IRANIAN YOUTH'S IDENTITY POLITICS: COSMOPOLITAN ASPIRATIONS, SELF-REPROACH AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BELONGINGNESS TO THE NATION

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Abstract
Constituting more than one-third of the country's population, young generation in Iran are also a subnational group who have their own unique experiences of living in Iran and distinct way of defining themselves as Iranian. This has given rise to Iranian youth's identity politics, evinced by nationwide student-led uprisings and social movements throughout the past decade. Identity politics in this sense is specified as the ways in which the young Iranians reflect on their everyday experiences in order to make sense of their belongingness to the nation. The aim of this study, however, is to elucidate the ambiguities surrounding the youth's identities through conducting a series of focus group discussions with the most mature segment of this age group who were selected from middle-class residents of Tehran. The findings ultimately unravelled cosmopolitan aspirations, self-reproach and some other identity-making aspects of these young people's lives.

Keywords: focus group, identity politics, Iranian youth, lived experiences, social movements

Introduction

Soon after Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran underwent a sudden political, economic and social change through which it turned from the West's major ally into an internationally isolated nation (Borszik, 2016). Accordingly, in the course of more than four decades, the fundamental shift in Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) international relations, particularly in regard to the West, has resulted in a series of grave consequences for the nation, affecting almost every aspect of people's lives in Iran (Milani, 2018). The magnitude of such devastating effects on the country was exacerbated even more with eight years of Iran-Iraq war which began shortly after Islamic Revolution and lasted up until 1988. Throughout these years, however, IRI has been capitalising on both repressive and ideological state apparatuses to reaffirm its legitimacy to rule over the nation (Golkar, 2016). In line with such efforts, the state-controlled social institutions, including mainstream media, have been incessantly engaged in construction of a homogeneous identity based on Islamic, revolutionary and anti-West ideology in order to ensure the continuity of the theocratic regime through solidarity of the nation (Amirpur, 2017). The

regime's relative success in establishing an Islamic state, however, was enabled through netting the support of the majority of people who up until mid-1990s had retained a revolutionary spirit and a warring attitude against a West-backed enemy, Iraq (Chubin, 2019).

In this way, the period of post-war was the beginning of a gradual societal shift partly for the waning collective mood of unity, comradeship and fanaticism, and partly due to the entrance of the world into a new era of globalisation. Perhaps the most remarkable transformative aspect of the globalisation at this point was the advent of the new forms of transnational media such as Internet and satellite TV, and their rapid expansion across the country during 1990s. In essence, these new means of mass communication had their impacts on the people of Iran by bringing about an abundance of unfettered information and entertainment contents, liberating people from the state-run national media's monopoly. Also, in tandem with such developments, a plethora of political and popular cultural contents with generally anti-regime disposition flooded the free-to-air satellite TV and various Internet-related websites and platforms (Alikhah, 2018). This in turn, marked a defining moment for people of Iran as they were able to access to a different narrative about the nation's history as well as alternative meanings of Iranianness (Marandi & Tari, 2017; Matin, 2020).

Nonetheless, the culmination of these social, political, and technological transformations during the last decade of the twentieth century coincided with the emergence of young generation in Iran. Being born between early 1990s to about mid-2000s, these young people are now almost 15 to 29 years old, and are predicted to constitute one-third of the 84 million population of Iran by 2020 (Roudi, Azadi, & Mesgaran, 2017). Also known as Iranian youth, the young generation is seen to be a distinctive subnational group with members who claim to have their own specific norms, values and unique experiences of living in Iran and being Iranian (Khosravi, 2017). Such uniqueness is seen by many to have its roots in youth's disconnectedness with revolutionary culture, as well as concurring their formative years with post-war era and the life-altering circumstances of this hectic period, the most significant of which was arguably the accessibility to the global media (Tajmazinani, 2017).

The youth's distinctiveness in this way, was remarkably manifested in various social and cultural practices, and their increasing radical political participation (Rivetti, Rivetti & Yurova, 2020). This is perhaps most evident in youth's burgeoning online activism and other emancipatory campaigns, along with the nationwide social movements and uprisings which have primarily been organised and spear-headed by young dissidents throughout the past two decades (Khazraee & Losey, 2016; Mohammadi, 2019). These observations, alongside the youth's self-proclaimed definition for their Iranian selves vis-à-vis the Islamic identity construct imposed by the state, therefore, have given rise to this subnational group's identity politics: the youth's struggle over the meaning of Iranianness, and the ways they perceive /express themselves in relation to their belongingness to the nation.

