



## Impact of Social Networks on Citizenship Education of Young Generation in the Context of Islamic Republic of Iran: A Lived Experience

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 01 August 2020 Revised: 09 October 2020 Accepted: 14 June 2021 Online: 15 June 2021	<p>Virtual social networks have given rise to new phenomena such as virtual citizenship and virtual citizenship education in various human societies. The purpose of this study is to investigate lived experience of young generation to understand the impact of social networks on their upbringing in the context of Islamic Republic of Iran. In this research, the qualitative method of ethnography is used both as a research method (to understand analytical attitude of individuals about research subject) and as a method of data collection (observation and interview through active presence of researchers in two virtual social networks of Telegram and WhatsApp). Researchers also considered Geertz's two-step method for clear description and interpretation to present and analyze the data. The research findings revealed that technological developments have made young Iranian citizens more familiar with their citizenship rights and culture. Also, the lived experience of Iranian youth shows a change in individuals' role as a passive citizens in real social networks to active citizens in virtual social networks. In addition, the research findings indicated the diversity of learning resources and issues related to citizenship rights. Thus, virtual social networks have created new opportunities for educating the young generation, which makes changes in current Iran's educational policies inevitable.</p>
<b>KEYWORDS</b> Citizenship Education Islamic Republic Lived Experience Social Networks Young Generation	

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## 1. Introduction

Today, information and communication technologies have penetrated social space and significantly affected people's lifestyles. Virtual social networks, as a new generation of websites, have been the focus of users around the world (Swist, Collin, McCormack, & Third, 2015). These sites are based on formation of online communities and bring together a group of Internet users with special features. By entering virtual networks, people enter a new world that originates from real-world events and current content and discourse around it is about the concerns of contemporary human beings (Anderson & Rainie, 2013). In these media, the recipient of the message is not passive and interacts dynamically and actively with the message, the sender, the sending and receiving process, and platform for delivering message. He also has the opportunity to change message, add his thoughts and intellectual views to it, or critique and delete part of the message and send it to other people (Akbari Tabar & Eskandaripour, 2013). Another characteristic of virtual social networks is the widespread acceptance of users, the disregard for national borders, and power to escape from control of governments and society (UNICEF, 2017). In fact, virtual social networks are a wide and complex space that brings together different people with different tendencies, beliefs and convictions (Rezaei & Pourjabali, 2016; Shahramnia et al., 2017). One of the prominent features of cyberspace is spacelessness and timelessness. The disappearance of spatial distance and unprecedented increase in the ability of individuals to exchange and interact with others has transformed their process of "collective identification." In other words, cyberspace is a type of meta-space (Zolfali et al., 2018).

Although the emergence of new technologies is mainly considered in terms of communication advances, the above-mentioned features have aroused the interest of social scientists –and especially educational scientists– to study its educational and behavioral effects. In fact, the main paradigm can be considered as a perspective in which new technologies affect the behavior of younger generation (Constantin & Labăr, 2008). One of the effects of new technologies is to change people's perceptions of rights and education citizenship. In fact, virtual social networks, as a place for unlimited interactions, receiving and transmitting information, conflicting opinions, and receiving a variety of entertainment, have created new opportunities for formation and manifestation of "modern citizenship education." Thus, these networks have played a key role in the development of "citizen identity" of their users (Musapour & Seifollahi, 2017).

The concept of citizenship includes key elements such as democracy, participation, respect for members of society and their rights, and a balanced relationship with the government (Al-Qatawaneh et al., 2019). Concepts such as culture and citizenship rights, although discussed by scholars of different philosophical, political, and legal schools, but the necessary condition for their objective realization is a change in social education methods based on centrality of citizenship education (Hashemianfar & Ganji, 2009). In fact, issues such as social order and cohesion, law-abiding behaviors, civil liberties, nation-state relations, gender attitudes, cultural development, and environmental challenges are greatly influenced by level of education and behavior of citizens. Of course, many of the existing definitions of citizenship education and related concepts are related to the time when digital social networks did not exist, while nowadays people deal with phenomena such as digital world, digital citizenship, digital citizenship rights, and digital citizenship education. Thus, Virtual social networks enhance civic collaboration and participation and contribute to developing civic skills (Baeldenet al., 2013; Chee et al., 2013; Harris, 2014; Näkki et al., 2011; Maguth, 2012).

