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Original Research Article

Western Music's Influence on Tehran's Café Culture: A Study of Intellectualism, Identity, and Music Industry

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Abstract

Problem statement: This study examines the interplay between ascribed identity and resistant identity in relation to musical and para-musical elements, in the formation of a distinct cultural identity within Tehran's café spaces. It also seeks to understand and explain the complexities of preserving an independent identity within a commercialized environment. The ascribed identity, rooted in intellectualism, independence, and alternative values, is evaluated in comparison with the resistant identity, which consists of opposition to popular musical elements and distancing from the dominant body of Iran's mainstream music industry.

Research objective: The central question of this research is to investigate the extent to which the independent music scene remains committed to the identity ascribed to it.

Research method: This study employed qualitative, comparative, and content analysis methods. Data collection was conducted both in the field and through library research. The fieldwork took place in Tehran and, virtually, in Austria during the winter of 2022–2023.

Conclusion: Drawing on the theories of Stuart Hall, Theodor Adorno, Timothy Rice, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault, this research highlights the interactions between cultural identity, commodification, and the influence of Western music on Iran's urban music spaces. The findings reveal a substantive overlap between the independent music movement in recent years and the popular music scene, which must be considered a major contradiction in achieving the ultimate goal of independence within today's Iranian music industry.

Keywords: *Western music, Cultural identity, Intellectualism, Popular music, Alternative identity.*

Introduction and Problem Statement

Over the past two decades, Tehran's cafés have become dynamic cultural spaces where Western music genres, particularly Rock, Blues, and Jazz, are embraced. Cafés such as Jazz Café and Kharabat Café have integrated these styles, shaping unique atmospheres that cater to an audience seeking cultural and intellectual distinction. This study raises questions about the authenticity of the "independent"

identity promoted by these venues and how effectively this identity withstands pressures from commercial forces. It is the question of whether the music industry in Iran collides with its rivalry with subcultural musicians who intended to differentiate themselves from industrial territories.

In Tehran's café culture, the reception of Western music represents a form of intellectualism that distinguishes itself from Iranian popular music.

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Within this context, the term independent refers to an alternative identity that has ostensibly freed itself from the mainstream. However, this study investigates whether such an identity can truly remain detached from commercial influences, or whether it inevitably becomes entangled in processes of commodification, thereby undermining its claimed independence. The central question of this research concerns the authenticity of the identity produced by the current musical trends, and the extent to which it corresponds to an underlying or ambiguous essence of identity. This inquiry seeks to determine to what degree ideals of enlightenment, independence, and an alternative cultural positioning are genuinely reflected and preserved in these practices—such that they remain distinct from popular music. To address this issue, a comparative analysis with Adorno's reflections on popular music is essential, particularly in relation to the trajectory of Western music within Tehran's café spaces. Every topic associated with popular music will, within this framework, be examined and analyzed accordingly.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on several key theoretical perspectives to analyze the café music scene in Tehran. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and diaspora helps contextualize the Western influences and their adaptation in Tehran's cafés. Hall's work on identity emphasizes the fluid and constructed nature of cultural affiliations, which is highly relevant to the café scene's mixture of local and global music elements. Theodore Adorno's critique of popular music, specifically his concepts of "false individualization" and standardization, provides a critical lens to examine whether Tehran's café music scene truly maintains an alternative identity. Adorno's work highlights how popular music is shaped by economic forces, leading to a pseudo-individualism that reflects commercial values rather than authentic, unique expression. Timothy Rice's exploration of music and identity, particularly in the context of traditional and ritualistic music, informs the study's examination of how Western music genres serve as markers of intellectual and cultural identity.

Rice's perspectives on identity through music allow an in-depth look at the ways these genres shape and reflect the aspirations of café-goers in Tehran.

Literature Review

Given the lack of comprehensive studies on the independent music scene in Tehran's cafés and the subculture reproduced through it, this research seeks to employ overlapping sources from both domestic and international scholarship. By drawing on these sources, alongside fieldwork, the study portrays this movement and its para-musical factors, which together form the subcultural framework emerging from it. The international literature relevant to this study may be divided into two categories: works focused on individual and social identity, and those addressing intellectual currents within society. Timothy Rice and Stuart Hall have made significant contributions to the former, while Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault have been influential in theorizing the latter. By combining these perspectives with domestic studies on Iranian popular music, this research aims to uncover the true nature of the independent music movement in Tehran's cafés.

