

Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on YouTube Dynamics in Iran: A Case Study of Iranian YouTube Content Creators

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social media and digital evolution in Iran, with a specific focus on YouTube and its role in the Iranian content creator community. Drawing from communication and media theories such as "Uses and Gratifications," "Authoritarian Media Theory," and "Media Dependency Theory," this study aims to investigate the motivating factors behind Iranian YouTube community dynamics amidst Iran's media censorship and the influence of Iranian authorities on the growth of User Generated Content (UGC) during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using a content analysis methodology, this research reviews three of Iran's most popular YouTube channels, including Puria Putak (Channel: @Putak), Farshad Dehghani (Channel: @Farshadsilent), and Kimia Ravangar (Channel @Miaplays). The analysis includes various metrics for social media Analytics Research, such as User Motivations For Engagement, the impacts of Engagement Metrics (views, likes, and comments) on user perceptions, and the formation of Groups and Communities. The paper concludes that the COVID-19 era resulted in a notable increase in YouTube followers in Iran across all top-tier channels, impacted the content production agenda of top-tier Iranian YouTubers post-lockdowns, boosted the growth of these channels beyond their PRE-COVID-19 levels in Iran, and introduced new challenges for smaller Iranian YouTubers to adapt their channels to the new situation, especially those with fewer resources and budget.

Keywords: YouTube, YouTuber, Content, User-Generated-Content (UGC), Trend, Vlog, Iran, COVID-19 Pandemic

ÖZ

Bu makale, YouTube'a ve YouTube'un İran içerik yaratıcısı topluluğundaki rolüne odaklanarak, COVID-19 salgınının İran'da sosyal medya ve dijital evrim üzerindeki önemli etkisini incelemektedir. "Kullanımlar ve Doyumlar", "Otoriter Medya Teorisi" ve "Medya Bağımlılığı Teorisi" gibi iletişim ve medya teorilerinden yararlanan bu çalışma, İran'ın medya sansürü ve İranlı yetkililerin etkisi altında İran YouTube topluluğu dinamiklerinin ardındaki motive edici faktörleri araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. COVID-19 salgını sırasında Kullanıcı Tarafından Oluşturulan İçeriğin (UGC) büyümesi hakkında. İçerik Analizi yöntemini kullanan bu araştırma, Puria Putak (Kanal: @Putak), Farshad Dehghani (Kanal: @Farshadsilent) ve Kimia Ravangar (Kanal @Miaplays) dahil olmak üzere İran'ın en popüler üç YouTube kanalını inceliyor. Analiz, Etkileşim İçin Kullanıcı Motivasyonları, Etkileşim Metriklerinin (görüntülemeler, beğeniler ve yorumlar) kullanıcı algıları üzerindeki etkileri ve Grupların ve Toplulukların oluşumu gibi Sosyal Medya Analitik Araştırması için çeşitli ölçümleri içerir. Makale, COVID-19 Pandemisinin İran'daki tüm üst düzey kanallarda YouTube takipçilerinde kayda değer bir artışa yol açtığı, üst düzey İranlı YouTuber'ların karantina sonrası içerik üretim gündemini etkilediği ve bu kanalların büyümesini önceki dönemlerin ötesinde artırdığı sonucuna varıyor. - İran'daki COVID-19 seviyeleri ve özellikle daha az kaynağa ve bütçeye sahip olan küçük İranlı YouTuber'ların kanallarını yeni duruma uyarlamaları için yeni zorluklar ortaya çıktı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: YouTube, YouTuber, İçerik, Kullanıcı Tarafından Oluşturulan İçerik (UGC), Trend, Vlog, İran, COVID-19 Pandemisi

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn have grown substantially, especially among younger populations. (Zohouri, 2020). The introduction of social media into public and private life has been revolutionary, profoundly altering how people communicate, share information, and interact with the world. The history of social media and the Internet in Iran before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 21st century has always had a political tie to its story. Despite its unusual nature as a video-sharing platform rather than a messaging tool, YouTube was no exception. On December 3, 2006, Iran first banned access to YouTube and numerous other websites after claiming them to violate social and moral rules of conduct. The YouTube suspension occurred after a video surfaced online purporting to show an Iranian soap opera star having sex (Tait, 2006).

Among popular social media platforms, YouTube stands out as a long-format video-sharing network and web service developed by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim, former employees of PayPal. Registered on February 14, 2005, its headquarters are in San Bruno, California (Hosch, 2024). Shortly after its limited beta launch in May 2005, YouTube began attracting around 30,000 visitors daily. By its official launch on December 15, 2005, the platform had already served daily over two million video views worldwide. Within a month, this number skyrocketed to over 25 million views by January 2006. The site's content increased, surpassing 25 million videos in March 2006, with over 20,000 new videos uploaded daily. By the summer

of 2006, YouTube was streaming over 100 million videos daily, signaling its exponential growth trajectory.

1.1 Aim of the study

This research aims to provide comprehensive data into the turbulent evolution of YouTube as a banned social media platform within Iranian strict media and Internet structure amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran and the unconventional media and press policies that have been in effect in the Iranian media landscape. Furthermore, this study tries to explore and provide literature on the growth dynamic of enthusiastic Iranian content creators and popular user-generated content in Iranian social media communities, of which many are the youngest generation, on a platform that has the potential to provide financial solid reliability with for youth in Iran and be treated as a full-time career.

1.2 The Motivation for the Study

The primary motivating factors for conducting this study include the lack of academic research on social media consumption practices in Iran. There are a small number of scholarly articles and international references about the actuality of Iranian culture and its complete social structure in terms of the social media landscape. This study, therefore, is meant to reference Iranian culture and history for international research projects and to help clear some international misconceptions about this country, not just for a global audience but for Iranian people from the perspective of an Iranian communication scholar. The isolated and authoritarian nature of media and media-related behaviors in Iran prevents international networks from having a clear and uncensored picture of Iran despite it being one of the largest media and Internet users in the Middle East.

In addition, the unavailability of unrestricted access to world media and sanctions on Iran have created unique consumption behaviors and talents to bypass limitations in this society, making it an extraordinary case study to review. I intend to fill the gap by conducting this study from a unique and holistic perspective as an Iranian researcher who experienced this radical change during the pandemic era. By so doing, I aim to help create quality references for future research on this topic.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Due to its role in the nation's popular uprisings following the 2009 elections, the Internet, particularly online social media sites, received significant scholarly attention in Iran. The significance of this election was that it became a very controversial event in Iranian geopolitical history because of a heated campaign between two political parties and massive protests that followed the results of the election, also known as the Green Movement, when Iran's news agency announced that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the election with 62 % of the votes and beating Mir-Hossein Mousavi. (Addis, 2009). Following this historical point, there has been a notable concentration of political research on the Internet, particularly on partisan platforms and politically active forums. Therefore, there is currently a tendency in the literature to minimize or ignore several topics significant to Iranian users and ignore indirect political issues and concerns of the Iranian web (Honari, 2015).

To have a complete understanding of a wide range of interests and topics, and thus a diverse group of Iranian Internet users, it is necessary to provide a larger picture and vision of the web in these societies if one is interested in understanding the role of the Internet in society and to understand society through the lens of the Internet. (Rogers, 2013).

Primarily, it is a pioneering effort to probe the intricate links between the COVID-19 pandemic and YouTube consumption habits within the unique context of Iranian Society. This investigation is particularly noteworthy due to the scarcity of prior English-language studies addressing this phenomenon within the Iranian Society. The fact that similar studies are rare highlights the originality and significance of this work, establishing it as a vital addition to our understanding of how people around the world consume media during pandemics.

Second, Iran makes an interesting case study due to its unique geopolitical and socioeconomic location as a Middle Eastern nation with a complicated social structure. Regarding this complexity, Iranians have a powerful sense of class structure. They used to divide their society into tiers, or “Tabagheh,” which were distinguished by numbers: the first tier corresponded to the high classes, the second to the middle classes, and the third to the poorer classes. Under the influence of radical ideology, society is now believed to be divided into three groups: the wealthy (a term typically prefixed with derogatory adjectives), the middle classes, and the “Mostazafin” (a term that means disinherited). Because each of the three major classes is subdivided into various social divisions, Iranian society has always been more complex than a three-tier structure implies. Both urban and rural communities have seen these divisions. (Curtis, 2008)

When considered in the context of Iran, the pandemic's dramatic effects on media consumption patterns take on even more depth and relevance. This environment functions as a microcosm in which the complex interactions between technology, cultural norms, and the pandemic may be examined to reveal the many facets of media consumption in these extraordinary times. The study's focus on YouTube production and consumption in Iran, a nation where the platform is officially banned, introduces

even more complexity. Studying for what purposes Iranians use YouTube despite legal restrictions adds another level of interest to the findings. This aspect illuminates the adaptability and durability of media consumption patterns. It offers insightful information about how Iranians navigate technological and political barriers to access and interact with digital content.

Thirdly, the consequences of research go beyond academic accomplishments and have wide-ranging effects in the real world. Legislators, journalists, and policymakers can all directly benefit from the research. By using this information, policymakers may better inform measures that support responsible media consumption and improve Internet accessibility, ultimately fostering a more educated and connected society. Armed with a nuanced understanding of Iranian viewers' preferences and challenges, media practitioners can adapt their content generation and distribution strategies to align with the dynamic media landscape shaped by political and technological constraints. By doing so, they can effectively cater to the needs and tastes of Iranian audiences, fostering a more meaningful and resonant engagement. Scholars can use the findings to further their understanding of media consumption in non-Western contexts and offer insightful viewpoints to the continuing international discussion about the pandemic's disruptive effects on media environments. Essentially, this research goes beyond the limitations of scholarly investigation, emerging as a valuable tool with real-world implications for individuals influencing and managing the complex nexus between media, technology, and society.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The progress of research throughout this study is based on several communication and media studies theories, including the "Uses and Gratifications Theory," which structures the research on how followers of Iranian YouTube channels

interact with their community, and press-related theories such as the "Authoritarian Theory of the Press," which is a dominant part of four theories of the Press (Siebert, 1984), and "Media Dependency Theory" (Rokeach, 1976).

According to the Uses and Gratifications theory (Hanson, 2022), audience members are active receivers of information of their choosing, motivated by a perpetual pursuit of gratifications, with the media trying to meet those wishes. This viewpoint is the foundation for understanding the various reasons Iranians utilize YouTube and the enjoyment they gain from its material. The study's perspective on media literacy and community gatekeeping is consistent with this theory's emphasis on individual agency and an active role for the audience. The idea implies that personal characteristics, cultural settings, and external factors all work together to create media consumption decisions, which reflects the study's goal of investigating how Iranian cultural norms and individual motivations influence YouTube usage.

The principles of the two chosen press and media theories, authoritarian media, and media dependency, enable the research to investigate how the strictly controlled media of Iran operates and how these state-implemented restrictions on international media affect the growth of YouTube among Iranian Internet users as well as the type of user interactions that follow these restrictions.

1.5 Methodology

The research tools for data collection for this thesis include content analysis and social media research with both qualitative and quantitative approaches, considering the parameters such as (1) User motivations for engagement; (2) Impacts of user engagement (views, likes, and comments) on user perceptions; and (3) Formation of groups and communities (Khan, 2022). To evaluate the effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic on content production dynamics and audience engagement of the top three Iranian channels.

This study quantitatively analyses the most popular (most subscribed) Persian Language YouTube Channels (@putak, @farhsadsilent, and @sogang) and their associated individual creators during the COVID-19 pandemic era to evaluate the changes in metrics of audience engagements (comments, likes, dislikes) and upload frequency and figure if the lifestyle changes in Iranian audience impacted the factors mentioned above. Furthermore, a qualitative approach is employed to evaluate the followers' motivation for engagement with the creator's content and subsequent community.

As for data sampling and collection, for each of the three chosen YouTube channels, the two average viewed videos on different topics, from before the COVID-19 lockdown threshold in Iran (March 27th, 2020) and two videos of the same issues from after the mentioned threshold are chosen from each of these Iranian YouTube channels, in addition 20 overall quantity of the upload is an approximately one-year period after the COVID. In summary, the methodology mentioned above and tools have been decided to suit YouTube content analysis needs, inspired and advised by seminal literature such as "Research YouTube: Methods, Tools, Analytics" (Khan, 2022), "Boots on the Ground" (Nashmi, 2017) and "Mass Communication: Living in a Media World" (Hanson, 2022).

1.6 Research Questions

RQ1: How have the lifestyle changes in Iranian society following COVID-19 lockdowns influenced the Channels' viewership metrics (Number of views, watch time, etc.) of popular YouTubers?

RQ2: How did popular Iranian YouTubers adjust their upload frequency and content agenda after COVID-19 restrictions in Iran took place?

RQ3: How have audience engagement metrics (e.g., likes, comments) from popular Iranian YouTubers' channels evolved throughout the COVID-19 restrictions?

RQ4: How have the popular Iranian YouTubers adjusted the quality of their production during the evolution of the COVID-19 lifestyle in Iran?

1.7 Limitations of the Study

“The World Wide Web, and particularly online forums, provide an alternate venue for studying and comprehending closed societies and their growth, given the limitations of in-country and survey research in these cultures. Despite awareness of the Internet's significance to political change in the Arab uprisings and the 2009 elections post-protests, existing research tends to focus on quite particular political debates and behaviors on partisan online forums” (Honari, 2015)

Researching YouTube content in a nation with severe media censorship and no official affiliation with the platform has several intrinsic drawbacks. First, since some subjects or viewpoints may be routinely left out or hidden, the government's restrictions on access to information could lead to an incomplete picture of the content landscape.

Furthermore, the lack of official ties to YouTube may make comprehensive data collection unavailable, which could obstruct attempts to gain a thorough picture of user behavior, trends, and patterns of material distribution. The representativeness of sampled data may also be compromised by the lack of openness and possible Internet access limitations, raising questions about the conclusions' generalizability. Furthermore, the covert nature of YouTube use in these settings might make finding volunteers and gathering accurate user-generated material challenging, compromising the study's validity and authenticity.

