

## **Constructing National Identity Online: The Case Study of #IranJeans on Twitter**

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This article explores social media users' circulation of a Twitter hashtag #IranJeans as it reflects a complex transnational dialogue about Iranian identity markers in a globalized mediascape. By conducting a thematic analysis of 140 tweets and photos shared under #IranJeans, this study draws attention to the ways in which social media provide users a unique space to address global political discourse, reconstruct their identities, and refute cultural misconceptions on a transnational level. The study presents this transcultural dialogue as an "affirmative opposition," focusing on identity construction processes that simultaneously critique and rearticulate existing cultural binaries. This, in turn, expands the discussion of identity construction from older generations of mass media to new, online, media platforms.

*Keywords: identity, nationality, Iran, West, Twitter, hashtag*

If the Iranian people have their way, they will be wearing blue jeans, they'd have western music and they'd have free elections.

—Benjamin Netanyahu (quoted in BBC News, 2013, para. 11)

The quotation is taken from an interview held by BBC Persian TV with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on October 4, 2013. It was the first formal interview carried out by a Farsi-speaking news source with an official Israeli government representative since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Kambiz Fattahi, the interviewing reporter, interpreted Netanyahu's intentions in a conversation held for this study (personal communication, December 22, 2014): Netanyahu mistakenly assumed that Iranian citizens are not allowed to wear denim. This was not wholly unfounded given past sartorial laws prohibiting Western clothing in Iran. Granted, Netanyahu could have used a current example, such as that of the hijab, to stress the lack of freedom in Iran. However, the fact that an Israeli prime minister reached out to the Iranian society was unprecedented in the postrevolutionary Israel–Iran relations and could mark, according to Fattahi, a wish for a dialogue on the Israeli side.

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In Netanyahu's interview, jeans became a symbol of Western societies, identifying the Iranian regime as opposed to Western cultures, values, and governments. It seems that many Iranians perceived that his comment on Iranian culture was a deep misunderstanding of Iran. In response to the interview, Twitter users created the hashtag #IranJeans as an online criticism of Netanyahu's comment on contemporary Iranian culture as a whole and about wearing jeans in particular. Users' circulation of the hashtag represents the new spaces opened online, enabling individuals' participation in transnational discussions about politics, culture, and identity. In this article, I analyze the discussion facilitated under #IranJeans, arguing for the complex role online media play in it. On the one hand, users' identity construction processes push online cultural discussions toward a plurality of voices that do not appear in mainstream media outlets. On the other hand, I argue that in these discussions, Western signifiers are used to create said criticism, rearticulating normative versus nonnormative and Western versus non-Western binaries.

To engage this project, I focus on the multiple sources of identification included in the process of identity construction. I draw on postcolonial approaches as a theoretical perspective to highlight hybrid notions of national identity formation and the multiple sources of identification and challenges faced by users online (Bhabha, 1994). These are coupled with cultural approaches to media studies to extend the discussion on media outlets' role in reenforcing worldviews, cultures, and identities ritualistically shared by communities (Carey, 1989). Based on these, I argue that the intersections of religious, national, ethnic, and Western identity markers produce an *affirmative opposition*. The term refers to cultural practices that simultaneously critique and affirm existing binaries, and is further developed through analyzing the circulation of #IranJeans.

### **Postcolonialism, Identity, and Online Media**

"Identity does not signal that stable core of the self . . . which remains always-ready 'the same,' identical to itself across time," argues Hall (2000, p. 17). Instead, identities are fragmented, fractured, never unified, never singular, and "constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 2000, p. 17). One approach focused on such construction of identities and differences is the postcolonial approach. It comprises of a set of theories seeking to critique and deconstruct practices of modern Western colonialism (or neocolonialism) both in Western and non-Western societies (Banerjee & Prasad, 2008). Focusing on identity as a key term, postcolonial theorists promote awareness of multilayered forms of interconnected identities that negotiate multiple sources of identification such as religion, race, migration, and so on. Thus, the colonial cultural categories identifying the Occident/West as privileged and superior while positioning the Orient/non-West as inferior (Said, 1978) are replaced in the postcolonial mindset with notions of multiple, overlapping, or intersecting identity markers. One way to explain this notion is through the formation of national identity.

Bhabha (1994), a prominent postcolonial scholar, coined the term *third space* to address hybrid notions of national identity formation. The third space emphasizes that identity is constructed between constantly changing global and local forces, East and West binaries, and national and foreign cultural influences. Between these sources of affinity—locality, nationality, religion, race, ethnicity, and the like—hybrid identities are formed. By pointing out hybrid identities, Bhabha acknowledges the reworking of

modern social, cultural, and economic narratives into a postmodern perception of self, nations, and cultures. The fusing of social categories positions the third space as a notional realm in which social structures are questioned and rearticulated. This space highlights the agency of constructing varying manifestations of hybrid identities in our postcolonial age.

Similar approaches that emphasize identity, namely, national ones, as a constructed notion are well established in the field of media studies. Nations, knowingly and unknowingly, use mass media to circulate national identity and construct a sense of belonging. Anderson (1983) addresses the imagined aspect of the nation, in which individuals build on mass media to imagine their own and others' membership in a nation-state. Carey (1989) stresses the cultural rituals facilitated by and through media. Media outlets are responsible for portraying and reenforcing a world image shared by communities and cultures. Media outlets thus operate as "national equipment"—those cultural tools that construct and maintain the boundaries and descriptors of a national community, constantly "flagging" the national markers in a public context to construct a shared reality and identity among its members (Billig, 1995; Deutsch, 1953). In turn, individual audience members formulate hybrid notions of self, constructing multiple, hybrid media texts (Kraidy, 2005).