• Domestic sources

Alireza Seyed Ahmadian (Adorno, 2002) has perhaps produced the most important Persian translation and commentary on Adorno's writings to date. In this collection, Adorno deconstructs the fetishized foundations of popular music. For him, the reification of popular music—through standardization, imitation, and pseudo-individualization—operates as a kind of social cement, forming the very structure of the culture industry (ibid., 1998). These concepts constitute the critical framework of the present study. By employing Adorno's discourse on popular music, and integrating it with other social, musical, and para-musical perspectives, this research seeks to examine the ways in which how popular music functions within Tehran's café culture and to compare it with Iranian popular music at large.

Similarly, Sasan Fatemi (2011) has conducted extensive research on popular music, particularly Iranian popular music. In one of his articles, he critically discusses

the terminology of the concept itself. By addressing the challenges of distinguishing classical, urban, and folk music, he highlights the blurred boundaries among them. This distinction helps provide a concrete framework for analyzing the social context of the independent music scene within Tehran's cafés, and further allows for the identification and classification of the lesser-known aspects of its identity.

Max Weber (2020), in his well-known work, after a relatively lengthy introduction and outline of his sociological framework, examines the process of the rationalization of Western music. He analyzes how harmony and melody, the systematic organization of scales, tonality, the development of polyphony, and broader economic and social interactions contributed to this process. Building on Weber's analysis, the present study investigates the rationalization processes at play in the independent café music scene, comparing them with the structures of popular music.

Additionally, Mirian et al. (2020) analyze the culture industry in an Adornian framework, examining the influence of Western culture on Iranian music. They detail para-musical mechanisms such as domination, legitimation, commodification, mass reproduction, and standardization, and trace how Iranian popular music has absorbed Western influences since the revolution. Although their scope and research field differ from the present study, their critical approach is nonetheless applicable. Both studies, in their respective ways, seek to uncover the "social cement" of popular music and assess its relevance to the topic at hand.

• International sources

Antonio Gramsci sought to uncover the true nature and social role of intellectuals and intellectual movements. In his "Prison Notebooks" (Gramsci, 1971), he distinguished between the "traditional" and the "organic" intellectual, emphasizing active agency within society as the key criterion. Michel Foucault (1980) introduced a parallel distinction with his notion of the "specific intellectual," defined as a specialist whose expertise enables critical awareness within a given field. Employing these concepts, the present research examines the extent and quality of intellectual agency among figures involved in

Tehran's café-based independent music movement—musicians as well as cultural actors in journals, cafés, media, and related domains.

In the field of identity, Timothy Rice (2007) provides a comprehensive meta-analysis and conceptual mapping of the term, particularly from sociological perspectives. Stuart Hall (1994), meanwhile, emphasizes the social and cultural constructions of identity, introducing the concept of diaspora as a subcultural formation within a "parent" culture. This framework is especially helpful for analyzing the influence of Western culture (particularly music) on Iranian cultural life. Together, the perspectives of Hall and Rice enable the identification and articulation of the authentic identity of the independent café music scene. The resulting identity can be positioned either in opposition to, or in dialogue with, the "real" identity of the movement. Distinguishing between—or recognizing the lack of distinction between—authentic and actual identity allows for a critical evaluation of the independent music scene's cultural positioning.

Perhaps the most concentrated body of relevant literature is provided by the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno. Drawing on Lukács and in collaboration with Horkheimer, Adorno developed an analytical lens for evaluating popular culture, one applicable even beyond the contexts he originally studied. His discourse here serves as a critical tool for analyzing Iranian music within its specific cultural setting. As Seyed Ahmadian's (Adorno, 2002) commentary notes, Adorno addressed these themes in multiple studies. In his *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* (ibid., 1991), he focused specifically on the reification of art and popular music. Later, in *On Popular Music* (ibid., 1998), he extended his critique to other dimensions of popular music, including standardization, pseudo-individualization, and imitation.

Taken together with other discourses, these frameworks enable the present study to interrogate the true nature of the independent café music scene in Tehran. In this context, the agency of intellectuals within the movement, the presence (or absence) of rationality among its actors, and their commitment to musical

and para-musical independence all combine to clarify the underlying “social cement” embedded within the identity of this movement.

Methodology

This research is based on a descriptive-analytical approach, with data collected through both library studies and field observations. Field interviews were conducted with key figures in Tehran’s café scene, including musicians, café founders, and cultural influencers. These interviews provided insights into the motivations behind the adoption of Western musical genres, the social significance of these styles, and the tensions between maintaining an “independent” identity and responding to the demands of a popular audience. After collecting the data, the study employs selected theoretical frameworks to compare and analyze the process of identity representation within this musical stream.