Against this background, the present study argues that since Iranian youth are (or perceive themselves as) members of a distinctive subnational group with unique norms, values and worldviews, they are also likely to have their own specific way of reflecting on and defining themselves as Iranians. As part of their identity project, then, such largely experiential self-perception has emerged as a meaningful source

for youth to compare/contrast themselves with 'others' while preserving their national belongingness. In this context, 'othering' involved the youth's construction and identification of self (as a subnational social group) and others, through attribution of differentiating characteristics to either in-group or out-group members.

This study, therefore, aims to shed some light on Iranian youth's identity politics through exploring some of the salient aspects of their identities, particularly those based on their lived experiences. Here, 'identity politics' follows Lawler's (2015) expanded definition of the term, focusing more on banal and everyday form of identity-making that produces and reproduces (sub)national identities (Billig, 1995) in the context of 'others' who are seen to stand outside such identities. Furthermore, a 'salient aspect of identity' in this study is specified as what young generation perceive to matter to them the most at specific point in time, particularly those beliefs, attitudes and experiences that set them apart from older generations. The term 'lived experiences', however, is referred to these individuals' personal knowledge about and experiences of social world gained through their direct and first-hand involvement in everyday events.

In this view, besides critical role of the politics of identity in advancing social change, any inquiry into Iranian youth's identities seems to be of paramount importance, precisely because young people comprise the largest segment of Iran's population, and have the highest potential for shaping the future of the country (Bakhtiari, 2020; Khan-Mohammadi & Kaveh, 2019). Moreover, the qualitative approach of this study was set to unravel some of the youth's deeply embedded perspectives often not accessible by means of survey and statistics. This is in particular important since the existing knowledge about youth within the circles of Iranian social science is largely built on positivist paradigm and quantitative research which have often sought generalisiblity rather than getting into the roots of social problems (Ghaneirad & Gholipour, 2009; Rahbari, 2015).

Identity and Identity Politics

The questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' have taken up an unprecedented level of immediacy and complexity in modern times (Papastergiadis, 2000). The 'self', as he further noted, is now the site of such intense cultivation while one's "place of origin is a determining force in our destiny". Identity in this sense refers to the ways individuals think about themselves as 'a people' and how they think about others, as well as imagining how others might think about them (Kidd & Teagle, 2012, p. 7). Lebow (2012) distinguished between concept of identity and practice of identity, considering the latter the understandings of individuals of themselves and their behavioral implications. Such understandings, he suggested, have three physical, social and reflective dimensions. An individual's physical body that differs from others including appearance, abilities and limitations that help shape his or her live and react to others and their perspectives upon his or her. The individuals' social understanding of themselves that comes from their social relations with others and their positions in society. The reflective dimension is a product of consciousness which enables people to grasp their distinctiveness from, and similarities with others.

Such sociological perspective, therefore, focuses on everydayness of identity, and considers it as an ordinary performance produced by individuals' self-making

processes alongside their positions in the social systems (Goffman, 1969). Parallel to this, Giddens (1991) coined the term 'identity project' to suggest that identity is not static, but it is a development process and a movement towards, rather than a conceived destination. It is through this view that Giddens thought of the complexity of identity whereas the more resources available for construction of the self, the more aspects of identities we weave around our 'selves'.

Since 1980s, however, there has been a 'veritable discursive explosion' around the concept of identity (Hall, 1996). It was during this time that identity emerged as a political struggle, and became a central theme in cultural studies (Barker, 1999, p. 2). Hall (1996) pointed to the 'impossibility' and 'political significance' as two differing ways of understanding identity. Impossibility of identity, as he argued, refers to the western notion of the totality of a person who owns a fixed and stable identity. In this view, individuals are regarded as unified agents with a universal and static identity. In contrast, cultural studies view on identity holds that an individual's self is made up of multi-layered and shifting identities. It was within this 'unstable identity' perspective that the political significance of the concept of identity was highlighted (Hall, 1996). Such anti-essentialist view on self within the cultural studies, therefore, featured identity politics "as a forging of 'new languages' of identity with which to describe ourselves" (Barker, 2004, p. 95).