These limitations underscore the complexities inherent in researching YouTube content within contexts of extreme media censorship, emphasizing the need for cautious interpretation and acknowledgment of the constraints imposed by the political and media environment. The boldest points among these numerous limitations for researching YouTube content within Iran include, firstly, inaccessibility to authorized and legitimate international media sources due to international sanctions on Iran and limitations and censorship implemented by the Iranian government. Secondly, conducting surveys, polls, interviews, etc., for data collection, however confidential, would not be sanctioned by official institutes in Iran and will not be endorsed by the government. They created complications in getting first-hand data, limiting the data to seemingly unofficial sources abroad and a few scholarly articles. Lastly, unusual methods used by Iranian people to access international media (including common streaming platforms and satellite channels) make the integrity of the study hard to maintain throughout the survey.

1.8 Frequent Terms

Vlog/ Vlogging (Video Blog/ -ing): is a record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you film and publish on the Internet” (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2024). A vlog, or ‘video blog,’ is a digital record of ideas and thoughts published and shared in video format. People who create and post vlogs on social media and other platforms are known as vloggers. (socialpilot.com, 2024)

YouTuber: a person who often uses the website YouTube, especially someone who makes and appears in videos on the website (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2024).

User-Generated-Content (UGC): User-generated content (also known as UGC or consumer-generated content) is original, brand-specific content created by

customers and published on social media or other channels. UGC comes in many forms, including images, videos, reviews, testimonials, or even podcasts (Beveridge, 2023).

Trend / Media Trends: social media trends refer to the constantly changing behaviors and topics prevalent on social media (socialbee.com, 2024). Anything trending can be any topic, event, or individual that many people discuss on social media (Huja, 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of coronavirus, an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2023) and the COVID-19 pandemic emerged at the end of 2019, as of 2023 it swept the world for more than two years, causing immeasurable damage to the lives and economies of the world (Hao, 2022).

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following segment with review related literature from various subjects associated with the paper's topic including dominant theories in social media and YouTube research and the timeline of social media research in Iran before and during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

In its early stages, scholarly research on YouTube focused mainly on the platform's role in distributing audiovisual cultural content created by its users. For example, Lange (2007) investigated the relationship between video sharing and social networking and discovered varied degrees of publicity that content providers assign to their videos. On the computer science side, Cheng (2008) compiled a massive collection of distribution statistics that provided an early overview of video-sharing habits on the site. However, two edited volumes proved to be the most significant milestones in early YouTube research. Snickars and Vonderau's edited collection (Snickars, 2009) highlighted the platform's relevance for cultural production practices. In contrast, Burgess and Green's book (Burgess, 2009) overlooked its unparalleled power to host, facilitate, display, and store culture (Arthurs, 2018).

2.1 Authoritarian Media Theory

Iran's media dynamics exhibit parallels with the authoritarian theory of mass communication, reflecting a unique socio-political context, which can be testified for by Iran's rank of 12 out of 100 on global freedom and 11 out of 100 on Internet freedom (freedomhouse.org, 2022). Like historical authoritarian practices, the

Iranian government exerts significant control over mass media through various measures. This control includes censorship, licensing regulations, and legal restrictions, reminiscent of the English monarchs' tactics during the printing press's advent. The authoritarian idea of mass communication arose from Plato's philosophy (407-327 B.C.). When the printing press was established, the English rulers took this strategy by censoring, licensing, taxing, and enacting laws. It is a normative theory of mass communication that asserts that national power and authority influence and dominate the media. Although the state or people in power do not directly control the media, it must accept what the authorities seek and function following their wishes. The press and media cannot function independently, and their publications are suspected of censorship (Shraddha, 2018).

According to the Iranian Press law (2002) and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979), which established the right to freedom of expression and signified that right by wide-ranging restrictions on its exercise (Human Rights Watch, 1999), the dominant role of the authoritarian theory becomes much more straightforward. Iranian media outlets are supposed to follow government directions and press law stated in the Iranian constitution and refrain from criticizing the elopements of the Islamic government, ensuring that their narratives match the interests of the national regulations. The government frequently justifies its control over the media as necessary for national security and stability, putting state interests ahead of individual rights, especially during internal or external unrest such as political upheaval or regional conflicts.

Iranian authorities maintain control over the media through selective licensing and vague regulatory frameworks, hence the authoritarian theory's emphasis on control by the state. Certain media outlets are given preferential treatment or leniency,

but others face stringent rules or even license revocation if they diverge from the government's expectations. Various types of censorship, such as political, religious, and economic, limit the flow of information and maintain societal order.

Iranian media outlets are viewed as instruments of state power, helping to strengthen the government's authority and forward its agenda, matching the authoritarian theory's view of media as a weapon of the powerful. However, it is vital to emphasize that Iran's media landscape reflects its own religious and cultural backdrop, setting it apart from classic Western authoritarian governments.

2.2 Media Dependency Theory

This theory is rooted in the "Uses and Gratifications Theory" and is related to the Agenda Setting Theory. It states that the more an individual relies on the media to suit their needs, the more valuable the press is to that person. The dependency model of media is presented as a theoretical alternative in which the structure of the three-way interaction between audience, media, and society is most directly accountable for many of the media's effects on people and society. The current study investigates audience reliance on media information resources as a significant interaction condition for changing audience beliefs, behavior, or attitudes in response to mass communication. Audience dependency is high in countries where the media performs numerous essential information functions and during periods of fast social change or significant social turmoil. The dependency model is broadened and demonstrated by looking at numerous cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects that may be easily tested and investigated using this theoretical framework. (Rookeach, 1976).

2.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory, as described by Hanson (2022), emphasizes the active role of individuals in choosing and engaging with media content to fulfill

their unique needs and desires. This theory is critical for understanding the dynamics of content selection and consumption trends on YouTube. It implies that consumers, as active participants, choose media content based on their unique wants and needs (Hanson, 2022). This includes many forms of media as well as competing sources of enjoyment. On YouTube, according to the latest YouTube updates, content value is assessed by audience satisfaction. They are the final evaluators of the pleasures they seek and obtain. By a quick stroll over YouTube content, it becomes apparent that users may turn to the platform for a plethora of reasons such as amusement, aesthetic pleasures, shared experiences with others, or, more generally, as stated by Google Consumer trends, “to relax” and “to feel entertained” (Google, 2016).

The overall tendency to use this platform for content consumption is entertainment above all else. Therefore, for this audience, the uses and gratifications theory highlight their active role in selecting content that fulfills their desires. It recognizes the multifaceted nature of content selection decisions on YouTube and acknowledges the competition with alternative sources of gratification. This insight aids in comprehending the complexity of YouTube's content landscape and why users engage with specific videos and creators. The theory underscores that media consumption is driven by individual choices based on desires and needs, emphasizing the audience's agency in shaping their media experiences.

The reason behind the particular boldness of this theory within the boundaries of this study in YouTube content trends and content consumption habits is that Iranian audiences turn themselves to YouTube content with no moderation and without any societal or governmental guidelines, driven by the fact that YouTube is banned in Iran and therefore no viewing regulations is in effect (in comparison with other regions such as the U.S) and because YouTube provides an unlimited supply of diverse content

for any taste, age and lifestyle. When one is not familiar with the power of a platform or has built an image based on rumors and news without using it, they might set their expectation of said platform to the highest. Predominantly Iranian people who have the potential for perfectionism (Moloodi, 2021)

To get a better view of the motivation of Iranian society about the use of social media (in this case, YouTube), we can refer to a qualitative study conducted in Iran and confirmed by a panel of experts (Pakpour, 2017). In this study, "Why do you usually use social media?" was the central question. People could select multiple options and contact the researcher for reasons other than those listed. It contained thirteen items: talking with others, receiving news, web surfing, entertainment purposes, learning, escaping from loneliness, forgetting their problems, making new friends, job searching, emotional needs, excitement seeking, and competing. Each item was scored on a yes or no scale, and the frequency of items was calculated. (Pakpour, 2017) Meanwhile, to identify the type of platform used, a question was structured as "Which social media do you use?" people could choose more than one option, and if they are users of other social media, write it. This list included WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and state-approved platforms such as Soroush and Gap, Line, Viber, and Emo.

Following the flow of this research, one of the primary inquiries was, "Have you ever had any of the following health problems due to using social media?" People could choose more than one option, and if they had any health problems related to using social media but were not in the options, write to us. These conditions included headaches, vision issues (burning eyes and eye pain), musculoskeletal disorders (arm, neck, wrist pain, and finger tingling), and sleep disturbance. This study's

demographics include age, gender, degree of education, employment, family size, marital status, years of marriage, and residence (rural and urban).

social media users in Iran dedicate an average of 4.0 hours (240 minutes) per day to social media; this suggests a distinctive utilization pattern compared to the U.S., where the time spent on social media is comparatively lower. The observed patterns in Iran reflect a significant cultural emphasis on interpersonal communication and entertainment within social media usage (Chegeini, 2022).

2.4 Social Media Evolution in Iran Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

The history of social media and the Internet in Iran before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 21st century has always had a political tie to its story. Despite its unusual nature as a video-sharing platform rather than a messaging tool, YouTube was no exception. On the 3rd of December, 2006, Iran first banned access to YouTube and numerous other websites after claiming them to violate social and moral rules of conduct. The YouTube suspension occurred after a video surfaced online purporting to show an Iranian soap opera star having sex (Tait, 2006).

The introduction of social media into public and private life has been revolutionary, profoundly altering how people communicate, share information, and interact with the world. social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn have grown substantially, especially among younger populations (Zohouri, 2021; Shahghasemi, 2019).

While blogging dominated the Iranian Internet in the early 2000s, social media took over by the end of the decade. The phrase "social media" has become the newest symbol of digital media's liberatory potential, surpassing even "Weblogistan" in popularity (Hendelman, 2007; Shakhsari, 2011). While the blogosphere had not lived up to its potential, social media appeared to be on the verge of exceeding expectations.

The social media mobilization following the disputed Iranian election in 2009 corroborated positive readings of the new technology as a 'Twitter Revolution.' Furthermore, the two Arab revolutions that occurred less than two years after the Iranian demonstrations, one in Egypt and one in Tunisia, remained optimistic about the revolutionary power of digital technologies. However, like in previous periods, the Iranian Internet was a hotbed of debate as state actors and sympathizers used the same technologies as their political opponents and critics. In truth, the state's attitude toward media and cultural creation got more aggressive in the era of social media (Akhavan, 2013).

The aforementioned political complexities, combined with the unstable nature of the Internet in Iran, have been an ever-present presence in the evolution of social media in Iran. Unconventional methods to access international data (more on this topic in the platform accessibility chapter) resulted in a very inconsistent and unpredictable dynamic of social media usage in Iran before the COVID-19 major shift in technology exposure in Iranian society.

In summary, the emergence of social media and the Internet in Iran reveals a complex interaction of technology innovation, political activism, and official supervision. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter once held out hope for positive change, they eventually became arenas for government regulation and repression. The Iranian example exemplifies the dual nature of digital technologies, demonstrating how they may both enable and impede societal progress. As we move forward, it is critical to identify and navigate the intricacies of this digital terrain, including its potential for both liberation and control in defining Iranian society's future.

2.5 COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Iran and Iranian Media

Through the following sections, the study delves into the state of media and public broadcasting in Iran amidst the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, providing insight into how a crisis is supposed to be managed and how it is defined followed by an assessment of how Iranian national media navigated the emergence and announcements of this health crisis and the subsequent imposition of COVID-19 restrictions.

During a crisis, crisis response methods indicate an organization's acknowledgment of responsibility for the issue. These chosen methods could have an impact on the organization's image and reputation among its followers, which in the scale of a functioning country is their population. Thus, organizations are recommended to be strategic in their selection of crisis response techniques based on an understanding of the crisis circumstances. Subsequently, response and crisis management rely heavily on methods and channels of communication. (Tam, 2016).

Annicka Engblom (2021), in a report for the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, underscores the significance of collaboration between governmental authorities and the media as a key strategy in managing a crisis situation. Effective crisis communication between authorities and the public is critical for combating disinformation and ensuring access to current information. However, given Iran's authoritarian media setting, national outlets are frequently untrustworthy, forcing the bulk of the populace to rely on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, for seeking information. Despite some segments of the press criticizing government actions (being the common case for the independent and oppositional press of Iran), achieving collaboration while preserving media independence is crucial, and while this approach is generally applicable in crisis management, its efficacy may

be limited within the framework of authoritarian media, such as in Iran (Engblom, 2021). The outbreak of the global COVID-19 health crisis, with over 100 million confirmed global cases, two million global fatalities as of February 2021, and just above 140 thousand deaths in Iran (Worldometer, 2024), underlined the critical significance of social media in sharing correct information during such emergencies (Abbas, 2021).

2.5.1 COVID-19 Pandemic Emergence and Media Coverage in Iran

As this study is primarily concerned with the changes in the media during the COVID-19 outbreak, it is necessary to examine the news coverage in Iran during that time to establish a threshold before and after its official emergence declaration. This research serves two purposes: First, it provides readers with a refresher on the subject. Second, it provides insights into the situation of the Iranian media and news distribution during this period of revolution. Significant events are typically disclosed bit by bit to the public, particularly when they pose a public health issue such as COVID-19. To prevent public concern, a great deal of content needs to be regulated before it reaches journalists. This is a universal rule, and Iran is no different when it comes to carefully reviewing information before making official announcements to the public.

The World Health Organization (WHO), on 11th of March, 2020, declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic (Cucinotta, 2020), which was followed closely in the same month by Iranian national and private news outlets. In the case of Iranian society, COVID-19 material was distributed in several ways. Numerous unofficial networks and social media platforms disseminated information about a sickness originated in China. A significant turning point was marked by the formal confirmation of two coronavirus cases in Iran by the middle of February. This

incident changed the media landscape as it addressed the expanding epidemic in addition to declaring the start of a public health emergency. In the following parts, I will look at the dynamics of news coverage and provide the readers with an idea of how the COVID-19 outbreak affected Iran's media landscape. The following are selected news from the beginning of COVID-19 public announcements in common Iranian news websites.

“The first day of Corona quarantine in Iran; The official statistics of an increase of 144 victims and nearly 3 thousand other patients...Since Saturday, April 8, traffic restrictions have been announced between different cities in Iran, and the government has announced that it is forbidden to attend public events and public parks and that citizens must observe social distancing". (BBCpersia.com, Feb. 27th, 2020)

“...On the morning of Thursday, March 1, the Ministry of Health announced the positive result of the coronavirus test of 3 more people in Iran. According to this news, "based on laboratory evidence, three patients hospitalized in Qom and Arak have been confirmed to be infected with Covid-19 (coronavirus) and the said patients are currently under care in the hospital." In the text of the news, it is stated that two of these people are in Qom and the third infected person was a resident of Arak..." (Docctoreto.com, Feb. 20th, 2020)

According to the news article, the first official lockdown in the Iranian capital was initiated on March 27th, 2020, and subsequently, a new lifestyle began for Iranian society. This event marked the beginning of a gradual yet swift content agenda change, which many Iranian content creators saw as an opportunity to seize profit and captivate a large batch of audience with much less effort than in ordinary circumstances.

