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REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

Risk Factors and Protective Elements in the Fight Against Addiction: A Conceptual Evaluation

Bağımlılıkla Mücadelede Risk Faktörleri ve Koruyucu Unsurlar: Kavramsal Bir Değerlendirme

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of addiction has manifested in different forms throughout history, producing serious consequences at the individual, familial, and societal levels. In contemporary societies, addiction is not only a problem that diminishes an individual's quality of life but also a multidimensional threat that generates destructive effects in social, economic, cultural, and political domains. By altering its content and form throughout the historical process, this phenomenon has shown continuity, creating new fields of struggle in every period; therefore, traditional methods have often remained insufficient. Despite prevention and intervention efforts carried out at international and national levels, the prevalence and diversity of addiction have not decreased; on the contrary, the ease of access to substances and addictive behaviors has persisted. This study aims to examine the biological, psychological, social, and environmental risk factors that contribute to the maintenance of the addiction cycle, based on the literature; analyze the impacts of these factors at both the individual and societal levels; and present a holistic framework for preventive and intervention strategies. The research was designed as a qualitative review study; national and international peer-reviewed articles, books, reports, and official statistics published mostly between 2015 and 2024 were evaluated through thematic content analysis. Findings obtained from the literature indicate that four main risk factors (biological, psychological, social, and environmental) are decisive in breaking the cycle of addiction. In addition, studies conducted specifically in Turkey reveal that substance use among young people shows an increasing trend, while protective factors (family ties, education, social activities) remain insufficient. Accordingly, this study suggests disseminating early intervention mechanisms, strengthening family-based approaches, enhancing access to psychosocial support services, and developing policies and legal regulations. In conclusion, the findings of this study are expected not only to make a theoretical contribution to the academic literature but also to guide social policy development processes and to provide a framework for implementing institutions.

Keywords: Addiction, Addiction Cycle, Risk Factors.

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Öz:

Bağımlılık olgusu, tarih boyunca farklı biçimlerde ortaya çıkarak bireysel, ailesel ve toplumsal düzeyde ciddi sonuçlar doğurmuştur. Günümüz toplumlarında bağımlılık, yalnızca bireyin yaşam kalitesini düşüren bir sorun olmaktan öte, sosyal, ekonomik, kültürel ve politik alanlarda da yıkıcı etkiler yaratan çok boyutlu bir tehdit niteliği taşımaktadır. Tarihsel süreç içerisinde içerik ve biçim değiştirerek süreklilik gösteren bu olgu, her dönemde yeni mücadele alanları yaratmış; bu nedenle geleneksel yöntemler çoğu zaman yetersiz kalmıştır. Uluslararası ve ulusal düzeyde yürütülen önleme ve müdahale çabalarına rağmen bağımlılığın yaygınlığı ve çeşitliliği azalmamış, aksine madde ve davranışlara erişim kolaylığı devam etmiştir. Bu araştırma, bağımlılık döngüsünün sürdürülmesine yol açan biyolojik, psikolojik, sosyal ve çevresel risk faktörlerini literatür ışığında incelemeyi, bu faktörlerin bireysel ve toplumsal düzeydeki etkilerini analiz etmeyi ve önleyici–müdahaleci stratejilere ilişkin bütüncül bir çerçeve sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, nitel bir derleme araştırması olarak tasarlanmış; daha çok 2015–2024 yılları arasında yayımlanmış ulusal ve uluslararası hakemli makaleler, kitaplar, raporlar ve resmi istatistikler tematik içerik analizi yöntemiyle değerlendirilmiştir. Literatürden elde edilen bulgular, bağımlılığın kırılmasında dört temel risk faktörünün (biyolojik, psikolojik, sosyal, çevresel) belirleyici olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca Türkiye özelinde yapılan araştırmalar, gençler arasında madde kullanımının artış eğilimi gösterdiğini, buna karşın koruyucu faktörlerin (aile bağları, eğitim, sosyal etkinlikler) yetersiz kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çalışmada; erken müdahale mekanizmalarının yaygınlaştırılması, aile temelli yaklaşımların güçlendirilmesi, psikososyal destek hizmetlerine erişimin artırılması ve politika–hukuki düzenlemelerin geliştirilmesi önerilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışmanın bulgularının yalnızca akademik literatüre kuramsal katkı sağlaması değil, aynı zamanda sosyal politika geliştirme süreçlerine yön vermesi ve uygulayıcı kurumlar için yol gösterici bir alt yapı oluşturması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağımlılık, Bağımlılık Döngüsü, Risk Faktörler.