Identity politics has often been described as the tendency of the members of a particular race, gender, ethnicity, age or religion to politically organise around a special interest merely with the intention of advancing such interest without concern or regard for any larger group or collective. This does not necessarily mean the reinforcement of a certain group identity, as some social movements have been the result of breaking away from dominant identity towards the acknowledgement of the individuals' identities. Bernstein (2005) traced back the formal use of the term identity politics to 1979 when social scientists began to use the phrase to label the certain activist groups who challenged the societal perspectives and description of how they perceived themselves. In later decades, identity politics was broadened to mean collective actions usually with activist or violent nature around issues of nationalism and ethnicity (Bernstein, 2005).

In the words of Wiarda (2014, p. 148), identity politics simply means 'the quest to belong', though it can be more formally described as "political attitudes or positions that focus on the concerns of sub-groups in the society". Identity politics, as he further elaborated, is a form of "activism or status-seeking" pursuits involving various social, cultural and political categories. Identity politics, therefore, concerns "the self-interested perspectives of self-identified societal interest groups . . . in ways that people's politics are shaped by these narrower (non-national) aspects of their identity" (2014, p. 148). In a strictly political sense, the term is described as political activities which involve struggles over the right forms of political, legal and constitutional recognition and tolerance towards identities of individuals belonging to various social or cultural (sub) groups (Tully, 2003). Identity politics, from a more cultural standpoint, refers to the "collective sensibilities and actions" originating from a distinctive worldview (or experiences, interests, and struggles) within a society as a response to the majority's worldview that has a tendency to overpower, subsume or erase such distinctive worldview (Hale, 1997).

Moreover, Identity politics has been conceptualised as "contestations of theory and interpretation about particular identity groups and in opposition to the dominant or majority population" with the aim of exploring the "discursive dependence on the ever-evolving constructions" discrete categories of identity (Fraser-Burgess, 2018). Identity politics, as noted by Arthur Asa Berger (2018, p. 189), is the strong passion and intense desire that social groups have about their own problems, situations, and needs. Identity politics for Chris Barker (2004) is about "making and maintenance of cultural rights" for those within a society or culture who strive to make identity claims. In terms of restoring justice and equality in a democratic society, identity politics also aims at changing culture and behaviour in ways that will have real benefits for the people involved. Identity politics, as Francis Fukuyama has observed is a natural and inevitable response to injustice which in recent years has resulted in "welcome changes in concrete public policies that have benefited the groups in question, as well as in cultural norms" (2018, p. 83). In recent decades, however, there have been some developments that emerged to explain the identity politics' implications for recognition of a certain group among other groups in various societies around the world, in addition to its critical role for social change in those nations (Parekh, 2008).

Methodology

In this study, focus group discussion (FGD) was preferred over other methods mainly due to 'group effect', allowing the data to emerge in the form of spontaneous conversations between participants, with minimum interference of a moderator. Here, the group effect was in particular vital for generating the necessary data, since the study dealt with young people's everyday experiences which were more likely to be revealed through unaffected and ordinary interactions between members in each group.

The recruitment of the research participants was based on a purposive sampling approach that aimed to provide an in-depth account about the under-investigation phenomenon through interviewing only a number of information-rich individuals (Liamputtong, 2011). This was carried out through snowball sampling technique wherein existing subjects provided referrals from people they knew, such as friends, relatives and colleagues, as long as they fitted the nomination criteria. The criteria required candidates to be 25-29 years old, Shiite, middle-class residents of Tehran, with no affiliation with Iranian political system. In this way, the candidates' age, religion membership and even political connection were relatively easy to confirm. However, estimating the participants' social class required extra effort which involved looking into the initial information provided by the referees at the preliminary nomination stage, to see if such descriptions qualify these individuals as middle class or not. The inclusion criteria protocol which was developed for this category considered factors such as the candidates' residential area (e.g. northern districts, inner city and southern districts respectively represent upper class, middle class, and under class), and the income of their families between $10 to $100 per person per day (Farzanegan, 2021).

Since the purpose of the FGDs was to explore some of the less-known aspects of individuals' identities which not had been adequately addressed before, the interview guide was designed with minimum structure to let up on participants and thereof allow the emergence of varied and new ideas (Kitzinger, 2020). The topics

for discussions were chosen carefully to allow the participants to start thinking about and reflecting on their sense of belonging to the nation as well as their everyday experiences of living in Iran and being Iranian.