2.5.2 Digital Literacy in Iran Facing COVID-19 Pandemic

A global movement has evolved in recent decades, moving people toward a modern learning paradigm (Scott, 2015). Çakmak (2019) contends that rapid growth has led to learner-centered and personalized learning methods, which improve on previous theories. As a result, there is universal agreement that new teaching methods

must adapt to the characteristics of today's students, become more inclusive, and address the multidisciplinary concerns of the twenty-first century (Carneiro, 2007). According to (Hazen, 2010), access to digital tools is unproductive unless teachers and students are trained to realistically implement contemporary learning approaches. On the other hand, the change in instruction has enhanced the importance of digital literacy. In the case of Iranian society, a nation with a rich cultural background, many restricting aspects in its society, including later access to advanced technology and telecommunication than Western nations and state-approved educational curricula, the fast and unexpected shift in digitalization that followed the COVID-19 pandemic was both a hassle for the older generation and a blessing for the younger, tech-savvy population (Heidari, 2021).

Khlaisang (2019) defines digital literacy or competency as "a combination of concepts, including information literacy (IL), media literacy (ML), and information and communication technology (ICT) literacy." This aligns with the definition of digital literacy established by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills organization in 2007, which is widely regarded as a developmental framework for the twenty-first century. In today's society, teachers and students must creatively use and adapt their abilities and knowledge while learning and working (Khlaisang, 2019), emphasizing the importance of IL, ML, and ICT literacy skills in today's education (Moto, 2017).

The importance of digital literacy begins at a young age and, ideally, within the educational system. According to a study by Heidari, which included 150 Iranian English language teachers (EFL) (Heidari, 2021), Iranian teachers strongly support digital literacy and incorporate those abilities into learning outcomes for their classes. Efforts and investments in technology application and digital literacy training are expected to be both cost-effective and beneficial in the future.

Although the challenges to adapt to heavy digitalization were sensible after the pandemic, challenges existed even before COVID-19, particularly in developing countries like Iran, where online education was not widely adopted in most educational institutes. The lack of management and clear implementation plans made online education challenging for students and lecturers, resulting in passive learning, decreased coordination, lower motivation levels, and increased social challenges (Heidari, 2021).

Following the educational approach signifies the critical need to incorporate digital literacy into higher education curricula, assessment examinations, and classroom practice. Thus, institutions should provide students with more computer-assisted language learning (CALL) resources and technology. Students will be more motivated to learn how to use technologies for EFL learning as technology becomes more accessible, increasing their digital literacy level. Training is another technique for promoting students' digital literacy, which is required for teachers and students if technology is to be used in EFL classes (Ekşi, 2012). It is envisaged that instructors will take on new teaching roles appropriate to the demands of the twenty-first century (Ekşi, 2012). Therefore, support for embedding digital literacy skills into formal university curricula is essential.

As for the effects of literacy on the future of a nation, (Carlsson, 2016) underlines the importance of media literacy and critical citizenship in preserving democracy, particularly considering changes in the relationship between political power and the market that endanger media independence and freedom. With 71.94 million Internet users, Iranian society confronts unique issues due to its aging population, where only 15.8 percent are aged 12 to 24, making adaption to new lifestyles and technology particularly challenging (datareportal.com, 2022). This

demographic condition and growing media consumption distinguish Iran as a unique case study in Asia and the Middle East.

The transfer to new technology and generational developments primarily depends on the youthful population, independent of a society's access to modern technologies. However, the transition is less accessible in rising or impoverished countries like Iran. Media censorship and authoritarian media agendas aggravate the situation by impacting media literacy and the propagation of misinformation. The increase of "Doomscrolling" among Iranians, defined as excessive intake of negative news, exacerbates media illiteracy by boosting bogus news and diminishing the ability to tell fact from fiction.

This media illiteracy epidemic affects all social categories in Iran, with long-term effects such as the growth of bad media habits and the impact of undisciplined media consumption on educated members of society. The media's failure to address this dilemma, combined with government support for preserving media income channels, exacerbates societal differences and delays progress toward a more media-literate society. It is possible to conclude that the media literacy crisis in Iran, exacerbated by demographic challenges and authoritarian media agendas, poses significant threats to democracy and societal cohesion. Efforts to address this crisis, including education reforms and media regulation, are essential to mitigate its long-term effects on Iranian society.

2.5.3 Population Demographics in Iran

Generational hierarchy plays a big role in the cultural approaches of each country, especially countries with long historical traditions such as Iran. Social media-related activities are generally associated with the youngest and most digitally literate segment of the population, which also is applicable to the Iranian population. Which

experienced the rise of the youngest generation to teenagerhood and young adulthood in 2020 and facing COVID-19. Furthermore, several terms and alphabetical designations have become a trendy way to reference different generations, and for analytic advantages. These terms have been defined in the article “Defining Generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins” by Michael Dimock (2019), in association with Pew Research Center, which divides generations of the population by specific intervals.

Generational thresholds are not a precise science. They should be seen essentially as tools, enabling the types of studies described above. However, their bounds are not arbitrary. Generations are frequently defined by their duration, although there is no universally accepted formula for how lengthy that span should be. Our working definition of Millennials is 16 years old (1981–1996), which is the same age as their predecessor generation, Generation X (born 1965–1980). According to this definition, both are younger than the Baby Boomers, the only generation officially labeled by the United States Census Bureau based on the famous post-WWII spike in 1946 and a considerable decrease in birth rates after 1964. (Dimock, 2019)

Table 1: Designator and Definition of Generations (1920-2012)

DESIGNATOR	YEAR OF BIRTH	AGE
Silent	1928-45	79-96
Boomers	1946-64	60-78
Generation X	1968-80	44-59
Millennials	1981-96	28-43
Generation Z	1997-2012	11-27

Table 2: Population Demographic of Iran (as of 2020)

AGE	POPULATION (*1000)
0-14	20,943
15-64	60,143
60+	9,550
Total	87,290

Demographically, by 2020, about 23.9 percent of Iran's population (20.9 Million) was between the ages of 0 to 14, while approximately 68.81 percent were aged 15 to 64, and 7.62 percent of Iran's inhabitants were aged 65 or older (O'Neill, 2024).

This concludes that a large portion of the Iranian population is among Generation-Z (ages 11-27), and subsequently, a large portion of social media users in Iran. The following segments will elaborate the usage of the Internet and social media within the Iranian demographic and the Internet infrastructure.

2.6 Internet Usage in Iran

Through this segment, the study reviews the evolutionary timeline of YouTube as a rising social media platform within the unique structure of Iran's Internet and Web accessibility as an infrastructure. Establishing a baseline for how Iranian regulatory bodies deal with the growth of user-generated content within Iranian social media communities and the mostly government-criticizing nature of such communities followed by YouTube's position in the growing preference of Iranian content creators as a valuable source of revenue and follower community management.

2.6.1 International Position of YouTube

How international scholars and non-scholars treat YouTube's evolution and success is a testament to its growing power as an international media outlet and its evolution beyond mere social media. The dual role of YouTube in the global digital landscape as an educational tool and an entertainment mediator has been more vibrant than ever before throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Since its acquisition by Google, YouTube has developed from a platform for amateur and ad-free films to an online destination for commercialized and professional videos. However, as (Morreale, 2014) stated, "Its tagline 'Broadcast Yourself' allows regular consumers to actively participate in creating the information they receive. At the same time, it is less evident that YouTube is a for-profit business." Kim (2012) commented on YouTube's institutionalization, "If the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment." Because of YouTube's success, industries have shown a strong desire to monetize it." This interest in monetizing video has enabled channels that began as a pastime to evolve into a source of revenue for content providers (Holland, 2016).

Furthermore, the effects of YouTube on educational global evolution became more sensible than ever in history after the digital reliability of humanity during COVID-19. In a recent study, Shoufan states that YouTube has grown into a global academic and informal education platform. Unlike traditional sources of learning multimedia, YouTube is a social network with various features that obscure its actual educational usefulness. We don't know how accurate YouTube's learning content is, what best-practice tactics for using the platform in education are, or how watching YouTube affects students' performance and conduct (Shoufan, 2022).

2.6.2 YouTube and Iran's National Media Relations

“The Internet penetration rate in Iran has exceeded 123 percent, according to the latest statistics of the Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA).” (Tehran Times, 2022)

The data from the Communications Regulatory Authority of Iran (CRA), as of January 19, 2022, provides a comprehensive overview of the evolving landscape of Internet penetration and usage in Iran. This segment aims to present an in-depth statistical analysis, incorporating additional sources to offer a nuanced understanding of the trends shaping digital connectivity in the country. Iran's mobile Internet penetration rate has increased dramatically, hitting 109.27 percent. This is a significant increase of more than 26% over figures reported in 2019 (Tehran Times, 2022). Furthermore, The overall number of mobile subscribers in the country has risen to around 135.890 million, resulting in a mobile phone penetration rate of 161.67 percent.

Fixed Broadband Stagnation: Challenges and Opportunities: Despite a tremendous increase in mobile Internet, Iran's usage of fixed broadband services has plateaued at 14%. Fixed broadband services connect about 11.921 million individuals to the Internet (Tehran Times, 2022). This data suggests that fixed broadband Internet has grown by less than 2 percent compared to the previous year, while mobile Internet has experienced a notable growth of 10 percent. The pace of expansion for mobile Internet is observed to be five times faster than that of fixed Internet, diverging from global trends.

Internet User Demographics and Offline Population: At the beginning of 2022, Iran had 71.94 million Internet users, indicating an Internet penetration rate of 84.1 percent of the total population. This represents an increase of 854 thousand Internet users (+1.2 percent) between 2021 and 2022 (Datareportal, 2023). Despite

these figures, 15.9 percent of the population, or 13.59 million people, remained offline at the start of the year, highlighting the digital divide that persists within the country.

Rural Telecommunication Access: According to the Communications Regulatory Authority of Iran (CRA) statistics, communications services in rural regions have improved, with 93 percent of all villages (52,182) accessing communication services. 47,837 localities have already gained access to residential landline services (Tehran Times, 2022). However, difficulties remain in extending high-speed Internet to almost 55,000 villages, highlighting the need for specific measures to bridge the urban-rural digital divide.

Global Perspectives: YouTube Advertising Reach: Shifting the focus to international perspectives, YouTube remains a prominent platform for online content. Advertisers could reach 2.527 billion users on YouTube in April 2023, making it the second most 'active' social media platform globally (Datareportal, 2023). Despite its substantial reach, data from YouTube's advertising tools indicates a slight decrease of roughly 35 million users (-0.5%) in the twelve months leading up to April 2023. Approximately 31.5% of the world's population continues to engage with YouTube.

The statistical analysis presented herein underscores the dynamic nature of digital connectivity in Iran. The surge in mobile Internet usage, coupled with challenges in fixed broadband adoption and rural connectivity, demands targeted policies and infrastructure investments. The global context, as exemplified by YouTube's trends, provides a comparative framework, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of local and international factors influencing Internet penetration and usage. In conclusion, this statistical segment contributes valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and industry stakeholders, informing strategies

to address disparities, enhance accessibility, and foster a more inclusive digital landscape in Iran.

2.6.3 Media Policy and Censorship in Iran

Following the 2009 Iranian election and the violent riots that followed, many journalists became firm believers in the benefits of social media, particularly user-generated content (UGC), with a journalistic bent. Citizen journalists disseminated videos and reports depicting a vastly different reality when the Iranian government asserted there were no protests over the elections. If any occurred, they were peaceful. The ability to obtain news stories from people on the ground demonstrated to news executives the value of User-Generated Content when foreign journalists were prohibited from entering Iran (Stelter, 2009).

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the influence of regulatory bodies of Iran on YouTube accessibility in Iran, it is essential to delve into the intricacies of media and press dynamics within Iran. The media landscape in Iran is intricately interwoven with the political structure of the Islamic Republic and somewhat irrational policymaking, providing a unique perspective on the interplay between policy and the media. With its globally applicable core agenda and community guidelines, YouTube stands in contrast to the preferences of authoritarian media and press. This stance of the Iranian government towards this media outlet and its subsequent outcomes makes it difficult to understand the policymaking process in Iran.

Policy is a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or a matter of concern (Anderson, 1997). This definition can help with a conception of public policy. Public policy is what the government wants to do to attain particular goals. This definition reduces public policy to a simple decision. That is, simple declarations of intents, wishes, ideals, or

expressions of desires cannot be said to be public policy. Actual resource allocation presented by projects and programs aimed to respond to perceived public problems and difficulties requiring government action for their resolution should be considered public policy. That is, complex patterns of resource allocation should be shown by initiatives and programs designed to respond to perceived public demands. (Anyebe, 2018)

In a broader sense, public policy encompasses governments' choices, including the actions, objectives, and official statements concerning specific issues (Dye, 1985). This intricate web of government decisions, collectively called public policy, is designed to address matters of public significance (Cochran, 2005).

While these definitions offer clarity, (Hill, 2017) underscores that public policy is a multifaceted concept defying precise demarcation. It can manifest as singular decisions or interconnected groups of decisions, with the term 'policy' subject to diverse interpretations and uses by different actors. In Iran, state-owned television and radio stations predominate, and strict regulation substantially impacts publications, mainly reformist media. Despite these limitations, Iran's media and the Internet serve as political debate and criticism outlets, albeit within murky parameters known as red lines, which allow authorities to interfere when controversial themes are reported.

Iran maintains a monopoly over television and radio broadcasting through the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Many Iranians use illegal TV dishes to watch foreign-based channels to get around the limitations. Furthermore, several websites and social media platforms, including Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, have been prohibited. Despite these constraints, Iranian users use anti-filter techniques to circumvent them. Notably, high-ranking officials maintain Facebook

and Twitter pages, highlighting the contradictions inherent in Iran's media environment (Mazrooei, 2023).

