The Impact of the Virtual World on Youth Divorce: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The increasing use of virtual space among young people and its correlation with divorce rates is a topic that has attracted the attention of many researchers. In the present era, virtual space has become an integral part of human life and plays a significant role in people's interactions and relationships. Despite the many advantages of this space, its excessive use can have negative consequences, especially in marital relationships. Studies have shown that there is a significant relationship between increased divorce rates and the use of virtual space. The present study aimed to investigate the impact of the virtual world on youth divorce. In this research, using a qualitative method (thematic analysis), the effective factors in the virtual world on divorce are examined. The participants in this research were ۲۰ couples on the verge of divorce who referred to pre-divorce counseling centers. Data were collected through interviews. Findings show that excessive use of virtual space leads to reduced face-to-face interactions, increased social comparison, and the creation of filter bubbles. These factors, in turn, reduce marital satisfaction, increase the likelihood of infidelity, and ultimately lead to divorce. The results of this research emphasize the importance of creating a balance between online and offline life and strengthening couples' communication skills. The findings of this research show that dependence on virtual space significantly affects marital relationships. Reduced face-to-face interactions, increased social comparison, and the creation of filter bubbles are among the most important factors that arise in couples' relationships due to excessive use of virtual space. These findings are consistent with previous studies that show that virtual space can lead to decreased marital satisfaction and increased likelihood of divorce.

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Finally, based on the research findings, suggestions are offered for preventing divorce in the digital age.

Keywords: Lebenswelt, virtual space, divorce, Mashhadi couples.

Introduction

Marriage is a sacred bond through which the family is formed, and the family is the first social organization in which an individual lives. It is fundamentally a center of help, relief, healing, and restoration, and it is a center that should alleviate the psychological pressures on its members and pave the way for their growth and flourishing. According to researchers, almost all couples who marry report a high level of marital satisfaction at the beginning of their relationship (Bradbury, ۲۰۱۸). However, this satisfaction with the relationship decreases over time and among many couples. The most obvious indicator of marital distress is divorce. According to research from the Office of Victims Affairs of the Welfare Organization, divorce in Iran has increased compared to the past, so that the growth of divorce was slow and almost constant until ۱۳۷۹, but since ۱۳۸۰, we have witnessed an upward and significant trend in divorce, and according to the latest statistics, the divorce rate in Iran has been ۱۱/۲percent, which is a very high rate. Today, men and women, without regard to the importance and function of the family and also due to a lack of care in forming it, as soon as problems arise, instead of finding a solution to the problem, easily cause the disintegration of the family (Younesi, ۱۳۹۸).

In recent years, with the ever-increasing expansion of the internet and cyberspace, we have witnessed significant changes in people's lifestyles. These changes have also affected human relationships and interactions. One of the areas affected by cyberspace is marital relations and divorce. As an integral part of daily life, cyberspace is increasingly influencing marital relationships and divorce. Statistics show that the divorce rate in Iran has increased in recent years. Various factors can contribute to the increase in the divorce rate. One of these factors is the ever-increasing expansion of cyberspace and the growing use of the internet and social networks.

Studies show that cyberspace can affect marital relationships both positively and negatively. On the one hand, cyberspace can provide an opportunity for couples to communicate more and better with each other, as well as with friends and family. On the other hand, cyberspace can lead to misunderstandings, jealousy, infidelity, and ultimately divorce.

One of the issues related to the concept of divorce among couples is "cyberspace." The soulless and lackluster family atmosphere, negative discourse, and demeaning and authoritarian behaviors of parents and family members towards each other, and the

strengthening of the force of escaping from the home, lead to unstable attachments of spouses and other family members to the family center, and sometimes their escape and refuge to dangerous virtual spaces such as the internet (Arjmand Siahpoosh & Piramoun, ۱۳۹۹). In other words, these tools gradually damage the psychological and environmental space of dialogue and lead family members to divergence instead of convergence; to the extent that each family member lives only in a shared physical space, and the reduction of interactions makes their goals more divergent from each other. As a result, family members connect with electronic devices instead of connecting with each other, which leads to strengthening emotional bonds and cohesion among family members (Ganji et al., ۱۳۹۶).