As Internet-based environments become crucial spheres of conduct in our everyday lives, researchers have turned to study constructions of identity via online media. Their focus shifted from consumption and passive spectatorship to active production and circulation of identities and cultures (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Early studies of identity construction in digital environments approached online and offline spaces as distinctly separate. The movement between the online and the offline gave individuals a chance to change their identity and become someone new (Dibbell, 1993; Markham, 1998). With the wide spread of Web 2.0 and mobile media outlets, scholars' fascination with identity has evolved from approaching experiences of disembodiment to studying how the Internet is embedded in everyday lives (Verschuere, 2006). By emphasizing users' experience online, scholars presently conceptualize identity as continuous between the online and the offline.

Alongside an examination of identity, researchers have focused on the role online media users play in political discourse. Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) and Dylko, Beam, Landreville, and Geidner (2012), for example, address the "Twittersphere" as a sphere of communication in which the influence of new nonelite online activists (e.g., bloggers) emerges alongside that of traditional political elite actors (e.g., government officials). During the "Arab Spring," online media were perceived as important facilitators of social calls for resistance by such nonelites. The use of Twitter hashtags, for example, connected related tweets under the #egypt or #libya, and the 2009 Iranian Green Movement brought along the use of #iranelection, which was described as the "Twitter revolution" (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013; Gaffney, 2010). Hence, as Hassan (2012) argues, "social media have played and still are playing a pivotal role in political mobilization, awareness raising, lobbying, and networking" (p. 234).

The studies cited in the previous paragraph, as a whole, portray social networking sites as the answer to limited political opportunities in offline spheres and as facilitators of political change through users' activism, focused on the question of whether the Internet is a virtual resource for resistance. They all describe the acts that social media users carried out against their own governing bodies via these

platforms. Approaching the Internet as a tool for resistance on a local–national level, less attention was given to the usage of these spheres for global discussions. Moreover, the role national identity plays in these discussions has been largely overlooked. Hence, there is a clear need to investigate the ways in which online platforms draw individual users into transnational political and cultural discussion around the issue of national identities.

From this brief discussion of postcolonial theory, identity construction in media, and political usage of online environments, a few important takeaways emerge. First, using postcolonial theory as a whole, and Bhabha's (1994) conception of the third space in particular, supports this study's goal of analyzing users' responses to the East–West binary reflected in Netanyahu's statement. Through postcolonial perspective, this study addresses the use of #IranJeans as an effort to question dominant sources of political capital that perpetuate paternalistic Occidental versus Oriental rhetoric. Second, understanding that media outlets play a central role in the process of national identity construction advances this study's ability to expand the investigation into online realms and explore their role in the process of contemporary national identity construction. Finally, there is a need to bridge the gap between research focused on the use of Internet-based media for political resistance and literature focused on identity formation online. By bringing these bodies of knowledge together, this article opens a conversation about the role of national identities in transcultural and geopolitical discussions via online media.

### **Iranian Nationality and the West, Western Identity, and Attire Commodities**

Netanyahu's statement focuses on the differences between Iran and the West, with the West signaled through personal and political freedom and the East through the lack thereof. The statement equates wearing blue jeans with the West, reducing the meaning of freedom to simplistic signifiers. The image of Iran is also simplified, presented as contradictory to jeans, democracy, and freedom. In a similar way, jeans in particular and attire as a whole became signifiers of identity and culture, central to postcolonial critiques. In the Brazilian context, for example, denim became a symbol of the Brazilian postcolonial woman. Jeans are articulated in media as a contested site of imagination and representation (Simai, 2011). Through representations of jeans, the postcolonial subject is trying to gain "international prestige by means of a strategic emphasis on its exotic otherness in order to attain the privileges of the former colonial elite" (Simai, 2011, para. 28). Jeans act as a fetish object associated more with identity and representation than with an actual sartorial function. This argument highlights what Fiske (2010) defined as the semiotic richness of the jeans, generating polysemic interpretation with multiple optional meanings. Jeans thus signify social differentiation, openness, and freedom associated with Western societies, and American society in particular. At the same time, the symbolic openness of the jeans also maintains the role of clothing in colonization processes. As argued by Kleinert (2010), clothing, as markers of civilization, explicitly appears in discourses of colonized groups, signaling admiration toward their colonizing groups.

Comparable conclusions emerged in the Iranian context. Historically, Western influences have constantly shaped the Iranian identity alongside religious and ethnic influences (Boroujerdi, 1998). The intersection of local Iranian discourses with global Western culture have positioned the hijab as a site of

"continuous contestation" (Naghibi, 1999, p. 556) of gender, class, nationality, and religion, creating social categories of "good" and "bad" practices of religion and femininity. In this context, unveiling became a practice associated with progress and freedom. Similarly, men's attire became a site of Western identification in Iran. Reza Shah enacted the "Pahlavi Hat" law in the late 1920s, allowing Iranian men to wear a specific set of three authorized Western hats for different social occasions (Chehabi, 1993). The discussion of Westernizing Iran has been central to the Iranian public sphere for decades. In fact, the Western impact has been evident in the Iranian national sphere as early as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, when Western states such as France and England ignited national revolutionary tendencies among Iranian citizens. These interventions drove the Iranian nation into a period of secularism, brought about the implementation of education and science, and strengthened citizen participation in politics (Mirsepassi, 2000).

