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The Content Analysis of Internet Users’ Approach on Changes in Iranian Population Policies

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Abstract

Iran’s population policies have faced a lot of changes in recent decades. This paper attempts to address the content analysis of internet users’ approach on changes in Iranian population policies. The sample consists of 799 Internet users of Iranian news websites. The research methodology is based on a qualitative content analysis. Among the related published news, 10 news with the largest audience were selected for content analysis. Findings made it clear that users put more emphasis on the economic dimension of increased childbearing. The most important categories extracted from analysed comments, are: “economic hardship as an obstacle to childbearing”, “relative continuity of the social function of childbearing” and “institutionalization of smaller family”. Although a group of users had emphasized the importance of “political dimensions of population growth”, the results made it clear that the political dimension of the subject is not the dominant position among users. The results indicated that in addition to challenging the dominant policy approach, the users had a critical approach towards interpreting and decoding of new population policies in Iran. These users resist the institutionalization of discourses of population growth.

**Keywords:** Population Policies, Content Analysis, Internet Users, Iran.

# INTRODUCTION

Family planning and population growth control policies in Iran were first implemented in 1967, but with the spread of religious rhetoric and the use of coupon system to provide basic necessities of people, family planning policies were rejected. This strengthened the social and political grounds for pro-natalist views in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al, 2003, p. 170). As a result of these changes, the fertility rate reached about 7 children during the period 1980-1981. With the spread of modernization elements by the end of the Iraq-Iran war, birth limitation policy was re-introduced and provided the grounds for a change in people’s attitudes towards reproductive behaviors. Consequently, the fertility rate reached about 2.1 in 2000 (Abbasi-Shavazi,1997;2002). Then, fertility rate declined further in a way that many urban areas experienced below-replacement fertility. The persistence of this trend led to the concerns of many policymakers and planners. These concerns are evident in different laws including the Fifth Five-Year Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2011-2015), Population and Family Planning Law, and the Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence which targets a fertility rate above replacement level.

With the development of virtual media, changes in population policies towards encouraging couples to bear children are among the issues increasingly raised by the Iranian media in recent years . In the discussions of childbearing, its economic, social, cultural and political aspects often become the main topic of discussion. Among various communication media, news websites have made it possible for Internet users to express and share their comments on the topics with others. During the exchange of views, users provide their own interpretations of various aspects of childbearing and show their reaction to policy alterations based on different meanings they attribute to childbearing. Proposing virtual ethnography, Uwe Flick believes that the Internet is a tool for studying the interaction and communication of people who otherwise do not have access to them. A different tool that goes beyond individual interviews or group discussions. Following Flick, the Internet can be taken as a “place” or a way of “being”. In such cases, the Internet can be studied as a type of environment or culture in which human beings create certain forms of communication, or sometimes certain identities (Flick, 2008, p. 294). Thus, we can study the form and content of comments on news websites in order to answer three questions: How does policy changes about childbearing gets constructed on the Internet? What is the meaning of the issue of childbearing raised by the news media to users? How do Internet users deal with the issue of increased fertility? Answering these questions requires decoding the way the issues relevant to policy changes and childbearing are interpreted on the Internet by the users. In this regard, it is important to address the following questions which constitute the main objectives of this article. (1) In response to policies that encourage childbearing, what issues are important to the users of news websites? (2) To what extent do users accept/reject the messages implied by the issues related to childbearing and how do they interact with these policies? (3) What strategies (critical/passive/supportive) do users adopt against the policies related to childbearing and population growth?

