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**MEANINGS OF IRANIANNES FOR YOUNG VIEWERS OF THE
REALITY SHOW BEFARMAEED SHAM**

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Abstract

In the past decade, the popularity of the diasporic reality show *Befarmaeed Sham* has provided young Iranian viewers with an unprecedented space for negotiating the meaning of Iranianness. Produced and transnationally broadcast by the exilic television network *Manoto TV*, this reality show features ordinary Iranians as they live in foreign lands and face the culture of the 'others'. Since this program is receivable through officially banned and censored free-to-air satellite TV, its representation of Iranianness is deemed to contradict the one persistently upheld by the state. However, unlike other merely political programs prevailing Farsi satellite TV channels (FSTCs) and directly criticizing the Islamic regime and its ideologies, as a new form of popular cultural program, *Befarmaeed Sham* takes on representation of Iranianness in subtle and conspicuous ways. This raises the questions about how young audiences of *Befarmaeed Sham*, who are also the program's main viewers, interpret and make sense of this reality show's representation of Iranianness. In the light of the reception theory and through conducting a series of focus group discussions with young residents of northern Tehran this study explores some of the meanings of Iranianness for these individuals and the ways in which they define their 'selves' as Iranians.

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1. Introduction

Soon after Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran underwent a sudden change in political, economic and social condition through which it turned from a strong loyal ally to the West into an internationally isolated nation (Borszik, 2016). Accordingly, the fundamental shift in the government's ideological and structural disposition has had a series of grave consequences for the nation not only on global scale, in terms of international interrelationship, but also within the nation-state and around the public life. Throughout these years, however, Islamic Republic of Iran has been capitalizing on repressive and ideological state apparatus to reaffirm its legitimacy in the region and maintain its power over the nation (Asgharzadeh, 2007, pp. 197-8). In line with such efforts and through its hegemonic representations of Iranianness, the state-controlled mainstream media has been consistently strived for constructing a homogeneous identity based on Islamic, revolutionary and anti-West ideology that would ensure the solidarity of the nation and thus securing the state's power (Ehteshami, 2017, p. 6).

The arrival of the free-to-air transnational television broadcasting systems and consequently the rise of the Farsi satellite TV channels (FSTCs) in 1990s, however, marked a defining moment for people of Iran as these exilic and thus predominantly anti-regime television networks offered an alternative view on the meaning of Iranianness and thus the Iranian identity (Farhi, 2007). Concerned with the proliferation of FSTCs and their popularity among Iranians, the authorities in Iran employed various strategies to hold back the influx of these so-called invading signals while warning the general public about their corrupting effects on the pure Iranian culture (Barraclough, 2001).

Nonetheless, despite the government's efforts in interrupting the permeation of satellite signals and preventing Iranian families from consuming their contents, the popularity of this new form of media across the nation has been more than ever (Khiabani, 2019). This has been seen by many as the result of the failure of mainstream national media in providing, creative, quality and entertaining programs, and also because of heavy censorship and content restrictions in both imported and local productions. In contrast, however, satellite television has brought Iranians an abundance of tele-viewing choices, emancipating them from limitations for fulfilling their information and entertainment needs. The attachment of Iranians to satellite TV has also been reflected in various studies and reports, and while there is ambiguity about the number of the satellite TV users in Iran, officials have admitted that more than 70 percent of Iranians have access to this medium.

In this way, while the nationwide popularity of FSTCs continues to grow, Iranian youth in particular, as the main viewers of these channels, are more and more presented with contradictory definitions of Iranianness than the one rigidly maintained by the state. In recent years, however, the proliferation of FSTCs and the intensification of the competition among them for capturing more viewers and increasing their profits have led to these television channels' adoption of various strategies (Alikhah, 2018). Among the most effective ways to capture the larger market share, though, was keeping up with the global trends in television programming as well as focusing on the younger segment of the population and their entertainment needs (Matani & Hassanpour, 2013). In pursuance of such vision, *Manoto TV* an exilic television network based in London premiered *Befarmaeed Sham*, an adaptation of the UK's popular reality cooking game show *Come and Dine with Me* (Atashi, 2018). In this way, as an innovative

form of entertainment television, *Befarmaeed Sham* gained an instantaneous popularity among Iranians which has also been seen by many as the reason for the early success of a relatively young television network like *Manoto TV* (Marchant, 2015).