Even the current religious regime in Iran is rooted, to some extent, in Western thought. Iranian intellectuals and revolutionary leaders drew on European (French in particular) anticolonial liberation movements of the 1960s to articulate Iranian rejection of the West (Boroujerdi, 1998; Mirsepassi, 2000). Furthermore, Khomeini insisted on using the term *republic* to envision the future Muslim state—the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ansari, 2006). This term that originated in Greek thought and symbolizes Western democracies became a prominent line of thought in the Iranian revolution of the 1970s. Moreover, many leaders of the revolution and their political and cultural successors (as well as the Iranian intellectuals they followed) were educated in leading Western educational institutions. Even today, some of them send their children to receive education in Western universities (Ottolenghi, 2014; Rosen, 2014).

This history plays an integral role in understanding the multiple sources of identification that make the Iranian national identity. The various, often conflicting sources of identification—religion, ethnic heritage, and the West, for example—are important to acknowledge when using a postcolonial perspective, such as the one used in this article. Bringing together literature on Iranian identity and online identity construction helps stress the conflicting discourses, practices, and positions informing the Iranian national identity constructed under #IranJeans.

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

To illustrate the process of identity construction via online platforms, I present an interpretive thematic analysis of tweets and images shared on Twitter under #IranJeans. In terms of data collection on Twitter, it has been established that sampling strategies depending solely on Twitter's API (the search widget) may be biased and lacking, as not all tweets are indexed or presented for each and every Twitter user (Driscoll & Walker, 2014; González-Bailón, Wang, Rivero, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2014). Hence, in this study, data were collected and analyzed manually through a nonrandom yet systematic sampling of #IranJeans.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, I manually collected 70 tweets that contained 70 images out of all tweets published in the week following Netanyahu's interview on BBC Persian TV. This week, October 6–12, 2013,

consists of the majority of tweets posted under #IranJeans. The 140 tweets and images were gathered as follows: First, a Twitter-based search of #IranJeans was conducted through the search engine offered on Twitter's website. Second, a sifting process was employed, focusing on images embedded within #IranJeans tweets. From each day of the mentioned week, the first 10 open tweets that included images were collected. By *open tweets*, I refer to tweets shared by users who did not set their personal profile to private and allowed full access to all content posted by them even to viewers who are not registered on Twitter. Given that the three last days of this week yielded fewer than 10 images for analysis (all of the days sampled had hundreds of tweets, yet some had fewer than 10 images embedded in them), I added extra tweets containing images from the first day of the sampling period. Thus, an emphasis was placed on the first hours of the online social reaction, stressing the immediate real-time aspects of the phenomenon. Some of these tweets or images were produced in Farsi, Italian, and Dutch, and were translated into English for this study by myself and other professional translators.

### **Data Analysis**

To study the tweets and images, I employed a thematic analysis to images and typed messages shared by users. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying and interpreting patterns of collective or shared meanings and experiences across a set of data. By using a thematic analysis in this study, I sought to unearth the salient and latent commonalities in a set of texts at different levels to uncover the common ways in which participants, individuals, or groups address different cultural occurrences (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2012). Following Dowdall and Golden's (1989) "layered analysis," I bring attention to the relations between written and imaged texts as well as to in-depth understanding of each, offering a nuanced manner of addressing data sets that compose both. This layered investigation calls for three analytical steps: appraisal, inquiry, and interpretation.

I opened the analysis with inquiry, concentrating on the collection of images as a whole. Through an inductive approach, I allowed the categories of analysis to emerge from the texts themselves through reoccurring patterns. Cross-data repetitions were identified and categorized into clusters. Then, clusters of similar, yet not overlapping, issues were gathered into themes. Thus, three categories of analysis were identified in the texts: character, location, and binary.

To create a rich reading of the texts, I then moved to the interpretation stage that focused on the varying manifestations of characters, locations, and binaries shared by users. First, I addressed the human characters featured in each image. Focusing on identity as a main concept in this study, I analyzed the relation of the characters with the jeans, the characters' appearances, and the identity markers associated with each character. Here, I addressed features that were included in the images themselves, such as age, gender, and religiosity. Similarly, identity references included in the typed text were sought. To generate an overarching analytical perspective, I also attempted to determine whether the message of the tweet and image conflicted with or complemented the notion of jeans being integral to the Iranian society, a perspective I applied to each of the three focal points. For example, as is shown later in the article, an image of a young man praying while wearing jeans was interpreted as religious identity and religion coexisting with jeans. In cases in which no character was featured in the image, I assessed the two other focal points used for the analysis.

The second focal point addressed in the interpretation stage was the location depicted in the image. Because this study focused on nationality, I attempted to identify where and how jeans were introduced in the Iranian public/national context. I address, for example, references to the periphery of Iran (i.e., jeans are not a matter of urban culture and are also worn outside big cities) or, in contrast, references to homes, rooms, and personal belongings that represent the private sphere. The third focal point addressed the binary of East and West, seeking to ground the analysis in postcolonial perspectives. In this context, I assessed whether users addressed the binary presented by Netanyahu and what relations they constructed between Iran and the West or between Iran and Western signifiers such as jeans.