Mashhad, as the center of Khorasan Razavi province and as one of the metropolises of Iran, is one of the cities where divorce rates are frequently observed and is considered one of the dangerous statistics that threaten the health of society in the city of Mashhad. Mashhad, due to the high internal marginal migrations from other smaller cities, is more exposed to family and social risks. One of the reasons that sociologists have cited for divorce in Mashhad is the cultural and class differences among the people of this city. Divorce damages the cohesion of the family structure and endangers family well-being, because the family is the first safe haven where a person begins their life journey. In fact, husband and wife, with the goal of forming a family through marriage, build their life together, and after marriage, the family is placed on one of the three paths of growth, turmoil, and disintegration and begins to move. Marriage is the basis of family formation, and its opposite pole is divorce, which causes its destruction. Divorce is one of the most important family damages that leads to individual, family, and social collapse (Arab et al., ۱۳۹۸). Divorce is one of the most important family damages. Divorce in society is like social upheaval and instability, which may lead to the devaluation of the family and family values, and create an increase in social harms such as addiction, alcoholism, and sexual perversions (Safarpour, ۱۳۹۵).

On the other hand, considering the rapid developments surrounding cyberspace, it can be predicted that the internet will gradually replace real human connections in everyday life. Since social life is based on these interpersonal relationships and connections, it is important to recognize the harms that threaten these relationships (Rabiei & Mohammadzadeh Yazd, ۲۰۱۸). This is because divorce has reached widespread statistics in our country today, which has brought both harmful individual and collective effects, causing individuals to suffer from burnout in their personal lives, as well as occupational

burnout and isolation, leading to emotional emptiness and psychological problems (Pompek et al., ٢٠١٩).

The necessity of this research stems from the fact that the family is a crucial and vital pillar of any society, and the health and progress of society are guaranteed by healthy families. If divorce increases in a society, it leads to sometimes irreparable harms and consequences for individuals and society. When divorce increases in a society, community leaders, politicians, sociologists, etc., sense this danger and seek to identify the factors and reduce this negative phenomenon. Unfortunately, in our society, despite the significant efforts made to reduce divorce and the numerous researches conducted, statistics and graphs show that divorce continues with great intensity and pervasiveness, which indicates a deficiency in the efforts. Examining this issue is important in several ways: Firstly, by accurately identifying the mechanisms of cyberspace's impact on marital relationships, a deeper understanding of the causes of youth divorce can be achieved. Secondly, understanding this relationship can help in designing more effective preventive and interventional programs. Thirdly, the results of this research can be used in developing appropriate support policies for young people and families facing the challenges of cyberspace. Finally, this research will significantly contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge in the fields of communication, sociology, and family psychology. Therefore, considering the importance and necessity of addressing and paying attention to the issue of the expansion of divorce and the misuse of cyberspace, which is now one of the most important reasons for the increase in this social harm, the researcher has been prompted to investigate the relationship between cyberspace and divorce among young couples in order to achieve a comprehensive and clear understanding of it. Hence, this article examines how the living world of cyberspace affects divorce. In this regard, this article seeks to answer the question of what mechanisms and processes exist in cyberspace that lead to an increased likelihood of divorce among young people.

Background and theoretical foundations

Amini Mehr (٢٠٢١) conducted a descriptive-survey study titled "Investigating the Relationship Between the Extent of Social Media Use and the Tendency Towards Divorce Among Couples in Baghmalek City." The findings of this research showed that there is a relationship between the extent of social media use, age, and tendency towards divorce among couples in Baghmalek City. There were also differences in the tendency towards divorce among couples in Baghmalek City based on the type of social media use, education, and occupation.