Censorship in Iran has resulted in creative approaches such as the IRIB code of conduct and private sector productions, with a considerable financial allocation for media censorship. Censorship is no longer limited to modesty and sexuality on television; it has evolved to include advertising censorship, which promotes one socioeconomic lifestyle while officially disparaging others. Several sections in the Iranian Constitution restrict the flow of information. However, the wording of these articles is frequently unclear, giving room for interpretation as to what is permissible or not.

This ambiguity can lead to poor decisions, especially by novice producers. Censorship regulation is a subjective process based on the interpretation of the particular bureaucrat in authority, who determines whether or not to apply censorship. This allows government officials who want to silence dissenting voices plenty of freedom to abuse the Constitution's articles. The Iranian Constitution does not explicitly grant journalists or artists rights or protections.

The Iranian constitution outlines general rules regarding freedom of expression. For instance, Article 24 states: "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law." However, as of now, no existing law specifies the details of this exception.

Article 3 of The Press law says: "The press has the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms, suggestions, and explanations of individuals and government officials for public information while duly observing the Islamic teachings and the best interest of the community." (irandataportal.edu) While the first part of this law

appears to grant extensive freedoms to the press, the second part introduces broad exceptions, with anything deemed against "the interest of the community" requiring careful consideration.

Article 500 of the penal code states, "Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment." The term 'Propaganda' is subject to varying interpretations, giving judges ample room to decide what constitutes a violation and warrants punishment. Almost all of these restrictions have been in force with little to no change since 1979, which makes little sense in this age of global media and the Internet. Surprisingly, most who authorized this legislation are still alive and in positions of power.

2.6.4 Iranian YouTube Landscape

YouTube is a highly effective social media platform for news organizations, rooted in its foundation on user-generated content (UGC). With a unique user base exceeding one billion people, YouTube is a predominant platform, particularly among American adults aged 18 to 34 and 18 to 49. These demographics engage with the platform by viewing millions of hours of content daily, surpassing viewership on any cable network. The platform, accessible in 76 languages and over 88 countries, underscores its global influence (YouTube, 2016).

Research, exemplified by studies like "Boots on the Ground?" (Al Nashmi, 2017), delves into the significance of user-generated content (UGC) in contemporary international journalism. It scrutinizes whether major news organizations actively encourage audience interaction through content analysis of their YouTube channels. The study specifically investigates the integration of UGC into daily news coverage by prominent entities such as CNN International (CNNi), Russia Today (RT), France

24 English, Al Jazeera English, and Al Arabiya. Additionally, it explores the implications of gatekeeping theory within this context.

Despite YouTube's status as the largest video-sharing platform globally, supported by Google's extensive and secure servers, it continues to be categorized as a social media platform rather than a mainstream medium. Notably, despite the prevalence of English language literacy among the Iranian population, content creators on YouTube primarily focus on language considerations for their scripted and conversational materials.

The following segments will go through different aspects of YouTube's evolution in Iran and its popularity as a social media platform.

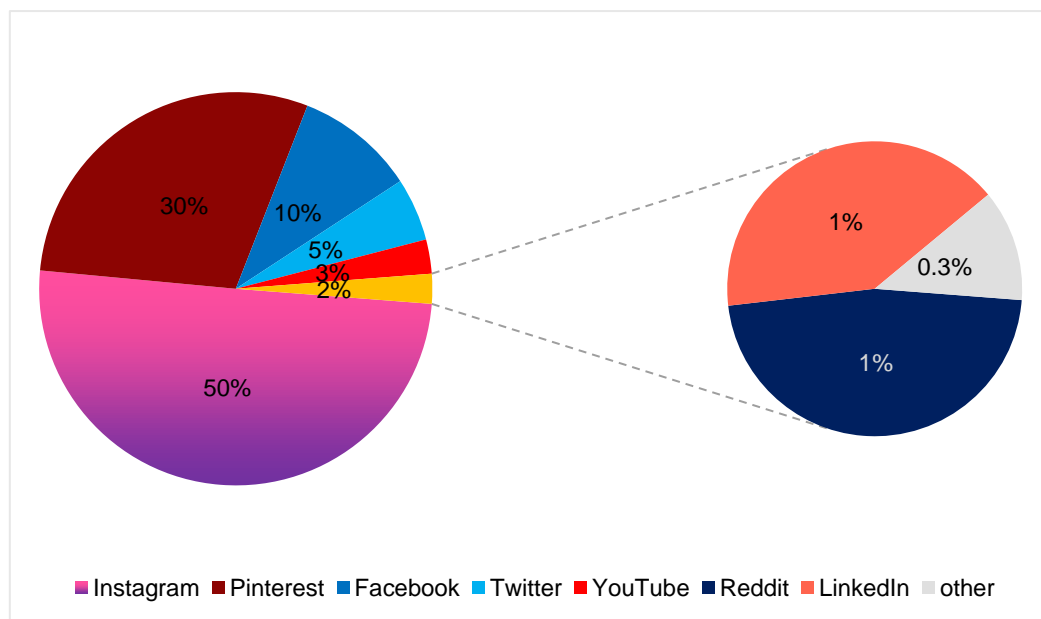


Figure 1: Social Media Market Share in Iran (Feb. 2020 – Dec. 2020)

Table 3: Main Focus/Content Type of Popular Social Media Platforms

PLATFORM	MARKET SHARE	FOCUS-TYPE
Instagram	50.23%	PHOTOS, SHORT VIDEO
Pinterest	29.43%	PHOTOS
Facebook	9.83%	PHOTOS, TEXT, SHORT VIDEO
Twitter	5.18%	PHOTOS, TEXT, SHORT VIDEO
YouTube	2.81%	LONG-FORMAT VIDEO
Reddit	1.15%	TEXT, PHOTOS
LinkedIn	1%	TEXT, PHOTOS
other	0.3%	---

According to the regional platform market share report from February 2020 to December 2020 (Statscounter.com, 2023), YouTube was the 5th most popular social media platform for Iranian followers throughout the early COVID phase. They indicate that Iranian people tend to stick to fast-evolving and trend-based platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram in the long run.

A noteworthy consideration is the existence of “YouTube Shorts,” launched first in India in September 2020 and globally in July 2021. It was introduced as a competitor to TikTok for short-format videos (Gartenberg, 2021) and developed by Google. This introduced a very efficient opportunity for Iranian YouTubers to shift their creativity in short videos to YouTube instead of TikTok and subsequently drive significantly more views for YouTube. However, this metric wasn't considered due to the chosen timeframe for this paper (until the end of 2021).

2.6.5 The Emergence of the Iranian YouTube Community

In this section, the study reviews how YouTube’s status grew within the Iranian Online Community landscape. It reviews the news articles from Iranian outlets

that indicate historical points in Iranian YouTube stories, such as its first censorship announcement and how a U.S. platform is presented nationally.

The term 'community' is derived from offline social interaction to represent a well-known cultural and social construct that, while nebulous, is ubiquitous in our lives. Offline communities, like online communities, escaped the exact definition. Hillery (1955) defined a community as "a collection of people engaged in social interaction, within a geographic area, that has one or more additional ties." Later definitions of a community shifted from physical qualities and spatial proximity to favor communication and social exchanges as fundamental traits (Wellman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). This shift was evident at most in the rise of online communities. In trying to draw the boundaries of online communities, many scholars did not attempt a single conclusive definition but somewhat related to the different attributes such communities may hold. (Rotman, 2010)

Frequently coming up parameters for online communities in the literature include (1) commitment to a shared domain (Cothrel, 1999; Preece, 2000), (2) shared repertoire and resources (Wenger, 1998), (3) companionship and bonding (Wellman, 2001; Etzioni, 1999), and (4) social activity and interaction (Donath, 1998; Putnam, 2000) or collective efficacy (Carroll, 2005).

Though all traits are vital components of the online community infrastructure, the last two, which focus on the community's members, are particularly crucial. Users play an essential role in the development and sustainability of the online community (Rotman, 2010), which is vibrantly evident in gaming communities, which have a strong sense of belonging and a competitive nature.

According to the global status report, YouTube possessed an overall 3.4 percent of all Iranian social media use between 2020 and 2023, with top spots being

held by Instagram (49%) and Pinterest (29%) (StatCounter.com, 2023). This low percentage of YouTube usage in Iran is primarily due to the newly founded introduction of the Iranian audience to high-speed Internet near 2020 and a powerful grasp of other platforms over trending content at the verge of COVID-19 lockdowns and digitalization by 2020.

According to a global status assessment, YouTube had a tiny 3.4 percent share of the Iranian social media landscape from 2020 to 2023. Instagram and Pinterest took the top rankings throughout this period, with 49% and 29%, respectively (Statscounter.com, 2023). This low percentage of YouTube usage in Iran can be due to several factors, the most significant of which is the recent provision of high-speed Internet access to the Iranian audience around 2020. Furthermore, YouTube's poor foothold in the country was exacerbated by the dominance of other platforms in creating trending material, the influence of COVID-19 lockdowns and the increased speed of digitalization.

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube's reception in Iran was hindered initially. The Iranian government was cautious of the platform because of its potential for unfiltered content sharing and its significance in global information dissemination. Furthermore, flaws in Iran's Internet infrastructure impeded its path to broader acceptance in its early years. Despite these challenges, YouTube has grown in popularity among Iranians living abroad. They used the Internet to share videos about their culture and convey their concerns. Even though Iranians began to use YouTube more frequently over time, introducing high-speed Internet around 2020 marked the genuine tipping point.

YouTube was able to cause a demand in the Iranian social media landscape because of this technological advancement, which substantially boosted the platform's

accessibility and attractiveness. However, considering its small market share compared to sites like Instagram and Pinterest, it is apparent that these alternatives continue to dictate Iranian social media users' preferences.

Despite YouTube's broad appeal, the Iranian setting highlights the intricate combination of technological infrastructure, cultural characteristics, and the competitive environment that defines the platform's uptake and attraction. Investigating the dynamic of social media use in Iran, particularly in connection with digitalization and COVID-19-induced changes in consumer behavior, might help one understand the delicate interplay between technology and society. By delving deeper into this investigation, we will be able to determine the multiple elements that contribute to the distinctiveness of Iran's social media ecosystem and the function YouTube plays in it. The following are news announcements from the earliest instances of YouTube censorship in Iran:

“Iran has blocked access to the popular video-sharing Web site YouTube.com, and a media rights group warned Tuesday that Internet censorship in the Islamic state is on the rise” (Dareini, NBC News, 2006).

“Over the course of last few days, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Islamist government has blocked access to several major international websites and demanded that all Iran-based Internet sites be officially registered with the country's Culture Ministry. Sites such as YouTube, Wikipedia, and Amazon were all blocked in the recent crackdown, indicating that Tehran is now casting its censoring net wider in a bid to protect citizens from what it sees as corrupting influences” (ABC News, 2006).

The following text is part of an article about launch of a domestic version of YouTube in Iran back in 2011, taken from a Persian-language private news website “Radio Farda” which is the Iranian branch of “Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty”, based in us and operating with the funding of the US Congress and under the

supervision of the United States Global Media Organization (USAGM). This website is a long-running news channel used by Iranian audiences and is trying to provide accurate, objective, and impartial news and reports with the aim of free circulation of information within the framework of the principles of professional journalism to Persian-speaking audiences (Radiofarda.com, 2023). This article shows how the Iranian government takes a stance toward YouTube and similar international media outlets.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran has launched a local version of YouTube under the name "Mehr" since 19 December 2011. This news was announced by Lotfollah Siahkoli, the vice president of virtual media of the Broadcasting Organization. In this way, it is clear that this project was implemented by a government organization (Islamic Republic Broadcasting). The news of the launch of this site was also announced on the sidelines of the first "Conference on Virtual Space and Emerging social Harms" as a sign of the Islamic Republic's confrontation with YouTube as one of the "new factors of social harms..." (Alizadeh, 2012).



Figure 2: Symbolic Stone Throwing at the Symbol of YouTube (Digital Media Exhibition in Iran, December 2011)

Interpretation: since this movement has been conducted at a national convention for digital media and proudly presented by Iranian authorities, it projects

the offensive and rejecting the view that authorities in Iran have towards international media providers and accusing them of harmful cultural influence, which is far more intense towards YouTube as a U.S based platform.

2.6.6 Platform Accessibility

Following the earlier discussion on press and media regulations in Iran, the increasing importance of YouTube and its crucial role in political activism triggered more government crackdowns and heightened censorship measures. The Iranian government frequently imposed YouTube access restrictions, especially during political instability or to quell dissent. Many Iranians could circumvent these restrictions by using virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxies to watch YouTube videos.

In Iran, avoiding censorship has become essential to using the Internet. The mandatory digitization of civilization during the COVID-19 pandemic expanded this environment to previously unheard-of levels. Surprisingly, what started as a profitable but hidden VPN service provider grew into a vast digital empire that unknowingly provided the government with an unofficial source of cash.

Being a content creator in Iran, particularly a YouTuber, entails more than just overcoming access barriers; you must also have high-speed Internet access. Due to Iran's insufficient landline infrastructure and the slow adoption of the 4G communication revolution, this requirement was not met until the late 2010s. Because of the time that has passed since these changes in Iran's online Internet access and the strong defenses put in place by the country's audience spanning more than three generations, censorship has become less of an issue and is now accepted. This acceptability has, strangely, enhanced the intensity with which YouTube is used. Censorship has taught both consumers and content creators to adapt, establishing an

imaginative and resilient culture. Ironically, this climate has led to fierce competition among content producers as they all try to attract viewers' attention while navigating the Iranian government's intricate limitations.

Investigating the changing environment of political activism on YouTube is crucial as we delve into the complex mechanics of usage in Iran. YouTube has matured into an effective platform for political expression, enabling dissident voices to reach a global audience. This new forum for political discourse has compelled the Iranian regime to reconsider its tactics constantly. Despite continued filtering measures, YouTube's tenacity and the ingenuity of Iranian users have made it an essential platform for political activism and a way for the Iranian population to express themselves. Additionally, the interaction between YouTube, political activism, and official censorship highlights the broader consequences for freedom of expression and access to information in Iran. The platform's dual position as a forum for political criticism and diverse content development demonstrates the complex forces at work. We acquire insights not just into the technological adaptations of Iranian users but also into the broader socio-political currents determining the contours of digital expression in Iran as we navigate this diverse world.