Finally, I returned to the appraisal stage, giving attention to the relationship between the typed and imaged sources of information. Both the visual and typed aspects of the data set were analyzed using the same focal points and categories, with emphasis given to the framing function of the typed text. Thus, the three focal points—character, location, and binary—and the two overarching perspective of analysis—the relations between the communicated message and the jeans, as well as the relationship between the imaged and typed texts—allowed a flexible analysis that was concrete in terms of theory, but open enough to encompass variations of identity articulation.

In the following stage of the analysis, I sorted the different categories into two themes: “the many faces of Western identity” and “Iran as an oppressive religious nation.” Both themes are defined and further exemplified in the following section. These two themes were then interpreted in a broader theoretical framework, addressing issues of identity construction and cultural global binaries.

### **Constructing Identity, Refuting Cultural Misconceptions**

The thematic analysis of #IranJeans yielded two main themes. The first theme refers to the many faces of Western identity, focusing on the similarities between Iran and the West as described by Twitter users. It counters Netanyahu’s statement and depicts Iranian identity, at least to some extent, as Western. This theme covers images that oppose the established binary between Western and non-Western societies in the Iranian context, and focuses on the multiple identity markers individuals hold, some of which conflict. Within this theme, I discuss three subclusters that emerged through the analysis process. First, the private sphere cluster is presented, focusing on the articulation of national identity in users’ private lives. Second, the authentic cluster is discussed with a focus on Western descriptors (among them, jeans) as organically existing in the Iranian culture and identity. Here, users mostly refer to the “untouched” and “unedited” nature of the images, evidence of the Iranian authentic way of living. Third, the religious cluster is presented, discussing the ways in which users refute the alleged clash between Islam and Western identity markers through the use of #IranJeans. Based on these three themes, I argue that although users work to criticize Netanyahu’s paternalistic approach, they end up rearticulating existing colonialist binaries through affirmative opposition.

In contrast to the theme defined above, the second theme demonstrates the portrayal of Iran as an oppressive religious nation. This theme covers images that highlight violations of human rights in Iran (e.g., executions) and stress the lack of individual freedom backed by a theocracy. In this context, rather

than focusing on cultural similarities, users address the cultural and social differences between Iran and what they imagine the West to be (mainly through references to freedom). Within this theme, two subclusters emerged: a religious cluster and a human rights cluster. Highlighting oppressive conduct in Iran not only contributes to the “us-versus-them” rhetoric established in Netanyahu’s statement but also reveals an existing colonialist approach conflating religion, in particular, Islam, with non-Western conduct.

These two contradictory approaches, or groups, used the same signifiers (e.g., jeans and religion), and thus represent what Fiske (2010) calls the symbolic openness of jeans. Drawing on this line of thought, the case study of #IranJeans shows how the same semiotic richness is associated with the hashtags circulated by Twitter users. The dialogue created between users online and voices that criticize, question, and sometimes support the dominant Western perception of the Iranian identity and the East–West binary.

***“Hipsters Outside #Iran’s Museum of Cinema”:  
The Many Faces of Western Identity***

Many of the analyzed images and tweets framed Iran and Iranians through Western symbols, arguing not only that Iranians wear jeans but also that Iran holds many other Western characteristics. Tweets such as “Welcome to my room,” featuring a photo of a wardrobe filled with jeans items, stress the use of personal examples to counter Netanyahu’s statement.

In this cluster, the personal and the national are woven into one, articulating the presence of Western identity markers in Iran through the most intimate and personal existence of users. An example of such use is seen in a self-taken photo of a user dressed in jeans head to toe. The user’s outfit includes denim Converse shoes, a brand of sneakers highly associated with the United States. A question is written on the user’s hand: “No jeans, huh?” (see Figure 1). The most personal feature of a person, one’s body, is used here to prove that Netanyahu’s statement is wrong, as if stating, “The nation is me.” By sharing images of bedrooms, living rooms, and even a restroom, users demonstrate the personal sphere as it is connected to the national sphere and sense of national self.

Alongside the private aspect, a second group of tweets displays the Western nature of Iran through rhetoric of an “authentic” way of living. In this cluster, users attempt to present the unedited version of their day-to-day lives. This is not to say that other clusters identified in the data are inauthentic compared with this one. Rather, the language used under this cluster was found to stress the genuine aspect of wearing jeans. Shared images that are described as “a typical jeans-loving Iranian family in Tehran” or “My photo from last year’s winter” illustrate what users view as representative of Iranians wearing jeans. These images portray the daily Western aspects of Iran, mostly in public locations, in which wearing jeans is inseparable from other mundane acts. The rhetoric used by users in the authentic tweets stress that Western identity markers are also located in the periphery, outside Iran’s urban centers that might be considered more progressed or globalized. Weaving together the private and the public, the central and the peripheral, the local and the global, users stress the all-encompassing nature of Western identification in Iran.