Introduction

Addiction has been addressed throughout its historical development not only as a biological problem but also as a social and cultural phenomenon. In general terms, the concept refers to an individual's strong inclination toward a particular substance, an inability to discontinue this behavior despite the desire to quit, and the continued use of the substance despite harmful consequences. Addiction is characterized by a recurrent desire to use the substance, an increasing need for higher doses over time, and impairments in both physical and psychological functioning when use is discontinued (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). In this respect, addiction is not merely a temporary behavioral tendency but a chronic and relapsing condition that progressively undermines an individual's capacity for self-control.

The phenomenon of addiction is examined on two main levels: physiological and psychological. Physiological addiction refers to the body's adaptation to a substance due to continuous intake and the emergence of withdrawal symptoms when use is discontinued. Psychological addiction, on the other hand, is associated with an individual's tendency to turn to a substance or behavior as a means of escaping anxiety, restlessness, or negative emotional states; during this process, the individual experiences pleasure, relaxation, or temporary satisfaction (Koob & Le Moal, 2005). These two dimensions often interact and reinforce one another, making the addiction process more persistent and difficult to break.

Although addiction is commonly associated with chemical dependencies such as alcohol, tobacco products, cocaine, and various other drugs (Aslan, 2020), contemporary discussions emphasize that it constitutes one of the most important public health problems globally. Its negative effects are not limited to biological and psychological health problems; rather, addiction also generates serious social consequences that weaken family structures, disrupt social solidarity, and create economic burdens. Addiction emerges from the interaction of neurobiological, psychosocial, and environmental factors, and over time it increasingly assumes the character of a chronic public health issue (Volkow et al., 2016).

According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), more than 35 million individuals worldwide require treatment due to substance use disorders. The World Drug Report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) indicates that approximately 275 million people aged 15–64 have used an illicit substance at least once. Alcohol and tobacco remain among the most widely used addictive substances globally, with 2.3 billion alcohol users and 1.3 billion tobacco users worldwide (WHO, 2021). These figures demonstrate the widespread and persistent nature of addiction across societies.

In addition to global trends, addiction represents a serious public health issue in Türkiye. Reports indicate that approximately 4.5% of individuals aged 15–64 have experienced drug use, and young people constitute one of the most vulnerable groups. Rates of substance use among individuals aged 15–24 range between 10–12%, and the use of heroin and cannabis is becoming increasingly common among youth. These data highlight the urgency of addressing addiction not only through treatment-focused approaches but also through preventive strategies that consider risk and protective factors.

In this context, addiction should not be evaluated solely as an individual-level pathology but as a multidimensional phenomenon with biological, psychological, social, and environmental determinants. Breaking the addiction cycle requires early identification of risk factors, strengthening protective mechanisms, and developing comprehensive prevention policies. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the risk factors that sustain the addiction cycle

and to evaluate protective elements within a holistic framework.

Research Method

Method

This study is a qualitative review study based on a systematic literature review. National and international peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2015 and 2024 were examined, along with official reports and statistical data from WHO, UNODC (2021), Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), and the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Health.

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, reliable international reports, and official institutional statistics. Popular publications without academic quality, blogs, personal opinion articles, and unverifiable internet sources were excluded. Both Turkish and English studies were included.

A thematic content analysis approach was adopted. All selected studies were first read thoroughly, and recurring concepts were grouped under thematic categories.
The study assumes that biological, psychological, social, and environmental risk factors are determining elements in maintaining the addiction cycle; that addiction has multidimensional consequences at individual, family, and societal levels; that early intervention mechanisms are effective in combating addiction; and that although official statistics are reliable, unregistered substance use may not be fully reflected.

The research is limited to secondary data and literature review. No empirical field data were collected. Substance addiction was primarily addressed, while behavioral addictions were considered secondary. Sources were limited to post-2015 publications accessible online, which restricts full coverage of international literature. Therefore, generalizability is limited and findings should be supported by field research.

Findings

The literature demonstrates that addiction progresses as a cyclical process consisting of trial, regular use, tolerance development, withdrawal symptoms, relapse, and reuse (Köknel, 1998). This cycle provides short-term pleasure and relief but leads to long-term functional impairment and health problems.

