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Modern Addicts: Addiction to the Virtual Space among Upper Secondary School Students in the Field of Human Sciences in Iran, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates

Hassan Shamian[1](Corresponding author)
Elaheh Abniki[2]
Zahra Abniki Fard[3]

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ABSTRACT

Although the young generation in the Middle East has gained a powerful tool—access to the virtual space—that allows them to transcend the traditional boundaries of society, this transition is not without its risks. A qualitatively comparative study, indicates that the proliferation of technology among the youth in the three selected societies has led to persistent and excessive use of the virtual space. Four major similarities were identified across the three countries: The rising prevalence of virtual space addiction; a shared sense of euphoric freedom among the youth, who feel liberated from social constraints; formation of personal & social identities that differ from those in the real world; and the emergence of various physical & psychological health issues stemming from this addiction. Conversely, four key differences were observed among students in these nations: Variations in internet infrastructure—ranging from high-speed access in the UAE and Turkey to a more controlled, restricted environment in Iran; disparities in gender-based access, with the UAE offering broad and equitable access, whereas students in Iran and Turkey face significant familial and cultural barriers; a higher incidence of health disorders related to obesity and physical inactivity among students in the UAE; and a more pronounced gap between real-world and virtual identities among users in Turkey and Iran compared to those in the UAE. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the teachers of secondary school—while acknowledging the positive aspects of the virtual space—also inform the young generation about the adverse physical & psychological consequences of this phenomenon.

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Persian Language & Literature Education, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran. Email: hasan.shamyan@gmail.com.
[2] PhD in Political Sociology, Department of Political Science, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran, Email: e.abniki1365@gmail.com
[3] M.A., Consultant, Ministry of Education, Tehran, Iran, Email: Zabnikifard@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and expansion of virtual sphere opened a new window for young people in traditional societies. This "tool of liberation"—particularly for women, girls, and the younger generation constrained by the long-standing traditions of the Middle East—became a means of escape toward a state of "exhilarating freedom" (*cf* Khamis & Sisler, 2010; Khamis, 2019). Consequently, rather than continuing within the conventional social frameworks that had existed for millennia, Middle Eastern societies were suddenly confronted with a "virtual space"—a realm that has facilitated powerful modes of communication and the transmission of cultures, lifestyles, languages, texts, and power dynamics. This is a vast, open, and flexible environment that fosters the free flow of interpretations regarding ideas, artifacts, knowledge, narratives, arts, cultural heritage, and identities, all while remaining unconstrained by traditional sources of power (Bennis, 2024). With keen insight, the youth of the Middle East explored this space and rapidly transformed it into a form of "social capital" (Hosni, 2017). Yet, this capital was not without its perils. Turning to the virtual sphere to escape the tangible dangers present in the streets—a strategy adopted by the younger generation, especially girls—has led many to become "Modern-day Addicts," spending hours in this space, seemingly devoid of agency or willpower (Anderson, 2017).

Technology addiction refers to a condition in which an individual engages in the continuous and excessive use of digital devices, software, and online content. This excessive usage can negatively impact various aspects of life, such as social relationships, mental health, and daily activities. With the increasing accessibility of the internet and the expansion of social networks, the level of technology usage has risen sharply across various societies. This dependency can be observed in children, adolescents, and adults, and may lead to harmful behavioral patterns. Research has indicated that technology addiction can result in issues such as anxiety, depression, and a decline in sleep quality (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; 2017).

Furthermore, addiction to the virtual space can be defined from both psychological and sociocultural perspectives. From a psychological standpoint, technology addiction is characterized as a disorder in which individuals become dependent on the excessive use of technology—such as the internet, smartphones, and social media—a dependency that leads to a diminished quality of life and an increase in psychological problems (Block, 2008). From a sociocultural perspective, technology addiction is viewed as a social and cultural behavior shaped by social trends, the virtual environment, and modern communication needs. Individuals may turn to the excessive use of technology due to social pressures and the need for virtual interactions (Young, 1998). In addition,

addiction to the virtual space encompasses psychological dimensions—manifesting as mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, stress, feelings of loneliness, and fatigue—as well as social dimensions (disruption of real-life relationships with family and friends), economic dimensions (reduced work productivity and loss of job opportunities), and physical dimensions (emergence of physical health problems such as obesity, sleep disorders, and vision issues) (Neverkovich et al., 2018). In this context, the common characteristics of individuals addicted to the virtual space include:

- Heavy reliance on technology: Spending excessive time on online activities.
- Behavioral changes: Noticeable shifts in social and daily behaviors, such as a reduction in face-to-face interactions, withdrawal from social activities, and a decline in the fulfillment of professional or academic responsibilities.
- Experiencing negative emotions when unable to access: Feeling anxiety, tension, or distress when unable to access the digital/online space.
- Use as a coping mechanism: Utilizing technology as a means to escape reality or as a mechanism to deal with daily stresses and pressures.
- Lack of focus and productivity: A deficiency in concentration and reduced productivity in the performance of professional tasks or daily activities (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005; Asieieva, Druz, Kozhyna, & Chernenko, 2021).

Of course, the extent of technology addiction varies significantly across different societies and age groups. Excessive internet use among adolescents is an emerging disorder that has become a source of concern for educational policymakers, teachers, and parents worldwide. Studies indicated that in recent years the prevalence of technology addiction has risen (Suissa, 2015). Middle and higher secondary school students are at a critical stage of growth and development, and this issue can have profound negative impacts on their physical, mental, and social well-being. Constant comparisons with their peers may lead them to feel less attractive, successful, or competent, and to experience lower self-confidence, alongside increased levels of anxiety (Düzenli et al., 2023). According to some studies, approximately 6% to 10% of internet users worldwide may suffer from some form of internet or technology addiction. This proportion is generally higher in urban settings and among adolescents (Yasuma et al., 2019). A report by the World Health Organization indicates that about 25% of adolescents suffer from some form of addiction to social media and the internet (WHO, 2021). This report also notes the presence of issues such as anxiety and depression among this group of young people. Other findings indicate that the prevalence of internet addiction varies

among university students across different countries: 18% in the United Kingdom, 12.3% to 15.3% in Taiwan, 21.9% in China, 34.7% in Greece, and 39.6% in Iran (Niemz, Griffiths & Banyard, 2005; Yan, Li & Sui, 2014; Lin, Ko & Wu, 2011; Frangos, Frangos & Sotiropoulos, 2011; Al-Gamal, Alzayyat & Ahmad, 2016).

In the United States, findings from the Pew Research Center (2018) indicated that 45% of adolescents report accessing social media constantly or multiple times a day. Furthermore, 30% of them acknowledge feeling that technology dominates their lives. Notably, the prevalence of virtual addiction varies across different age groups (Van den Eijnden, et al., 2016). In Serbia Pjevac et al. (2024) demonstrates that internet addiction is associated with age, the purpose of internet use, time spent online, and temperament. Additionally, if an adolescent spends more than three hours a day in the online environment, the risk of developing an internet addiction increases. Alkhani et al. (2021), in their examination of the prevalence of internet addiction in the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, found that one in every three individuals is addicted to the internet. Furthermore, the overall prevalence of internet addiction is 33%, with the rate being significantly higher among women than among men.

Meanwhile, traditional societies have not remained immune to the impact of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs). In this context, the Middle East presents a unique situation. On one hand, there are countries—such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar—where state officials and policymakers have enthusiastically embraced the introduction of new technologies over the past two decades. On the other hand, countries like Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq have shown resistance or reluctance toward the expansion of ICTs among the young generation. Naturally, there are also nations—such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey—that have cautiously sought to strike a balance between their long-standing social traditions and the arrival of new manifestations of modern civilization. The main aim of this study was to examine addiction to the virtual space (cyberspace) among the young generation in Iran, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates from a comparative perspective.

2. Research Method

The study was a qualitative comparative research using systematic review for data collection. A systematic review serves as a structured and transparent tool for gathering, synthesizing, and evaluating findings from studies concerning a specific question or topic. Its function is to mitigate the bias inherent in individual studies or non-systematic reviews. Furthermore, a systematic review is characterized by two primary features: High reliability and replicability, and a multi-stage

execution process. This study employs the systematic review framework proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). According to this approach, the review process is conducted in three stages: "review design," "literature review," and "report compilation." In qualitative research based on a systematic review, the researcher typically identifies and gathers evidence from a wide range of sources—including primary and secondary materials such as documents and reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations, books, reference works, and academic articles. Aligned with the research goals, the authors employed a documentary data collection method utilizing Boolean Search Strategy (covering the period 2000–2026) (Hynek, 2002). To enhance the validity of the data, the researchers applied two specific measures: The establishment of qualitative criteria—such as the authors' level of subject-matter expertise, their tacit and experiential knowledge, and whether the selected works underwent a formal peer-review process. The data analysis is directed toward answering two research questions through a qualitative comparative approach: First, dentifying the status of the phenomenon under study (virtual addiction in the selected societies); and Second, identifying the reasons why higher socondary school students in the humanities stream engage with the virtual environment in these societies. Accordingly, the findings are presented through a three-stage process: Description, interpretation, and comparison.