# Theoretical Approach

Due to features such as “interactivity”, “real time”, “ubiquity” and “decetrality”, virtual social networks provide a good place for users to express their ideas and opinions. Such features, along with the possibility to share ideas by users, double the significance of virtual social networks. Thus, some social scientists believe that virtual social networks have the potential to create a virtual public sphere; users are able to engage in dialogue and interaction on various issues through virtual networks and hence form a type of “public sphere”. In the analysis of social and political behaviour, several researchers have pointed to the formation of public discourses influenced by social media (Khondker,2011; Eltantawy & Wiest,2011; Stepanova; 2011). Other researchers have emphasized how Internet users can apply different meanings and interpretations about a public issue and can play a role in forming public opinion (Garnham,1992; Eickelman & Anderson,2003). The concept of the public sphere and its formation has been discussed by Jurgen Habermas (1991). For Habermas, the public sphere is a realm of social life in which every factor that can bring public opinion together will find the opportunity to be formed. Nancy Fraser believes that Habermas’s public sphere identifies a theater in modern societies in which participation is carried out through dialogue. Public sphere is the space where citizens talk about their common affairs and, therefore, it is an arena of discursive interaction (Kivisto, 2010). In fact, the public sphere is part of social life in which the actors can discuss important issues related to the common good (public interest) and this leads to the formation of public opinion.

In current cultural studies, the representations of social phenomena in the media space is of great importance. Representation refers to the fact that a phenomenon does not have inherent meaning but its meaning depends on how it is represented in a society. As one of the leading thinkers in the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall proposes his ideas about the fluid relationship between hegemony and resistance, or text and audience. In an article about encoding/decoding model, Hall tries to find out to what extent television can shape subjects and to what extent subjects can resist the meanings, values and codes induced by television programs. Following this approach, the meaning-making process in any society can be understood in the context of power relations, relations in which different groups compete over the power to give meaning to events and values. For Hall, although a text or television program has a preferred meaning or dominant reading, it is a potential source of different meanings activated through a dialogue between the text and the audience (Hall, 2001). According to the above-mentioned points, it can be said that this paper’s theoretical approach is inspired by the ideas of Habermas and Stuart Hall. This approach allows for the interpretation and decoding of public debates by actors.

# Methodology and Study Field

This study is a netnographic research conducted through qualitative content analysis. Netnography is the online ethnographic research to identify participants’ insights (Kozinets, 2010). In other words, netnography is an ethnographic research adjusted (optimized) for studying online communities which provides information on meaning and context of online users (ibid, 2010). The methodology applied in this study is very similar to Flick’s intended virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography is primarily based on the analysis of texts and online discussions or based on participant-as-observer interactive online studies (Sade-Beck, 2004). This method is way easier than survey, testing, focus groups and individual interviews, especially for participants. It is applied to contexts that the researcher has not manipulated or fabricated. This method is less expensive and faster than focus groups and individual interviews (Kozinets,1998) and seems to be more consistent with the nature of ethnographic research because it is more unobtrusive than in-person methods (Ibid, 2002). In this method, users can do their desired action in agreement or disagreement with a subject.

According to Hsieh and Shanon’s theory (2005), qualitative content analysis is divided into three categories: (1) conventional content analysis, (2) directed content analysis, and (3) summative content analysis. Each of these categories has its specific applications and benefits. Aiming to identify and quantify specific words or concepts in a text in order to understand the application of these words or their content in the text, this study has applied qualitative content analysis with the summative approach. Through this method, in addition to quantitative analysis, it was tried to analyse and thematise the implied content of the words. The study population consists of 799 Internet users who had read the news[[1]](#footnote-1) related to recent population policies in Iran in the cyberspace and shared their opinions on this issue. The users were both male and female. In addition to these 799 users, 41,684 other users who had read the comments of the original users expressed their position as “agree” or “disagree” and the related data was analyzed in the quantitative section of the study. Table 1 presents distribution of comments and the number of supporters and opponents as separated by the news items.