Baratzadeh (٢٠٢١), in a study examining the impact of the internet and social media on the increase in divorce cases in Iranian courts, with a case study of divorce cases in courts, counseling centers, and social work offices using a descriptive-applied method, concluded that a significant percentage of the research's statistical population, clients in ٢٠٢٠ and ٢٠٢١, consulted with lawyers and counseling centers regarding marital and family problems resulting from social networks. The investigations revealed that spending time on the internet and social media destroys marital life and also leads to depression in couples. Accordingly, the rate of divorce and separation is higher in couples who spend a lot of time on the internet and social media than those who experience life without the internet and social media. Thus, the internet and social media can be a factor in distancing couples from each other, which in some cases leads to divorce. This research was applied in terms of its objective and the method of data collection was field-based. The results showed that the internet and social media have an impact on the increase in divorce cases in Iranian courts.

Charles (٢٠٢٠), in a study titled "Investigating the Impact of Social Networks, Especially Twitter, on Marital Infidelity and Divorce," showed that social networks, by providing a platform for romantic relationships with people other than a spouse, lead to marital infidelity and ultimately to divorce.

Pumpek (٢٠١٩), in his research in Nigeria on couples' relationships and social networks, showed that women use social networks significantly more than men. However, men's use of these networks leads to more dissatisfaction and conflict. This can be partly attributed to social software. Women usually establish broader relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances, and this is accepted by society as a gender characteristic of women, while this is not the case for men. Therefore, spending time on social networks by men raises more sensitivity in women. Another explanation is that men who spend time on social networks may not be very satisfied with relationships at home and are looking for other positive relationships on the network (even romantic relationships with the opposite sex), which has a positive relationship with the perception of marital instability.

Olson and Differin (٢٠١٩) examined the relationship between virtual social networks and marital satisfaction and divorce rates in the United States. The research data showed the high popularity of social networks among participants. According to the research results, the use of virtual networks has led to a cooling of relationships between couples.

Theoretical Framework

The state of the family, the nature of relationships between family members, and its dissolution and collapse are on the one hand a reflection of social, cultural, and economic conditions, and on the other hand, the result of internal factors within the family (micro level) and its quality and nature. Due to the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of divorce and the multiplicity of theories and explanatory approaches, the theoretical framework chosen for this writing has a sociological approach, and several theories are presented to explain the current state of Iranian society in the issue of divorce. The use of theories in qualitative research is to create theoretical sensitivity and is used as a guide for the coding process.

Social capital, based on Bourdieu's theories, refers to the network of social relationships, the level of trust, solidarity, and cooperation within a society. This capital is a form of social asset that enables individuals to access social resources and support (Sidman, ۲۰۱۹). Regarding divorce and cyberspace, the relationship between these concepts can be pointed out in several ways:

Decline in Social Capital: By replacing face-to-face interactions with online interactions, cyberspace can lead to a decrease in social interactions and, consequently, a decrease in social capital. When people spend more time in cyberspace, they have fewer opportunities to build strong and lasting relationships with friends, family, and neighbors. This decline in social capital can weaken social support and increase feelings of isolation, which in turn affects marital relationships.

Change in the Nature of Interactions: Interactions in cyberspace are often more superficial and less intimate than face-to-face interactions. This can lead to a decrease in trust and solidarity in interpersonal relationships. When people interact with each other in cyberspace, they may pay less attention to each other's feelings and needs and focus more on social validation and creating a virtual identity.

Creation of Filter Bubbles: Social media algorithms personalize content based on users' interests. This can lead to the creation of filter bubbles, where people are only in contact with those who share similar views and are deprived of exposure to different perspectives.

Symbolic Interaction Theory:

Symbolic interaction theory believes that people jointly construct meanings and concepts in their interactions with each other. Cyberspace can serve as a new space for social interactions. In this space, people can communicate with each other, share information

and ideas, and represent their identities (Reiters, 2009). The way people interact in cyberspace can affect their marital relationships. Based on this theory, the following propositions can be made:

•Communication: Social media can help couples stay in touch, even when they are far apart. However, social media can also lead to misunderstandings and conflict between couples. For example, one partner may misinterpret a message or post from the other.

•Information Sharing: Social media can help couples share information and ideas. However, social media can also lead to jealousy and insecurity between couples. For example, one partner may be jealous of seeing pictures of their spouse with friends or colleagues.

• Identity Representation: Social media can help people represent their identity. However, social media can also lead to lies and deception in marital relationships. For example, one partner may present themselves in social media in a way that they are not in real life.