3. Findings

Phase 1: Description

To address the first research question—concerning the intensity and prevalence of addiction to the virtual space (cyberspace) in the selected societies—the findings derived from secondary sources (articles and reports) are presented.

1. Iran

The rapid expansion of the Internet in Iran over the last two decades has led to excessive use of this technology, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Research indicates that 53.7% of higher socondary school students are regular Internet users, with 37.5% exhibiting mild addiction and 8.8% showing moderate addiction (Hassanvand, 2016). A study by Yarahmadi et al. (2020) found a prevalence rate of 57.6%. Findings by Emami Hamzeh-Golou et al. (2025) regarding Internet addiction among high school students in the city of Babol, northern Iran, revealed that approximately 30% of the students suffered from a moderate level of Internet addiction. Furthermore, the prevalence of Internet addiction was higher among girls, students of technical &

vocational education, and students with only one employed parent. Also, the mean mental health score in the group addicted to the internet was significantly higher compared to non-addicted students. Gholamian, Rajab Vardjani & Shahgholian (2024) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic increased students' addiction to the internet and jeopardized their mental health. In a study aimed at determining the prevalence of internet addiction and its association with anxiety, stress, and depression among high school students, they also found that while mean scores for anxiety, stress, and depression were significantly higher in students addicted to the internet than in typical users, there was no significant relationship between internet addiction and variables such as gender, educational level, or parents' occupation & education. Examining the lived experiences of home quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, Esmaeil and Naji (2023) reported that 49.7% of high school students exhibited high levels of addiction to the virtual space, while 50.6% fell into the moderate range regarding their emotional state. Saadatmand et al. (2022), in a study on mobile-based social media/cyberspace addiction among 250 secondary school students in Mashhad City, found that such addiction has a negative relationship with social self-efficacy and a positive relationship with ambivalence over emotional expression. Firoozi, Firoozi, & Karimi Riabi (2022) investigated the prevalence of internet addiction among Iranian adolescents in the post-COVID-19 era. They found that the age of first internet exposure and the duration of time spent online are correlated with addiction, whereas gender did not play a significant role. Furthermore, internet addiction was significantly associated with recreational use, gaming, and inadequate parental support, though it showed no link to educational use. Chaboki et al. (2020) examined the mediating role of attachment styles in the relationship between mental health and internet addiction among more than 300 high school students. The findings indicated that both mental health and attachment styles have a significant direct effect on students' internet addiction. Sadati Baladehi and Taghipour Javan (2018) investigated the relationship between internet addiction, social development, and health-related behaviors among high school students in Tehran. They indicated a significant negative correlation between internet addiction and social development. Furthermore, a significant negative correlation was found between internet addiction and health-related behaviors. Specifically, significant negative correlations exist between internet addiction and the sub-domains of personal health, nutrition, physical exercise, sleep and rest, and stress management; as adolescents' dependence on the internet increases, each of these dependent variables decreases. In a study on internet addiction among high school students in Tehran and its association with symptoms of mental disorders, Mohammad Khani et al. (2017) revealed no significant difference in the prevalence of internet addiction between male and female students. However, a significant