***Figure 1. "No jeans, huh?" October 6, 2013.***

In line with this argument, one of the tweets in this cluster states, "Um, Western music doesn't seem to be the problem, either," presenting a photo of Metallica's band logo street graffiti (see Figure 2). This tweet ties rock music, also mentioned in Netanyahu's statement, to the Iranian public domain. The graffiti is juxtaposed with both veiled women and a gate ornamented with Farsi text. The Persian-Iranian components of the image supposedly conflict with the Western symbol. Tagged under #IranJeans, this tweet reveals yet again the wish to recontextualize Iranian identity, bridging the local with the global. Drawing on multiple sources of cultural influence, users communicate a multilayered national identity that transcends Netanyahu's cultural misconception. It is possible to argue that users simply note the Western aspects of Iranian identity. But the message constructed by these tweets is more complex than just saying, "See, we are Western." The message transcends the simplistic use of the jeans as a symbol of Western cultures, creating interesting interplay between oppositional voices and colonizing practices.



**Figure 2. Metallica's band logo street graffiti. October 10, 2013.**

By using the hashtag on Twitter, users find a unique space to negotiate their identity and refute cultural misconceptions on a transnational level. They bring together varying influences, local and global, Western and Iranian, and secular and religious, to stress the Western nature of the Iranian identity. The Iranian national identity constructed by Twitter users under #IranJeans challenges the readily used terms of West versus East and calls for a more nuanced discussion of the different levels in which these are experienced in every society and identity. This construction process works in the logic of the third space, as conceptualized by Bhabha (1994), allowing users to recontextualize the Iranian identity and fuse multiple identity markers and present them anew.

However, alongside the simplistic reading of the jeans as a symbol of freedom, I further unpack the notion of the colonialist binary produced by users and by the hashtag. By using jeans as the main reference to the West, users in fact rearticulate its role as a marker of Western cultures. Presenting jeans in an Iranian context, users re-create the colonization process associated with Western attire, further constructing colonized identities that are not associated with jeans. That is, users might oppose Netanyahu's statement, but they do not oppose the binary between groups that wear jeans (Western) and those that do not (non-Western). By further using the symbol of jeans to refer to Western identities, users reveal how the logic of affirmative opposition works. The use of jeans as a symbol associated with Iran

positions Iran on the Western side of the cultural spectrum, re-creating the binary all together. Thus, users both oppose their misrepresentation via online media, but at the same time they affirm the East–West binary through the very same platforms. Using colonizing symbols to oppose cultural misconceptions, users are able to simultaneously oppose and affirm the same social constructions.

This dual position, which I define as affirmative opposition, can be further unpacked through additional tweets. An image shared under #IranJeans features two young men, both dressed in jeans and Nike shoes; one wears what seem to be Ray-Ban sunglasses (a brand highly associated with the U.S. Air Force) and the other wears a T-shirt with the U.S. flag printed on it. The two young men hold skateboards, and are described as “#Tehran Skateboarders Alireza & Ehsan” (see Figure 3). This image stresses the cultural Western “normativity” of youth in Iran, skating, dressed in American fashion, all in the heart of Tehran. Consistent with this example, an image described as “Hipsters outside #Iran’s Museum of Cinema” (see Figure 4) was shared under #IranJeans. The two images together suggest that young Iranians’ culture is similar to European and American hipster culture, linking Tehran with other global hipster-populated major cities such as New York and Berlin. Hipster culture is defined as the main subculture mass media outlets use to present new trends for youth pop culture. Hipsters are progenitors of self-consciously cool, underground, local art and music scenes (Hendlin, Anderson, & Glantz, 2010).



**Figure 3.** “#Tehran Skateboarders Alireza & Ehsan.” October 8, 2013.



**Figure 4. "Hipsters outside #Iran's Museum of Cinema." October 9, 2013.**

Considering jeans as a Western symbol, the images emphasize how Western culture markers go naturally hand in hand with everyday Iranian culture. Moreover, these examples demonstrate that Iranian Western aspects are not present only in the private spheres, but are a part of common culture that is present in the streets, museums, art, and fashion. Going back to the discussion about affirmative opposition, we can see that while users identify Iran as Western, hipster, and progressive, opposing cultural misconceptions that deem Iran as non-Western, they also reconstruct the West versus East binary through negotiating their authentic position on the Western, "cultural," or "civilized" end of the binary. The multiple challenges faced by users who wish to counter Netanyahu's comment are thus presented through "normalization" and simplification of the Iranian national identity: normalization in terms of emphasizing similarity to Western societies, and simplification in terms of reducing Muslim and ethnic historical identifiers into the East-West binary. Such a binary might help users formulate an identity that seems comprehensive and simplified enough for Western consumption. Yet, this is done by ignoring some social complexities that are crucial for resisting external paternalistic Western notions about Iran, such as those presented in Netanyahu's comment. Internal Iranian issues of the cultural and religious freedom experienced by individuals in Iran are also overlooked. Instead of only resisting Netanyahu's comment, stressing the Western features of the Iranian identity overly simplify the critical call of the hashtag.

The religious component of the Iranian identity also plays a role in this discussion. Some of the images and tweets illustrate being Western and Muslim as equally inherent features of the current Iranian culture. Although often described as fundamentally dangerous to the Western lifestyle (Ali et al., 2011), Twitter users do not consider Islam as conflicting with Western cultures. These users represent themselves and others around them as Muslim and Western simultaneously. For example, users present women wearing jeans and a veil or a chador, Muslim signs for feminine modesty, while others present men in jeans during Muslim prayer routines (see Figure 5). Coupling religion with jeans, users oppose Netanyahu's argument about the current religious leadership, calling to view religion, in particular, Islam, and Western culture as complementing rather than conflicting.