The impact of cyberspace on marital relationships depends on how people interact in this space. If couples use cyberspace correctly and responsibly, it can help strengthen their relationship. However, if couples use cyberspace incorrectly, it can weaken their relationship and ultimately lead to divorce.

Postmodern Theory:

Postmodern theory believes that modern society tends towards individualism, fluidity and uncertainty. These tendencies can affect marital relationships and divorce. Cyberspace can act as a tool for individualism and fluidity and help individuals to construct their identities independently of others (Seiman, 2019). This can lead to tension and conflict in marital relationships and ultimately divorce. On this basis, it can be said:

•Individualism: People in modern society increasingly seek independence and self-awareness. This can lead to a weakening of commitment and responsibility in marital relationships.

•Fluidity: Relationships in modern society are increasingly fluid and temporary. This can lead to infidelity and divorce.

•Uncertainty: Life in modern society is increasingly characterized by uncertainty and anxiety. This can lead to tension and conflict in marital relationships.

Cyberspace can serve as a tool for individualism and fluidity. For example, individuals can construct their identities independently of others in cyberspace and connect with different people around the world. This can lead to tension and conflict in marital relationships, as couples may feel distant from each other or feel that their spouses are not paying enough attention to them.

Research Method

The approach of this research is qualitative and thematic analysis. This method was chosen due to the novelty of the subject and the lack of sufficient knowledge and comprehensive theories about the subject under study. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 people who referred to pre-divorce counseling centers in Mashhad. Thematic analysis is a systematic approach in qualitative research that focuses on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the meaning patterns of qualitative data.

Thus, it can be said that thematic analysis is a method for recognizing, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. This method is a process for analyzing textual data and transforms scattered and diverse data into rich and detailed data (Mohammadpour, ۲۰۱۳).

Then, in order to analyze the findings, three-stage coding was used. Therefore, we first started analyzing the collected data, then categorized and coded the concepts and themes, and finally created relationships between the concepts and themes (Braun, ۲۰۱۰).

To achieve the reliability of the findings, simultaneous research was used. In this method, data collection, analysis, and coding are done simultaneously. This allows the researcher to change the data collection path based on preliminary findings and ensure theoretical saturation, if necessary. Theoretical saturation refers to a situation where new data no longer leads to the formation of new concepts.

Findings

Description of the background characteristics of the participants in the study The participants in this study were 20 male and female clients of pre-divorce counseling centers in Mashhad, all of whom were between the ages of 18 and 35. Five of them had less than a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree, and the rest had a bachelor's

degree. Based on the coding table below, axial coding is based on the identified main categories.

Based on the coding table below, axial coding has been determined based on the main categories.

Table 1 Conceptual classes

The Three step: Main Themes (Related to Virtual World Life)	The second step: Pivotal Codes	The One Step: Open Codes	Example from an interview
Cyberspace addiction	Mobile addiction	She always has her phone in her hand.	"It was always on her phone, even when we were talking".
Impaired effective communication	Misunderstanding	We don't understand each other anymore.	"It's like we're two people from two different planets".
Distrust and betrayal	Betrayal in cyberspace	He betrayed me.	"I found out he's in a relationship with someone else and chatting with them".
Decreased interest and affection	Disinterest	He's bored now.	"He says he doesn't love me anymore and is tired of living with me. He's mostly having fun in the virtual world".

Differences in values and beliefs due to the influence of cyberspace	Disagreement	We always fight.	"We disagree about everything, especially when we should be online".
Violence from online arguments	Physical violence	I was beaten by him.	"When I told her she spent too much time on Instagram, she got angry and raised her hand at me".
Feeling lonely in the real world due to being online	Loneliness	I feel lonely	"It feels like I'm alone in this house, all my time is spent in the virtual world".
Decreased satisfaction with real life	Comparison with virtual ideals	Comparison with others	"I always compare myself to the people I see on Instagram and feel inferior".
Compensating for lack of attention in cyberspace	Attention deficit in the real world	Lack of attention	"Because I wasn't paying attention to him in the real world, he went online looking for attention".
Competition with cyberspace	Fear of losing your spouse due to cyberspace	Fear of loss	"I'm always worried that someone else will take my place on social media".
Decreased trust	Secrecy in the use of cyberspace	Secrecy	"She always changes her phone password and doesn't let me look at it".