Table 1. Distribution of comments as separated by news items

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Selected news items** | **Number of comments** |
| News item 1 | 30 |
| News item 2 | 156 |
| News item 3 | 50 |
| News item 4 | 8 |
| News item 5 | 8 |
| News item 6 | 40 |
| News item 7 | 439 |
| News item 8 | 25 |
| News item 9 | 13 |
| News item 10 | 30 |
| Sum | 799 |

# Findings

Here, the results of qualitative content analysis of users’ comments is provided. Generally, a number of 1915 concepts, 76 subcategories and 4 main categories were extracted by the content analysis of the findings. In the following sections, the most important concepts and categories arising from the studied texts will be discussed and analyzed.

## *Users’* comments *about economic dimensions of population policy changes*

Content analysis of the submitted comments showed that “high cost of living” has made parents cast serious doubts on the necessity of having a child. They constantly refer to economic crisis in Iran and development of a feeling of economic insecurity in describing the conditions prevailing in the society. Regarding the high cost of living, uncertainty about the necessity of having children and the inability of parents to devote sufficient time to the upbringing of children, one users, says:

*I’ve got a 10-month-old baby. I put her in the nursery at 7 a.m. and take her back at 5 p.m. Her dad comes home from work at 7 p.m., all tired and exhausted. We are so involved during the day, job, traffic, these high costs...we don’t have time for this kid. We don’t take ourselves as good parents for her. This is a sorry situation, sometimes we think if we really needed this kid now. Now, in this situation, some guys say we should have a couple of kids! On what grounds? In the old days, the father was working alone and was breadwinner to 6 children. Now both parents work but they can’t provide for ordinary costs of a single kid.*

Another user stated that despite her desire for a second child, her husband was strongly against it because of economic problems. She believed that other people have the same desire but the conditions in society leads to “people’s failure in childbearing”. The following quote represents the views of such users.

*The only problem is income and life shortages, otherwise all love to have children. I’ve got a kid and really want to have a second one, but my husband doesn’t allow it and always refers to facilities as an excuse.*

In reaction to the supporters of population increase, one user says:

*You are living on the easy street!!! Do you pay its costs? Do you provide for its housing, education, job and future?? If so, I’ll have 10 children!!*

In response to another user, one user, adopted a critical approach and pointed to the mismatch of revenues and living costs and believed that one should have a realistic approach to the analysis of the current situation and the impact of living costs on childbearing.

*You sure save all your money. Carfare cost alone can be 100-200 thousand tomans, if your workplace is far. If you respect your life and spend some money for yourself, a lot of money will be gone. But if you want a very ordinary life, you’re right. Rising divorce rate because of family poverty is a good reason to reject your claim.*

Following this comment, another user criticizes “officials’ ignorance of the costs of childrearing” and, adopting a “critical” approach, he writes his comment on the news item related to encouraging people to childbearing:

*Can one place 5, 6 children in 40-50 meter houses? Do you know about the cost of food, clothing and...? Do you know about the price of diapers at all?*

Another user, Reza, refers to economic problems, including housing, as the root of decline in population growth and believes that:

*The root of the problem is in the economy and housing. I’m married for 15 years and I’ve got a 13-year-old kid. I swear if I knew the country’s economic condition would end up like this, I wouldn’t have wanted this one child too. What’s the point to have a child whom you can’t fully feed or answer his question about when to have a shack of our own?*

## Users’ comments about social dimensions of population policy changes

On the social dimensions of the subject, one of the extracted categories was “criticism of the limitation of generation continuity with one-child tendency”. With regard to this, a user believes that:

*When everything’s tied to economy, it’s like this. With one-child policy, don’t you think how your child will live in the future without a family or relatives? Why shouldn’t we think that having brothers and sisters is the right of every child and we shouldn’t deny them this right? Don’t we think that our grandchildren need aunts and uncles? Or we assume that we know everything and right now we recognize that no one has any rights and costs are the only basis for valuation in the society?*

Another user criticized people’s strictness in life, pointed that large families have less problems and referred to the positive social dimensions of childbearing. In this regard, Sharif, another user, agreed with population increase policy and stated that “having a sibling” is a “factor for joy and social vitality”. His comment, is as follows:

*I completely agree with family population growth because my most beautiful, most memorable and most emotional memories were with my sisters and brothers.*

Another user criticizes increased childbearing in the 80’s and believes that today’s generation puts more emphasis on quality rather than quantity. Describing his ideas, he states that:

*Most people of childbearing age are the 80’s generation who haven’t forgotten the bitter memories of 5-6 children families in a small house. We still remember our parents suffering to have an average life, we remember our limited facilities and options. There’s no way this generation be willing to raise its children with the same hardships and poor qualities of life.*

In relation to the difficulty of raising a child in today’s conditions and preference of quality over quantity, another user, refers to a change in standards of living and believes that:

*Even if families are wealthy, they also have come to the understanding that it is difficult to properly raise more than 2 or 3 children. So instead of having 6 children and leaving them to chance, it’s better to have 2 or 3 kids and care for them properly. It’s not only a financial matter, it’s about the number of children that can be raised properly by parents.*

## Users’ comments about cultural dimensions of population policy changes

The categories arising from cultural aspects of the subject reflect the development of a concern among users about the change of criteria for happiness and extreme materialism of the society. In this regard, one user, who had opposed to another user’s comment by saying that “marriage is necessary for happiness”, stated that:

*My dear: I saw people in the census plan with less income but happier than you and people with more income but more miserable than you. Singles’ money is not blessed. If you don’t believe, compare yourself with the married people.*

Criticizing the secularization of people, another user recommend that users should put their trust in God and believed that:

*If economic problems were a barrier to marriage and childbearing, why do they say: Whosoever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him?!!! Have you ever thought about this sentence deeply? Have we ever really put our trust in God?!!! Who do we really put our trust in in our daily life?!!!*

“Normative control of childbearing” and “collectivism in childbearing” are among other categories extracted from the analysis of users’ comments. To users, high fertility in today’s society is abnormal and, with the popularity of low fertility, high fertility leads to social exclusion. The following quotes express the above points.

*These conditions don’t allow having many children. Having more than two kids needs courage. Bring four kids on the street and see what they’d call you?!!!*

Another user also states that:

*I don’t think the main problem is unemployment, housing and the like.... It is the culture in which someone with more than 2 kids is looked at as if they are of a low culture level ...... in our culture, having fewer children is considered high class.*

## Users’ comments about political dimensions of population policy changes

The majority of the political comments have emphasized two types of political analysis. The first group were those who were concerned about external threats and conspiracies and therefore agreed with the policies of population growth. The other group were critical of domestic policy and believed that policy incoherence and lack of enforcement mechanisms prevent population growth. In the first group, a user expresses his concern about population decline in Iran as follows:

*I swear my heart is burning! I can’t say the things I know here.... but enough to say that it was all because of the irrational advertising of IRIB saying that “fewer children, better life”. For those who talk about inflation! Inflation is irrelevant. Population decline has been proposed by the Pentagon against the Islamic Republic!!! The rest you should know...*

Another user also believes that:

*“Given the threats from Western countries, and the possibility of war, I think that the population should increase.... Who should really fight in a society where all people are old? We should prepare ourselves for the conquest of Palestine.*

In the latter group, a user points to the “failure of government incentive policies” and refers to the distrust of officials’ promises in a comment:

*The president’s renege on paying 1 million tomans per infant[[2]](#footnote-2) reduced the population growth rate in the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

Criticizing “incentive policies for quantitative population growth”, another user states that:

*Millions of young and middle-aged talented and competent Iranians are in America, Canada, Australia and.... Why????????!!! Instead of poor policies for population growth, the government should seek to keep human resources within the country.*

Criticizing the projection of internal problems on enemies, another user describes his tragic look to the past as follows:

*We were three kids. I mean the last ten years everywhere we went, in the alleys, on streets and roads it was written “fewer children, better life”. How sad did I become! I swear I thought I was surplus. Were these writings the enemy’s too?*