Similar to its original version, *Befarmaeed Sham* brings together four strangers to compete against each other by showcasing their hospitality and cooking skills. However, unlike its British counterpart, *Befarmaeed Sham* features contestants not in their homeland but in diaspora. In so doing, the diasporic reality show *Befarmaeed Sham* depicts ordinary Iranians in the context of everyday life in foreign lands while dealing with the consequences of their displacements. In this way, although the contestants compete for a prize, as part of their performance they also self-narrate their own biographies usually at the beginning of the first episode of each group. In addition to individual narrations, at times contestants also engage in dialogues with others in the group about a variety of social and political issues later somewhere in the middle of the show. Coupled with conventional and technical codes of reality genre, such self-narrated biographies as well as the ostensibly deliberative conversations among contestants become remarkable discourses that act as a powerful means for construction and representation of the dominant meanings of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham* (Azeri Matin, 2020).

2. Problem Statement

In light of the fact that *Befarmaeed Sham* is a production of FSTCs, the representation of Iranianness in this program is regarded to be inconsistent with the one pervading the mainstream media in Iran (Gholamian et al., 2017). This contradiction in representation, therefore, raises the question of how Iranian youth as the main audiences of *Befarmaeed Sham* negotiate and make sense of the preferred meanings of Iranianness in this reality show. As such, these audiences who, according to reception theory, are active producers of meaning (Hall, 1980) resist the preferred meanings of Iranianness and make their own, depending on individuals' sociocultural backgrounds and personal circumstances. Hence, an in-depth understanding about certain audiences' readings of a specific media text can reveal a great deal of information about their wider cultural codes and sense-making practices.

3. Research Questions

In correspondence to the study's problem statement, this exploratory research was set to find answers to the following question: What are some of the key ways in which the research participants define their Iranian selves through interpreting and making sense of the representation of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham*?

4. Purpose of the Study

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which a sample of young habitual viewers of *Befarmaeed Sham* negotiate the preferred meanings of Iranianness in this reality show and make their own meanings. By tapping into the existing interplays between audiences, representation and power, which is the key premise of the qualitative reception analysis, the ultimate goal of this study

was to bring to light instances of Iranian youth's assent or resistance to the dominant ideology of Iranianness.

5. Research Method

Anders Hansen (1998) argues that exploring the 'how or why' of audience's sense-making process, and examining their frame of knowledge and experiences for interpreting media texts, necessitates the employment of more qualitative method rather than relying on surveys (p. 257). In this way, the focus of the qualitative approach is on "how meaning, in a media context, is generated in everyday life" (Devereux, 2013, p. 217). Likewise, since the study was concerned with construction of meaning among individuals through their experiences and their media consumption, a qualitative approach was adopted as the basis for its research design.

Furthermore, the focus groups discussion (FGD) was preferred over other qualitative data collection methods both for its convenience as well as its usefulness in examining dialogues, deliberations, democratic practices and other issues which are also central to the communication studies (Keyton, 2015, p. 313). Just like other qualitative research, as Liamputtong (2011) stated, in focus group generally a purposive sampling method is adopted, exactly because "the participants need to be selected to suit the investigated issue" (pp. 50-51). Nevertheless, following the recommendations of authors like Bernard (2017), for recruiting focus group participants, the study employed snowball sampling technique in which an initial contact with an informant generated further contacts.

Subsequently, 25-29 years old residents of northern Tehran who habitually watched *Befarmaeed Sham* were recruited as focus group participants. While residing in northern Tehran is an approximate indicator for individuals' socioeconomic similarities, other sampling criteria such as belonging to Shia faith and having minimum college degree were considered during nomination process in order to form a more homogeneous groups. This was in line with the idea of communication scholars like Jensen (2013) who noted that in media studies, homogeneous focus groups had proven to be useful for gaining access to participants' "distinctive experiences of media content". Furthermore, the groups were segregated in terms of gender to avoid the possible hindrance to the flow of the discussions, as remaining sensitive to the group's culture necessitated, and also to enable the comparison between males and females. The recruited participants also formed 3 male and 3 female groups each of which consisted of 4 members.

The design of this research follows the general qualitative strategy in reception analysis where a specific media text is presented to purposively selected individuals who are then interviewed and asked to share their understandings and views on particular aspects of such media text (Morley, 1980). In line with such strategy, a sequence of *Befarmaeed Sham*, containing the relevant discourses of Iranianness, was selected to be shown to the research participants at the outset of each focus group session. The displayed video featured Sepideh (Dawn) an Englishwoman who hosted the three Iranians in the group. In the video, she explained that she was married to an Iranian and had lived in Iran for many years. Filmed in Manchester, England, this sequence was chosen from the first episode of Group 11 Season 10 of *Befarmaeed Sham*. With a focus on what constitutes Iranianness as opposed to 'otherness', the participants, then, were asked and encouraged by the moderator to articulate their thoughts on the displayed video amid the natural flow of the discussions. Subsequently, the participants' discussions

about this sequence were voice-recorded and then fully transcribed while being simultaneously translated from Farsi to English. After that, the English transcriptions were open coded and thematically analysed using Microsoft Word software which consequently yielded the findings that are presented next.