Addiction is defined in various classifications as a loss of control accompanied by behavioral, psychological, and physiological impairments and withdrawal symptoms (World Health Organization, 1992; Sinclair & O'Neill, 2020). The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria include prolonged use beyond intention, unsuccessful attempts to quit, excessive time spent obtaining or using the substance, continued use despite harm, strong cravings, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms (APA, 2013).

The findings reveal that four primary dimensions sustain the addiction cycle:
Biological factors include genetic predispositions and neurobiological sensitivities. Functional disorders in the dopamine reward system play a critical role in reinforcing addictive behaviors (Volkow & Koob, 2015). Genetic polymorphisms have been linked to alcohol and opioid addiction (Goldman et al., 2005). Neuropsychiatric studies in Türkiye indicate dopamine transporter gene variations may increase vulnerability (Reith et al., 2022).

Psychological factors involve trauma, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric conditions. Clinical studies reveal high comorbidity between addiction and disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder (Kessler et al., 2005). Field research in Türkiye shows trauma history and domestic violence increase addiction risk (Bilaç et al., 2021), while low self-esteem predicts substance use among university students (Bekircan et al., 2022).

Social factors include family communication problems, weak parental supervision, risky peer groups, and inadequate social support. UNODC (2021) identifies peer environment as a strong predictor of substance use. Studies in Türkiye show higher addiction risk among youth from low socioeconomic families and in cases of weak family bonds (Gündüz & Çok, 2015).

Environmental factors encompass poverty, unemployment, urbanization, social inequalities, and ease of access to substances. WHO (2021) data indicate higher substance use rates in low-income regions. TÜİK (2024) reports increased prevalence in regions with high unemployment. Urban studies (Gürel et al., 2024) show easier access to substances in metropolitan areas increases risk levels.

Mortality and morbidity rates related to addiction are substantial. WHO (2021) estimates approximately 11 million deaths annually related directly or indirectly to substance use. Addiction is associated with liver cirrhosis, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular diseases, suicide attempts, and violent behaviors (Degenhardt, 2018).

In Türkiye, approximately 4.5% of individuals aged 15–64 have experienced drug use, and rates among youth range between 10–12%. Nearly 10 million individuals are reported to confront substance or behavioral addiction (IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, 2020).

Protective factors identified in the literature include strong family bonds, school-based prevention programs (Tinner et al., 2022), social support networks (EMCDDA, 2022), and participation in sports and cultural activities (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025).

Overall, the interaction of these factors sustains the addiction cycle and makes breaking free increasingly difficult.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that addiction emerges through the complex interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions. The literature consistently indicates that genetic predisposition and neurobiological sensitivities increase individual susceptibility to addiction. Functional disruptions in the dopamine system play a central role in reinforcing addictive behaviors (Volkow and Koob, 2015), while genetic polymorphisms are particularly influential in alcohol and opioid dependence (Goldman et al., 2005). Neuropsychiatric research conducted in Türkiye further suggests that variations in the dopamine transporter gene may heighten vulnerability to substance addiction (Reith et al., 2022). These findings confirm that biological

vulnerability constitutes a foundational predisposition in the addiction process.

However, biological sensitivity alone does not sufficiently explain the development and persistence of addiction. Psychological factors significantly shape this process. Traumatic life experiences, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety disorders increase individuals' tendency toward addictive behaviors. Empirical studies indicate that individuals experiencing mental health difficulties face a markedly higher risk of substance use. Research conducted among young populations shows that trauma history and exposure to domestic violence are important predictors of addiction risk (Bilaç et al., 2021), while findings from university samples in Türkiye demonstrate that low self-esteem significantly predicts alcohol and substance use (Bekircan et al., 2022). These findings highlight the reinforcing role of psychological distress in sustaining the addiction cycle.

Beyond individual-level vulnerabilities, social context plays a decisive role in the emergence and maintenance of addiction. Family communication problems, weak parental supervision, association with high-risk peer groups, and insufficient social support mechanisms increase susceptibility to substance use. Reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) identify risky peer environments as one of the strongest predictors of substance initiation. Field studies conducted in Türkiye (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025; Bilaç et al., 2019) reveal that addiction risk is particularly elevated among youth from low socioeconomic families. Additionally, weak family bonds and inadequate parental monitoring directly increase substance use (Gündüz and Çok, 2015). These findings underline the importance of social relationships and family structures in either mitigating or reinforcing addiction risk.