• Field of research

In order to avoid information overload and potential issues with the accuracy of this study, the field research framework deliberately refrained from aggregating a wide range of viewpoints. Instead, a clear filter was chosen for the data input. This filter consisted of three key groups who play crucial roles in the aforementioned stream: a composer, a performer, and the founder of one of the most significant cafés in Tehran that hosts and organizes independent musicians. By adopting this approach and designing a structured and purposeful questionnaire, the study aimed to produce a multidimensional perspective on the field under investigation.

The general framework of the questionnaire was divided into five major categories:

- **History:** The approximate starting point of this movement and the first sparks of the independent stream in Iran.
- **Influential Figures:** The individuals who played decisive roles in shaping, directing, and developing this movement.
- **Economy:** The economic structure and its developers within this stream, as well as the degree of financial independence of its participants.

- **Raw Material:** Identity-shaping components such as locality, dialect, and other personal cultural elements.

- **Audience:** The demographics and segmentation of audiences, and their modes of engagement within the stream.

This questionnaire was designed to highlight the identity-shaping elements of the independent music movement in a broad sense. Each element was crafted in accordance with the theoretical framework of the study and to allow for proper verification of the data. Following the interviews and during the analysis of the extracted data, the research adopted a part-to-whole approach to map out the authentic identity of this movement.

By considering the historical trajectory of the stream (from its coherent formation in the early 2000s to the present day), the individuals who shaped it, their audiences and social interactions, the raw material of the musicians involved, and the economics of the stream, the study seeks to construct an overall image of its essence. The selected interviewees represent some of the most influential figures active in the independent music scene embedded in Tehran’s café culture. It should also be noted that, in gathering data for this research, interviews and other available sources related to additional musicians and non-musicians were also utilized.

• Key figures

Mahan Mirarab, born in Tehran and raised in Babol, has lived in Vienna since 2009. He began his musical career in Iran and later continued it in Europe. His collaborations include projects with the Abrang Ensemble, Peter Soleimani-Pour, and the Rumi Ensemble. By incorporating elements of jazz and Persian music, Mirarab has sought to redefine Iranian jazz.

Saeed Shams, born in 1989, is a clarinet and saxophone player who studied at the Tehran Conservatory. He began playing music at around sixteen and has worked professionally for over a decade, specializing in jazz and gypsy jazz. He is known as a skilled and active street musician in central Tehran and has collaborated extensively with other musicians of this stream.

Peyman Bahmani, architect of “Jazz Café,” defined

the venue as an architectural project in which the performance stage was integrated into the café's design. He was among the first to notice the transition of independent music out of underground spaces, providing an opportunity to support this process. His café has hosted a total of 170 nights of live music. Bahmani himself is a double bass player and has consistently worked to promote and preserve independent music culture by supporting jazz groups, string ensembles, and numerous musicians. He has previously collaborated with Khate Etesal (Connection Line), Cadence, and other platforms within the independent music movement.

Findings and Analysis

• The popular (pop) music

The Western Music trend in the cafes of Tehran has an interwoven connection with popular music, but this connection is deliberately hidden. Before analyzing this trend in Tehran cafes, we need to identify with popular music, especially in Iranian scholars' studies. People's music is basically the music of a city whose audience is the mass of people, and its creation along with its expansion, has a close connection with the market economy, mass production, and mass media (Fatemi, 2011). According to Vega, this music can be inspired by popular music and songs or be a simplification of them. Simplification, which is a simplified reproduction of the object in question, is reminiscent of the reproducing and territorializing Diaspora, according to Stuart Hall, which will be discussed in the following. From Manfredini's point of view (Manfredini, 2006), the melody-oriented nature of popular music in contrast to classical music, which is "a few pieces or melodic ideas", is the most obvious difference, and according to Stuart Hall's point of view, this change is the self-identity of popular music.

• Western music trend

During the last 20 years, some types of western music have slowly started to live in the heart of society, the types whose existence reached before the revolution with people like Farhad Mehrad, Kourosh Yaghmaei, Habib Mohibian and Fereydoun Foroughi. Genres such as rock, Jazz, metal and blues, which of

course consisted of sub-genres such as blues rock, progressive rock, pop rock, psychedelic rock and so forth. The focus of this study is more on the last five years, of course, with a general look at the twenty years of life of these genres and sub-genres; From the early bands such as Maad Band, consisting of Abdi Behravananfar, Mohsen Namjoo, Masoud Fayazzadeh, Navid Arbabian, Ali Baghfâr and guest members such as Pouyan Ghandi, Uham Band, The Lemonise, Damahi, etc. to independent musicians such as Peter Soleymani-Pour, Saeed Shams, Nima Ramezan, Saeed Shams, Mahan Mirarab, King Ram and others who are somehow related to cafe performance and "independent" music. Regarding the identity of this trend, two identities are generally considered, one is the transparent identity and the second is the hidden/ambiguous identity.