Each topic was introduced by asking a general question and then giving the members some time to mull it over, while listening to their responses and observing their nonverbal interactions in order to present the probes and follow-up questions appropriately and at the right time. These interrogation techniques allowed to get a better sense of what individuals were exactly trying to communicate, since their initial responses to the general questions were hardly clear, detailed and meaningful.

The arrangement of the topics to be discussed as well as the wordings of the interview questions were tested out and fine-tuned during a pilot study with a group consisting of 2 males and 2 females. The pilot study also proved to be useful for evaluating the group characteristics such as size and diversity. As such, the focus groups with 4 members were found to be manageable without compromising 'group dynamics', not to mention the inconveniences that having larger groups would bring to the host. Conversely, the pilot study provided some clues about unproductivity of the mixed groups, since gender relations between members seemed to sway the participants' opinions and way of speaking. That is to say, at times male participants seemed to play with words and alter their views in order to appear 'cool' or sophisticated. In the same vein, the female participants occasionally united against male peers to signal 'girl power' which influenced their overall responses to the questions. Following these observations, and in order to remain sensitive to the local culture and also to be considerate towards the hosts' expectations, it was decided to have homogeneous groups in terms of gender, each consisting of four members. The decision on the number of the groups, however, was based on data saturation wherein the continuation of the FGDs did not yield any new ideas.

Furthermore, due to the current political climate in Iran where people are generally hesitant to openly talk about their experiences and reveal their views in public or in formal settings, the FGDs were informally conducted in host participants' homes. A consent form was designed and copies of it were given to the participants at the outset of each session to read and sign if they were willing to take part in the focus groups. The form was also included a section informing the participants about the nature of the research and the ways in which its findings would be used in future. Also, each participant was assigned with a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Each focus group lasted about 90 minutes and they were voice-recorded in their entirety. Finally, the discussions were fully transcribed, and then were translated from Farsi to English.

The analysis began with reading through the transcripts of each focus group and in a topic-by-topic order to get a general sense of what participants are saying. This was followed by coding each text segment, starting with the shortest or easiest to access ones. Coding required paying attention to the main idea being conveyed within a text segment and then assigning a single code to it accordingly. After assigning about 18 code labels to the entire text database of 250 pages, the codes were listed and then grouped in order to eliminate the overlaps and redundancies, resulting in emergence of 7 major themes. These themes, then, reflected the range

of ideas associated with the participants' perceptions and everyday experiences of being Iranian.

Limitations

As a qualitative study there are a number of limitations most of which are inherent to its non-probability sampling approach. This, ultimately, prevents the generalisation of the study's findings to the large and diverse population of the youth in Iran. Nonetheless, both demographic and geographic inclusion criteria within this sampling framework present the two main limitations of the study. In this way, choosing middle-class Tehranis for investigation, as the most relevant group, was primarily due to the feasibility considerations, including time and resources involved in the research. Furthermore, the decision to limit the sampling population to only 25-29, rather than 15-29 year-olds, was based on the idea that participants with any greater age difference are less likely to use the same vernacular, linguistic terminologies and communication styles (considering the urban Iranian culture). Similarly, reducing the geographical scope to the middle-class dominated areas followed the rationale of enhancing group homogeneity, and therefore, encouraging group interaction and dynamics which are essential for generating the quality data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014, p. 44). Moreover, Tehran has long been the country's heartbeat of culture, commerce and politics, with middle-class Tehranis being an indicator for cultural, political and economic traits across the nation (Basmenji, 2013; Ghaffari, 2020). In addition to this, the capital city's middle-class population have often been the protagonist in political activism and social movements (Bagheri, 2018).

Findings
Desire to join the world

At certain point during the interviews, the participants were taken by surprise when they were asked "How would you describe who you are as an Iranian if you were to introduce yourself to the people from other countries?", as if they had never taught about such matter before. In response to this question, however, the participants tried to rely on their imagination in order to say something about themselves in such hypothetical situation. In so doing, they came up with various answers, many of which were vague, abstract or uncertain, but others provided some clues about how they regarded themselves as Iranians. Ali from male Group 6, for example, said:

> I'd say anything positive about Iran. I'd tell them that our civilisation is one of the earliest in the world. I'd tell them that we are friendly people and despite all the shortcomings and disreputableness of our government, at least we have peace and security in our country.