Environmental conditions further shape the addiction process at the macro level. Social inequalities, economic hardship, unemployment, urbanization pressures, and ease of access to substances undermine psychosocial balance and create fertile ground for addiction. World Health Organization data (WHO, 2021) show higher substance use rates in low-income regions, while TÜİK statistics (2024) indicate that addiction prevalence increases in regions with elevated unemployment rates in Türkiye. Research conducted in rapidly urbanizing metropolitan areas (Gürel et al., 2024) demonstrates that easier access to substances contributes to rising risk levels among young people. These structural determinants illustrate that addiction cannot be separated from broader socioeconomic conditions.

Taken together, the findings confirm that addiction cannot be reduced to a single explanatory framework. Biological vulnerability may create predisposition; however, psychological distress, social context, and environmental inequalities determine whether addiction develops and persists. The addiction cycle is reinforced through reciprocal interaction among these dimensions, making it a dynamic and self-sustaining process. Studies in the literature (Volkow and Koob, 2015; UNODC, 2021) further indicate that the interaction of these factors not only increases the risk of addiction but also makes disengagement from the cycle significantly more difficult. At the same time, the literature emphasizes that protective factors play a critical role in counterbalancing risk mechanisms. Strong family bonds (Nawi et al., 2021), school-based prevention programs (Tinner et al., 2022), and social support networks (EMCDDA, 2022) significantly reduce vulnerability. Research conducted in Türkiye (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025) demonstrates that encouraging youth participation in sports, arts, and cultural activities provides important protective effects. Strengthening family ties, expanding educational initiatives, and increasing opportunities for social participation therefore emerge as essential components in sustainable addiction prevention.

In the context of Türkiye, rising substance use rates among youth suggest fragmentation in prevention policies and insufficient institutional integration. Although treatment services are available, treatment-oriented approaches alone are inadequate to break the addiction cycle. Sustainable prevention requires interdisciplinary cooperation among psychology, sociology, health sciences, education, and legal systems in order to establish coordinated and long-term mechanisms.

Moreover, addiction generates significant social costs, including workforce loss, weakened family structures, increased crime rates, and long-term economic burdens. These consequences highlight the necessity of comprehensive and policy-integrated approaches that address addiction not only as an individual health issue but also as a structural societal challenge. Only through coordinated, multidimensional, and preventive policy frameworks can the cyclical nature of addiction be effectively disrupted at both individual and societal levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Addiction is a multifaceted public health issue that lowers individuals' quality of life, weakens family bonds, erodes social solidarity, and imposes a significant economic burden on public finances. The findings of the research indicate that the addiction cycle is sustained through the interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Genetic predispositions and neurobiological sensitivities increase individual susceptibility to addiction; meanwhile, psychological vulnerabilities (trauma, depression, anxiety), social factors (family communication problems, negative peer relationships), and environmental conditions (poverty, unemployment, urbanization) reinforce the addiction cycle. Therefore, treatment-focused approaches alone are insufficient; it is essential to implement preventive, protective, and supportive strategies simultaneously.

The results also reveal that in Türkiye, especially among young people, they constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of addiction. Data from TÜİK and the Ministry of Health show an increase in drug use rates among the youth; field studies indicate that weak family ties, lack of education, and social support deficiencies heighten these risks. Therefore, comprehensive policy approaches are needed both at the individual and societal levels to combat addiction.

In this regard, the following suggestions stand out:

Regarding biological factors, early screening programs should be developed for individuals with genetic and biological predispositions, and neuropsychiatric assessments should be expanded for children and adolescents.

Regarding psychological factors, access to mental health services should be facilitated for individuals with a history of trauma, depression, or anxiety; programs that reduce stigma and strengthen psychosocial support mechanisms should be implemented. Regarding social factors, family-based projects that strengthen family communication and increase parental awareness should be supported; anti-drug education, peer support programs, and social activities should be expanded in schools. Regarding environmental factors, social policies aimed at combating poverty and unemployment should be integrated into addiction prevention; local governments should provide safe social spaces (sports facilities, cultural centers) for young people.

In terms of social participation, local governments, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the media should share responsibility in the fight against addiction; especially, awareness campaigns targeting young people should be carried out on social media and digital platforms.

Finally, considering Türkiye's regional differences, policies that make substance access more difficult should be implemented in metropolitan areas; in rural areas, models that strengthen family and community solidarity should be applied.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Participation Approval
Not applicable.

Publication Permission
Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions
The determination of the topic, the review of the English and Turkish literature, and the writing of the entire manuscript were carried out by the author. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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