6. Findings

6.1. Our Rich and ancient culture

One of the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups was the participants' belief that Iran is among the world's few earliest civilizations with a rich cultural heritage. This in turn was seen by them as the main reason for attracting Westerners who lack such qualities in their presumably superficial and not so old history. This sort of reasoning came into view when at the outset of their conversations almost all of the participants in one way or another pronounced the extent of Sepideh's fascination with Iranians and their culture. The male Group 1, for instance, had the following conversation about Sepideh (Dawn):

*I think, the fact that she participated in this show means that she loves Iranian culture (Hamed).
Sepideh did her best as much as she could to present Iranian culture to her guests (Yashar).*

Further in response to the question that whether Sepideh considered herself more English or Iranian, the majority of the participants had a similar view indicating that she was indeed proud of being identified as Iranian. As such, participants of the female Group 2, for example, described Sepideh as:

*She was 100 percent proud of being Iranian. Yes indeed, her way of dressing up, cooking, Koofteh Tabrizi [Iranian traditional dish], and so on, with a sense of proudness. The poor fellow really wanted to relate herself to Iran (Mohadeseh).
She loved it [to be known as Iranian] (Fateme).*

Although, according to few participants Sepideh's pleasing memories came from her marriage or perhaps the country's superb pre-revolution conditions, many others believed otherwise, emphasizing Iran's long history as well as richness and glories of Persian civilization as reasons for the Westerners' fascination with Iran:

*She liked Iran. Sepideh had grasped it well. Her husband was Iranian, who was her own choice. She liked, she liked our way of living, the richness of our culture (Elmira, female Group 3).
She was attracted to it [Iranian culture] and continues to love it . . . I have to say again that our culture is an ancient and rich one, no one rejects or says that it is useless (Ashkan, male Group1).*

Evident in their discussion about the possible reasons for Sepideh's fascination with Iranians, the initial scenes of the displayed video conjured up the participants' imaginations and sentiments not only about Iran's relatively recent past during pre-revolution era, but millenniums earlier when the first Persian race (Aryans) supposedly merged more than 2500 years ago. This in turn enabled them to worm their way in a position in which they felt to have an upper hand in inheriting a praiseworthy ancestral legacy as opposed to inhabitants of the western world who purportedly lack such inheritance.

6.2. Warm Iranians, cold others

As part of their interpretations, the focus group members went on to make a sensibly strong argument that regarded Iranians as warm and affectionate, a virtue and quality which, from their standpoints, is not common in Western societies. According to majority of the participants another even more important reason for Sepideh to be fascinated with Iranians was the people's warmth and affection which was presumably so rare among Westerners. For instance participants in female Group 2 mentioned that:

The exceptional warmth and cordiality that exists among our families is not a small thing, it is very important. This is what Sepideh as a foreigner pointed out when she came to live in Iran and spent ten years of her life in here (Fateme).
Because she [Sepideh] liked Iranian culture she wanted to say that she is like Iranians, serve guests like Iranians, had their warmth, cordiality, and is hospitable like them . . . well this is rooted in Iranian culture. Iranians like to serve guests the best possible way (Maryam).

Although being family-oriented is venerated as a virtue particularly in Eastern world, as part of their readings of the sequence, the research participants used such quality to take advantage on and differentiate themselves with western people who were seen to be destitute in this regard.

6.3. They appreciate our culture more than we do

The second major theme that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups was the participants' idea that western people rightly and knowledgeably appreciate Iranian culture while Iranians themselves fail to sufficiently value their own culture:

She really appreciates those things that we don't appreciate about our own culture, like wearing simple clothes, simplistic lifestyle (Yashar, male Group 1).
She had a very interesting personality, one was because she wasn't Iranian but her dishes were traditional Iranian. Then even though she wasn't an Iranian, she was so attracted to Iran and Iranian, to the extent that she used very Iranian traditional and commonly used proverbs and slangs in her talks. The amount of pure Farsi she used in her talks may be exceeded others'. I mean, Iranian participants very often used English words in their talks (Elham, female Group 3).