Whereas the comments like the one above suggested the participants' strong desire to be known as a peaceful and unthreatening nation, their further elaborations held Western media responsible for the current negative image on Iranians. Other participants in this group, for instance, said:

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> What could be heard about Iranians is not positive at all. They [Western countries] even made films about Iranians to destroy our image. First thing I'd do is to convince them [people of the world] that what they show about Iranians are not true at all,especially younger people are totally different from what's shown in there. They should know that nothing's wrong with us or our culture. Yet, I rather not to say anything about our government! (Hesam)
>
> I'd even talk proudly of our religion . . . I'd talk about politics too, and try to show them that the created image of Iran by the West is false. Iranians are peaceful people, and the new generation cares about connection with the world. (Saleh)

Expressing their resentment against demonising depictions of Iranians across the world's major media networks, the respondents believed that it was time for other nations to begin questioning the validity of such misleading representations. Implied in their comments also was the aspiration that Iranian youth deserve global recognition as a dissident generation who did not elect the current government in Iran, and therefore, have no association with authorities and their wrongdoings. The participants' responses, in this way, can be explained in the historical context and throughout the years that followed the Islamic Revolution when Iran-US relationship came to an end. This alone, was the single major political shift that brought about a series of devastating circumstances for the nation, not to mention the recent crippling international sanctions that exacerbated the Iran's already secluded status (Peksen, 2019). Parallel to this, global media corporations have relentlessly attempted to construct a biased image of the nation (Ebrahemifar, 2019), often making no distinction between young and old generations, or undiscerningly confusing 'government' with 'people' when using the word 'Iran'. Ultimately, the participants' discussions at this point showed that the reverberation of the world's negative views on Iran has particularly been felt by young generation who more than ever care about being known as unthreatening and peaceful people with a hope of becoming the citizens of the world.

Considering migration

Next to the discussion around the topic of defining the self as Iranian, when the participants were asked whether they would consider migration, they almost readily began to respond as if they had frequently thought about such matter before. As exemplified in the following conversations between members of the male Group 6, the participants conceived of migration as a solution to their presumably depressing situation:

> I won't leave Iran to live somewhere else forever, maybe just for a short while to earn some money, and experience 'real' life at least for a while! (Hesam)
>
> If some of my friends and family can followed me, I'd definitely consider it! (Amir)
>
> Well, if this was the case everyone would go! [All laugh] Personally, I'd consider living in another country, only temporarily, just to improve my

financial condition and of course to see how the life feels beyond the walls! (Saleh)

What these comments bring to light the most is the participants' both current pressing financial problems, as well as their overall sense of desolation caused by boredom of living within the nation-state boundaries that keep them away from the rest of the world. In this way, migration looks like a valid option for the participants, as overwhelming restrictions imposed by authorities together with other social problems like unemployment, inflation, and economic recession continue to make it more and more difficult for many people to prosper in Iran (Kazemi, Baghbanian, Maymand, & Rahmani, 2018). In this view, contemplating migration is more prevalent among the youth since they are, on the one hand, feeling uncertain and insecure about their future in Iran, and on the other hand, more likely to be engrossed by the aspects of the Western way of life (Khosravi, 2017). That being said, despite the participants' general preoccupation with migration, they regarded being in the company of family and friends the only worthwhile belonging that held them back from leaving Iran for good. In other words, expressing such feelings might be construed as an overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness among youth, since other than kinship, they cannot imagine any other meaningful reason for spending the rest of their lives in Iran.

Nonetheless, as the nation currently undergoing a more serious political and economic turmoil, while migration for many young people remains a relevant idea to improve their lives (Kamal & Hossain, 2017), for others it is way to repudiate the legitimacy of the Islamic regime's rule (Larsson, 2018). In consequence, then, it can be said that similar to their desire to join the world, as their responses to the previous topic suggested, the youth's reflection on migration presented just another dimension of these young people's cosmopolitan aspiration; the tendency to go beyond the restricted view on reality of life and as part of their commitment to move towards an imagined global culture.