• Western music as intellectual identity

Western musical genres in the café scene of Tehran have cultivated a subculture grounded in intellectualism and cultural distinction. Foucault (1980) refers to this category of intellectuals as specific intellectuals. Musicians within this movement engage in critique, resistance, and consciousness-raising within local, relatively closed networks particular to their milieu. Through their works, semi-private gatherings, and the virtual sphere, they attempt to enact agency. These cafés project an image of independence and an alternative taste that signals a rupture from the Iranian mainstream music industry. Nevertheless, such intellectualism often manifests in a form that Adorno (2002) describes as pseudo-individualization, where independent identity is more concerned with attracting niche audiences than with expressing authentic individuality. In some cases, priority is even given to drawing upper socio-economic audiences—evidenced by the high cost of café orders, their affluent locations, and ticket prices (sometimes exceeding those of Los Angeles-based Iranian singers performing abroad). Although this constructed identity represents a marker of cultural resistance, it nonetheless risks remaining entangled with commercial values. In Gramsci's terms, the musicians of this movement attempt to reproduce an intellectual identity akin to the organic intellectual—a

socially engaged figure emerging from a specific class, acting to raise awareness, organize, or guide that group (Gramsci, 1971). In practice, however, they gravitate more toward the role of the traditional intellectual—one that does not detach itself from structures of power (the Iranian mainstream music industry, the state, etc.) (ibid., 5).

According to Peyman Bahmani (Personal communication, February 15, 2021), founder and architect of Jazz Café, the origins of independent music trace back to the pre-revolutionary era and the cafés surrounding central Tehran. Afterward, during the 1990s, the movement was sustained through underground performances and activities of figures such as Sardar Sarmast, Hamzeh Yeganeh, Mahan Mirarab, and Kasra Saboktakin, among others. He identifies this movement as the scattered beginnings of underground activity in the 1990s, but argues that with the launch of Jazz Café in early 2019, it became more public and no longer confined to underground spaces

In an interview, clarinetist and saxophonist Saeed Shams (Personal communication, February 20, 2021) emphasized that the roots of this trend can also be traced to the pre-revolutionary era with the presence of artists such as Farhad Mehrad, and later Hamzeh Yeganeh and Mahan Mirarab, followed by a newer generation including Saeed Shams himself, Soroosh Jalilpour, Sahand Bahadori, Armin Hemmati, Payam Eslami, Ali Aflatoon, and Mehرداد Mehdi—one of the pioneers of street music performance in Iran.

Mahan Mirarab (Personal communication, March 03, 2021), musician and composer, offers a different perspective. He argues that the emergence of this independent trend, or subculture of Western music, is tied to Western colonialism and its cultural legacy—from the extensive use of Western music theory to performance practices such as musicians' seating arrangements. Subsequently, figures such as Sardar Sarmast and groups like Damahi and Bomrani moved toward greater popularity, leading to higher incomes and eventual ties with the mainstream industry. This divide placed two paths before musicians of the movement: either maintaining a commitment to the values and frameworks of independent music while

distancing themselves from the mainstream (aligned with the state and the music industry), or joining that mainstream. This hidden affiliation is the subject addressed in the following discussion.

• The identity of the Western music movement in Iran

There are two main approaches to identity production in this musical current: direct attributions by the musicians within their music, and para-musical elements such as attributions by magazines and others. Recently, cafes and music organizers like “Khatt-e-ettesal Club” have played a significant role in identity formation. Lyrics from the past twenty years, especially the last four, show a critical and enlightening approach. The musicians' lack of access to mainstream performance venues has led them to avoid the pop music industry and national media, fostering a deceptive sense of independence and alternative approaches.

Over the past four years, Cadence magazine, led by Siamak Qolizadeh, has played a significant role in shaping the identity of a new musical territory. This territory includes independent/alternative musicians, their audience, and cafes that act as investors. Initially focused on introducing musicians and their works, Cadence adopted a critical approach that involved valuing these musicians. The magazine formed a connection with Owrsi magazine to introduce musicians' works without geographical constraints, creating a platform that brought fame to selected albums and music. Fame was achieved through both positive and negative reviews, encouraging audiences to listen and form their own opinions. Cadence asserted its right to prioritize musicians based on taste. Furthermore, Cadence pursued para-musical issues by collaborating with other magazines like Owrsi.

