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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Social Function of Virtual Networks in Urban and Rural Areas

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

In contemporary urban studies, the concepts of space, time, and place have acquired new definitions, a transformation in which new information and communication technologies play a fundamental role. The Internet, and more recently virtual social networks, serve as the backbone of these technologies, playing a pivotal role in shaping this new dynamic and facilitating the emergence of novel economic, cultural, social, political, and security-related spaces. Currently, Iran is confronting an extensive media war, characterized as "soft" warfare. The predominant approach to countering this media offensive has been largely reactive, with a notable neglect of proactive social and cultural planning. The primary objective of this research is to investigate and analyze both the positive and negative effects of virtual social networks on social capital, with a specific focus on a comparative analysis between urban and rural areas.

Method:

The statistical population of this study comprises residents of villages and urban areas within Mianeh County. This research employs a descriptive-correlational design, operationalized through structural equation modeling.

Findings:

The estimated values indicated that, although the usage of social networks was significantly higher in urban areas than in rural areas, these networks demonstrated a greater efficacy in fostering the components of social capital among rural residents compared to their urban counterparts. To examine the difference in the means of the independent variable (the role of virtual networks) and the dependent variable (place of residence), a one-sample t-test was utilized. The results of the t-test, assuming equal variances, revealed a significant difference between the two groups ($P=0.002$, $F=2.56$) at a 95 percent confidence level.

Furthermore, bivariate regression analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between the independent variable (number of visits) and the dependent variable (household location). The results showed that among urban users, the variable Y (number of visits-approvals) explains 75 percent of the variance in variable X (number of households). This confirms the dependency of visit frequency on the number of urban households. In contrast, among rural users, variable Y (number of visits-approvals) explains 65 percent of the variance in variable X (number of households).

Conclusion:

The findings reveal a significant difference between rural and urban residents of Mianeh County concerning the type and level of their activity within social networks. Respondents acknowledged both the positive and negative consequences of utilizing virtual social networks. The impact of these networks on the physical and mental well-being of individuals was reported to be of comparable significance among both rural and urban users.

Regarding the effects of virtual networks on family and social relationships, the most salient findings indicated an increase in social participation and the development of civil society within villages. Conversely, in urban areas, negative consequences were more pronounced, including the emotional distancing of children from parents, the weakening of the family institution, the emergence of familial disputes, and the formation of unconventional friendships.

An analysis of four components—public trust, credibility, sense of local belonging, and individual characteristics—used to measure social capital revealed that the perceived accuracy and truthfulness of content published on virtual networks in both urban and rural contexts are contingent upon the credibility attributed to the source of the content.

The results also indicate that in urban areas, individuals primarily utilize virtual networks for income generation, followed by staying informed about current political and social issues, and for educational purposes. In contrast, rural residents reported using social networks primarily for their children's education, for raising young children, and for generating economic income. Consequently, the influence of traditional media, such as radio and television, was found to be more pronounced in villages than in cities. Furthermore, the function of social networks was observed to be more diversified and complex within urban settings.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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