We are all know-it-alls

In response to the question "What are some of the common traits among Iranians that distinguish them from other nations?", the first characteristic that the participants strongly agreed on was being 'know-it-all'; a quality that describes Iranians as people who consider themselves expert in every subject. The general essence of this kind of perception can be seen in the conversations of the participants in male Group 5:

It's true that we Iranians are all doctors and philosophers! I don't know why we are all like that but maybe it is in our genes. One talks about everything, knows about anything, and finally concludes in his/her own way. It's rooted in our culture . . . our excessive friendliness. (Reza)
Well, when we talk, we close our ears. I just wait for the moment when it's my turn to prove my own point, regardless of whether or not I have enough knowledge about that subject. (Peyman)
We don't really care what others' point is. We just want to show that we know more and understand better than others do. (Mehdi)

In the same way, the participants across female groups attributed 'know-it-all' as a common feature among Iranians:

> Iranians always try to say that they know more and better than others: "I know everything but others know nothing, they are all wrong, they don't understand and I am the only one who understands it all". This is partly because of our inquisitive nature that we all share; the one that makes us interfere in others' lives . . . I think Iranians are inherently too warm and friendly, and being all-know-it-all is one of the consequences of the overshoot of such seemingly positive traits. (Forouz, Group 4)
> Unfortunately, it's bitter fact about us. We all know it all, and we all think that we know everything very well. (Elham, Group 3)

The notion of Iranians' hospitality, warmth and cordiality has long been recorded in various travelogues and ethnographic accounts (Simpson-Hebert, 1987; Bar, 2004). From the participants' point of view, however, these positive traits have evolved over time into a rather conceited and narcissistic mannerism. Nevertheless, as the group members openly admitted that such attribution is indeed an inconvenient truth about the whole nation, at times they seemed to be uneasy to direct such criticism toward themselves. This in turn, implied that although these individuals did not try to detach themselves from the nation's dominant culture, they felt mortified for inheriting such negative attributions, hence, willing to leave off this customary but not-so-honoured common trait. Consequently, the participants' reproachful attitude towards this seemingly long-existing national characteristic, seem to serve them as a sensible strategy to dissociate themselves from some aspects of their predecessors' tradition, in exchange for illuminating a contemporary and progressive dimension of their identities.

Our judgmentalism

Continuing the discussions around the common national traits led to the emergence of another major theme, describing Iranians as people who tend to criticize others and their behavior or moral standards. The following conversation between members of the male Group 1 provides a glimpse into how these individuals perceived 'judgementalism' as another negative, and yet significant mannerism that they believed to persist across generations in Iran:

> We are all one hundred percent judgmental! That's something we've grown with. We've lived with these norms since our childhoods. The environment in which people grow up has great impact on who they become. Even those Iranians who claim never judge people, unconsciously do it all the time. Unfortunately, it's part of who we are. (Hamed)
> We all know that judging others is wrong, but somehow, we all still do it. (Ashkan)
> Iranians are famous for doing that, since antiquity these traits have been reflected in Persian poetries, proverbs and satires. It's like when we don't understand something, we make thousands of comments about it, unlike Westerners who don't make comments on things that don't concern them.

> The act of judging others is atrocious, it's sort of ridiculing people . . . such a trait is specific only to Iranians. (Yashar)

What is quite clear in above conversations is that the participants do not seem to be pleased to carry on those ancestral legacies that are considered undignified, at least by today's universal standards of morality. Similar dispositions were also noticeable among female participants, as they expressed their disapproval of judgementalism, while regarding it as an inseparable part of being Iranian:

> We judge others in regard to everything, even about those things that don't concern us. I mean, we tend to pass judgments about other people's face, outfit, behaviour, and everything else. Although, making comments on others' behaviours could be a bit justifiable, being overly critical on other things is not right, especially things that don't concern us. (Elmira)
> The idea that Iranians are judgmental is true . . . yes, we do judge others. All of us do it. It is something innate, not in our hands. (Elham)

As reflected in all these comments, the participants tried to indirectly distinguish themselves from their ancestors, not by excepting themselves and pretending to be unjudgmental, but by implying a desire to put an end to the continuity of such presumably inherited trait. In this way, detaching themselves from unfavourable aspects of tradition, particularly in the cultural globalisation context where differences are becoming less critical, was just another self-reproach strategy employed by these individuals to reflect on their identities without denouncing their belongingness to the nation.