**Figure 5. Praying. October 7, 2013.**

An image of Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, advances the use of religious identity markers under #IranJeans. In the photo, Khamenei is conversing with a young boy. The boy in the photo is the son of Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, an Iranian scientist who was allegedly killed by Israeli forces. The tweet featuring this image states, "Best #jeans photo so far: with #Iran SL [Supreme Leader]" (see Figure 6), possibly referring to the jeans worn by the young boy. This tweet adds a political statement into the mix, criticizing both Netanyahu's mistake and Israel's diplomatic conduct. This image represents not only the multiple and conflicting sources conflated by users under their definition of the Iranian identity but also the new ability to partake in transnational political discussions



like never before. On the one hand, using the symbol of the jeans under #IranJeans leads to the reconstruction of existing cultural binaries, namely, West versus East cultures. Here, users also downplay the impact of the Iranian regime on the levels of freedom experienced by different groups, such as women, political opposition groups, and so on. On the other hand, we do see users' engagement in discussions that were relatively closed for them thus far, contributing unique images and perspectives about Islam. Bringing multiple identification markers into this new space of interaction, users exemplify the complex nature of identity construction processes, opposing while affirming cultural oppressions.



**Figure 6. Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei. October 6, 2013.**

To summarize the findings related to the first theme, Twitter users attempt to counter Netanyahu's depiction of Iranian identity by regaining control of the representation task. A rhetorical pattern of using jeans as evidence was found among tweets related to this theme. Users prove through visuals, Iranian public domains, private and domestic spheres, and even their bodies that Iranian nationality is completely different from Netanyahu's perception. By using #IranJeans, users connect themselves to a political statement, aiming at reconstructing Iranian identity against the backdrop of Netanyahu's interview. Drawing on the symbolic openness of jeans, users highlight similarities between Iran and the West, positioning themselves alongside Western, large, global, and hipster urban centers around the world. However, using the symbol of jeans to represent Iran does not mean that users oppose existing cultural binaries represented by jeans. Rather, users reproduce the binary of East versus West culture while aiming at rehabilitating Iran's geopolitical and cultural image.

***"And Since When Are Jeans a Symbol of Freedom?":  
Iran as an Oppressive Religious Nation***

#IranJeans was originated with the purpose of opposing Netanyahu's statement. As the thematic analysis shows, not all of the following tweets were consistent with this message; some of them even challenged it. Tweets and images that criticized the Iranian regime, for example, demonstrate a group of users who do not view Iran as Western or liberal, but at the same time do not necessarily support Netanyahu. Opposing the portrayal of Iran as a Western progressive nation, users construct narratives that conflict with the original purpose of the hashtag. They emphasize the oppressive characteristics of the Iranian religious regime rather than its Western nature. Here, I found two subthemes. The first is related to religion, in which Twitter users note the arbitrary use of jeans as a Western identity marker. The second focuses on civil rights violations, pointing out that jeans are not, in fact, a signifier of Western societies and values. Interestingly, Twitter users who produce such arguments draw the same visual components as the group of Western-related tweets presented above. Users employ the same hashtag and the same signifier of jeans to portray the exact opposite argument.

For example, by retweeting the photo of Ayatollah Khamenei and the young boy (see Figure 6), a Twitter user disputes the presentation of jeans as a Western symbol. The user asks, "And since when are jeans a symbol of freedom?" By doing so, the user challenges both Netanyahu's claim and other users' construction of Iranian Western identity through the image of jeans. This user strongly ties the West with the concepts of religious freedom, inconsistent with the religiosity of Khamenei and current Iranian theocracy. At the same time, the user points at the arbitrary use of jeans as a Western symbol. This image is especially interesting in the context of visual representations of Iranian identity. The same objects (Ayatollah Khamenei's photo but also jeans and hashtags) are appropriated by different groups to signify contrasting points of view on Iranian identity. For one group, the jeans, and by default the image depicting jeans in the Iranian context, are signifiers of Western markers in Iran. For another group, the same signifiers signify oppression and extreme religiosity, sharply contradicting Western values and perceptions.

Thus, the semiotic richness associated by Fiske (2010) with the jeans allows two conflicting messages to draw on the same signifiers to create their message. This, in turn, positions the hashtag as a highly polysemic medium pulling together multiple, and even conflicting, messages at once. Yet, the symbolic richness of jeans works as a double-edged sword for the original argument of Twitter users using #IranJeans. Under the same hashtag, users also point at political harassment, aggressive policing acts against citizens, and human rights violations such as executions practiced in Iran. They do not argue that these are taking place because people are wearing jeans, but rather in spite of the fact the people are wearing jeans in Iran. Thus, users note that clothing is not an adequate predictor or indicator of freedom, democracy, or equality.