In the meantime, virtual networks have affected especially young generation (Mousavi & Haddadi, 2011). This has led researchers in various human sciences to emphasize the role of mass communication in shaping personality of young generation (Zemmels, 2011). These networks affect the identity, educational backgrounds, behavior and mood of young people – more than any other social group. They have the ability to make fundamental changes in the thoughts, behavioral patterns and social life of youth because of their readiness to accept changes quickly (Ariani et al., 2015; Dastani et al., 2015). In fact, they have provided an opportunity for all young people to exchange ideas, content, thoughts and communication with anyone they like without fear of people such as parents, teachers, and the police (Amirpour & Grivani, 2014). Thus, virtual social networks change the young generation's perception of society and its intellectual and value foundations which lead to a change in their culture (Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020; Koiranen et al., 2020; Reuters et al. 2019).

In addition, researchers have considered the positive and negative effects of cyberspace on youth behavior and have become two groups of advocates and opponents of the "digital generation" (Buckingham, 2006). The first group believes that cyberspace and especially social networks have caused the intellectual liberation of young generation today. According to them, new technologies

have become a tool to free young generation from unlimited influence of powerful social institutions – such as family and government – and to escape their various demands. In the past, cultural, religious, political, and family barriers and restrictions, especially in traditional societies, did not allow many young people – especially girls – to participate in society freely (UN Women, 2019). The digital generation in the present age has been able to ignore many frontiers and obstacles. Thus, the youth of this generation are more open-minded, democratic, creative, and more confident than the youth of previous generations (Buckingham, 2008). They welcome the presence of information and communication technologies and have a more optimistic assessment about it, because technologies have provided new opportunities for social participation, citizenship-based behavior, creativity, self-expression, rapid access to knowledge, and new ways of work and leisure (Livingstone, 2002). In addition to the impact of virtual social networks on individual life, we can also mention their social function. Many studies show that there is less area of social life of young generation that has not been affected by virtual networks. One of the affected areas is people's relationship with government, especially in matters such as political and social rights. For example, studies of Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay (2013); Balkin (2004); Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng (2014); Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez (2011); Pinkleton, Weintraub & Austin (2001); Shah et al. (2007); Loader, & Mercea (2011); Ashtrinan & Amirzadeh (2015), and Abdolhian & Haghgooi (2009) indicate direct impact of social networks on political effectiveness, democratic political culture, political debate, and political participation.

Many studies also show the role of virtual social networks in promoting citizenship rights. For example, Lucas and Motor (2019) mention two positive and negative roles of social networks: First, the role of education and awareness and Second, the abuse of people. In a study related to North Africa, Zanzoun (2017) revealed that social media play a significant role in enhancing Moroccan social and collective action capabilities by favoring different forms of mobilization, and facilitating links between dispersed constituencies and national public spheres with a view to promoting human rights practices. Also Swagger (2012) in her research entitled “The Online Citizen: Is Social Media Changing Citizens’ Beliefs about Democratic Values?” found a strong correlation between the use of Facebook and personal blogs and support for civil liberties. Individuals who spend more time self-publicizing on the Internet seem to value freedom of expression more, but also value the right to privacy less than individuals who use social media less often (p. 1). Victoria Chioma Nwankwo (2011) through her research work indicated media’s role on human rights promotion. She believes its role is important because the mass media audience is often averse to human rights programmes

as they consider them boring. However, the seemingly boring human rights programmes can be made attractive when the media adopt a technique which attracts the audience's interest and attention to human rights programmes (p. 5).

Studies have also been conducted on role of virtual social networks in citizenship education, and in some countries practical measures have been taken by those involved in the education system. For example, Claison and Van Killern (2018) have reported providing 76% of all public schools in the U.S. with digital citizenship curricula. This popular digital citizenship package teaches students a variety of topics, including internet safety, privacy and security, information literacy, and cyberbullying and digital drama. Also research by Anderson and Hitlin (2016), Bennett et al. (2008); Tufekci and Wilson (2012); Greenhow et al. (2009), and Aouragh (2012) indicated impact of virtual social networks on citizenship education. In the meantime, it can be interesting to study the extent of influence of social networks due to environmental differences (social, cultural and political). Iran is a country in the heart of Middle East with a population of more than 83 million and political system of Islamic Republic can be a good case to study the role of virtual social networks in a specific cultural-religious environment (Saleck Pay, Hosseini & Shakouri, 2013). After change of Iran's political system in the late 1970s, social institutions largely followed a religious pattern. According to this pattern, all social strata must follow a specific doctrine accepted by the political system. With the emergence of new methods of communication and especially with the prevalence of the Internet, new opportunities for alternative discourses and doctrines were formed (Saei, Safarpour & Bavir, 2010). Ineed, the fact that more than half of the Iran's population is less than 30 years old shows how social environment is ready to adopt communication technologies. Thus, in recent years, social networks have been able to increase user engagement to pave the way for dramatic changes in formal doctrine of social systems (Rezaei et al., 2017).

