

Digital social communication and the imperative of platform authority: A case study of children in Iran

Saeid Reza Ameli^{1*}, Azam Ravadrad², Abdollah Bicharanlou²,
 Milad Mousavi Haghshenas²

1. Professor of Communications and Global Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.
2. Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info	Abstract
Original Article Main Object: Interdisciplinary Scope: China, Iran, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Vietnam Received: 19 February 2026 Revised: 05 March 2026 Accepted: 05 March 2026 Published online: 12 March 2026 Keywords: Aparat, Bale, domestic platforms, dual-spatial children, Eitaa, Instagram, KakaoTalk, Line, platform authority, Rubika, social platforms, super- app, YouTube, VKontakte, WeChat, WhatsApp, Zalo.	Social platforms serve as one of the primary gateways to the web for children and adolescents, and for some, they represent the very first access point. The widespread adoption of these platforms, alongside the significance of their algorithmic systems for governance in political, social, and cultural spheres, has prompted some countries to design and develop domestic social platforms in the form of "Super-apps". This study, employing the Dual-Spacization framework of the world and a qualitative approach, first sought to understand the mental beliefs and practical behaviors of children and adolescents aged 6 to 14 regarding both domestic and global platforms through interviews. In the second phase, the study examined the leading global platform models and Iran's trajectory toward achieving platform authority. Examples of successful platforms in countries with diverse political systems include KakaoTalk in South Korea with 95% penetration, VKontakte in Russia with 89% penetration, WeChat in China with 91% penetration, Line in Japan with 89% penetration, and Zalo in Vietnam with 98% penetration. Despite employing different strategies, these platforms have pursued similar objectives. Although Iran is considered a pioneer in this regard, it has not achieved platform authority. The most popular domestic social platform in Iran, with a 26% penetration rate, ranks fourth on the list of the country's most-used platforms. The final section of the study emphasizes the necessity of achieving this goal, highlighting the platform as an essential space for work and life.

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* Corresponding author: ✉ ssameli@ut.ac.ir,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3724-4362>

Extended Abstract

Background

Children are born into a "dual-space" world where even the prenatal images of some are published by their parents on social media networks prior to their birth. They live on the internet and are, in the truest sense, dual-space children who have entered existence in a platform-centric society, undergoing their developmental stages in tandem with the advancement and evolution of digital technologies. Today, platforms are intertwined with numerous aspects of children's lives and are considered one of the primary gateways for their entry into the digital environment. Therefore, in such an ecosystem, the structure and design patterns of platforms, their approaches and policies, their monitoring methods, the algorithms defined for them, and their mechanisms for oversight acquire special significance. In addition to the specific sensitivities regarding children in various societies, the widespread penetration of social platforms among other age and social groups, the position of "super-apps" in the political, economic, cultural, educational, and social spheres of nation-states, and the deep connection of these digital foundations with the concept of lifestyle, have driven some countries toward the development of indigenous (native) platforms. This has prompted them to utilize their technological knowledge to demonstrate local and national performance in the arena of social platforms, while adopting a global mindset.

Aims

The primary objective of the present study is, in the first instance, to gain an understanding of the mental constructs and concrete behaviors of children and adolescents aged 6 to 14 on the internet, as well as their perspectives on domestic versus global platforms, through interviews and dialogue with this demographic. In the second phase, the agenda focuses on examining the status of indigenous platforms in selected countries that have embarked on this path. This research aims to address questions regarding the extent of their pervasiveness within their respective nations, their competitive standing against global platforms, the level of user adoption, and their penetration rates within national borders. To this end, prominent platforms in China, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam, and Japan are analyzed. In the third phase, this research seeks to determine the trajectory Iran has traversed in the design, launch, and development of indigenous platforms, as well as its current standing and the position of its prominent platforms in comparison to both global rivals and the native counterparts in the aforementioned countries.

Methods

Given its objectives, this study employs a qualitative approach. The initial phase of the research entails designing semi-structured

interviews with children and adolescents to elicit and analyze their views, desires, experiences, and preferences regarding the landscape of digital communication in general, and social platforms in particular. The subsequent step is dedicated to a descriptive study of prominent indigenous platforms in Russia, South Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, and Iran, examining the status of these platforms among their respective domestic users. To execute this phase of the research, a combination of documentary analysis and participant observation techniques has been utilized.