Several images of executions held in Iran were circulated under #IranJeans. These critically approach the conjunction of jeans with democratic societies. An execution image was posted by an American user, possibly of Persian descent (based on her username and Twitter profile), "Advocate of regime change in Iran; Independent specialist in Middle East. Secular democracy and individual freedom

worldwide. Stand for international human rights.” The image shared by this user is the execution of Majid Kavousifar, an Iranian citizen, executed by the Iranian regime in 2007 (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Execution of Majid Kavousifar. October 8, 2013.**

Kavousifar was accused of the murder of a well-known Iranian judge, Hassan Moghadas, who was described by human rights activists as constantly ruling against democracy activism in Iran. The user who posted the photo asks, “Remember Majid’s Smile while he was getting hanged on [sic] his #IranJeans?” The tweet also included the following organizations: @NYtimes, @CNNi, @FoxNews, @latimes, @WSJ, and @amnesty, calling for an international intervention against such acts. Again, we can see the global scope of the discussion, bringing together users and established old generations of media outlets into the same transnational sphere. This image does not stand in line with the images using jeans to demonstrate Iranian freedom and Western identity. It highlights that jeans should not be addressed as a symbol of Western values, and that because Iranians wear jeans does not diminish from antidemocratic and anti-human-rights acts of the Iranian regime. This user repositions Iran as a non-Western state, in line with Netanyahu’s argument, using #IranJeans to oppose the hashtag’s original oppositional message.



Additional public executions are presented by users (see Figure 8 and Figure 9) to stress non-Western conduct in Iran. Whereas Netanyahu argues that jeans represent the West and the chain of signified (freedom, democracy) associated with it, users argue that jeans are not a scale on which freedom, liberty, and democracy should be measured. As one of the users suggests alongside an image of execution, "This is Iran today. Look, they really wear jeans!" (see Figure 9). These arguments do not necessarily support Netanyahu, but rather point out the fallacies in associating jeans with freedom and the West. The argument constructed under the hashtag evolves, bringing conflicting voices into a discussion about the nature of Iranian national identity. The same symbolic richness that allowed users to use jeans to draw similarities between Iran and the West now serves the opposite argument, revealing the arbitrary use of attire as an identity marker. Both #IranJeans and jeans themselves evolve through this discussion, becoming signifiers of two opposite arguments about Iran's Western and non-Western nature. The two signifiers encompass, at once, the two sides of the Western-Eastern binary, representing Iran as simultaneously Western and non-Western.

**Figure 8. Public execution. October 6, 2013.**



**Figure 9. Public execution. October 6, 2013.**

Other tweets have addressed the matter of aggressive regime measures in a more humoristic yet still critical manner. In a caricature shared under #IranJeans, Mana Neyestani, a well-known Iranian artist, assures Netanyahu that Iranians do wear Jeans. The image shows a woman in a veil being chased by an armed soldier/police officer while both are wearing jeans (see Figure 10). The female character says, "You see, Netanyahu, we all wear jeans." The caricature sarcastically portrays the complexity of the situation highlighted in Netanyahu's interview and later in the circulation of the hashtag.



**Figure 10. "We all wear jeans." October 6, 2103.**

First, as argued in the shared image, Netanyahu is wrong and Iranians are in fact allowed to and do wear jeans freely. The added commentary, however, implies that jeans do not reflect the well-being of citizens in Iran. This criticism is directed at the Iranian government and Iranian people at the same time; calling out the fact that Iranians wear jeans and Netanyahu is wrong does not make the Iranian regime less aggressive toward its citizens. In a way, Neyestani's tweet notes that when it comes to questions of culture and politics, the situation is too complex to be addressed through one lens and one single symbol. The tweet criticizes the Iranian state and government but also calls the Iranian public to rethink Iranian identity as it is presented in Netanyahu's statement as well as in other users' tweets tagged under #IranJeans.

In terms of identity construction, the examples presented under this theme highlight the complexities of living in a country whose citizens contend with both internal political oppression and widespread misunderstanding externally. In Netanyahu's statement, Western identity is associated with personal and democracy-related freedom. Personal freedom is tied to the right to choose what to wear (i.e., jeans) or which culture to consume (i.e., Western music). Democracy-related freedoms are associated with the right to vote in free elections. Users negate this assertion through jeans as a symbol of Netanyahu's ignorance. Cultural freedom, according to them, does exist in Iran. On the one hand, users demonstrate these freedoms, as they are practiced in Iran. On the other hand, users ignore other sartorial laws, veiling law, for example, and nonelected dominant governmental institutions in Iran, such as the

Iranian judiciary. It is evident in the examples presented above that two forces work simultaneously, creating a complex understanding of Iranian nationality and culture. Thus, paternalistic and colonial approaches assumed by external players exacerbate misunderstanding about Iran and its culture. At the same time, the discussion created under #IranJeans and the use of jeans as an arbitrary symbol of Western cultures beg the question about the levels of freedom experienced de facto in Iran.

In terms of media usage, the "evolution" of the analyzed tweets and images demonstrates how a hashtag that originated as a counterstatement against Netanyahu is used to tag a counterstatement against Iran and against the original message of the hashtag. Using #IranJeans, multiple voices negotiated the characteristics of Iranian identity, employing different descriptors to articulate it. Thus, through the medium of the hashtag, Twitter users were able to participate in a transnational discourse and to recontextualize Iranian nationality.