2.6.7 User-Generated Content in Journalism

The relationship between the portrayal of UGC in media and press in any nation is essential for understanding YouTube's content and news updates about YouTube. Journalistically focused user-generated content is divided into two categories: (1) content produced by "citizen journalists," including raw video, video segments, and full-fledged news packages, and (2) content produced by "citizen journalists" that closely resembles the output of "traditional" journalists (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). Additionally, there is a second variety that is gauged by "interactivity," giving

viewers a chance to participate in the journalism process by expressing their desire to "like," "dislike," or remark; share a video; or create a video response (Burgess, 2009).

The news industry itself, as well as academics, have occasionally struggled to define UGC precisely. Wardle and Williams (Wardle, 2010) contended, for instance, that the term "UGC" is far too general to encompass the variety of ways significant legacy news institutions, like the BBC, depend on content created by unconventional journalists. "Interactivity" was frequently defined and assessed by tallying and analyzing "likes" and "comments" in content analysis studies that focused on user-generated content. Researchers examined a range of topics in those studies, such as viewer motivation (Hanson, 2008), popularity (Gallardo, 2010), and tone analysis of comments (Ksiazek, 2015). Both approaches, content production by citizen journalists and viewer interactivity, are considered UGC and have been explored by news organizations and scholars (Al-Nashmi, 2017).

2.6.8 Rise in Iranian UGC and YouTube's Popularity

The power of UGC, especially after the evolution of social media, can't be underestimated in Iran. The top-tier content creators are essentially opinion leaders of society. This emphasis was closely explored in research such as (Motahar, 2021), which studies the power of social media influencers in framing on YouTube and how Iran is framed as a travel destination by social media influencers on YouTube.

Close to COVID-19 emergence in early 2020, Iranians turned to YouTube as a platform for creative expression, limitless and accessible to visual entertainment and community engagement. Iranian content creators began to thrive, producing a wide range of videos, including music, comedy, cooking, and vlogs. These creators garnered large followings, not only in Iran but also among the Iranians. YouTube in

Iran was mostly a secondary option for young content creators to stay connected to their followers.

2.6.9 From Game Streaming to YouTube Content Creation

Understanding the popularity of Iranian user-generated content on YouTube evolves around the prevalence of gaming content and the gamer community. The emergence of gaming streams found its popularity over dedicated platforms such as “Twitch.tv” (a subsidiary of Amazon) back in 2011, which had the agenda of a live stream service focused on gaming.

Twitch was officially launched in June 2011, but its roots trace back to a platform called “Justin.tv”, which allowed users to broadcast their daily lives, also known as vlogging. The term “Vlog,” an acronym for “Video Blog,” is essential and recurring in following content analysis segment and categorization of content from YouTube channels, which is defined as “a video blog: a record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you film and publish on the Internet” (McIntosh, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2013).

Within the “Justin.tv” ecosystem, gaming became one of the most popular categories, creating a dedicated gaming channel called Twitch. The platform quickly gained traction among gamers looking to share their gameplay, engage with their audience, and build a community.

The most followed content genres in Iran are Community interaction and Gaming, and the leading content creators on YouTube are gamers who have chosen to share, store, and engage with their followers as a secondary option. The community among Iranian streamers is powerful, and their sense of loyalty and friendship among people of common interest far surpasses their desire to consume different content. It

means they would rather watch their favorite streamer even if they produce occasional “bad” content and keep interacting with their friends.

During the early days of digital gaming, Iranians were relatively slow in adopting these emerging technologies. While the precise year when gaming gained popularity in Iran remains unclear, it was in the early 1980s, coinciding with the 1360s decade in the Solar Hijri calendar when Iranians were introduced to the concept of digital games through TV games (referring to the classic console gaming era which required a TV as a display). In contrast, the Western world had firsthand experience with the rise of online gaming between the late 2000s and early 2010s. Much later, Iran's Internet infrastructure allowed Iranian millennials (1981-1996) and Generation-Z (1997-2012) to join and contribute to this phenomenon. (Dimock, 2019)

To illustrate the extent of this transformation, by 2022, the Iranian gaming community had become one of the largest in the MENA region. In a 2017 article, it was predicted that the Iranian gaming community would exceed 42 million by 2022. The article mentions, "Currently, about 30 percent of Iran's population are gamers, but this number is estimated to grow to 50 percent by 2022. social games, educational and health-related games, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Mixed Reality are some of the primary drivers for the growth of digital gaming in the upcoming years, as experts have anticipated" (Ahmadi, 2017).

The segments mentioned above cause speculation that YouTube's history in Iran reflects the broader dynamics of Technology, Culture, and Politics. As one of the world's most influential video-sharing platforms, YouTube has played a unique role in defining the Iranian digital environment. It has evolved into a platform for entertainment and activism, allowing Iranians to share their culture, convey their worries, and exhibit creativity. As Iran grapples with political issues and censorship,

YouTube remains an essential medium for Iranians to connect with the rest of the world and participate in global discourses. YouTube's path in Iran is evolving, and the ever-changing interaction of technology improvements, cultural manifestations, and political changes will undoubtedly influence its future.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology segment of the paper examines the intricate process of social media analytics research, concentrating particularly on YouTube content analysis within the setting of Iranian society. It begins by outlining social media analytics research and its importance in understanding online user behavior and engagement dynamics. The chapter discusses the reason for using qualitative content analysis as the methodology for this study, emphasizing its importance in investigating the effects of pandemic-induced changes in lifestyles on Iranian YouTubers' material. It also covers the interdisciplinary nature of YouTube research, calling Insights from various scientific disciplines, such as communication, business, sociology, and informatics, and the need to use different analytical tools to acquire insights into user interaction patterns and behaviors. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the sample and data-gathering procedures, as well as the data analysis methods used in the study. The thesis's thorough methodology intends to contribute to the existing literature on social media analytics while also providing significant insights into the dynamics of Iranian YouTube content providers and viewer interactions.

Social media analytics research is defined as the use of various tools and approaches to make sense of online actions and conversations through the collection, refinement, analysis, and visualization of social media data, and such assessments can employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand better online user behavior, needs, perceptions, and obstacles. Researchers analyze social media to

determine which social media channels are most popular, what people are discussing, how users engage with one another, and why users trade and consume specific information (Khan, 2021).

In the context of Iranian followers, this study employs a qualitative content analysis of Iranian public figures' user-generated content on YouTube channels based on the principles of communication and media theories to investigate YouTube channel dynamics. YouTube video content is diversified, targeting a broad spectrum of audiences in several languages and across genres (Khan, 2017). compared to other top social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), YouTube remains an understudied platform in terms of the user base, variety and amount of content, and influence on popular culture (Allgaier, 2020), applicable to Iranian society due to the ban of all major social media platforms.

Given the significance of YouTube as one of the leading players in the social media landscape (Alexa, 2021), organizations, businesses, governments, and the public alike have a robust presence on the platform. It is, therefore, imperative for researchers to study YouTube and engage in research that advances their understanding of content and the resulting engagement surrounding that content. For example, YouTube research can be about understanding participatory behaviors and knowing what content garners the most significant user interest. YouTube research can also study the motivations of online participation and consumption. Additionally, research may employ various analytic techniques to understand user engagement patterns and behaviors around videos through likes, dislikes, comments, and shares.

Many tools for YouTube data-gathering have been mentioned in Khan's seminal research on YouTube content (Khan, 2017, 2022), encompassing contemporary social media analytics tools and conclusively advocating for

interdisciplinary collaboration. Studies from various scientific disciplines, including communication, business, sociology, and informatics, have employed diverse research approaches to investigate and gain insights into multiple perspectives on the platform and its users, which includes examining individuals and communities to better comprehend their motivations for uploading and viewing videos, as well as predicting video virality (Khan, 2022).

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

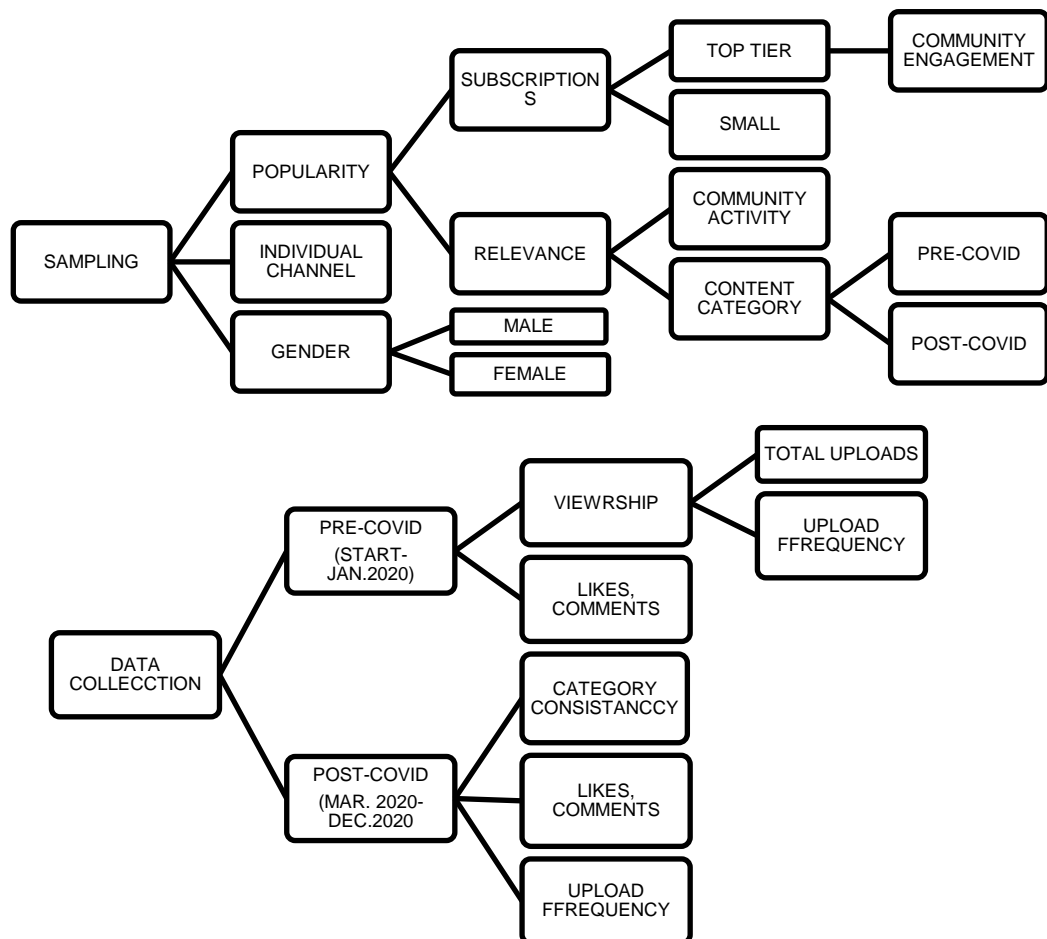


Figure 3: Sampling and Data Gathering Process Hierarchy

According to Snelson's (2012) study, seven key factors should be considered in YouTube research: (1) users, groups, and communities; (2) teaching/learning; (3) social and political impact; (4) video creation/production; (5) legal/ethical concerns;

(6) media management; and (7) commercial interests. In a more recent study by Khan (2022), these seven factors were altered and reinterpreted as five parameters: (1) User motivations for engagement; (2) Video content's social, political, educational, and economic impacts; (3) The effects of user engagement (views, likes, dislikes, comments, and shares) on user perceptions and sense-making; (4) Group and community formation; and (5) Ethical and legal challenges of video sharing (Khan, 2022). For this study and for the purpose of analyzing the productions of Iranian YouTubers, three out of these five parameters are being considered: (1) User motivations for engagement; (3) Impacts of user engagement (views, likes, comments, and shares) on user perceptions; (4) Formation of groups and communities.

Considering the aforementioned pointers, the sampling process for the Iranian UGC on YouTube and the content creators themselves will follow criteria that are aimed at selecting reflective content from the chosen Iranian YouTubers including content diversity, audience engagement metrics (e.g., likes, comments), Popularity ranking (evaluated by channel's Subscribers) and community representation (associated with their production format, artistic values, etc.). accordingly, the research sample will include the top two most subscribed channels (both individuals and male), who stood relevant and active on the platform before and after the threshold and are considered the leaders of their online follower community due to high engagement rate and cross-platform activity, followed by the inclusion of one of the top two female creators (Kimia ravager), who was selected due to the older history of her channel and higher community focused agenda.

Subsequently, data collection will systematically include the selection of the two most-viewed videos on different topics from before the COVID-19 lockdown threshold in Iran (March 18, 2020) and two videos from the same topics (enabling

comparison) from after the aforementioned COVID-19 threshold, from each of the three selected channels.

3.2 Data Analysis

As for the data analysis procedure, the primary focus of the study is on a quantitative approach for engagement metrics (Follower's activity) through the designated period to identify themes, patterns, and changes in production parameters such as upload frequency, accompanied by a qualitative approach to the context to elaborate on the driving motivation of YouTubers and subsequently followers' satisfaction via their new production agenda.

Historically, content analysis was defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952), and by a broader definition, Kari Holsti explains that content analysis is any technique for making inferences by methodically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1968) offers some excellent guidance on content analysis methodology, which is expanded in terms of all forms of communication, whether written or oral. He acknowledges the variety of perspectives on what content analysis might be and outlines common traits on which there is broad agreement, such as (1) objectivity, (2) system, and (3) generality (Haggarty, 1996).

As mentioned above, due to the purely visual context of YouTube and its comprehensive archival capability, the use of Content Analysis is the most suitable tool to investigate the video content produced by Iranian YouTubers and, subsequently, the changes in their channel dynamics to establish the changes of different significance during the chosen time frame for the study. This method provides a systematic and impartial approach to analyzing enormous amounts of

diverse information, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of Iranian YouTube during a time of expected significant societal change.

As for the pros and cons of the content analysis research method, a reference to a 2023 article from the University of Colombia proves significant, based on the work of Palmquist, mentioned the advantages of this method as follows: (1) Textual communication is directly examined, allowing for both qualitative and quantitative examination. It provides access to data and significant historical and cultural insights over time (2) The text in coded form can be statistically examined. It can be used for analyzing interactions unobtrusively. (3) It sheds light on sophisticated models of the human mind and language use. Content analysis is a simple and inexpensive research tool (Palmquist, 2023).