Results

The initial section of this study's findings is dedicated to processing data derived from the conducted interviews. "Platformization of consumption", "networked communication and the fear of isolation", "user-friendliness and engagement", "content gap compared to global counterparts", and "YouTube-centrism and Instagram-orientation" are the five overarching themes that explain the orientation of the interviewed children regarding domestic and foreign social platforms. The second section addresses findings related to prominent global patterns and Iran's trajectory toward achieving platform authority. KakaoTalk in South Korea (with a 95% penetration rate), VKontakte in Russia (89%), WeChat in China (91%), LINE in Japan (89%), and Zalo in Vietnam (98%) are examples of successful platforms in countries with diverse political systems that have pursued similar objectives by adopting different strategies. However, despite stepping onto this path in the mid-2000s and being considered a pioneer in this regard, Iran has not yet been able to achieve platform authority. With a penetration rate of 26%, the most popular domestic social platform in Iran ranks fourth on the list of the country's popular platforms, trailing behind three global counterparts.

Discussions

The commonality among the experiences of Russia, China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam is the successful realization of their strategic objectives through "affirmative and protectionist policies" aimed at the design, launch, and development of indigenous platforms. By establishing robust technical infrastructures, adhering to structural principles, and prioritizing aesthetic appeal and user-friendliness, these nations have effectively addressed the multifaceted expectations, diverse needs, and heterogeneous tastes of their users. Consequently, they have successfully elevated their national platforms to the top of the list of the most popular social networks and media within their respective borders. In contrast, despite following a similar trajectory and adopting restrictive policies, such as the blocking mechanisms employed by Russia and China, Iran has yet to achieve comparable success. While these measures have driven a significant number of

internet users toward domestic platforms, Iran has failed to position at least one national platform at the forefront of the competitive market against foreign counterparts. The reality is that a multi-year vacuum in the presence of powerful indigenous alternatives allowed the Iranian digital environment to fall under the hegemony of global platforms. Large numbers of users chose these foreign services for their social interactions, business activities, and virtual activism. Given the inherent nature and requirements of the digital environment, reversing this trend is an arduous task. The personal pages and user accounts of a significant portion of society are deeply intertwined with their daily lives. For many, these platforms serve as a "digital habitat"—a hub for interacting with family, followers, reference groups, and social circles, as well as a gateway to daily digital content. From this perspective, a social platform possesses the capacity to become deeply embedded in an individual's lifestyle; therefore, migrating from one to another is rarely a seamless or challenge-free process. Collectively, these conditions have resulted in a situation where, even a decade after the emergence of domestic challengers, the most popular local platform only holds the fourth position in the country's popularity rankings, trailing the blocked top-ranked competitor by a margin of fourteen million monthly active users.

Conclusion

To offer a metaphorical explanation: a social platform is akin to a home. A resident may be reluctant to leave an old house with stairs for a modern one equipped with an elevator, simply because they are "settled". They are accustomed to the space and the neighborhood, have deep social and neighborly ties, find comfort in its familiar amenities, and feel a sense of security there, even if the perception of security differs from security itself. This behavior aligns with the concept of "Networked Communication and the Fear of Isolation". Countries like Russia and South Korea understood the shifting paradigms of digital presence and the "platform-centric" nature of consumption (as emphasized in the five themes of the findings section). Through timely interventions and policymaking, they provided environments where users defined and shaped their identities, social circles, family ties, political orientations, economic activities, and communication systems years ago. In short, the platform became the sphere of work and life for them. Furthermore, the management and R&D teams of these platforms, backed by necessary support, continuously updated their features and services in line with the latest global digital trends to ensure they did not lose their sphere of influence to global rivals. Comparative statistics provide a guiding index for the level of influence a reference domestic platform wields. According to reports by Aparat, in the first half of the Iranian year 1403 (2024), the total number of uploaded videos reached approximately 2.5 million, averaging roughly

420,000 videos per month. In stark contrast, reports regarding the performance of VKontakte (VK) show that its video segment, VK Video, hosted 13.7 million user uploads in the single month of June 2025. This indicates that the volume of content uploaded to VK Video in one month is more than 32 times that of Aparat, even though Russia's internet-using population is less than twice that of Iran. These data corroborate the interviewees' responses categorized under the theme "Content Gap Compared to Global Counterparts". Additionally, Aparat reported nearly 20 billion total views for its uploaded videos in 1403 (2024). Meanwhile, the average daily views for VK Video in the second quarter of 2025 reached 3.3 billion. This means that one week of views on VK Video is equivalent to the entire annual viewership of Aparat. It is crucial to note that this is not a comparison between a national platform and a global giant; rather, both VK Video and Aparat are indigenous platforms in their respective countries, both aiming to provide a local alternative to YouTube. In conclusion, indicators such as these effectively illustrate the concept of a "Reference Platform" and, more broadly, "Platform Sovereignty" (Platform Authority). They clarify the specific coordinates, attributes, and capacities a digital platform must possess to become a permanent residence for users and an inseparable part of their daily existence.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence. Ethical Code:

<https://ethics.research.ac.ir/ProposalCertificateEn.php?id=829186&Print=true&NoPrintHeader=true&NoPrintFooter=true&NoPrintPageBorder=true&LetterPrint=true>

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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