It is clear that these changes are not limited to a specific area of life, but what is obvious is the quantitative and qualitative growth of presence of social networks in the lives of young generation. The importance of this issue becomes more clear when we realize how much Iran's society - consisting of different ethnicities, religions and languages - is receptive to new ways of social relations. For example, according to the latest statistics of the Radio Regulatory Authority (2019), more than 67 million people in Iran use the Internet (with a penetration rate of 81.48) and the highest number of users is connected via mobile (with a penetration rate of 76.58). Also, the advisor to the Minister of Sports and Youth stated that the average daily use of social networks by

Iranians is 9 hours (Rostami, 2015). In addition, we can mention other new statistics that show the penetration of virtual social networks. The head of the Information Technology and Digital Media Center of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance & Culture announced that 53% of Iranians are members of at least one social network and 72% of young people aged 18 to 29 are members of different social networks (Mousavian, 2016). This influence also becomes more apparent when we realize that cyberspace access infrastructure in Iran is not very desirable. For example, the latest report of the World Telecommunication Union (2019) shows that the speed of Iran's internet is ranked 145 among more than 200 countries. The main question here is why Iranians are so popular on social media – despite the slow speed of the Internet.

For this question, three short answers can be given: First, the very young population structure of Iran; Second, increase of education level of society, especially girls and women, and Third, the technological and social attractiveness of networks. Of course, the role of social, cultural, political and family constraints should not be overlooked. According to Salekpai, Hosseini and Shakouri (2013), the layers of identity of Iranian have become much more meaningful and shaped through their virtual life nowadays. In fact, by satisfying the intellectual, emotional and social needs of young people and adolescents, virtual social networks have been able to use this opportunity to convey their cultural, political and social messages (Shahramnia et al., 2017). Research by Iranian researchers also shows the penetration rate of virtual social networks. For example, Navabakhsh (2018) in explaining the sociology of the effect of using the World Wide Web on the social trust of Tehran citizens showed that there is a significant relationship between use of Internet and level of social trust. Akhavan Malairi, Noghani & Mazlum Khorasani (2014) tried to investigate the relationship between presence in virtual social networks and happiness. Findings showed that increasing social capital through virtual networks has an increasing effect on experience and positive feeling and a decreasing effect on experience and negative feeling, both of which lead to increased happiness. Moradi et al. (2014) tried to find motivations for using social networks. The most important reasons for membership in Facebook among Iranian youth were self-disclosure, improving personal status, finding information, spending time with others, maintaining relationships and finding more entertainment.

The present study is designed based on assumptions that arise from both theoretical and environmental realities. Theoretical support showed that social networks play an essential role in promoting and explaining the concepts of modern life. The present researchers also found that

there is an interact relation between demographic and political facts and virtual social networks effects. According to these two features, the purpose of study is to investigate the lived experience of young Iranian in terms of social networks' impact on their citizenship education and with regard to the social context of an Islamic Republic.

## **2. Research Method**

According to the proposed model of Sade-Beck (2004) for research related to cyberspace, the qualitative method of ethnography is used both as a research method (to understand the analytical attitude of individuals towards the subject under study) and as a method for data collection (observation and interview of researchers through active presence in two virtual social network of Telegram and WhatsApp). Researchers have also considered the Geertz (1973) two-step method for rich description and interpretation of data analysis. These two steps have been done by assembling, summarizing, and categorizing the data, identifying and showing the relationships and connections between them in the form of answers to the main research questions. The statistical population of the study were all young friends and acquaintances of main researcher (including 250 persons in the age range of 18 to 30 years old). The method of sampling was Purposeful Sampling and 26 people were divided to two groups (one group in WhatsApp and a group in the Telegram). To select the sample, two criteria were considered by the main researcher to ensure the reliability and validity of the data: First, the selection of a person from young friends who trusted other members of the group and Second, active presence in social networks through the production and publication of content.

## **3. Findings**

The present section consists of several stages. In the first stage, the demographic and virtual characteristics of the research participants are stated. In the second stage, the results of data analysis related to social networks are presented. The third step with more detail, consists of two parts: description and interpretation of results.