• Group identity

Group identity in music refers to the shared understanding of the self among members, expressed through musical features, activities, and rituals. In this regard, a clear distinction exists between the existence of the group as a whole and the roles of its members (Rice, 2007). Peter Soleymani-Pour, a well-known independent musician, emphasizes the importance of developing a personal philosophy in music as the

foundation for individual identity—a philosophy that resists both Western cultural appropriation and the dominance of the music industry. Such a philosophy enables musicians to cultivate their individuality while contributing to the collective self-understanding within the independent music movement (M. Mirarab, *Personal communication, March 03, 2021*). Consequently, once musicians establish a personal identity and distance themselves from globalization, they move toward constructing a collective identity. This collective identity may be shaped by the musician's role in the group (singer, instrumentalist, songwriter, composer, arranger), the importance of their presence within the ensemble, and the compatibility of their personal traits with the group's collective features. To better grasp this concept, a bottom-up perspective is helpful. For instance, consider an electric guitarist who develops a personal philosophy, reflected in their choice of clothing, dialect, and other individual traits. This process may even result in a distinctive style of performance. Imagine, for example, a guitarist born into the culture of southern Iran, who incorporates rhythmic and melodic patterns from local traditions into their music. Upon joining a band, if their goals and stylistic direction align with those of the ensemble, the musician contributes to the band's group identity. Each member, through their unique influence, helps shape the overall collective identity.

The reverse process, however, is also possible—highlighting the distinction between the group's existence and its members' roles. Here, a top-down approach is required: the attributed and selected traits of the group, along with its goals and general form, reproduce aspects of individual identity within the framework of a collective one. From this perspective, identity is a shared self-understanding expressed through the representation of characters, activities, and rituals—including musical practices. In musical groups, there is no doubt about the existence of both the ensemble and its members; rather, the debate revolves around what gives the group its character, what constitutes its essential nature, and what kind of professional behavior its members should display (Rice, 2007). In this context, M. Mirarab

(*Personal communication, March 03, 2021*) recalls Soleymani-Pour, who firmly believed in the necessity of identity in music and encouraged individuals to develop a personal philosophy. According to him, two main obstacles to individual identity are Western cultural appropriation and the overarching dominance of the music industry:

“You are forced to reproduce another's sound to fit onto a shelf; otherwise, you will not have a place in the industry. This search for philosophy happened for Darayee, Daraei, and Hamzeh Yeganeh.” (*ibid.*)

Soleymani-Pour's approach thus encouraged musicians to cultivate their own personal philosophy, leading them to develop individual musical characters within the independent music movement—contributing, in turn, to the collective self-understanding of the movement itself.

• **Dual structure of identity (ascription and resistance)**

Constructivist perspectives argue that identity is multiple and fragmented, consisting of several different selves (gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc.). Music provides a medium for the expression of these diverse identities through its symbolic elements such as melody, rhythm, timbre, and so forth. Identity is either articulated through the attribution of identity-forming elements or through resistance against them. Nicholas Rose describes the self as a combination of various regimes (masculinity, femininity, honor, civility, etc.) (Rice, 2007). Music operates both as a regime of self-formation and as a form of resistance. S. Shams (*Personal communication, February 20, 2021*) states that in restrictive environments, independent music gains meaning through resistance to censorship and the mainstream music industry, cultivating a resistant identity.

As mentioned earlier, the ascribed identity of Western music currents in Tehran cafés presents itself as independent and, to some extent, alternative. This identity distances itself from the core of music in Iran—especially pop music—as well as from the music industry and its affiliated stages. Consequently, this resistance to the aforementioned elements has itself become a means of reproducing the ascribed identity.

Up to this point, the focus has been on identifying the identity attributed to the musicians of this movement. Now, by introducing a model, this study seeks to dissect the gap between the reality and the truth of this matter. In the proposed model, ascribed identity is considered as the assumption or the apparent reality of the phenomenon. To test the authenticity of this identity, the study evaluates the extent of resistant identity that this musical current strives to embody. The greater the alignment between the ascribed identity and a resistant identity, the closer the truth of this identity will be to its reality. The following section elaborates on the proposed model and its components.