In justifying why Iranian culture was praised by Sepideh who is an Englishwoman, while it was criticized by Iranians in the group, the majority of the participants made the assumption that western people were more knowledgeable than Iranians. This can be seen in a dialogue in the female Group 2:

I think she is someone who had known and truly understood Iranian culture and for this reason she loved Iranian culture, that's why she wanted to introduce herself as an Iranian, considering the fact that she had changed her name. She wanted to say that she is an Iranian considering her knowledge about Iranians (Forouz).
Iranian contestants didn't want to admit their origin and culture because they didn't know its merit, and because they don't want to learn. I say it is because of their lack of knowledge about their own history and culture; they hadn't studied about those things enough. We Iranians neither read nor know much about our own culture, that's why we submit to any idea so easily (Narges).

The research participants' interpretations of the ways in which Iranian contestants in the show discussed their views on Sepideh suggested that group members held a strong belief that since Iranians do not have enough knowledge about their own culture and its exclusive merits they cannot deservedly appreciate it. On the other hand, Iranian culture was seen to be sought-after by the western people who supposedly are more knowledgeable but suffer from a grave void in their culture.

6.4. They are honest, unlike us

One of the surprising themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups indicated the majority of the participants' belief about existence of the disparity between Iranians and westerners in terms of simplicity and honesty. In this way, participants regarded Sepideh as a simple and honest person who was in stark contrast with Iranian contestants who were regarded execrably boastful and insincere. This is perhaps best captured in a discussion between members of male Group 5:

*She was a very refined woman. She was just herself, more honest than anyone else in the group. She didn't try to impress others by wearing expensive clothes. She was the humblest of them all . . . She loved her memories; you could see that in the way she showed the photo album to other participants. She was the most honest person (Mehdi).
 Yeah, she didn't even wear make-up! (Reza).
 In my opinion she was very pure and honest (Nima).
 She proudly talked about her mother-in-law, unlike Iranian women! I was impressed by her honesty. The honesty in her talks, the honesty in her . . . See, you could clearly see it in her behaviour (Peyman).*

The participants' regrettable acknowledgement of the idea that unlike westerners, Iranians lack simplicity and honesty, points to the fact that these individuals adulated the West for cultivating straightforwardness and honesty as cornerstones of its culture. Although by expanding upon such ideas participants ran the risk of appearing morally degraded, yet they succeeded in untangling some of the imbroglios in defining themselves as Iranians which seemed to be the whole thrust their remarks.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the reception of a purposefully selected sequence of *Befarmaeed Sham* among a sample of young habitual viewers of this television program. Whereas *Befarmaeed Sham* in general presents audiences with a space for negotiating the meanings of Iranianness, the juxtaposition of an Englishwoman with Iranians in a group as well as the incorporation of presumably deliberative mono/dialogues that in one way or another positioned Iran vis-à-vis West have made this particular episode remarkably expressive in this regard. As such, the findings of this reception analysis revealed some aspects of Iranianness which reflected the research participants' interpretations of the respective representations through the discourse in this show. In this way, by negotiating the preferred meanings of Iranianness, the research participants were able to define their Iranian 'selves' with respect to the Western 'others' in their own words and through their own specific perspectives.

In so doing, all of the participants were fanatically proud of being Iranian as they considered themselves the inheritors of a rich and ancient culture while regarding West's culture as a superficial and trifling one. In addition, by emphasizing the uniqueness and cultural embeddedness of practices such as

hospitality and cordiality among Iranians, the participants made a clear distinction between themselves and westerners, considering the latter deprived of warmth and affection. The emergence of another theme, however, suggested that the research participants had a strong belief in the idea that unlike Iranians who underappreciate their own culture, western people recognize the value of Iranian culture and therefore hanker after it mainly due to lack of richness in their culture and also their superior knowledgeability. Finally, a remarkable but relatively less anticipated theme that transpired from data analysis was indicative of the participants' disconcerting acknowledgement of the absence of simplicity and genuineness among Iranians. As such, the focus group members pointed to the disparity they thought that existed between Iranians and westerners by referring to qualities such as honesty and straightforwardness as part of the core values and intrinsic national traits of the western world.

In conclusion, the findings of this reception analysis revealed some of the instances of participants' resistance in their readings of the discourses of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham* with no significant discrepancy whatsoever between male and female groups. These findings suggested that while the representation of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham* has persistently been challenged by the mainstream media and other state-controlled institutions, the young Iranian audiences did not simply submit to or oppose one side in favour of another, in this clash of ideologies. Rather, as part of their wider sense-making practices and struggle over the meaning, they strategically engaged in negotiating the dominant meanings of Iranianness by taking a position face to face with the Western 'others'. Ultimately, such comparing/contrasting efforts enabled these individuals to articulate and reflect on certain aspects of their selves so as to disentangle some of the complexities in their identities; that is who they are as a nation and what it means for them to be Iranian.

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