### *Results related to demographic and virtual characteristics*

As stated in research method section, the statistical population includes friends and young acquaintances of the main researcher (250 people), from which 26 people were selected through purposive sampling method and became members of two groups (one group in WhatsApp and other in Telegram). Main researcher also used the nicknames "Citizenship Education 1" and

"Citizenship Education 2" for both WhatsApp and Telegram groups. In addition, the purpose of research and concepts of citizenship, citizenship education and virtual social network were explained to the participants. In this way, the members of both groups, who knew each other very well and trusted each other, shared the different experiences, issues, and topics that they thought were relevant to the research topic. The results related to the demographic and virtual characteristics of both groups are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic and virtual characteristics of participants

Type	Number
Gender	11 females / 15 males
Average of age	24 years and three months
Average of follower	440
Average post per month	33
Average duration of membership in social groups	3 years and 4 months
Average number of membership in groups	7
Average daily time spent on social networks	4 hours and 39 minutes

As Table 1 shows the participants are completely familiar with cyberspace and social networks. This made the researchers confident that members of the two groups could well express their views on the impact of virtual social networks on their citizenship education. They have an average of more than 440 followers and on average are members of 7 different social networks.

#### *Results related to social networks*

The first question from all participants was about technical characteristics of virtual social networks and why they prefer to use these networks to exchange their opinions. Data analysis shows that features such as freedom from temporal and spatial constraints and social boundaries, power of sharing, ability to change and reorganize content, speed to find new friends, ability to cite and generalize information, use of multimedia techniques to convey message, opportunity to follow and be followed, and opportunity to present personal and collective initiative and creativity have increased interest of Iranian youth to participate in virtual social networks. Through mentioning some of quotes the present researchers tried to make readers more familiar with Iranian cyberspace:

### *Freedom from time and place and social boundaries*

Although this feature has a global aspect and all Internet users are fully familiar with it, the differences of societies such as Iran with other countries can not be ignored:

"I'm very happy that I can access the internet and networks and internet groups whenever I like. My own room, a dedicated password and roaming freely. I do not always have to answer my parents where I was, who I talked to and What I said and what I heard" (Priya, 30 years old, quoted from WhatsApp Group, July 18, 2018)

This feature becomes more attractive when it crosses cultural boundaries, as is evident in the following message:

"A mobile phone is like a toothbrush for me. Just as no one should use my toothbrush, no one has the right to use my mobile phone without my permission. There is no difference between me as a girl and my brother. I am a member of different groups and I can comment freely wherever I like" (Fatemeh, 18 years old, quoted from Telegram, June 10, 2018).

### *Ability to change content and reorganize it*

Social networks are youth-oriented and youth wants change. The majority of participants mentioned this feature and believed that social networks are a place for expression and creativity. They can receive different messages - which in many cases differ from the official interpretations of social institutions. At the same time, they are able to make appropriate changes to messages and organize them as they wish:

"I'm very excited about the variety of messages I receive, that what I read and see is different from what is in the newspapers and on the radio and television" (Amir Ali, 20, quoting from WhatsApp, 9 June 2018).

In fact, youth tend to join social networks because of their spirit of diversity, creativity, tendency to connect with others, curiosity and interest in having a different life. Due to the social constraints that exist in Iran's society, they exchange information, obtain news and organize it through virtual social networks:

"I am used to expressing my opinion on every message I read. I also like to send messages to others with my own explanations. Sometimes I joke with the messages and manipulate them"(Rana, 21 years old quotes from Telegram, June 11, 2018).

Since many of technical features of social networks are the same for Iranian and other users in different countries, we will refrain from further explanation and refer to the main results of research in the next section.

### *Results related to citizenship education*

#### *A) Description*

According to the content of collected data (messages sent to WhatsApp and Telegram groups) and in terms of virtual social networks' impacts on citizenship education, participants can be divided into three groups of responsible citizens, participation-oriented, and justice-oriented. In the first group, the content of the messages is more indicative of individual action. For example,

"I have been paying a lot of attention to environmental problems since I joined an environmental group. That's why I pick up a garbage bag one day a week and collect the garbage around our house" (Akbar, 25. Telegram, 5 September 2018).

The content of messages also shows that people do a variety of things individually, such as feeding domestic animals such as dogs, cats and birds, and helping the elderly. In the second group, we deal with citizens who have actively participated in social work:

"I like attending weekly visits to nursing homes. On Wednesdays, every week we are a group of 15 people who go to visit and talk to old men and women, and we cheer and cheer up" (Zahra, 20 years old from WhatsApp, November 27, 2018).