As advantageous as this methodology might be, it also has disadvantages: It can be incredibly time-consuming, requiring significant manual efforts to examine massive amounts of text. Furthermore, the methodology is prone to more significant errors when utilizing relational analysis to get a more nuanced interpretation. Moreover, content analysis is frequently reprimanded for failing to provide a sound theoretical foundation, which can lead to potentially inaccurate findings about relationships and impacts in a study. Its inherent reductive character oversimplifies nuanced information, which becomes more apparent when dealing with complex materials. Content analysis is frequently based only on word counts, ignoring the depth and nuances of the text.

Furthermore, it tends to neglect the environment in which the literature was written and the changing state of affairs post-production. Finally, the process encounters challenges with automation or computerization (Palmquist, 2023).

3.3 Case Studies: Most Popular Iranian YouTubers

In this section, the study establishes a baseline for the popularity of Persian-language YouTube channels, followed by individual content creators (two male and one female) among them for content analysis. The data collection process includes gathering publicly available metrics, including likes, views, comments, quantity of uploads, and date of uploads of the chosen channels from their YouTube channels.

Due to the unique nature of YouTube's accessibility and operation framework for an Iranian audience, it is crucial to understand the difference between popular Iranian YouTubers (individuals) and corporate YouTube channels. The most significant deciding factor for a content creator to choose YouTube as a video platform to connect with its community is “monetization,” which translates to revenue. YouTube is the most profitable free-to-share long-format platform and, therefore, the most viable option for content creators to generate income. The most popular forms of YouTube content format among the younger Iranian audience (based on the top followed channels) are gaming streams, reaction videos, and community interactions (a dual-role interactive option for the content creator to stream real-time content online and receive real-time feedback). By the beginning of COVID-19 lockdowns and forced in-house time for children, the content creators jumped at the opportunity to produce new materials, captivate as many views as possible, and, eventually, more revenue.

Interpretation: The chart indicates the popularity of top Iranian YouTubers; @putak is the 13th most searched term in Iran's region, followed by “YouTube” as the 25th. Inclusion within this list is a statistical testimony to a YouTuber's popularity growth.

The evaluation of popularity for Iranian YouTubers proves unconventional via the international ranking systems due to (1) the majority localized Persian speaker followers and (2) an insignificant amount of minority language content. The signifier of success for international YouTube channels is either YouTube’s ranking system or the people’s choice awards such as “streamy awards.” This means that the websites and rankings that Iranian audiences refer to check the status and rankings are fan-managed, regional, or a sub-segment of a more prominent entertainment news website that has little to no association with the Iranian government, which is usually located overseas.

According to the ranking provided by independent Iranian websites and an English-language source, persianYouTubers.com (cross-referenced with other sources), and based on the metrics of Viewership and Subscribers, the top ten Persian-language YouTube channels ranking is as follows:

Table 4: Top 10 Most Popular Persian-language YouTube Channels as of 2023

#	NAME OF CHANNEL	Ownership	Category
1	Radio Javan (912K Followers)	Corporate	MUSIC, RADIO
2	Putak (883K Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING, MUSIC
3	BBC Persian (880K Followers)	Corporate	NEWS AGENCY
4	Amir Tataloo (764K Followers)	Personal	ARTIST FAN-PAGE
5	Farshad Silent (707k Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING
6	Top Persian Music, TPM (615K Followers)	Corporate	PERSIAN MUSIC AGENCY
7	Sogang (554K Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING
8	Aria Keoxer (550K Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING
9	Madgal (547K Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING
10	Mia Plays (543K Followers)	Personal	GAMING, VLOGGING

Interpretation: This ranking (according to persianYouTuber.com) is based on subscriptions, and among the top 10, only six are considered as individual creators (Putak / Farshad Silent / Sogang / Aria Keoxer/ Madgal/ Mia Plays) and the rest are corporate-managed channels and non-main focus of the brand (Nobakht, 2022), and for the scope of this study on Iranian YouTube content creators, the study will review two top male YouTubers (“Putak,” and “Farshad Silent”) and one of the most popular female Iranian YouTubers (“Mia Plays”).

3.3.1 Pouria Arab (900K Subs)

Pouria Arab, nicknamed “Pouria Potak” and by his channel “Putak,” was born in July 1991 and is one of the most famous Iranian content creators and one of the earliest Iranian YouTubers with a unique popularity among the young Iranian music-oriented Iranian generation. In addition to publishing rap songs with a social theme, he started his activity on his YouTube page. Now, with 691 thousand subscribers and 852 videos, he has the most popular YouTube channel among Iranian YouTubers and is one of the best Iranian YouTubers. He has attracted many audiences by producing content such as rap performances, up-to-date information from rappers worldwide, humorous videos, new songs and challenges, and online games, and he is now the most successful Iranian YouTuber.

By reviewing the timeline overview of his channel to establish the content agenda, from September 2014 (his first video) to December 2023, his focus had been on Music production, with over four million views in total and 80% of his uploads being audio-only music and occasional music videos.

To conduct the content analysis on this YouTube channel, the study has taken the first official lockdown of Iran (March 18, 2020) as the threshold to analyze the effects on the content agenda and audience engagement, followed by a qualitative

interpretation of the acquired metrics and topic popularity.

Table 5: Putak's Channel Overview (PRE-COVID)

Start (Sep 2014) – January 2020	
Top Focus	Music, Music Video, Vlog
Total Views	4.7M
Highest View	450k – Music Video
Total Uploads	~80

Table 6: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, VLOG

Video title: READING HATEFUL COMMENTS	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	January 2020
Views	181k
Likes	6.1K
Comments	1713
Description	A reaction style video to the public hateful comments from various people to his videos

Table 7: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, GAMING

Video title: OutLast - Part 1 (PUTAK)	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	January 2019
Views	11k
Likes	406K
Comments	146
Description	Streaming montage of him playing a trendy horror game, with low-quality video and no direct interaction with his fan base

Data interpretation: During the growth period of the channel, leading to the PRE-COVID period (September 2014 - Early 2020), the channel primarily focused on music content, specifically the rap genre, including audio-only music (with only a thumbnail) and music videos and the least of all (less than 10%) vlogs of any kind, amassing approximately 4.7 million total views, with a music video receiving the most views at 450,000. During this time, the channel uploaded roughly 80 videos.

Table 8: Putak's Channel Overview (POST-COVID)

March 2020 – Dec 2020	
Top Focus	Vlog, Gaming, Music, Music videos
Total Views	12.7 M
Highest View	1.2 M-Vlog
Total Uploads	~100

Table 9: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, VLOG

Video title: "Fun videos"	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	November 2020
Views	308k
Likes	5.4K
Comments	12k
Description	A reaction-style video to funny and trendy videos of the time, focusing on his expressions as a source of entertainment

Table 10: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, GAMING

Video title: "LAST Of US (Part 1) PutaK"	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	July 2020
Views	308k
Likes	5.4K
Comments	12k
Description	Streaming Montage of him playing a famous horror-action game, with commentating and live chat with his fans

Data interpretation: The year after the COVID-19 pandemic started in Iran (From March 2020 to December 2020), the channel's content strategy changed significantly, yet the growth rate increased. While music remained a focal point in content, there was a noticeable shift toward Vlogging in addition to gaming. This shift was matched by a significant increase in overall views, which reached 12.7 million during one year, with the highest view count being 1.2 million for one Vlog, indicating a considerable rise in audience engagement and viewership. The growth of all these metrics is more than all the prior years combined, suggesting that an outside factor boosted this growth rate, which is the significant rise in Internet users and social media followers after COVID-19.

As for the qualitative side of the data interpretation, the unique nature of Putak's content agenda creates a non-typical fan base, and therefore, the followers who are accustomed to his type of content and style are more likely to keep following him in the long run. Before COVID-19, his content didn't resemble any professional production agenda or quality control, as observable in the video quality and videography of earlier videos that were expected from a high-level YouTuber. But as the channel grew close to the threshold of COVID-19 in Iran, he shifted focus from

music (at least on YouTube). He concentrated his content agenda on Vlogging and community interactions over trendy and unusual topics and successfully captivated new audiences. The significant growth rate one year after COVID-19 indicates an unexpected element in this processing compared with his channel's natural growth rate.

The summary of boldest indications based on analysis of Putak's channel can be categorized as (1) Shift in Focus: Before COVID-19 threshold, the channel's primary concentration has been Music-related Content, such as Music Videos and Vlogs. However, during the post-pandemic era, a significant change in the production agenda and production scenario took place, emphasizing Gaming, Vlogging, and, least of all, Music. This indicates that the channel's content strategy was adjusted in response to a time-related change, possibly to take advantage of changed audience preferences or to explore new content opportunities. (2) Increased Engagement: Following COVID, total views increased significantly, showing that the channel's content was more engaging to the audience. This shows that the channel's strategy of mixing gaming material into its existing programming was well-received by the audience, resulting in increased viewership. (3) Video Performance: The videos selected for examination show a shift in concentration. The first sample video chosen after COVID-19, classified as a vlog, received 308k views, indicating a high demand for vlog content after the COVID-19 threshold, followed by similar performance stats on another video from the gaming category. Overall, it is apparent that Putak chose to adjust and experiment with shifts in content but played safe by avoiding introducing an entirely new type of content.

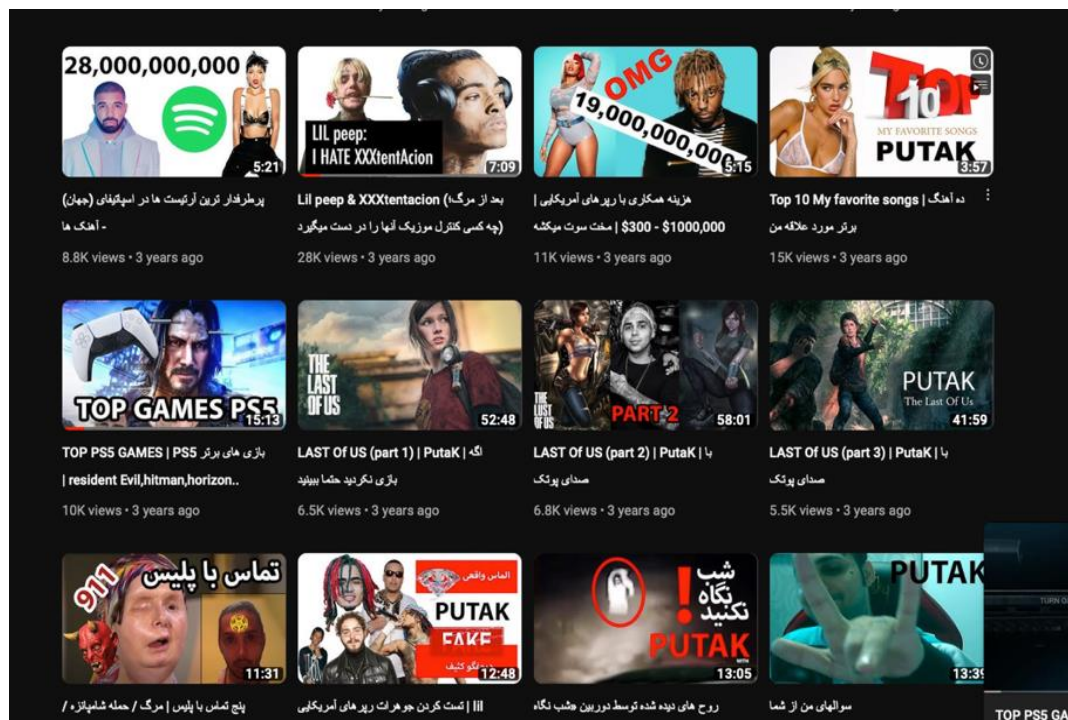


Figure 4: Putak's Timeline Sample (View Counts, Thumbnails, etc.)

Interpretation: This sample of Putaks' POST-COVID timeline indicates topic diversity, quantity of average audience engagement, and preferences of his audience. His unconventional content type managed to stay on top over the years.

3.3.2 Farshad Dehghani (711K Subscribers)

Next on the ranking, Farshad Dehghani, with the Channel name "Farshad_Silent," is one of the most popular and successful faces of Iranian YouTubers and the Gaming community. He started his activity in 2018 and has amassed 711K followers as of December 2023, with his incredible growth rate, which is the result of intelligent work and producing quality content by following the example of the world's best YouTubers.

Table 11: Farshad's Channel Overview (PRE-COVID)

Start (August 2019) – January 2020	
Top Focus	Vlog, Gaming
Total Views	11M
Highest View	676K-Vlog
Total Uploads	19 (16 Vlogs – 3 Gaming)

Table 12: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, VLOG

Video title: QESHM ISLAND VLOG	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	December 2019
Views	52k
Likes	1.8K
Comments	439
Description	An early video of his channel documented a trip to Qeshm island in Iran and performing Pranks on locals

Table 13: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, GAMING

Video title: Lurk in the Dark – most terrifying voices I have heard	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	November 2019
Views	18K
Likes	759
Comments	156K
Description	Streaming montage of playing a trendy horror game in single-player, no direct community interactions

Data interpretation: From the start of his channel (August 2019 - Early 2020), Farshad's channel's primary topic concentration was on Vlogging and gaming, amassing total views of 11 million over the years and the highest view count of 676k, which was for a Vlog video. Notable uploads during this period include a funny

pranking video (Vlog) named "QESHM ISLAND VLOG" and a gaming video titled "Lurk in the dark - most terrifying voices I have heard," which was a trendy videogame of that time.

Table 14: Farshad's Channel Overview (POST-COVID)

March 2020 – Dec 2020	
Top Focus	Vlog, gaming
Total Views	21M
Highest View	1.1M-Vlog
Uploads	195 (36 Gaming videos – 159 Vlogs)

Table 15: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, VLOG

Video title: REACTING TO STREAMERS	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	April 2020
Views	436k
Likes	6K
Comments	2K
Description	A reaction-style video to the trend of watching other streamers' and influencers' videos

Table 16: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, GAMING

Video title: COD Warzone	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	April 2020
Views	234k
Likes	5.7k
Comments	938
Description	A typical streaming montage of a multiplayer videogame, single player and no direct community interactions

Data interpretation: Subsequently, after the COVID restrictions took place (March 2020 - December 2020), Farshad's channel mostly maintained its concentration on Vlogs of related trends and Gaming as a professional streamer, resulting in total views of 21 million in less than a full year, including the most outstanding view count of 1.1 million for a Vlog video, which is a significant improvement in comparison with the same category of the previous era. Notable uploads following COVID include a Vlog titled "REACTING TO STREAMERS," which is a community favorite content inspired by short reaction videos from Instagram and Ticktock, and a gaming video of a world-popular shooting game titled "COD Warzone."