Oddness of freedom

Focusing the discussions more on the group members' experiences of everyday life, the first and foremost matter that the conversations were drawn to, was the problem of lack of freedom in Iran. The discussion around this topic began when the moderator asked the participants to talk about their day-to-day struggles which might be particular to the young people in Iran. In response to this, each participant reflected on lack freedom in Iran from their own specific point of view and sometimes shared their personal stories in this regard, however, what they ultimately pointed to was their discontentment to the overwhelming restrictions that they had to face on an everyday basis. Ashkan from male Group 1, for instance said:

> You see, young people thirst for freedom. Because there's no freedom in Iran, young people cannot harness their energy or utilise their talents. We want to be free to choose what to do. We are not even allowed do those basic things that are considered normal in other countries.

Likewise, the participants' conversations across both male and female groups suggested their strong belief against numerous restrictions in Iran which have particularly divested women from their ordinary rights. For example, some of the members of female Group 4 stated:

Well, women cannot sing or play musical instruments in Iran. That's a truth. There is no future for female singers or musicians. Many Iranian women leave their homeland just to pursue their goals since there are so many restrictions even for things as trivial as singing and dancing. (Negin)
We have too many restrictions in here. For most of us, Iran is a cage because we cannot pursue our dreams or realise our talents. We cannot even choose what to wear. (Saeideh)

Despite their apparent authenticity, these statements did not come as a surprise, since there have been mounting reports on human rights violation and restrictions on civil liberties in Iran throughout the past few decades (Parsa 2016; Bozorgmehri 2017). Nevertheless, after the moderator posed some follow-up questions, a rather less-known idea came into view, suggesting that freedom is an odd, or perhaps misunderstood concept among Iranian youth:

When we think about freedom the first things that enter our minds, are drinking alcohol and removing women's hijab. We rarely talk about freedom of speech and belief. You see, the art and culture are heavily controlled in Iran, but do we really care enough about such things? (Nima, male Group 1)
We inherently want to be like modern nations where there's no restriction in obvious things such as our choice for clothes and hairstyles. But we don't know the true meaning of freedom, because we only see those kinds of trivial things in Western shows and movies. (Reza, male Group 5)

Although in making their points, the participants frequently referred to "true meaning of freedom", they did not provide any clear explanation about it. Indeed, by using the term, they only tried to emphasize two main ideas: the young Iranians' limited experience of freedom as well as the pervasiveness of restrictions in Iran, especially in those aspects of life that are not so obvious to ordinary people. The point to note here at this point of discussion is the participants' belief about the oddness of freedom for the young people in Iran. In their views, this was mainly because of the young generation's limited abilities to act and speak freely while witnessing obvious aspects of liberty in Western world mainly through their routine access to the transnational forms of media. Ultimately, these reflections point to the participants' exclusive perspectives on freedom; the ways in which being free is imagined by the youth and the extent to which such imaginations might resonate with the standards of living in the democratic societies.

Disappointment in national media

The next issue that the participants frequently referred to, when they were asked to talk about their everyday struggles that could only be experienced in Iran, was their disappointment with national media. Mainly criticizing IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), the largest media organization in the country, for lacking creativity, entertainment, and quality contents, the participants regarded heavy censorship and regulations, as well as the authorities' reluctance to capitalize on productions that do not serve the state's political agendas. This idea was captured in the conversations of the members in female Group 1:

The fact is that our own national media doesn't have anything to offer . . . (Parisa)
It is not about being Iranian or limitation of resources; producers' hands are tied! (Fatemeh)
They [media content producers in Iran] don't have the relevant and up-to-date knowledge and facilities, too. (Mohaddeseh)
You don't have many options . . . either this one or that one. Obviously, no matter how much you try to be creative within this framework, you cannot satisfy your audiences. You cannot talk about certain subjects for the fear that they might become political or religious issues which might go against their [authorities'] doctrines. There's no such a thing in other countries because they believe in everyone's rights, and recognise everyone's beliefs and opinions. (Parisa)

Whereas the media are doubtlessly one of the most indispensable aspects of modern life, they are also indicators of the political system and cultural practices in a society (Thompson, 1995). The inadequacies of national media, as reflected in the conversation above, highlights the government's authoritarian approach to control the media in Iran, especially through regulating national media and deciding what contents to be consumed by the people. The participants' disappointment in national media, therefore, can hardly be taken as only the reflection of these individuals' deprivation of entertainment, since those needs are in one way or another met through their access to alternative media. Rather, it is more of the youth's distinct way of expressing dissidence and defiance against the state's hegemonies, and hence, presenting themselves as a generation that besides seeking institutional transformation, aspires recognition of their cultural rights.