• Ascribed identity: independent, intellectual, and alternative

The characteristics of the ascribed identity of this musical current are presented in Fig. 1. Possessing these components—even in varying proportions—associates the movement with an identity that is independent, intellectual, and alternative.

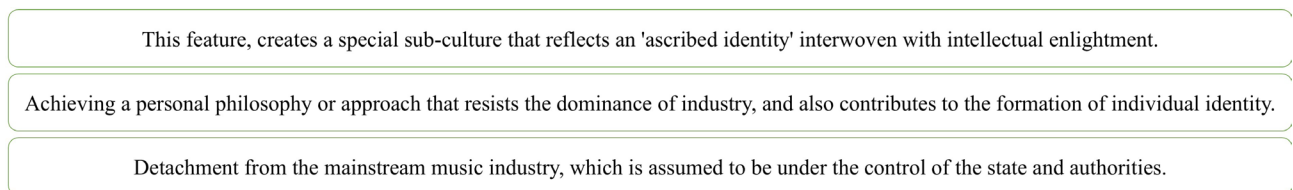


Fig. 1. Ascribed identity. Source: Authors.

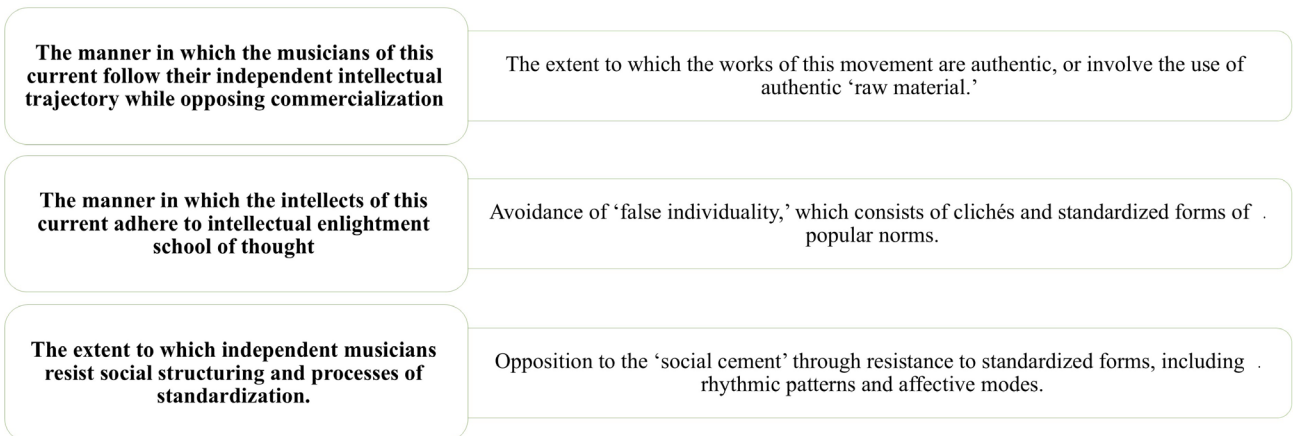


Fig. 2. Resistant identity. Source: Authors.

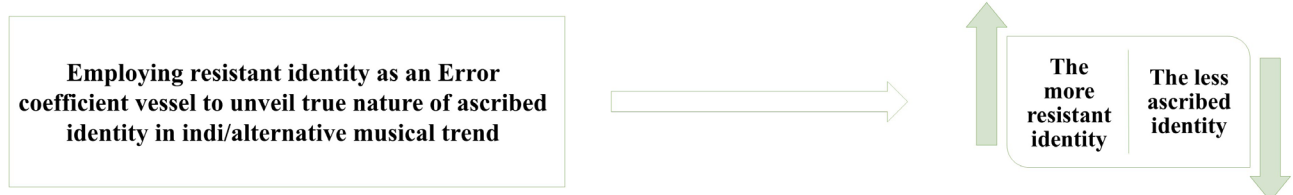


Fig. 3. Identity model. Source: Authors.

• Resistant identity: resistance against popular music and dominant norms

The characteristics of resistant identity are presented in Fig. 2. When these components are present, the resulting identity can be considered a resistant one. Such resistance is directed both against the music industry and against the dominant intellectual current shaping the body of Iranian music.