positive relationship was observed between internet addiction and symptoms of mental disorders; notably, the specific symptoms of psychosis and anxiety—as indicators of mental disorders—exerted a profound influence on internet addiction. Keikavani et al. (2017) argue that depression is one of the factors influencing internet addiction. Their findings indicated a significant positive correlation between internet addiction and depression among Iranian adolescents and adults. Furthermore, Gholamian, Shahnazi & Hassanzadeh (2017) tried to determine the prevalence of internet addiction and its association with anxiety, stress, and depression among high school students in Shahrekord City and found that the mean scores for anxiety, depression, and stress were significantly higher in individuals addicted to the internet compared to typical users. Ostovar et al. (2016) examined the relationship between internet addiction and stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness among 1,052 Iranian adolescents. The results revealed that internet addiction serves as a predictor for stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. They also demonstrated that addictive internet use varies by gender, with boys facing a higher risk of internet addiction than girls. A nationwide study by Ahmadi (2014), conducted across 13 Iranian provinces highlighted that addiction to the virtual space (cyberspace) was significantly more prevalent among boys, students whose parents held doctoral degrees, and adolescents whose mothers were employed, compared to their peers. Hashemian et al. (2014) have noted the negative consequences of internet addiction among Iranian students, including the emergence of depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, anxiety, social phobia, and academic difficulties. Solhi et al. (2014), aiming to identify the factors contributing to internet addiction based on the "Theory of Planned Behavior," determined that there is a significant relationship between attitude, perceived behavioral control, and internet addiction scores.

2. United Arab Emirates

Over the past two decades, the rate of internet access in the United Arab Emirates has grown significantly faster than in many other parts of the world. This development has brought about both positive and negative consequences for this small country. Regarding the physical and psychological impacts of internet addiction, a recent study by Alheet (2025) revealed that individuals suffering from moderate to severe addiction experienced psychological distress 7.49 times more frequently than young people with only mild addiction. Alomosh et al. (2025) investigated the impact of internet addiction on Emirati adolescents—from cultural, behavioral & social perspectives— and found that the most significant consequences include smoking, social withdrawal, introversion, excessive irritability, the emergence of deviant behaviors, increased

aggression, and rebellion against the social system. Akhtar & Alali (2025), in their examination of young people's attitudes toward the effects of social media addiction, demonstrate that heavy use of these platforms is associated with a greater acknowledgment of addiction to the internet and media-based entertainment. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant correlation between frequent social media use and perceptions of self-esteem. Akhtar (2024) investigated the impact of social media addiction on sleep-related issues among the young generation in the United Arab Emirates. His findings reveal that social media addiction is a significant positive predictor of poor sleep quality, with the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) and nighttime social media use acting as a serial mediating mechanism in this relationship. Hussain et al. (2020), in a study on the prevalence of virtual addiction among Emirati adolescents aged 13–17, found that the majority (over 68%) spend between one and five hours a day on social media; 39.8% of the students reported going for long periods without food or drink, and 60% believe that the virtual environment has reduced their interaction with the outside world and time spent with their families. El-Kader & Funmilayo Hanson (2019) assessed internet usage and the level of internet addiction among young people in Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates. The findings indicated that these young people hold a positive attitude toward internet use, and there is a positive correlation between internet addiction scores and age. Alkaabi, Albion & Redmond (2017) examined the impact of social media addiction on the motivation of university students in the United Arab Emirates. The findings show that social media addiction has affected classroom performance and, in some cases, has led to academic failure.

3. Turkey

As a growing trend in Turkey, internet usage among young people has increased significantly in recent years, becoming an integral part of their lives. According to the "Survey on Information & Communication Technology Usage in Households," conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) in 2013, individuals aged 16 to 24 exhibited the highest rate of internet usage at 90.7% (94.7% for males, 86.5% for females) (TurkStat, 2018a). Young people aged 15 to 24 accounts for 16.1% of Turkey's total population (TurkStat, 2018b). In this developing nation with a large youth population, several factors—including the widespread and ever-increasing use of the internet, the unchecked proliferation of internet cafés, and unemployment—have created conditions conducive to unhealthy internet use and internet addiction (Yar et al., 2019). Yilmaz et al. (2025), in an examination of the relationship between internet addiction, social anxiety, and happiness among adolescents, found a significant positive correlation between internet addiction and social anxiety,

