Potentials of telecom for socialising and language learning in Iran

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Abstract
The social potentials of telecom are diverse and yet can be extended in different countries. This paper describes how Iranian people perceive and use mobile supported services like a social network named 'viber' instead of more internationally recognized and internet-based social media which may not be accessible and discovers the most recurring themes in Iranian users' mobiles and suggests how this potential can be geared towards language learning Three methods have been used for data collection and triangulate the results. Firstly, a content analysis of language learning aspects of a group of mobile users was conducted and the most recurring themes were then used as a basis of questions for finding whether the same themes recur within larger population and more groups. A questionnaire was developed based on the most frequent contents and uses and finally few participants were interviewed to confirm the results. This paper concludes that the social potential of the local mobile networks provides a unique opportunity for language learning and speaking a foreign language where other types of language input such as real-life communication and interaction are limited due to slim tourism and sanctioned foreign commerce.

1. Introduction

The social atmosphere that potentials has recently created in Iran can be exploited for language learning because of its unique features in terms of demography and socializing patterns and purposes. Iran is a unique example where traditional society and rules intersect with youth ambitions who wish a broader socializing pattern with heavy reliance on mobile communication in a country with high mobile penetration rate. This paper explains how text messaging has been in use beyond information transfer in 2G and how it was widely used light heartedly and intensely for various social purposes and how on-air applications in 3G is now being heavily employed by users in place of less accessible active social media networks. The paper concludes with the notion that how similar telecom services can lead to complex and diverse social repercussions in different countries. This paper also outlines the potential areas of socializing that can be used for educational purposes such as language learning and suggests how some free speaking apps can be employed by educational institutes to fill the gap of real-time interaction that is not quite available because of slim tourism industry. The structure of this paper is set in a way to explain the background information initially in order to set the scene for the work with literature references. The paper then build on these notions to outline the results of an experimental research in Iran, or the new realizations of familiar aspects of telecom in this previously less explored context and ends with implications for employing the ripe social setting to manage social change towards a more open minded society and educational policies.

2. Literature review

Social relationships face a momentous increase and change as a result of developing telecommunication. Despite the initial attention and sole emphasis on the formal and businesslike aspects of telecom devices in earlier adverts, the social aspect could not be left ignored from the middle of 20th century and advertising turned to engaging with the customers' emotional and social spheres and highlighted the significance of keeping in touch with family and friends [1].

Although awareness of social aspects of telecommunications is now more than half a century old, the recent years, the rise of several events and services from earlier text messaging to more recent social networking sites has given the social aspect a turning point that involved many people from diverse countries and is generally received very well and yet for diverse social purposes and amounts.

Advances in technology made the landline phone, and then mobile phone available to large number of people and the advent of cheaper, less intrusive short message service (SMS) made a big impact on social interactions. By the year 2000, statistics from a market research group show that more than 80% of young people in the United Kingdom of ages from 15 to 24 years had used the SMS to organize social arrangements [2]. The quality of SMS learning as a rapidly growing learning tool is

being studied in Iran with results suggesting that language learning is one of the top issues employed by service providers [3].

Moreover, the social networking sites that become popular in the 21st century enable the users to expand their communication by various other means such as photograph and video posting, and sharing events and profiles with others and the world. Since lots of personal information could be shared and accessed in profiles, social networking sites added a new dimension to the society from arranging social events to courtship and finding mates [4]. Many social networking models mentioned in [5] can get inaccessible due to policies such as filtering or simply not used due to low-speed internet. In this situation, some other accessible ones become the sweeping choice for many.

A lot of similar things can be said about the potentials of telecom in different countries. Yet, different demographical, sociopolitical and organisational elements in certain countries can provide a setting for interesting dimensions to be added to the more common use of telecom services around the world. Many young Iranian people are highly educated and the country is safe, compared with some countries in the region. The strict rules and traditions regarding social relationships abound and many people find a way through their mobile phones to vent and chill out. The state sector mobile companies wielded a lot of power in providing services and although some have been recently privatized, they still abide by a national and state policy and as a result the functioning of popular social networking sites has faced some limits. Moreover, in today's world, there is a fuzzy border between work and play [6] or language learning and socialising in this case. For this purpose, an experimental research design is planned and implemented to test whether and in what ways the telecom has influenced the social aspects of communication in Iran recently.