Based on the model in Fig. 3, if—according to the above diagram—the production of a resistant identity within the independent music scene leads to a reduction or contradiction in the ascribed identity of this current, then the essence of this identity will differ from its actual reality. In other words, the more this movement and the subculture reproduced from it remain committed to a resistant identity—which is itself the proclaimed goal of the independent music scene—the closer or more identical the truth of its ascribed identity will be to the reality of that identity. However, if the components of the ascribed identity

appear in contradiction with the resistant identity, it can then be concluded that the truth of the ascribed identity stands in opposition to its reality (Fig. 3). In the following section, we will examine the resistant components of the existing identity and assess the extent to which the ascribed identity of the independent music scene adheres to them.

• Music formatting in Tehran Cafés

Now, before comparing popular music with independent music in Iran, it is necessary to explain the notion of standardization in popular music. If we regard popular music as a commodity within a particular industry, like any other commodity it requires packaging. This packaging—while appearing diverse in its combinations—ultimately follows a pre-defined template that is applied to all products. In popular music, the listener is thus deprived of spontaneity and reduced to conditioned responses. The issue is not that the listener refrains from pursuing the objective process of the music; rather, it is that the listener is presented with patterns or models through which the objective elements become recognizable. These objectified patterns and models are precisely the pre-fabricated templates. The dissemination and promotion of such schemata dictate the mode of listening to the audience, while simultaneously rendering any form of active listening unnecessary. Hence, Adorno characterizes popular music as being already “chewed and digested” (Adorno, 2002).

To better understand standardization, we turn to the process described by Adorno. He argues that “imitation” serves as our guide for grasping this phenomenon. The musical standards of popular music initially emerged in a competitive process: when a particular song in popular music sells well, hundreds of other versions imitating that successful model are produced. According to him, the overarching concentration of economic power institutionalizes standardization and transforms it into a necessity (*ibid.*) In this regard, he states:

“The best-selling songs of the day are always imitated, with all the ‘ratios’ among their constitutive elements reproduced; this process culminates in the crystallization of the objective standards of this music.

Under centralized conditions, which today have been fully realized, these standards undergo a process of ‘freezing.’ That is to say, the standards are seized by economic cartels and rigidly imposed on the production of whatever is considered new. Any deviation from the rules of this game leads to the exclusion of both the song and its composer from the scene. Thus, the overarching concentration of economic power institutionalizes standardization and transforms it into a necessity” (*ibid.*)

The process of standardization in the forms of independent music in Iran can also be understood in light of Adorno’s discussion of popular music. This process involves examining the balance between covering Western musical pieces and composing original works. P. Bahmani (*Personal communication, February 15, 2021*) notes that performing successful covers of Western music or older local pieces has played an important role, such that the ratio of cover songs to original works has been approximately one to one hundred. In jazz cafés, audiences tend to prefer music in non-Persian languages. The greater focus has been on standardized subgenres, and there is often little clear awareness of the authentic identity of the works themselves.

Bahmani further points out that the diversity of performed music helps sustain audience interest, even though listeners may not engage deeply with the music beyond its immediate excitement. S. Shams (*Personal communication, February 20, 2021*) adds that melodic and lyric-based pieces enjoy greater popularity than progressive works, reflecting a tendency toward less risky and more popular forms that challenge the essence of serious music. Shams also regards this as a matter of taste, while emphasizing that melodic and lyric-centered pieces are generally more appealing to audiences than progressive compositions. Taken together, these observations indicate a shift toward less risky and more popularized formats that threaten the core of independent music. Such standardized forms are designed to attract audiences who seek pre-packaged content, distancing themselves from the elements of independent music. This standardized form functions like a container that touches and restricts the

listeners' taste; as a result, both content and form lose their intrinsic value.

• **Raw Material in Tehran Cafes' music**

Adorno refers to a raw material that, in his view, makes examples of popular music appear "natural" to unrefined listeners. This "natural" music is in fact the amalgamation of all conventions and material formulas embedded in a kind of music to which the listener has become accustomed, perceiving it as the inherent and straightforward language of music itself—without realizing the relative novelty and recent emergence of this language. This raw material has its roots in the audience's earliest musical experiences: nursery rhymes, school songs, lullabies, and, more broadly, any sonic elements embedded in the collective musical fabric of social life (Adorno, 2002).

The analysis in this article also draws on Stuart Hall's (1994) work on diaspora (Hall, 1994) and Timothy Rice's (2007) studies of identity to illustrate how the unique identity of a musician is shaped by personal experiences and the surrounding society. The influence of Western media has triggered a process of deterritorialization, leading to the emergence of diasporic hybrids composed of Western subcultures. Musicians, often driven by intense interest yet lacking full access to Western musicians and culture, mis-localize Western music, a phenomenon P. Bahmani (Personal communication, February 15, 2021) describes as "symbolic and superficial localization". This process creates a sense of naturalness both for musicians and their audiences. The raw materials present in this space are thus a fusion of Western subcultures, producing a fragmented identity.