and significant negative correlations between internet addiction and happiness, as well as between social anxiety and happiness. Furthermore, a gender-based comparison revealed that girls had significantly higher mean scores for both happiness and social anxiety than boys. Öztekin (2024) investigated the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between internet addiction and school engagement among Turkish students, determining that internet addiction is positively associated with psychological distress and negatively associated with school engagement. The study also demonstrated that depression, anxiety, and stress serve as mediators in the relationship between internet addiction and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These findings suggest that adolescents prone to internet addiction may experience challenges related to their engagement with school, in addition to psychological difficulties. Boz and Dinç (2023), in their study of internet gaming addiction among 14–15 year-old adolescents in Turkey, found that addiction is more prevalent among male students than female; the former predominantly prefer action-adventure, combat, and racing games. Üstündağ (2024) examined the predictive role of media literacy regarding internet addiction among 401 adolescents aged 15 to 18. The study revealed that these adolescents fall into an "at-risk" group for internet addiction, with girls exhibiting higher average levels of media literacy, while boys show higher levels of internet addiction. Kumcağız (2019) investigated the relationship between internet addiction, attachment to parents, and sociodemographic characteristics. The findings indicated that young people whose fathers had lower levels of education scored higher on internet addiction measures compared to those whose fathers had higher levels of education. Furthermore, internet addiction scores were found to be negatively correlated with age, maternal care, and paternal overprotection. Yar et al. (2019) found that the prevalence of Internet Addiction (IA) among adolescents with psychiatric disorders—such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and mood disorders—is significantly higher than among adolescents with no psychiatric history. Ozmutlu, Cenk Ozmutlu, & Spink (2007) investigated computer and internet addiction among adolescents and discovered that those who frequent internet cafes are typically adolescents—mostly middle and high school students—who engage in activities such as chatting, emailing, web browsing, and gaming. Adolescents visit these cafes to spend time with friends and use computers. Furthermore, approximately 30% of the visitors acknowledge having an internet addiction, while about 20% specifically report experiencing problems related to their internet use.

Phase 2: Interpretation

To address the second question—namely, the reasons for the younger generation's embrace of the virtual space in the selected societies—the findings derived from sources are presented for each country separately.

1. Iran

The central question is why there is such widespread embrace of the virtual space, and what impact this acceptance has had on Iran new generation. An analysis of the data reveals a divergence of opinion among Iranian researchers. For instance, Khalesi, Babaei & Mazaheri (2019)—in their examination of the challenges and opportunities presented by the virtual space within the Islamic Republic of Iran—argue that this space is well-suited for showcasing individual and collective assets; furthermore, it provides the tools and capabilities necessary to counter the "soft war" waged by adversaries. Consequently, this environment offers a platform for traditional and religious cultures, as well as various subcultures, to find expression, while the prospect of the West achieving its desired cultural hegemony is increasingly diminishing. Adopting a more pessimistic perspective, Hashemi and Soltanifar (2015) contend that social networks within the virtual space foster a global cyber-culture among the youth. They argue that this process alters the structures of local and national culture and identity, while also introducing the risk of alienation—leaving young people detached from both the real world and the virtual realm, and estranged from the realities of life.

Conversely, a recent study by Jafarpour and Chitforoush (2023) on the impact of cyberspace on the cultural and identity-related components of Iranian society indicates that, due to easy access to a multitude of conflicting identities and cultures within this space, the pace of identity and cultural transformation has accelerated significantly, and the phenomenon of "identity and cultural alienation" is rapidly growing. Furthermore, Mokhtarpour and Kiani (2020)—who sought to provide a theoretical explanation for the use of cyberspace and the transformation of family structures in Iran—found that parents often perceive themselves as "too old" to engage with new technologies and digital spaces; naturally, one consequence of this digital presence is a decline in social capital within the family, which has contributed to a generational gap. Alimardani and Milan (2018) also argue that the prevalence of cyberspace usage in Iran is exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for political competition. In their view, cyberspace and applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram—acting as liberating communication technologies—have played an active role in motivating the young generation during the elections for the Islamic Parliament of

Iran. This influence, however, is not limited to the political sphere. Examining the impact of South Korean music on popular culture among young Iranian women, Koo (2020) suggests that the fandom exhibited by these young people demonstrates their potential to influence social change in Iran, while also providing a means to track the cultural shifts currently underway.