Decreased self-confidence	The need for verification in cyberspace	Dependence on the approval of others	"He was always looking for likes and comments on his posts and cared a lot about what others thought".
Physical and mental problems caused by lack of sleep	Sleep disturbance due to cyberspace use	Changes in sleep patterns	"She stays up all night long with her phone in her hand, then she's all sleepy and nervous".
Weakening of family relationships	Reducing in-person social interactions	Reduced real interactions	"She doesn't go out with my family and friends anymore, she just plays at home".
Declining the importance of real relationships	Prioritizing cyberspace over your spouse	Change in priorities	"He was always busy on his phone and didn't pay attention to me".

Discussion

This study examined the impact of virtual life on the phenomenon of divorce. Although qualitative research cannot generalize its results due to the small number of participants, it provides significant results due to its penetration into the underlying layers of respondents' consciousness. Table 1 shows that the effects of virtual space on couples' relationships include:

Changes in communication patterns:

•Decreased face-to-face communication: Cyberspace has made it possible to communicate without the need for physical presence. As a result, couples spend less time talking and interacting face-to-face.

•Changes in body language and expression of emotions: In virtual interactions, there is no possibility of using body language and non-verbal cues. This can lead to misunderstandings and a decrease in intimacy in relationships.

•Creation of filter bubbles: Social media algorithms personalize content based on users' interests. This can lead to the creation of filter bubbles in which people only communicate with people who have similar opinions and are deprived of exposure to different perspectives.

Impact on identity and self-image:

•Social comparison: Cyberspace provides many opportunities to compare oneself with others. These comparisons can lead to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and reduced self-esteem.

• Creating virtual identities: People in cyberspace can create new identities for themselves that are not necessarily related to

Their true identity does not match. This can lead to a gap between the real self and the ideal self.

Changes in power patterns:

•Unequal distribution of power: Access to technology and the skills to use it can create inequality in relationships. A person who is more skilled in using cyberspace may have more power in the relationship.

•Control and surveillance: The ability to monitor a partner's online activities can lead to feelings of insecurity and reduced trust in the relationship.

Impact on emotional and psychological life:

•Anxiety and depression: Excessive use of cyberspace and constant comparison of oneself with others can lead to increased anxiety and depression.

•Addiction: Dependence on cyberspace can become a type of addiction that negatively affects other aspects of a person's life, including relationships.

Comparing the results of the present study with other studies, the following can be noted:

• The direct impact of cyberspace on marital relationships: All the studies reviewed have concluded in some way that excessive use of cyberspace can have a negative impact on marital relationships and increase the likelihood of divorce.

•Differences in communication and interaction between couples: Various studies show that cyberspace can reduce face-to-face communication, misunderstandings, and reduce intimacy in couples' relationships.

•Cheating and extramarital affairs: Several studies have concluded that cyberspace can lead to cheating and extramarital affairs.

• Gender differences in the use of cyberspace: Pompek's study shows that women and men use cyberspace differently, and these differences can affect marital relationships.

The findings of this research indicate that addiction to virtual space significantly impacts marital relationships. Reduced face-to-face interactions, increased social comparison, and the creation of filter bubbles are among the most important factors caused by excessive use of virtual space in couple relationships. These findings are consistent with previous studies that show virtual space can lead to decreased marital satisfaction and increased likelihood of divorce.

To interpret these findings, social capital theory can be used. By reducing face-to-face interactions, virtual space reduces the social capital of couples, consequently weakening their relationships. Also, constantly comparing oneself to others in virtual space can lead to decreased self-esteem and increased feelings of isolation, which also affects marital relationships. The findings of this research show that addiction to virtual space is significantly associated with reduced social capital of couples. This reduction in social capital occurs due to the reduction of face-to-face interactions and their replacement with superficial interactions in virtual space. As a result, couples who spend more time in virtual space receive less social support and feel more isolated. This can lead to decreased marital satisfaction and increased likelihood of divorce.