Generational gap

At certain points during the group interviews, the participants spontaneously stepped up to make a comparison between the circumstances of their lives with older generations', in order to get their ideas across, particularly at times when they were trying to emphasize their goals and purposes in life:

I admire our parents and grandparents' generations. I feel they lived a better, healthier and more fulfilling life, than us. We will grow old in misery, full of regrets of not fulfilling our wishes. The older generations lived on their beliefs. Nowadays we hardly have faith in anything! We have no life or religion and no future or even past. (Reza, male Group 5)
We feel empty, suspended in the space . . . neither here nor there, a big question mark! We call ourselves Muslims, but we drink and resent hijab. Obviously, social media, Internet, satellite TV and other modern technologies responsible for disparity between young and old. (Ali, male Group 6)

As exemplified by the comments above, the participants' seemingly wistful admiration for their ancestors for supposedly having a simple, purposeful and fulfilling life, served them as a way to reflect on their living condition in Iran. This

is clearly shown in their talks awash with a number of pessimistic terms such as "grow old in misery", "no life or religion", "no future or even past", as they tried to paint a gloomy picture of the young people's everyday life in Iran. Once again, such self-reflections functioned to show the participants' discontentment with the circumstances of living in Iran, and the disjointedness they believed to exist between young and old generations. Along these lines, by considering the strong influence of modern communication technologies on widening the generational gap, they also pointed to the young generation's substantial dependency on various forms of new media, which in one way or another distinguishes them from older generations.

Conclusion

The current unsettling social and political condition in Iran can perhaps be best described as an ideological battleground for winning the majority's consent about what it means to be Iranian. This provocative climate has largely been shaped by Islamic regime's increasing confrontation with the West's cultural imperialism throughout the past three decades or so, and in response to the intensification and expansion of the globalisation forces, particularly the developments in transnational communication systems (Pahlavi & Ouellet, 2020). The beginning of this period (early 1990s) also witnessed the gradual diminishing spirit of comradeship and revolutionary values especially among younger people who did not see themselves part of the Islamic Revolution nor directly dealt with the consequences of Iran-Iraq war. The emergence of the young generation during this era was remarkable since they have shown less resilience than their precursors towards the state's hegemonies. The youth's changing attitudes and increasing resistance against the Islamic identity construct, therefore, have discursively projected into these young people's perceptions and experiences of being Iranian, which in one way or another have given rise to their identity politics.

The present study, however, was an attempt to throw some light on these young people's identity politics through investigating a few members of this social group who had a more or less similar demography and living circumstances. In so doing, the research took an interpretive (meaning-centred) approach to explore these deep-seated dimensions of the participants' identities which are presumably less accessible by means of surveys and statistics. As such, the in-depth group interviews revealed some of the least known but critical aspects of the participants' identities: cosmopolitan aspirations and the desire to end their disconnectedness with the rest of the world which has thus far brought them a great deal of despair and emptiness. Sense of self-reproach presented another dimension of their identities as they had to deal with Iranians' time-honoured but unfavourable notions such as being know-it-all and judgemental, particularly in the contemporary context of global culture. Tapping into the participants' other experiences, some of the most salient aspects of their identities came into view: the oddness of freedom for the youth as they hardly had the opportunity to experience liberty, the dissatisfaction with national media which was seen to be more of an ideological state apparatus than the media for quality content for the people, and finally, the inter-generational gap which they perceived to exist, disjointing them from their traditionalist predecessors and ancestral culture.

These results demonstrated how the participants built on everyday problems and dilemmas of life to shape their moods, attitudes and feelings, and how their identities are formed around basic needs for security and self-esteem as well as the desires that flow from them. This experiential based identity, as LaCapra (2006) noted, should neither be idealised nor demonised merely on grounds of whether it is beneficial in some ways or is a source of political ills of the modern world. Instead, identity should be seen as modes of being with others, ranging "from the actual to the imagined, virtual, sought-after, normatively affirmed, or utopian" (LaCapra, 2006, p. 228). In this view, and as argued here, identity may be mobilised as a resource for political claims and recognition, not only in explicitly political sense (as in policy-making and public-government affairs), but more prevalently in everyday and banal uses of identity (Billig, 1995). These more pervasive forms of identity, as this study showed, are to be found in the embodied habits of social life; the often unnoticed, taken-for-granted and ordinary talks and practices of both belongingness and disassociation.

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