2. United Arab Emirates

A report by Pennington (2016) indicated that in the United Arab Emirates, more than one in four students uses social media for five hours or more daily. Furthermore, this survey reveals that 14.7 percent of them spend between five and 10 hours, and 12.3 percent spend over 10 hours, engaging with social media online. 41 percent of the students reported that this habit has led them to go for long periods without food or drink, while 56.5 percent admitted that they had attempted to quit social media within the past 12 months but were unsuccessful. A majority of the students (58 percent) stated that spending time on social media has prevented them from spending time with their families, and 56.4 percent believe that it interferes with the completion of their school assignments. Ahmad (2019) reported that online chatting is rapidly becoming an addiction among youth in the United Arab Emirates, with internet cafes proliferating across the country. Approximately 70 percent of internet cafe users are young people who visit solely to chat, often spending between two and four hours there. Advanced Television (2021) presented findings from a study aimed at identifying which children are most addicted to technology and examining the potential impact on the next generation. By analyzing metrics such as childhood obesity, daily time spent online, and levels of physical activity, the study determined where the world's most technology-addicted children reside. The results revealed that children in the United Arab Emirates exhibit the highest level of addiction to their phones. Consequently—due to a low physical activity score of 17 (indicating that only a small percentage of Emirati children meet the guideline of 60 minutes of daily physical activity) and an average of over seven hours spent online each day—this West Asian country has earned the dubious distinction of being "home to the world's most technology-addicted children". In this context, the main question is why there is such an enthusiastic embrace of the digital sphere, and what impact this has had on Emirati society. Wiest, & Eltantawy (2015) found that modern technologies—particularly in the Middle East—have expanded rapidly, driven by innovations in satellite, mobile telephony, and the Internet. Furthermore, the socio-political phenomenon known as the "Arab Spring" served as a turning point for the adoption of new media in the Middle East, helping to define appropriate uses for these technologies. These findings underscore the significance of new media in the Arab world, reflecting both the enduring influence of traditional values and growing impact of Western culture. Tariq

(2021), in an examination of the impact of Korean music on young women via the digital sphere, demonstrated that Emirati youth expect diverse and unique content from local media industries. Since they do not receive such content through mainstream Emirati media, they seek to fill this gap by engaging with the global digital space. Recent findings by Blooshi, Yousif, & Khalil (2025) highlighted social media as a powerful tool for empowering women to participate, share their stories, and advocate for legal reforms in the United Arab Emirates.

3. Turkey

Recent reports tracking internet usage among Turkish citizens indicate that internet penetration has reached an all-time high of 86.5% (Kemp, 2024). These findings point to a landscape of robust and widespread digital engagement among the population. As digitalization continues to shape daily life, experts in Turkey are drawing attention to above-average social media usage and the associated risks. For instance, The Turkish Media Watchdog has expressed concern regarding the detrimental effects of digital dependency on children and adolescents, warning that excessive screen time and social media use contribute to the development of "FOMO" (fear of missing out) and "virtual autism" (Türkiye Today, 2026). According to data shared by the “Turkish Green Crescent Society”, people in Turkey spend approximately 25 hours per week on social media, compared to a global average of 19 hours. However, the time spent does not necessarily indicate a risk of digital addiction; rather, what matters is the impact of this time on an individual’s daily functioning, as well as the potential harm caused to social relationships and personal responsibilities (Deniz Güler, 2024). Furthermore, due to the widespread embrace of the digital sphere by the young generation—a trend seen in many Middle Eastern countries—the internet has become a powerful tool for dissenting voices in Turkey; a development that has triggered a reaction from authoritarian politicians. In response to the expanding opportunities for these voices—within an increasingly online society—the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has implemented various regulatory measures aimed at controlling the digital sphere, reflecting efforts to suppress dissenting narratives and voices (Bellut, 2021). This is not simply a political issue, of course, but the two institutions of politics and religion – like two sides of the same coin – work together in this process. The central focus of this strategy is the dissemination of Islamic values through state-run religious institutions, traditional media, and social media platforms, all of which act as tools to align public sentiment with the authoritarian agenda of the digital state. The cumulative effect of the merging of religion and digital governance has created a pervasive climate of online censorship and self-censorship. The consequence of this climate of caution and anxiety is not only to reinforce the authoritarian stance of the state, but also to influence the behavioral

patterns of online users, hindering free expression and discourse in the digital arena and limiting the free flow of information and the dissemination of different opinions (Kenes, & Yilmaz, 2024).

