

Sonic Resistance: How Does the Iranian Heavy Metal Scene Function as a Form of Cultural and Political Resistance in an Authoritarian State?

Abstract

This thesis investigates how Iran’s underground Heavy Metal¹ scene operates as a form of cultural and political resistance within the constraints of an authoritarian state. Drawing on qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis of lyrics and artwork, and digital ethnography of online communities, the study examines how musicians and fans negotiate political identity despite censorship and moral policing. The analysis is anchored in theoretical contributions from sound studies, subcultural theory, and resistance scholarship, particularly the works of Jacques Attali and Steve Goodman. Four interrelated analytical lenses are proposed: *Sonic Resistance Identity* (the formation of political subjectivity through sound), *Repetitive Resistance* (Camus’s Sisyphian logic applied to enduring subcultural defiance), *Digital Vernacular Resistance* (locally adapted strategies for navigating surveillance), and *Subcultural Infiltration* (the slow diffusion of Metal aesthetics into mainstream youth culture due to infrastructural fatigue). Findings show that participation in metal, despite often not overtly political, is inherently oppositional in Iran, with distinct challenges for women, whose engagement constitutes “double dissidence.” The study concludes that resistance in this context is less about overt revolution and more about the sustained creation of alternative cultural spaces, where sound becomes both a medium and a metaphor for autonomy.

¹ In this thesis, the term *Heavy Metal* is capitalized to emphasize its role as a distinct global music genre and cultural formation, rather than merely a descriptive category of “metal that is heavy.” While lowercase *heavy metal* is common in journalistic usage, capitalizing it aligns with academic treatments of named genres (e.g. *Hip Hop*, *Punk*, *Reggae*) where the name denotes a specific tradition with established stylistic and historical characteristics. For this reason, the term Heavy Metal is capitalized throughout this thesis. See Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 5–6, on the sociocultural coherence of Metal as a genre.

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1. Introduction

The Hill and the Sound

‘Without a doubt, music is a strategy running parallel to religion. The channeling power of music, like that of religion, is quite real and quite operative. Like an individual, a society cannot recover from a psychosis without reliving the various phases of its terror; and music, deep down, induces a reliving of noise's fundamental endowment with form, the channelization of the essential violence. The musician: the sacrificed sacrificer; the worshipped and excluded Pharmakon; Oedipus and Dionysus. His work, which is political because it is religious, serves to integrate and channel anxiety, violence, and the imaginary, and to repress marginality. But in addition, because it is a threat of death, it transgresses; it heralds;’ - Jacques Attali, ‘Noise: The Political Economy of Music’

Music and religion are similar in function: both organize emotions, rituals, and social experience. They help societies process complex, often uncontrollable feelings. Music has real, active power to channel emotions and social tensions, just like religious practices do. Just as a traumatized person needs to repeatedly relive their trauma to heal, a society also needs to confront and re-express its collective anxieties. The aforementioned psychosis.

Jacques Attali shows us how at its core, music turns noise (chaos, raw emotion) into form. In doing so, it channels violence, anxiety, disorder into something meaningful or manageable. Music becomes a tool to express, relive, contain and express social tensions. Riddled with paradoxical understandings, it is both a vehicle towards unachievable goals as much as it is comfort. The ‘sacrificed sacrificer’ is a mythical and symbolic description of the artist: the musician suffers for and because of the community, becoming both a victim and a priest. *Pharmakon*² is simultaneously a panacea and a poison. The musician is both celebrated and dangerous, sometimes healing society through music, yet often marginalized or rejected. Still, the artist channels contradiction by being *Oedipus*: fate, inevitable but taboo. He is *Dionysus*: chaos and ecstasy through sonic embodiment. All necessary traits to represent the power of music, both political and religious, in symbolically and emotionally charged manners, helping integrate social fears and desires within the unknown. An unknown which always contains the threat of the outsider or the ‘marginal’, either by including or

² An ambiguous Greek term, it can refer to something that heals, or something that poisons, depending on the context it is used.

suppressing it. *"But in addition, because it is a threat of death, it transgresses; it heralds;"*³ Music is dangerous. It can be subversive, rebellious or even revolutionary. It crosses boundaries and announces change and rebirth. It does, indeed, herald.