In this context, new players enter transnational discussions, negotiating and even resisting the mainstream portrayal of their identities. A mediated discussion that was previously open to political elites is now circulated, varied, and contested by individual users who can address the topic from their own perspectives. The binary constructed between Iran and the West is presented through narratives that are not often featured in mainstream media. Instead of the regular "anti-Western" religious calls hailing from Iran, Twitter users show the world that their religiosity does not conflict with perceived Western markers. In fact, Western markers are central to Iranian identity and coexist with other identity markers such as religion. These calls, in turn, evoke a larger discussion of whether or not identity is inherent or constructed, arbitrary or not, using jeans as a point of reference. These arguments, although conflicting in nature, further exemplify what Carey (1989) described as the ritualistic nature of media. Online media platforms allow groups to question, articulate, and affirm their values, identities, and points of view through circulation of media texts, new among them the hashtag.

### Conclusions

The ideas and questions raised in this study help us understand how a social networking site enables transnational political and cultural dialogue in the context of Iranian national identity. The investigation of #IranJeans on Twitter demonstrates social media users' efforts to negotiate and reconstruct this identity, refuting cultural misconceptions through images, hashtags, and tweets. The first theme depicted in the data revealed the many faces of Western identity, highlighting similarities between Iran and the West. The second theme revealed the depiction of Iran as an oppressive religious nation. The analyzed tweets and images exposed a nuanced understanding of what it means to be both Iranian and Western. Together, the tweets and themes illustrate how social networking sites and online participation provide users with a cultural space to fuse but also to re-create the East-West binary and to negotiate their understanding of a multilayered identity consisting of religion, nationality, and global and local cultures alike.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis and discussion presented. The first relates to the process of identity construction via online environments, and the second focuses on postcolonial thought and the East-West binary. In this study, I stress that a national identity is experienced locally,

but reflects global issues. It bridges what is internal and external to a society, because it can at once relate to both religiosity and globalization, both oppression and freedom, and both Middle Eastern Islam and the West. Twitter users demonstrate through the use of #IranJeans that identity, like many online and material cultural artifacts (e.g., jeans), is fluid, unfinished, and open for interpretation and manipulation (Fiske, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013).

These unfinished identities are constructed, circulated, celebrated, and criticized online by individual users. Twitter users who support Iran formulate a positive, proud image of being Iranian. Individual users take an active role in the construction of their own national identity, using hashtags to connect themselves with other like-minded users and make a larger political statement about their identity. Whereas older generations of mass media provided audiences with the representation of their identity, new media platforms and tools, such as the hashtag, provide them a space to negotiate, reformulate, and evaluate their identity. This enables individuals to participate in a political and cultural discourse that was, until recent years, handled only by states' official representatives, mass media outlets, and other political elites.

This recently developed representation process is followed by a second conclusion related to Bhabha's (1994) articulation of the third space. As presented in the literature review, Bhabha conceptualized the third space as a sphere that ensures the ability to formulate oppositional hybrid identities. In that space, the meanings and symbolic aspects of identities and cultures have "no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (p. 55). As shown, the same signifiers—jeans and hashtags—were used to signify conflicting messages about Iran, nationality, freedom, and Western societies. The representation and identification processes captured under #IranJeans support the argument of the third space. The hashtag advances a combination of signifiers that lead to the formulation of multilayered identities through a transcultural discussion. However, this process also represents what I define as an affirmative opposition, a cultural act that simultaneously opposes and reaffirms existing social structures.

By using jeans to articulate the Iranian national identity, users reaffirm the usage of this signifier within the Western versus non-Western binary. On the one hand, the representation of jeans allows users to negate and criticize Netanyahu's poor understanding of Iranian culture through an online mediated third space. On the other hand, through jeans, users signify the "normative" Iranian identity, one that holds similarities to other Western centers around the world; users in fact reaffirm the binary they ask to oppose. By formulating their own identity, users re-create the normative "Westernness" signified by jeans, only now they are able to position themselves on the "correct" end of the spectrum—the Western, normal, modern end.

As the discussion users create is grounded in the binary model they wish to oppose, a form of nonbinary discussion is not offered or achieved. Hence, I argue that although online media platforms do allow users to take part in a transcultural discussion and circulate positive self-representations, these outlets also enable the affirmation of existing binaries. By using the term *affirmative opposition*, I stress that whereas some oppositional calls negate negative misconceptions about an oppressed group, they can, in fact, repeat and confirm the social narrative that established the very same oppression. As exemplified

through the case of #IranJeans on Twitter, even acts of rebellion and opposition are able to perpetuate oppressive social and cultural binaries.

Although the last part of this article takes a somewhat pessimistic approach to postcolonial studies, it is important to stress the significance of the narrative identifying Western identity markers in Iran. Much of the international coverage of Iran, specifically surrounding the nuclear negotiation, Western sanctions, and the relationship with Israel, stresses the religious leadership's lack of cooperation with Western countries. Yet, online, we are able to find a more complex discussion about the West, Iran, religion, and culture. The formulation of an identity (oppositional or not) that draws on Muslim, Persian, and Western identity markers represents an opportunity for shared language—one that can facilitate future negotiations, cultural exchanges, and openness between Iran and other societies that presently seem to be in conflict. Like the contemporary Iranian identity, national identities are nested and multilayered and draw on different, often conflicting, origins. This understanding is essential to note in the context of every cultural and political exchange, and is crucial for facilitating communication and fruitful dialogue within and among societies.

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