Regarding divorce, reduced social capital can lead to an increased likelihood of divorce in several ways:

- Reduced social support: Couples with less social capital receive less support from family, friends, and the community, and as a result, are less likely to seek help when facing marital problems.

- Increased feelings of isolation: Feelings of isolation and loneliness can lead to decreased life satisfaction and increased stress, both of which can negatively affect marital relationships.

- Reduced communication skills: Superficial interactions in virtual space can lead to a reduction in people's communication skills, which can affect their ability to solve problems and communicate effectively with their spouse.

Consequently, it can be said that the reduction in social capital resulting from excessive use of virtual space is one of the most important factors influencing the increased likelihood of divorce.

Based on a postmodern approach, it can also be said that:

- Polyphony and multiple narratives: There are multiple narratives from different people about the effects of virtual space on marital relationships. These narratives show that there is no single truth about this issue, and each individual presents a different narrative of this phenomenon based on their experience and situation.
- Deconstruction and transformation of identity: Virtual space, as a new social structure, has transformed and challenged people's identities. It is observed that people find their identity in virtual space, which leads to conflict and contradiction with their identity in the real world.
- Relativism of values: In virtual space, values and beliefs are changing rapidly, which has caused people to face new challenges in their marital relationships. Differences in values and beliefs due to the influence of virtual space are one of the main reasons for conflict and discord in marital relationships.
- Fluidity and instability of reality: Cyberspace has blurred the boundaries between reality and virtuality. In this space, individuals can create new identities for themselves and experience new realities. This has caused marital relationships to be affected by this fluidity and instability.

Symbolic interaction theory believes that meaning is constructed through social interactions and the exchange of symbols. In this theory, individuals are considered active and meaningful beings who are constantly interpreting and constructing social reality.

- Shared meanings: Couples used to have shared meanings of marital relationship. However, with the advent of cyberspace, these shared meanings have changed and different interpretations of concepts such as loyalty, connection, and attention have emerged.
- Symbols: Mobile phones and cyberspace have become symbols of attention, connection, and identity. Couples display different behaviors based on their personal interpretations of these symbols.
- Interaction: The behavior of each partner triggers a reaction from the other, and this cycle of action and reaction shapes social interactions. For example, when one person spends a lot of time in cyberspace, the other may feel neglected, and this feeling may lead to other behaviors such as controlling or separation.
- Self: Individuals' identities are formed in interactions with others. Cyberspace, as a mirror, shows individuals an image of themselves that may be different from their image in the real world. This difference in self-images leads to conflict and tension in relationships.

According to the findings of various studies, it can be concluded that the extensive use of cyberspace is considered a risk factor for marital relationships. This effect can be due to various reasons, including reduced face-to-face interactions, creating opportunities for infidelity, increased social comparison, and reduced satisfaction with real life.

Practical suggestions for dealing with the harms of virtual life on couples' relationships:

Comprehensive and targeted education:

•Focus on life skills: In addition to technical training, focus on strengthening life skills such as time management, anger management, empathy, and active listening.

•Training effective communication skills in cyberspace: Teaching correct ways to communicate in cyberspace, respecting the privacy of others, and preventing misunderstandings.

•Promoting digital literacy: Improving the level of digital literacy of individuals for the conscious and responsible use of new technologies.

Extensive and sustainable culture building:

•Targeted information campaigns: Designing attractive and creative campaigns to increase public awareness about the dangers of cyberspace and the importance of real relationships.

•Using social media: Using social platforms to produce educational and interactive content and create dialogue in this field.

•Encouraging joint family activities: Promoting joint family activities away from cyberspace to strengthen emotional relationships.

•Supporting the production of healthy and informative content: Encouraging content producers to produce healthy and informative content that helps strengthen family relationships.

Supporting couples and strengthening the foundation of the family:

•Establishing specialized online and in-person counseling centers: Expanding specialized counseling centers by providing telephone, online, and in-person counseling services to couples.

•Facilitating access to psychological services: Reducing the costs of psychological and psychiatric services for couples.

• Creating support networks: Creating support networks for couples to exchange experiences and receive social support.

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