Phase 3: Comparison

An analysis of the data from the previous two phases reveals both similarities and differences among the three selected societies regarding two key issues: The consequences of internet addiction and the reasons why the young generation becomes drawn to it. Table 1 presents the main components, broken down by the selected country:

Table 1: Dimensions and components of internet addiction in the selected countries

Dimensions	**Components**	**Iran**	**UAE**	**Türkiye**
Technological	• Facilities • Speed • Prevalence	▪ Slow development of ICT infrastructure ▪ Low and controlled internet speeds ▪ Rising prevalence among the younger generation	• Rapid development of ICT infrastructure • High-speed internet with minimal control • Rising prevalence among the young generation	○ Rapid development of ICT infrastructure ○ High internet speeds with moderate-to-high levels of control ○ Rising prevalence among the younger generation
Physical/Psychological	• Gender differences • Physical consequences • Psychological consequences	• Prevalence across both genders • Obesity, physical inactivity, sleep disorders • Increased consumption of fast food • Anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem	• Prevalence across both genders • Sleep disturbance • Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and reduced self-esteem	• Prevalence across both genders • Sleep disturbance • Increased consumption of fast food • Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and reduced self-esteem
Social/Cultural	▪ Social liberation ▪ Exhilarating freedom ▪ Identification ▪ Virtual social capital ▪ Virtual gender equality ▪ Religious conflicts	• High degree of social liberation, coupled with an effort to assert oneself • Carefree freedom from tradition and social controls • Construction of an identity distinct from reality • Strong inclination toward building virtual social capital • Relative decline in real-world social capital and an upward trend in social isolation • Virtual gender equality, particularly for girls and women • o The role of religion as a mechanism of control	▪Significant social liberation, coupled with an effort to integrate tradition with modernism ▪A carefree liberation from family traditions ▪Balanced identity formation ▪A strong inclination toward building social capital in virtual spaces ▪An effort to strike a balance between social capital and individual freedoms	○ Significant social liberation, coupled with an effort to integrate tradition with modernism ○ A carefree sense of freedom from familial and social traditions ○ Balanced identity formation ○ A strong inclination toward building social capital in the virtual realm ○ An effort to strike a balance between social capital and individual freedoms ○ Gender equality in the virtual space, particularly for girls

			▪Gender equality in virtual spaces, particularly for girls and women ▪o A neutral role for the institution of religion	and women in rural and marginalized areas ○ A supportive role for religion
Economic/Political	• Price •position and role of the government • role of virtual space (cyberspace)	• High prices driven by severe inflation • Controlling and deterrent • A tool for consolidating political values	• Affordable price • Supportive and encouraging • Balanced	○ Moderate price ○ Deterrent and dispersive ○ A tool for consolidating political values

The data in the table indicate that the characteristics and effects of addiction to the virtual space among younger generation in the three selected societies can be categorized into four general dimensions, each comprising various components: From a technological perspective, three components—access to the virtual space, internet speed, and prevalence of the habit of accessing virtual space—can be examined for each country. It is evident that the necessary telecommunications infrastructure and facilities for the expansion of the virtual space across the geographical expanse of all three nations have been established by their respective governments; however, Iran's larger geographical area—compared to United Arab Emirates and Turkey—poses certain challenges regarding access for some young people living in rural or remote regions. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of urbanization in all three countries has accelerated access to the digital realm at an incredible pace. Regarding physical and psychological aspects, data analysis indicates that in all three nations, government officials, psychologists, educational stakeholders, teachers, parents, and students are aware of the risks associated with digital addiction; however, in the United Arab Emirates, physical consequences—such as obesity and physical inactivity among the younger generation—are more pronounced than in the other two countries. While other factors—including high urbanization rates, climatic conditions, and shifting dietary habits (such as increased fast-food consumption)—contribute to obesity among Emirati students, addiction to the digital realm has further exacerbated this crisis. From a socio-cultural perspective, all three societies—heavily influenced by the expansion of internet and active presence of the younger generation online—are experiencing shifts in their social and cultural behavioral patterns. The social system of the United Arab Emirates has demonstrated greater flexibility throughout this process. In contrast, the conflict between tradition and modernism in Iran—along with the rural character of certain regions in Turkey—has given rise to "dual-faced" individuals: A generation whose behavior in the real world (in the streets and public spaces) differs significantly from their

conduct in the virtual realm, particularly regarding dress, speech, and behavioral patterns. The economic and political dimensions further illustrate the varied impacts of the virtual space on these selected societies. While the political system in the United Arab Emirates largely views the internet as a tool for development, the existing political/economic, and social crises in Iran and political crises in Turkey have led state officials to view the virtual space with suspicion and skepticism. Based on the foregoing, it is possible to identify the similarities and differences among these three countries regarding the dimensions and consequences of the virtual space, as well as addiction to it:

Similarities

- Rising prevalence of addiction to the virtual space (cyberspace)
- A shared sense of euphoric freedom among the younger generation, allowing them to break free from social constraints
- Formation of personal and social identities distinct from those in the real world
- Spread of physical and psychological consequences resulting from addiction to the virtual space
- Weakening of social institutions such as the family, religion, and the state
- An increase in gender equality

Differences

- High internet speeds in the UAE and Turkey, versus controlled and monopolized internet access in Iran.
- Greater gender equality in the UAE compared to Iran and Turkey.
- An increase in health issues stemming from obesity and physical inactivity among the younger generation in the UAE.
- A significant gap between the real-life and virtual identities of users in Turkey and Iran, compared to the UAE.
- Neutral role of religious institutions in the UAE, contrasted with their active, controlling role in support of the political system in Iran and Turkey.
- Negative impact of economic factors—such as inflation—on the usage of the virtual space in Iran, in contrast to the low cost of internet access in the UAE and Turkey.

4. Conclusion

While trust in the internet and cyberspace is on the rise among the younger generation in the three selected countries, the perspective of older generation is characterized by skepticism and pessimism. Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to examine addiction to cyberspace within three societies in transition—the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Turkey—located in the volatile Middle East region. A systematic review of the literature, revealed that the proliferation of technology among the youth in these three societies has led to the continuous and excessive use of digital devices, software, and online content. This finding is consistent with previous research (Hassanvand, 2016; Yarahmadi et al., 2020; Hamzaglu et al., 2025; Elhat et al., 2025; Almoush et al., 2025; Akhtar & Alail, 2025).

The second finding indicates that addiction to the virtual space among the younger generation in these countries has resulted in negative impacts on various aspects of life, including physical and mental health as well as daily activities. This finding aligns with the research of Yilmaz et al. 2025; Öztekin ,2024; Akhtar ,2024; Boz & Dinç ,2023; Hussain et al. 2020; El-Kader & Funmilayo Hanson ,2019; Yar et al. 2019; Alkaabi, Albion & Redmond ,2017, all of whom have reported the emergence of conditions such as obesity, anxiety, depression, and reduced sleep quality among young people who are addicted to the virtual space in these countries.

The third finding indicates that the gap between "real self" and the "virtual self" is significantly wider in societies such as Iran and Turkey compared to the United Arab Emirates. While young people in the UAE are engaged in a peaceful process of reconciling Arab traditions with the manifestations of modernism, in Iran and Turkey, the family and religion—two highly influential institutions—often act in opposition to the desires and aspirations of the youth, thereby exacerbating the divide between their real and virtual selves. This finding aligns with the research of Jafarpour & Chitforoush (2023); Mokhtarpour & Kiani (2020); Alimardani & Milan (2018); Alkaabi, Albion & Redmond (2017); Hashemi & Soltanifar (2015) and Solhi et al. (2014).

The fourth finding reveals that while oil revenues in the United Arab Emirates—coupled with political will and specific economic orientations—foster an expanded presence of the younger generation in the digital sphere (a presence not necessarily perceived as "addiction"), in Iran, political crises and rising inflation make access to the digital space increasingly difficult for the youth. Meanwhile, the younger generation in Turkey finds itself in an intermediate position: access to the digital space carries political risks—given the perspective of the ruling party—yet economic concerns do not necessarily lead to an adaptation or normalization of this situation. This finding is

supported by research from Blooshi, Yousif, & Khalil (2025), Kemp (2024), Deniz Güler (2024), Kenes and Yilmaz (2024), Tariq (2021), Bellut (2021), Ko (2020) and Wiest, & Eltantawy (2015).

It is clear that the current findings do not yield robust recommendations for all three target groups: The younger generation, policymakers, and those involved in social institutions. In each of the three selected countries, the younger generation views the digital space as an opportunity to open themselves up to new horizons in life. Politicians, meanwhile, hold distinct political, socio-cultural, and economic priorities—priorities that often make it difficult to reconcile their agendas with the demands of digital-space activists. Furthermore, institutions such as the family and religion tend to play a largely passive role vis-à-vis the digital realm, or else serve the interests of political and economic structures. Given these realities, the most viable recommendation is directed toward teachers; they are uniquely positioned to highlight the positive aspects of the digital space while simultaneously informing the younger generation about the adverse physical and psychological consequences of its excessive use.

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