# Conclusion

In this study, we tried to deal with population policy changes in Iran by qualitative content analysis of related news items. The aim of this work was to study interpretations and representations of population policy changes among Internet users. The qualitative findings of the research made it clear that users put more emphasis on the economic dimension of increased childbearing. The most important categories related to the economic aspect, extracted from analyzed comments, are follows: “High costs of child-rearing”, “criticizing the authorities’ ignorance of the costs of child-rearing”, “economic pressure”, “failure in childbearing”, “feeling of economic insecurity” and “realistic reasoning about the costs”. The extracted categories reveal that the issue of fertility has been constructed and represented on the Internet as an economic phenomenon. The results also showed that in the face of the dominant approach that seeks to institutionalize state population policies in the society, users not only avoid passive approaches but adopt a critical approach and analyze economic conditions and its influence on their quality of life. Accordingly, the main category that can explain other categories related to the economic dimension is “economic hardship as an obstacle to childbearing”. This category suggests how economic situation has affected the nature of the reactions to the issue of fertility on the Internet and news websites. The social function of childbearing action was another issue explored among Internet users. The aim of this was to determine how users socially define the issue of fertility on the Internet and news websites; how issues such as “generation continuity” and “childbearing as a social action” are interpreted by the users and what changes have occurred to these concepts in the cyberspace. In this regard, the most important extracted categories are: “Having siblings is a factor for joy and social vitality”, “criticism of the limitation of generation continuity with one-child tendency”, “the positive function of high fertility”, “decline in quality of life with the increased number of children”, “belief in the positive effects of population growth” and “changes in the criteria for raising children”. This part of the research findings indicate that childbearing action still has social functions. Many users expressed their regret about the impossibility of increased childbearing due to social and economic conditions of the society. In general, the ultimate category in this part of the research is “relative continuity of the social function of childbearing”. This category suggests that in spite of economic and social problems in Iran, when fertility issues are raised on the Internet, users tend to express concern about the dominant conditions in the society and demand changes in views which are incompatible with Iran’s social and cultural background. In this regard, some of the concepts, main categories and subcategories emerged from the findings that focus on the cultural aspects of the subject were in line with the above concepts and categories in the social dimension. The categories of “criticism of the secularization of people”, “abnormality of high fertility”, “institutionalization of low fertility” and “malfunctioning of marriage customs” confirm this claim. The main category in this section is “institutionalization of smaller family” which reflects cultural and value changes in the concept of family and its place in Iranian society. Although a group of users had emphasized the importance of “political dimensions of population growth”, qualitative and quantitative content analysis of users’ comments made it clear that the political dimension of the subject is not the dominant position among users. In this regard, categories such as “the failure of government’s incentive policies”, “criticism of quantitative population growth policy” and having a “tragic look to the past” suggest that users reject the nature and process of policies related to family planning and fertility and tend to adopt a critical approach in negotiating with the dominant approach of population policies. The main category in this part of the findings is “breaks and contradictions in the population policies”. According to what went before, it can be concluded that in addition to challenging the dominant population policies promoted by the mainstream media, Internet users adopt a critical position in interpreting and decoding the related issues. They resist the institutionalization of discourses that promote childbearing based on the economic and social conditions of the Iranian society.

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**Appendix:** **Sources of the news / the studied interviews in the research**

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1. In this study, from the released news related to new population policies in Iran, 10 news items with the largest audience were selected for analysis. News headlines and the related Internet addresses are provided in Appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . According to the approved plan of “Mehr Reza Future Fund” in 2010, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran established that from then on 1 million tomans would be deposited by the state into an specific account of each newborn baby and afterwards per a yearly deposit of 240 thousand tomans by the families into that account, the government will deposit an additional 120 thousand tomans. Bank Melli Iran (National Bank) refused to implement the plan because of lack of funds. (Jamejam Online, 27 Jan. 2012. Retrieved from http://www1.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100802651266). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)