As for the qualitative side of the data above, Farshad's channel is younger than his competitor content creators, but he started strong and on a professional basis, indicating his access to professional filming and editing equipment. From the start, in addition to the collaborative videos close to the start of his channel, he indicates a strong influence in the Iranian YouTube community. Near the threshold and after, the channel kept the agenda of Vlogging as a priority content followed by gaming content, but with significantly more frequent uploads. The data indicates that his fan base enjoyed the balance he had in his content category, contributing to his rapid growth after COVID-19 changes.

As for a summary, critical indications based on the above data can be categorized as (1) Consistent concentration: Before and after COVID, the channel's primary concentration was on vlogs and gaming material. This suggests that the channel stuck to its primary content approach despite the hurdles created by the COVID-19 outbreak. (2) Increased Engagement: Following COVID, there was a significant rise in total views, indicating increased audience engagement with the

channel's content. This might be ascribed to several causes, including increased Internet activity due to lockdown measures and a growing interest in digital entertainment during the pandemic. (3) Video Performance: The videos selected for examination show the channel's sustained popularity in both vlog and gaming content during the POST-COVID era. A video titled "REACTING TO STREAMERS" earned 436k views, demonstrating that vlog content continues to be popular even after the pandemic has begun. Similarly, the gaming video "COD Warzone" received 234k views, showing the channel's capacity to keep viewers interested in gaming material during the pandemic. Overall, the data indicates that the channel effectively negotiated the obstacles of the COVID-19 pandemic by remaining focused on vlogs and games, resulting in improved audience engagement and viewing POST-COVID.

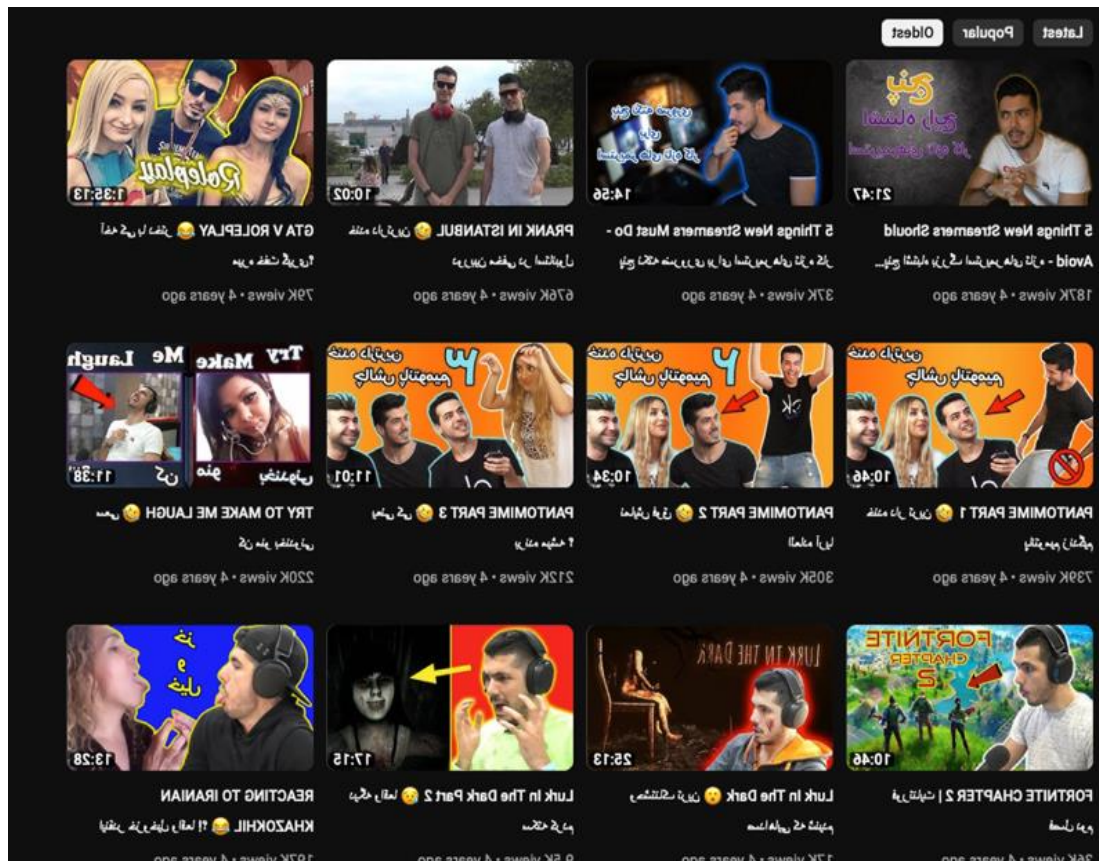


Figure 5: Earliest Thumbnails of Farshad's' Channel

Interpretation: It is observable through the thumbnail designs that his agenda favors Collaborative content, which is a wise move to engage the followers from 2 large channels. It shows many people from his community and fans in his videos and a heavy concentration on gaming stream montages.

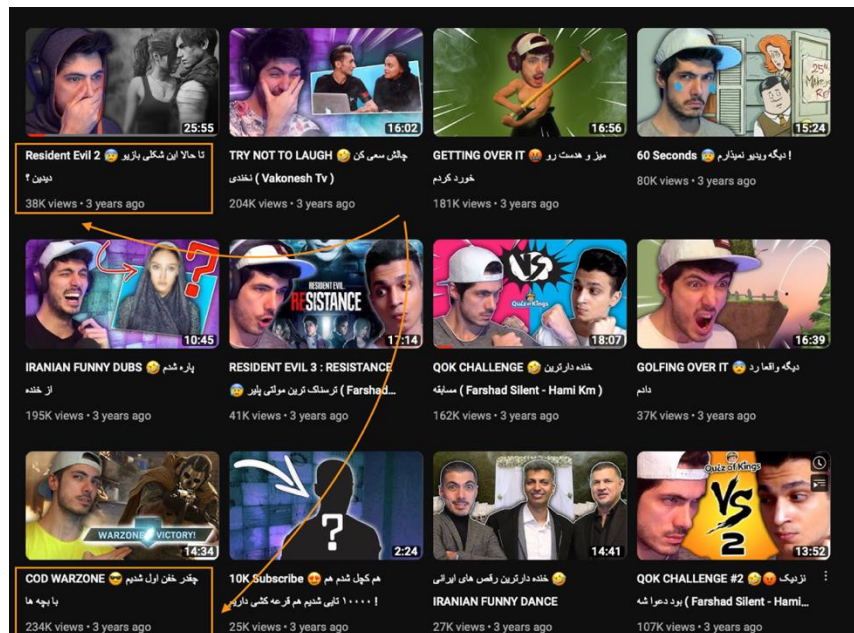


Figure 6: Timeline Sample of Farshad's Channel after COVID-19



Figure 7: The Only Video in Farshad's Channel, Directly Addressing the COVID Situation and Creating a Video Just to Address COVID-19 situation

Interpretation: This video is one of the only directly related content to COVID-19 that Iranian YouTubers produced, and it indicates the influence of the pandemic

era on the digital lifestyle of Iranian society, so much so that a top-tier YouTuber chose to monetize a video in this subject and make revenue.

3.3.3 Kimia Ravangar (542K Subscribers)

Kimia Ravangar, known by her channel as “MiaPlays”, occupies the Top spot among female Iranian YouTubers (amassed over 540K subscribers as of December 2023 and sharing the top spot by a small margin with @madgal channel at overall ranking by number 10 and was chosen due to the more audience engagement). She was born on November 15, 1992, in Tehran. She has been interested in artistic activities since childhood and has attended many music and painting classes. Her content is loved by the Iranian community (indicated by her community engagement metrics) due to her collaborative productions with her partner (Kourosh Zarandouz, also a YouTuber and owner of the channel @Kouman) and incorporating a likable satirical tone, in addition to the natural advantage of being a good-looking female in social media, especially with the Iranian follower community.

Through the following segments, the study presents the gathered quantitative data, including audience engagement metrics in the same order as the two previous channels, followed by a qualitative interpretation of the data:

Table 17: Kimia’s Channel Overview (PRE-COVID)

Start (May 2017) - January 2020	
Top focus	Gaming, Vlog
Total Views	~100 M
Highest view	1.6M
Uploads	130 (100 Vlogs – 30 Gaming Videos)

Table 18: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, VLOG

Video title: FUNNY IRANIAN COMMERCIALS!!!	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	May 2019
Views	592K
Likes	11K
Comments	3.2K
Description	A reaction-style video to popular funny videos on TikTok and Instagram

Table 19: Stats of a Sample Video from the PRE-COVID, GAMING

Video title: *KOUROSHTOPIA*-I hate Fortnite	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	December 2019
Views	1.4M
Likes	24K
Comments	3.3K
Description	Streaming montage of a famous multiplayer videogame, focusing on gameplay

Data interpretation: Before COVID restrictions, from the start of her channel in May 2017 to early 2020, the channel mainly concentrated on gaming content and Vlogging, with a total view of around 100 million views, which peaked at around 1.6 million. Notable videos from this period include a Vlog with 813k views and a Gaming video with 1.4 million views.

Table 20: Kimia's Channel Overview (POST-COVID)

March 2020 - Dec 2020	
Top Focus	Vlog
Total Views	~100 M
Highest View	1.6M
Uploads	57 (50 Vlogs – 7 Gaming videos)

Table 21: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, GAMING

Video title: FIFA IS FUN	
Category	Gaming
Uploaded	June 2020
Views	1M
Likes	19K
Comments	9.9K
Description	The video is a streaming montage of a famous videogame, played alone, but the focus is on gameplay as a gamer, not daily events.

Table 22: Stats of a Sample Video from the POST-COVID, VLOG

Video title: Moving out!!!	
Category	Vlog
Uploaded	November 2020
Views	1.6M
Likes	20K
Comments	10K
Description	The Vlog is a record of her playing a videogame with her partner in a house set up, focusing on interactions between them instead of gameplay

Data interpretation: Following the COVID-19 epidemic, from March 2020 to December 2020, the channel moved its focus mainly to Vlogging, while amassed views during just one year after the pandemic remained around 100 million, the same as the total view count in the entire previous years, with the highest count being at 1.6 million. Notable videos following COVID included a gaming video titled "FIFA IS FUN" with 1 million views and a vlog titled "Moving out!!!", subjected around a day in her life, with 1.6 million views.

As for the qualitative side of the data, the creator's agenda started by favoring family-friendly and trendy content, with vlogs being the core of her agenda but accompanied by frequent gaming content. This agenda shifted observably close to March 2020 by replacing the frequent gaming-centered content with more daily life vlogs and community interactions and almost no more gaming videos. This indicates a shift in follower preference and her successful adaptation and understanding of the Iranian audience. Followers seem to have tried to compensate for the lack of real-life friendly interactions by turning to a digital depiction of daily life stories from these content creators. Especially an attractive young female in the community. This favored

behavior towards female creators is constant everywhere around the world in social media, and Iran is no exception.

Key indications based on the data mentioned above can be categorized as (1) Consistent High Views: Throughout the investigated periods, Mia Plays maintained a high level of total views, indicating a long-term and engaged viewership. (2) Shift in Focus: although the channel had a dual focus on Gaming and Vlogging before the pandemic era, it displays a substantial shift after the threshold (march 2020), with Vlogs becoming the primary focus. This adjustment could be a purposeful response to changing viewer tastes or other COVID-19 pandemic-related issues. (3) Consistency in Top Views: The top view count stayed above one million before and after COVID-19, demonstrating the channel's capacity to draw a big audience despite changes in the content category. Overall, the data reveals similar performance enhancements to aforementioned competitors, meaning that this channel successfully adjusted its content strategy to the changes in Iranian social media follower metrics, focusing more on Vlogging videos after COVID-19 while maintaining a stable and engaged follower base, as proven by consistently high quantity average view count.

3.4 Challenges of Smaller Iranian YouTubers During COVID-19 Pandemic

Through this segment, for the purpose of providing further insights in addition to collected data from the top-tier channels in the Iranian YouTube community, it would be appropriate to mention the operational dynamics for smaller and lower-tier Iranian YouTubers, which generally consist of Generation-Z (born 1996-2015) Iranian content creators.

Carla Marshall (2023), signifies numerous challenges that lower-tier YouTubers have to deal with if they want to achieve discoverability and relevancy,

the boldest of which are (1) standing out, (2) understanding and manipulating YouTube's algorithm, and (3) monetization and regional restrictions on the platform. (Marshall, 2023). Logically, these challenges become much more difficult to overcome for newly emerging in a restricted media environment like Iran. Subsequently, this creates a steep growth curve for smaller Iranian content creators, and the COVID-19 era paved the way for many new enthusiastic content creators from Iranian communities, who previously focused on short-video content for popular platforms such as Instagram and TickTock to realize the financial potential of YouTube and start experimenting with different strategies.

For this study, I had a chance to interview an established and successful Iranian Generation-Z YouTuber, Leili Mokhtari, known by her YouTube Channel “@madcat_stream,” to hear about her challenges throughout the COVID-19 era and how different the process of adaptation was for her to this situation. She is a 21-year-old, college-educated Iranian content creator with an established and successful YouTube channel and has been deemed an ideal candidate for the interview data collection process for this segment of the study because she is a representative of diverse focused segments of the Iranian population, such as (1) Generation-Z Iranians, (2) the digitally literate and tech-savvy Iranian youth, (3) multi-lingual Iranian content creators, and (4) small community opinion leaders and those who had an active presence in YouTube platform throughout the COVID-19 era in Iran.

The interview included ten questions about various aspects of the COVID-19 era and its effect on smaller YouTubers of the Iranian community, five of which were chosen for interpretation in this segment. Chosen questions are listed as (1) Were there specific challenges maintaining your channel during the pandemic? (2) How did the pandemic affect the types of content your audience engaged with the most? (3) Did

the restrictions during the pandemic change your content creation process? (4) Did specific topics or themes emerge as Trends or became particularly popular within Iranian YouTube content during the COVID-19 era? (5) In your opinion, have the lifestyle changes caused by the coronavirus impacted the tastes of people who come to YouTube for entertainment? If so, what have these changes been?

The first question, which inquired about the specific challenges in maintaining one's channel during the pandemic, produced the following response

“No, I felt no pressure or worry about keeping my friend groups or audience. Most of the children of streamers and gamers spend most of their time at home, and the content of their channel is available wherever they want because of social media. But the quarantine is over, and the audience should watch your content more.”