The content of messages also reflects a wide range of different group activities, such as visiting historical sightseeings, and collecting garbage from parks and beach. The third group is justice-oriented participants who are influenced by network training on issues such as rights of child labour, rights of vulnerable women and heads of households, animal rights, rights of ethnic and religious minorities, educational issues, political issues and economic challenges such as unemployment. Given the volume of messages, the majority of people can be considered as a citizens of justice. For example, one participant writes:

"Children's rights are very important to me. I really get nervous when I see a child collecting garbage instead of at school" (Razieh, 29, quoted from Telegram, September 17, 2018).

Undoubtedly, one of the most important effects of virtual social networks is to provide educational content in various forms and using audio and visual attractions. Examining the content of messages shows that objectives of these trainings can be summarized as follows:

- Provide information and skills about citizenship education for appropriate action at the local, regional, national and international levels,
- Increase understanding of legal and moral behaviors in personal, professional and social life,
- Increase people's understanding of a citizen's responsibilities to others, society and the environment.

The content of these messages provides ample evidence to support these three goals. For example, one participant writes:

"I receive a lot of audio, text and video files every week, even books and magazines. They teach me what my rights are in society and what laws protect or restrict me. It's very good, because I can better defend my rights and those of my family" (Faezeh, 22, quoted in Telegram, September 17, 2018).

Another participant writes about the impact of social media on citizenship skills:

"The fact is that I used to focus more on my own interests, but since I became active on the Internet I have seen how little I feel about others. Little by little, I realized that I had to be sensitive to the fate of others, to my own family, to people of my country, and to environment. This sea, this mountain, this city and this street all belong to society and future generations. We have no right to think only of our own interests" (Dariush, 27, quoted in Telegram on July 1, 2018).

Another result of research is to pay attention to values that virtual social networks convey to users. Data analysis shows teaching of values such as a sense of national identity, commitment to social justice, respect for diversity of ideas and tolerance, legalism and belief in the active role of human beings. In fact, virtual social networks have placed their main emphasis on introducing values of modern societies and have tried to give it a global image. Thus, in the speeches of all participants, similarities can be achieved in cases such as type of relationship with government, government's responsibility, methods of civil protest, and social responsibilities of citizens.

Naturally, active participation in social networks requires acquisition of skills that must be learned. Data analysis shows that all participants acknowledge learning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving skills, collaboration skills, saying no skills, stress management skills and emotion management skills through virtual social networks. For example, one participant writes:

"I used to not be able to hear dissenting opinions and I used to get angry with others quickly. But fortunately I have gained the skill of tolerance by participating in virtual social networks. Now I see different people offering different opinions on same subject. I agree with some of them and disagree with some. But the interesting thing I have noticed is that everyone can bear to hear other things and it does not lead to violence" (Sarah, 21, quoting a WhatsApp message, 18 February 2018).

The results of research in description section also reveal the role of virtual social networks in denying behaviors that may in some human societies for various reasons have the support of institutions such as politics, religion, culture, economy and family. These behaviors are mainly threatening human rights, although advocates try to justify them for a variety of reasons. For example, participants' statements show that they have strongly opposed racism, gender discrimination, sectarian prejudice, and organizational and governmental discrimination in recent years, and that virtual social networks have provided an opportunity for youth to express this opposition:

"I am against any discrimination. We do not have good or bad discrimination. No common sense allows us to discriminate between people on issues such as race, language or gender" (Ali, 23, quoted in Telegram, June 11, 2018).

### *B) Interpretation*

Development of "citizenship education" concept has been one of the topics of interest for policy makers and educational planners over the last two decades. In fact, many countries have tried to provide appropriate education for their citizens (especially the young generation) in various ways. Background of citizenship education's concept is synonymous with concepts such as moral education, personality education and civilization education and is partially based on them (Geboers et al., 2013). Citizenship education provides opportunities for young generation to become committed and active individuals in various social and political fields through participation in meaningful learning experiences (Gholtash, 2012). Given this explanation, the first interpretation of research data is the active presence of virtual social networks as a new "educators" instead of traditional educational institutions. It is clear that virtual social networks are still less influential in

many societies – especially in developing countries – compared to family or formal education system, but we should not overlook its growing speed. The research findings showed that the presence of young Iranian generation in cyberspace is almost equal to the time they attend school.

