time made hopeful assertions about the potential for these technologies to mobilize civic activism and drive social and political change in the Middle East. However, it is increasingly clear that a more nuanced understanding of how social media are used in specific cultural contexts is necessary to substantiate early claims about their powers of political efficacy.

Our findings indicate that Iranians rely on Facebook primarily to communicate with friends and family and only a small percentage use Facebook for political purposes. As such, it appears that Facebook functions as an alternative or quasi "public space" where social norms and codes of conduct for public life are less restrictive.

In addition, our research demonstrates that Iranian Facebook users are adept at circumventing technical restrictions that impede access to the social networking site. That most respondents in our survey report accessing Facebook with high-speed broadband from home indicates that the state's restrictions on faster internet speeds for residential services is no longer enforced by ISPs, perhaps in keeping with market demands. Likewise, our data confirms the widespread use of VPNs as the circumvention tool of choice among Iranian Facebook users, particularly among older, less tech-savvy respondents. Yet even with high-speed internet, the use of circumvention tools considerably reduces connection speeds; therefore, Iranian Facebook users have trouble consuming and sharing the rich multimedia content offered on Facebook.

Our research indicates that while respondents frequently use Facebook, most appear to be passive rather than active users, with a majority preferring to follow rather than share content, especially politically oriented materials. In contrast, there is less disparity in following and sharing behaviors with regard to content about personal, cultural, and societal issues. This may indicate that Iranian Facebook users are less comfortable sharing political content given that certain kinds of political expression are heavily disincentivized. Notably, our research shows that Iranians are less interested in sharing content about religion than most SNS users in the Middle East, which highlights some national and socio-political differences in SNS use across the region.

Our data also demonstrate the complexity of security-related issues with regard to the use of Facebook and circumvention tools in Iran. While respondents express concerns about Facebook's security and privacy settings, they do not appear to be overly concerned about the security risks of using circumvention tools—which is reflective of how commonplace the use of these tools to access blocked social media sites have become. It is also indicative of how many Iranians are attracted to social networking sites like Facebook as platforms for self-expression and alternative sources of information despite the risks it might entail.

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ANNEX: DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study is designed based on a previous qualitative study of Facebook use among Iranians. In the former study, we first conducted a series of qualitative interviews and a content analysis of activities of Iranian Facebook users to better understand the specific issues of SNS use among Iranians. Findings of the assessment were used to design the online survey of Iranian Facebook users for this current study.

In effort to reach the target population, a link to a Persian-language survey on Facebook was distributed via Facebook's advertisement system. However, this method proved challenging, as Facebook's advertisement system targets users based on information such as their location and language, yet neither of these options are available in Facebook's advertisement system for the Iranian or Persian language.

We therefore developed strategies to overcome the limitation of this feature in order to target Iranian users inside Iran. Since access to Facebook requires circumvention tools to bypass filtering using proxy servers outside Iran, we decided to use proxy servers' locations for targeting users inside Iran. A former study shows that the majority of proxy servers exit through the United States, Germany, the UK, Netherlands, France, Canada or Sweden. We also used the "interests targeting" feature of Facebook advertising which targets users based on users' profile content and onsite connections. Therefore, we added a group of keywords both in English and Persian such as Iran, Persian, Farsi, the name of major cities in Iran, and popular sports clubs as target interests. In order to avoid a biased sampling, we did not use controversial keywords or political terms. According to Facebook's advertisement system, the size of potential audience for our advertisement campaign reached to 2,284,840 users. To maximize the outreach of the survey we also used snowball sampling to spread the link to the survey on Facebook.