This response might mean that because of the epidemic, viewers preferred to stay indoors, which gave an advantage to networks that aired programs meant for indoor consumption. As a result, more people were watching networks with educational or entertaining material.

The second question, which inquired about the effects of the Pandemic era on audience engagement and the chosen type of content, produced the following response:

“Not significantly. After Corona and quarantines, most of the YouTubers kept the format they had on YouTube. If they wanted to try a new format or create content with a new trend, they turned to other social media outlets that are more popular in Iran and support short videos - doing the same as Instagram, which is still more popular.”

This response might mean that the pandemic impacted audience engagement metrics and preferences more than the content genre. However, it stimulated content creators to experiment with different formats to accommodate changing consumer interests.

The third question inquired about changes in the content creation process due to restrictions of the pandemic, produced the following response

“This case did not affect the gaming-centered channels such as mine either, but most of the contents were produced indoors, or many channels changed the content to the gaming channel, so it was unnecessary to go outside the house to create content.”

This might mean that content producers have to modify their workflows due to the pandemic to support remote work. This meant that they had to devise new methods for filming and editing videos in addition to investigating novel content concepts appropriate for indoor production.

The fourth question, which inquired about the popularity of new content formats and the possibility of a trend during the pandemic-induced changes, produced the following response:

“A unique topic that can be called a new trend, no. This increase in views was related to all Farsi-language YouTube channels, especially those whose content was exclusively focused on YouTube even before the start of the Corona era and used YouTube as their primary platform. And as I mentioned, instead of changing the content scenario, the content number increased.”

This might mean that the pandemic increased demand for pandemic-related information and resources. This resulted in the creation of new content that addressed these requirements.

The fifth question, which inquired about the opinion of the interviewee on the impact of changes in the audience’s lifestyle on their taste for content, produced the following response:

“Yes, in my opinion, but not in a very significant way. In Iran, the interest of ordinary audience is mainly directed towards platforms that support short videos, such as Instagram and TikTok, and it is these platforms that determine what to watch and how long. To be transformed. But this is much less true for YouTube because before the advent of YouTube Shorts, which works like

TikTok, the Persian language content on YouTube in the format of long videos was only limited to rebroadcasting things like summaries of gamers' streams and trends. It is not being involved in the production of new content for YouTube.”

This might mean that generally, the answer to this question is yes. The pandemic did cause some changes in the preferences of those who enjoy YouTube. For example, there has been an increased demand for movies on pandemic-related themes, such as safety precautions and coping techniques. However, these changes were not as dramatic as they were on other popular platforms in Iran such as Instagram and TikTok.

The interpretation of the responses indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran didn't affect the video production agenda of smaller Iranian YouTubers. They have found opportunities and obstacles due to the increase in demand for diverse content and the changes in followers' preferences. At the same time, they had multiple YouTubers to choose from. Similar to the situation for the top-tier Iranian YouTubers, the pandemic caused an increase in viewership for already-existing popular categories in Iran, like Gaming and trend-related content, even if it did not specifically create any new trends in content categories. To support working from home, these smaller content creators had to adapt their production agenda, which called for more ingenuity and inventiveness while coping with a lack of high-end equipment and financial limitations.

Furthermore, increased viewership as a result of the pandemic encouraged these smaller content creators to produce more material and experiment with new types of content, which is the boldest difference between the top-tier Channels, who didn't want to risk their established agenda by experimenting with a brand new content category, and the minor content creator's community. Additionally, pandemic-related

content, including videos on safety precautions and coping techniques, was also sparked by the outbreak. The epidemic produced a dynamic environment in Iran for the development of the YouTube community, necessitating that creators adjust, innovate, and satisfy their viewership's changing demands and tastes.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the following section, the study reviews the key findings based on the data interpretations of the previous segments and their relevance to the 4 research questions of the study in order of their appearance.

In association with the first Research Question--- (1)How have the lifestyle changes in Iranian society because of COVID-19 lockdowns, influenced the Channels' viewership metrics (Number of views, watch time, etc.) of popular Iranian YouTubers?---The data indicate that a significant rise in viewership and subsequently Watch time was a consistent occurrence among all three of the chosen top tier Channels that are focused on Persian-language content and Iranian followers. This surge in followers is an indication of many new Internet users in Iran and a notable increase in the free time of both content creators and social media followers who did not previously use YouTube as a primary source of content.

In association with the second research question--- (2) How did popular Iranian YouTubers adjust their Upload Frequency and content agenda after COVID-19 restrictions in Iran took place?---The gathered data indicated a notable increase in total uploads across all three chosen channels during the one-year period following the COVID-19 threshold, all of the aforementioned content creators chose to take advantage of the new surge in followers and uploaded a larger quantity of materials over a period of time in comparison to the period of the same length from before COVID-19 threshold in Iran.

In association with the third research question--- (3) How have audience engagement metrics (likes, comments) from popular Iranian YouTuber's channels evolved throughout the COVID-19 restrictions?---Data suggests an observable shift in audience engagement metrics after the channels started to produce more quantity of content and experience a rise in their followers due to numerous reasons including youtube's algorithm, that also contributes to audience engagement by increasing discoverability of trendy videos from these channels

As for the fourth and last research question from this study--- (4)How have the popular Iranian YouTubers adjusted the Quality of their production during the COVID-19 lifestyle shift in Iran?--- The acquired data such as notable changes in content focus in all three channels as well as observable improvement in videography, editing, and thumbnail design quality indicates that the changes caused by COVID-19 caused enough motivation for these top-tier content creators to dedicate resources and attention to produce more ad higher quality content in regards to their followers' gratification.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The conclusive segment of the paper reviews and summarizes key points from content analysis and acquired interpretations from the previous segments and data mentioned above, pointing to the correlations between the media theories and the expectations of related literature.

In association with digital literacy in modern society (Heidari, 2021) and signified by Van Dijck about the nature of a platform such as YouTube, adopting new technical and technological systems in any environment requires more than just establishing a new institutional practice. It takes time for a technology to mature in tandem with its social use and cultural shape while attempting to fit itself into a scheme of vested economic interests. Maintaining this complexity level while defining a revolutionary technology is critical. (Van Dijck, 2013). Such technicalities make Iran an interesting case study as a destination. This country has been formed in the Cyberworld with various contradictory pictures and representations since it has been portrayed negatively by Western mainstream media outlets and positively by social media influencers and YouTubers (Motahar, 2021). Considering its unique relationship with international media, being the reason for a turbulent path of evolution for social media in Iran, especially one as powerful as YouTube, makes research on YouTube's dynamic in the Iranian landscape much more beneficial.

Rotman (2010) stated, "Users play an essential role in the development and sustainability of the online community" (Rotman, 2010; pp. 317-333)" This research

concluded that top-tier Iranian YouTubers, as the leaders of their online community, mainly chose to avoid addressing unsettling global issues (such as COVID-19) directly through their productions due to concerns for the possible loss of followers because of lack of interest in such problems in their mostly-young fan base and subsequently their revenue opportunities as well as not experimenting with injection of entirely new categories of content on their YouTube channels. The advent of COVID-19 restrictions in Iran posed a challenge to the digital literacy of hundreds of thousands of Iranian social media followers and creators from each of these communities, who share common interests and are made primarily out of Iranian literate youth, might have a significant impact on literacy of the rest of population and proved the power and influence of social platform of education in society as well, whether university curricula (Eksi, 2012) or ordinary households.

On the other hand, some smaller creators, who lack the high production budgets of the aforementioned top-tier creators and were given the gift of significant free time as a benefit of lockdowns, chose to experiment with content diversity to a marginal degree to figure out if a new form of content is more captivating for both their established and brand new followers, while also putting effort into other short-video-focused platforms that were popular in Iran during that era like Instagram and TikTok (evidenced by market share of these platform in that era) instead of effort-demanding platforms such as YouTube, and pushing most productions around trendy and time-sensitive topics on these platforms to enhance their discoverability and invest in their future YouTube channel's potential. This is directly correlated with what Uses and Gratifications Theory discusses, stating that audience members are active receivers of information of their choosing, motivated by a perpetual pursuit of gratifications, with the media trying to meet those wishes (Hanson, 2022), and

following the parameters of social media Analytics Research such as User motivations for engagement (Khan, 2017). The shift dynamics in these YouTube channels indicate what Iranian audiences choose to gratify themselves with, which in the case of social media videos focuses primarily on Entertainment purposes.

The alignment of the findings from this research with my own experience and expectations as an Iranian researcher who was present during these transitions. YouTube became a global phenomenon even in a strict media environment such as Iran, rooted its presence and triggered numerous online communities that will only continue to grow. This study bluntly pointed out Iran's distinctive position in the 21st century digital adaptation amidst a global crisis, shaped by its unique historical background and sociopolitical complexity. Iranian content creators exhibit intelligence in navigating challenges such as self-censorship and fear of prosecution, contributing to the success of their channels. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered global media interaction dynamics, impacting diverse communities worldwide. In conclusion, the study underscores the adaptability of Iran's digital community and the evolving nature of international media. As the next generation becomes increasingly media-savvy, community diversity will continue to grow.

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APPENDIX



Eastern Mediterranean University
Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences Ethics Subcommittee

17 January 2024

REF NO ETK00-2024-0012

Dear Farhad Mokhtari

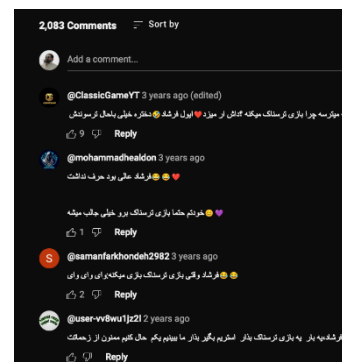
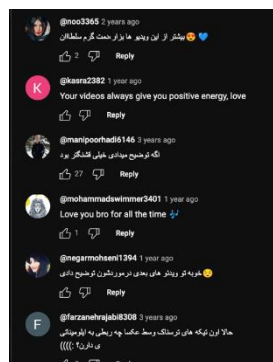
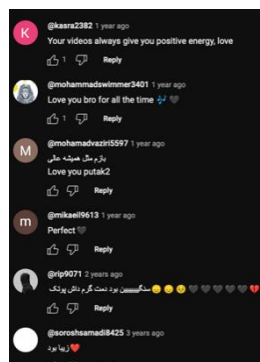
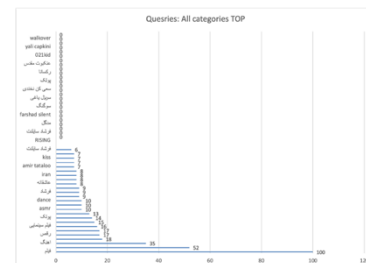
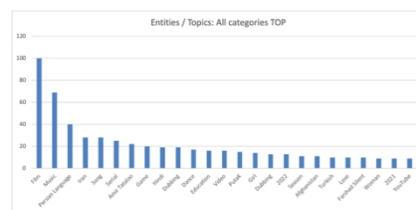
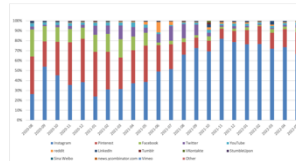
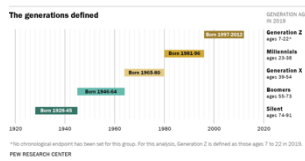
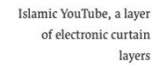
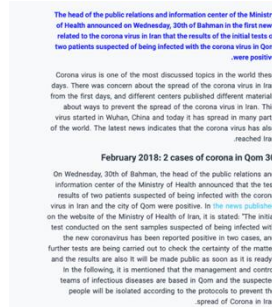
I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for your project titled *The Choice of Content & Consumption Habits on YouTube During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Iranian Society* under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nilufer Turksoy has been approved and you can start data collection.

With all good wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'İ. Raman', is written in a cursive style.

Prof Dr İlhan Raman

Chair, EMU Social Sciences, Humanities and Administration (SOBIB) Ethics Subcommittee



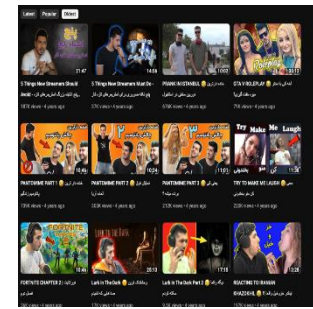
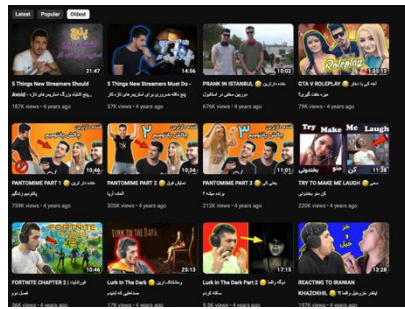


Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

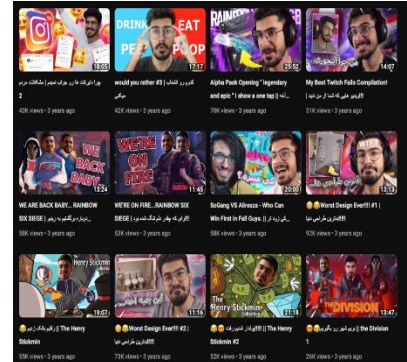
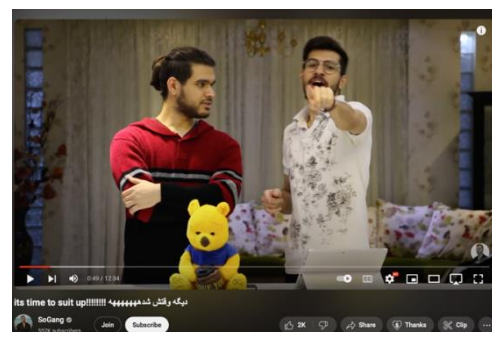
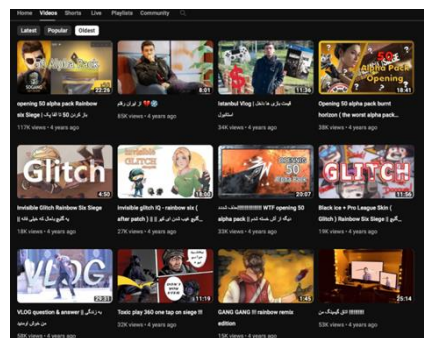


Figure 20,21,22