The second interpretation is based on the fact that in virtual social networks, users as "actors" have the opportunity to share their hidden attitudes, cultural values and identity interests with others, even if these are contrary with official values and rules of society. In fact, data analysis shows well that virtual social networks in a very short period of time have been able to introduce different value patterns, educational methods and behavioral models to the young generation. The third interpretation that can be provided of the role of virtual social networks is that these networks have been able to provide a new lifestyle for the young generation - especially for girls and women. The current realities in the Middle East show the widespread influence of institutions such as family, government and religious institutions in interpersonal and social relations. Naturally, the views of these institutions can create different opportunities and limitations. Virtual social networks easily ignore many of the limitations of these institutions.

The fourth interpretation refers to fact that virtual social networks provide users with the opportunity to present views that are different from the official perspectives. Analysis of research data clearly indicates a common sense among users that these networks are often a place for presenting an opposite opinion, various discourses and rejection of formal discourses of society. It is natural that this issue is more evident in the very young society of Iran.

The latest data-driven analysis is the role of virtual social networks in familiarizing and educating the young generation with opportunities and challenges of civic education and citizenship rights in other societies. Virtual social networks have created a global window for young people. This window allows them to observe and examine various sources of information such as movies, articles, books, short texts, images and songs to understand the quantity and quality of process of citizenship education in other human societies. Thus, virtual social networks have increased the global awareness of young generation of social events. Given the above, the main components and sub-components of citizenship education - obtained through the analysis of participants' textual data - can be summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Main components and sub-components of citizenship education in virtual social networks provided by the young generation of Iran

Main components	Subcomponents
Law	Respect for law / Critique of laws' content / Critique of law-making process / Laws for and against civil rights / Conflict of national laws with international law / Comparison and critique of legislators' performance
Collobration	Analyzing role of social participation / Examining types of participation / Opportunities and challenges of participation / Role of non-governmental organizations / Government's relationship with NGOs / Global NGO experiences
Communication methods	Investigating changes in communication methods / cultural, social and political barriers / role of gender / role of communication in citizenship education
Training methods	Content of citizenship education programs / role of formal education system / relationship between curriculum and cyberspace / Virtual teaching and learning methods / role and relationship of parents with social networks
political system	Understanding function of effective institutions / Understanding human rights / Understanding political currents / Understanding structure and ideology of government / Understanding state-nation relationship / Citizenship rights in the constitution
Emotional-motivational system	Increasing self-confidence of the young generation / Respect for environment / Respect with values criticism / Tolerance / Optimism and altruism
Practical and behavioral system	Educate active / aware / sensitive / efficient / responsible citizens

#### 4. Conclusion

The concept of citizenship education and its dimensions for humanity promises a new desire for a better life, although traces of this concept and its dimensions can be seen in the history of education of different societies as well as the history of religions. Also, from the perspective of political sciences, the main emphasis of citizenship's concept based on how relationship between government and people is. Thus, citizenship education mainly means cultivating people who can play a role in process of passing and enforcing laws defend their citizenship rights well, and strike a logical balance between freedom and responsibility. The aim of the present study was to find out how a modern concept is formed in the minds and psyches of the young generation through new communication technologies.

The first findings of this study support the research findings by Loader and Mercea (2011); Pinkleton, Weintraub and Austin (2001); and Shah et al. (2007) who found that virtual social networks transcended spatial and temporal boundaries very well and easily. The second research finding highlighted that today all social institutions - traditional or modern - are aware of the role of virtual social networks in educating citizens and try to transmit their views through this tool to the younger generation. This finding is in line with research findings of Baelden, Audenhove, and Jehaes (2013) and Pathak-Shelat (2019) that showed governments' efforts to educate citizens.

Another message of the present research is like Buckingham (2008); Chee, Mehrotra and Liu (2013); and Swigger (2012) findings which hold that virtual social networks today act as a kind of "modern social capital" to support thoughts and ideas of individuals. To prove this finding, many practical examples can be mentioned from the political and social scene of different societies. Thus, virtual social networks have been able in a specific political environment - the Islamic Republic of Iran - and through membership of individuals in different groups, adherence to the same norms and laws, creating an atmosphere of trust in others, and obtaining information from various sources help process of citizenship education. The findings also support Castells (2014) which consider functions of social networks to include valuation and convergence of social relations, while opposing the evolution of the oversight policies he has outlined. In fact, the research findings showed that, contrary to Castells (2014) and to practice of traditional social networks, virtual social networks do not necessarily support regulatory policies of society.

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