• **False individualization in Tehran Cafe's music**

False individualization occurs through various elements like cafés, magazines, and music cartels. This leads to stereotyped and formatted popular music. Musicians incorporate light harmonies, familiar yet nostalgic melodies, and local personalization to appeal to audiences. Bahmani views these fusions as superficial attempts to blend native and western elements, resulting in a show-like presentation (ibid.).

• **Social cement in Tehran Cafes' music**

Music in Tehran cafés acts as social cement. "Funky" music and emotional pieces create a standardized format that offers a shadow of freedom. This "shadow of freedom" is marked by light harmonies and melodies that invoke feelings of despair and misfortune. This acceptance of standardized music is driven by a dependence on rhythm and a superficial sense of freedom (Adorno, 2002).

Rhythmic type can be seen in "funky" music such as the music of Arash Saedi, an Iranian guitar player/musician which empties the rhythm of the piece of its content or the kind of emotional listening in the works of Morti Aziz Zadeh, Haido Hedayati, or Hadi Pakzad, in which you can feel the little freedom of accepting misfortune, a touch of some kind of freedom in a standardized musical format. In the piece "I miss myself" with a very limited and light harmonic and melodic atmosphere, without the smallest noticeable changes, he started to create a feeling of extreme despair and catharsis that drowns the listener more and more in his misfortune. This function can also be seen in most of the parts of He and his friends' band. A completely para-musical function that creates dependence on a shadow of freedom created by the listener's confession of his misfortune.

The afore-mentioned foundation that has caused the acceptance of standardized music in the spectrum of the western trend in the cafes of Tehran and sends a mass of handicraft products to his special audience. Such a cement that feeds on dependence on a shadow of freedom or drowning in rhythm. Overall, the trend shows a process of creating standardized, pre-digested music for the audience, contradicting the movement's enlightened appearance.

• **Contradictions in the "Independent" Label**

Tehran's café music scene is often branded as "independent" or "alternative," suggesting a break from commercialized, state-influenced music. However, economic pressures from magazines, cafés, and music cartels reveal underlying contradictions within this alternative identity. For example, magazines promoting these musicians shape public perception, while cafes carefully curate their performers to ensure

broad appeal. This creates a paradox where the music's commercial aspects may undermine its claim to authenticity.

Adorno's critiques of popular music standardization reveal that even music positioned as alternative may fall into repetitive patterns dictated by economic success. The supposed freedom and uniqueness of Tehran's café music scene thus risk becoming yet another form of "pre-packaged" cultural product, aligning it with popular rather than alternative music aesthetics.

Conclusion

The café music scene in Tehran serves as an example of a complex dynamic, or in other words, a nonlinear and chaotic system in which cultural influence and identity formation take place under the impact of Western genres. While genres such as rock, blues, and jazz foster distinctive identities in these spaces, they nonetheless remain vulnerable to the pressures of commercialization, which undermine their claims to independence. The identities formed around these genres embody both resistance and conformity—a duality that reflects the idealistic features of an urban, intellectual subculture, while simultaneously exposing its susceptibility to popular taste and market forces. In other words, despite their aspiration to organic authenticity, the intellectual musicians of this scene gravitate toward social cement and popularization through processes of standardization, imitation, the superficial use of raw material, and pseudo-individualization. This, contrary to expectation, aligns with what Weber (2020) has described as a form of social action oriented toward rational goals. The goal here is to attract audiences and to achieve what Adorno (1998) refers to as "handicraft". Such a goal redefines an already tenuous identity, placing it in contradiction with the scene's ascribed identity—namely, its orientation toward intellectualism and resistance to commercialization.

By analyzing this process through the theoretical lenses of Hall, Adorno, and Rice, as well as with the aid of the model developed in this study, the article demonstrates how the adoption of Western music in Tehran cafés aligns with broader issues of cultural commodification

and identity construction. These findings contribute to an understanding of how cultural spaces, when confronted with global influences and local identity needs, become engaged in complex and often contradictory interactions. It should be noted that when reference is made here to the independent music scene in Tehran cafés, it specifically concerns those segments that are in contradiction with their own ascribed and resistant identities. Other individuals within this scene, both historically and today, have consistently remained faithful to their ascribed identities—even if this has meant distancing themselves from the mainstream and commercialized music of Iran, and accepting the consequences thereof.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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