3. Methodology

A unique methodology was adopted to capture an image of the functions of mobile phone within samples of population. A content analysis of mobile phones of group of users was done after seeking permission from them. Only the content of a free internet-based calling service, called Viber were analyzed to extract the recurring themes. The recurring themes were then used as a basis of questions for finding whether the same themes recur within larger population and more groups. Participants who answered the questions were recruited through groups of family and friends active in Viber groups and were then extended by asking each member to post the questions to other groups they may be on. Thus, a type of snowballing sampling was employed to the point that the researcher was able to obtain the opinions from as far as the third layer of links to previously unknown participants. This gives us some confidence in the bias-free selection or random sampling, up to a practical extent. A second method for sampling participants to add to data collection was to post a short questionnaire based on recurring themes of content analysis, developed by the researcher, through sms to known contacts. The reliability of the data collected is more when it is obtained through various channels and modalities, such as what is done in this study. To examine whether the users are fully aware of what uses they put for their mobiles, and to triangulate and obtain more in-depth information on certain questionnaire items, a few candidates who answered the questionnaires were chosen carefully for interviewing and those who agreed, were interviewed in an in-depth and open-ended format.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The content analysis of ten random users of mobiles in different groups were sought with their permission and to strictly adhere to privacy issues, they themselves looked through their viber messages and declared the type of topics or themes recurring more than a few times in their communication over one month prior to the time of data collection from the backlog of messages they received or sent. The researcher noted that most recurring themes fall into four broad categories. Firstly, it was reported to be used regarding work-related topics and issues related to colleagues and workplace such as getting advice on a procedure, how to use a software, etc. to talking about the company's future and influential people; secondly, it was used instead of the more expensive SMS and calls; thirdly, it was used as a small targeted advertising tool to sell items and help taking off a small business; fourthly, as an overused entertainment tool with contents from simple funny statements and jokes to taboo themes including adult jokes to unsolicited encounters.

Table 1: Themes recurring in Viber messages' content.

Themes	Percentage
Work-related	30
Free option	25
Advertising	10
Entertainment	35

Apart from content analysis, questionnaire was also used. Based on the themes extracted from the content analysis, the following questions were formulated to be included in a questionnaire that was then posted to fifty more users to test if the results confirm the findings from the pilot content analysis or not. The questionnaire was first posted to small family group on Viber as a pilot stage and their replies were sought. Then, based on the answers and reactions, the rubric and instructions were further refined to reach a more rigorous content and context validity.

The answers to the first question ranged from social purpose at the top to business and information transfer as the next purposes. The answers to the second question are daily to every other day. There was little variation in this respect and most participants expressed that they used Viber, once on it. The third question brought about the resounding affirmation that such technological tool is so interesting, accessible and cost-effective that one cannot simply ignore it. As the fourth question, their perception was a little different from what they actually in content analysis but not greatly. They believed Viber as a free option rather than calls or SMS, is best used for entertainment. There is a good number of respondent to the questionnaire, beginning with all fifty to the first question down to forty tot eh fourth question. Thus, the results obtained have some degree of consistency among the participants; however, it should be tested with other groups and more participants in future to be applicable to other contexts.
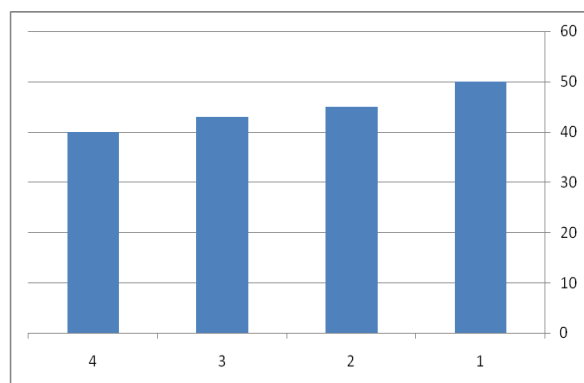

Fig. 1. Number of respondent to the questionnaire

In this section, the participants expressed that Viber can be best used for educational purposes, especially language learning in Iran, given that it is very popular and accessible to all. They also said there is a lack of such apps or group through that you can connect through Viber to practice a foreign language, like English. The content analysis of viber message done by ten early participants also confirms this point that such gap exists.

Interviewing is the third source of data. The follow up interviews with participants who produced interesting or different results was conducted. Five participants were chosen at a random selection from questionnaire respondents. The interview was originally planned for two reasons. Firstly, to see if the results from questionnaires can be confirmed when the participants are asked to explain further and whether they agree with our interpretation of findings. Secondly, they could also add some issues which were left-out or simply could not be captured in the previous phases of data collection. The themes in questionnaire and content analysis were all confirmed in the interviews. That means, they were mentioned at least once, by the participants in the interview unprompted by the researcher. Also, further themes were mentioned (shown with frequency of mention in Table 2) at this stage such as using Viber for 'marking special occasions', 'expressing political or religious views', as a 'way to break or cross class-specific or age-limited topics' such as 'slang terms' and 'taboo language'. In retrospect, the three themes added here are first categorized under social use (in the content analysis). Yet, as the interview shows, their stance and frequency merits a separate analysis.

Table 2: Viber themes explained in the interview

Themes	Times
Expressing socio-political views	23
Using slang terms	12
Using taboo language	8

It is hard to say whether the same themes top the list of socially-related themes in other countries but further studies need to be conducted in other countries to show if the mentioned three are among the most frequent social uses of mobile social media.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents the results of experimental research conducted on actual and perceived uses of a mobile social media called 'viber' in Iran. The main points of the paper have been the need to explore the social aspects of telecom in a wider sense. The importance of such work is beyond doubt for social planners and telecom experts alike to assess and adjust the applications and uses of mobile phones to the social atmosphere of the context and consider these factors in future development of the telecom networks. The results of this study are in line with findings of motivations for play, proposed by a group of researcher [7], who explains the diversity of informal and entertainment aspects of mobile communication.

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