Attali claims that music is a powerful social force, and much as religion, it helps a society cope with chaos and violence by transforming them into sound and ritual. The unknown into the known, security represented by rhythm. At the same time, it has the power to challenge authority and question its norms.

Therefore, the musician is a contradictory figure that represents both savior and threat, hero and outcast, capable of channeling the deepest forces within society. That is why music is inherently political: it touches power, and channels emotion and identity all at once.

Like Sisyphus poised at the base of the hill, Iranian metal musicians begin their resistance in full awareness of the weight they bear. This chapter introduces the central research question, on how the Iranian heavy metal scene functions as cultural and political resistance, by introducing a theoretical guiding lens for this thesis: Jacques Attali's vision of music as prophetic and political, and perspectives from sound studies and cultural resistance theory. It also lays out the Sisyphus metaphor, establishing a framework in which metal becomes an act of rebellion not defined by success, but by the refusal to be silenced and most of all, accepting that this may very well be Heavy Metal's exact role.

Each day, Sisyphus pushes the boulder up the hill, knowing it will roll back down. And yet, he persists. In Albert Camus' reading, the absurd hero finds meaning not in the success of his task, but in the very act of resistance. This myth of endless struggle and defiant perseverance offers a reflection of the Iranian Heavy Metal scene as a cultural force that continues to create and survive in the face of authoritarian repression. Like Sisyphus, these musicians and fans are engaged in an uphill battle against censorship. Yet, in their sonic defiance lies a radical form of meaning-making. Drawing from Jacques Attali's view of music as both prophetic and political stems a force capable of organizing noise, and announcing social transformation. This dissertation explores how Heavy Metal in Iran functions as a form of cultural and political resistance. Through the lens of sound and resistance studies, digital ethnography and interviews with musicians and fans alike, I argue that Iranian Metal is not merely underground art. It is a form of sonic rebellion that endlessly rolls its distorted, screaming boulder up the slope of authoritarianism, not to win, but to insist on being heard. Additionally, it is shown why Heavy Metal can be deemed a

³ Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

useful tool for political dissent, especially due to its typically underground⁴ status. It belongs to the outcasts, it is a vehicle of the voiceless that enables them to scream through the someone else's growls. Its sonic properties represent pain and struggle in a way that can simply never be understood by the mainstream.

Sisyphus was punished for all eternity, mainly due to cheating death and imprisoning its embodiment, preventing anyone else from dying and therefore disrupting the natural order. Metal music in Iran is seen as a disruption of the natural societal norms as well. Musicians can be punished for producing such music, not for eternity, but only because they do not live eternally. Yet, just as Sisyphus keeps pushing endlessly, Heavy Metal music in Iran keeps being produced, fans keep attending underground shows and musicians keep seeking exile in other countries. Would Camus go as far as to call these people absurd heroes? Perhaps, considering they are aware of their possible fate, yet still choose to resist.

1.2 Contextualization

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has governed under a theocratic framework that controls all forms of cultural production⁵. All forms of artistic expressions are subject to heavy censorship, especially when they are perceived as threats to the core cultural values and identities, and therefore seen as a catalyst for political upheaval. Music occupies a particularly sensitive space: while traditional and state-sanctioned music is promoted, genres associated with the West, such as rock, rap, and heavy metal, are often criminalized, pushing their production and circulation underground⁶. At a superficial level, it becomes clear that the very act of producing music within these environments turn it into a highly politicized act in itself, and such unauthorized musical practices often embody forms of resistance against the state's ideological control.

In Iran, Heavy Metal began taking root in the 1990s, influenced by bootlegged albums, satellite television and eventually with the spread of the internet. Despite the risks, Iranian metalheads⁷ cultivated an underground scene that created spaces where rebellious identities

⁴ The term "underground" refers to cultural production and circulation that takes place outside officially sanctioned channels, often to avoid censorship or regulation. In the Iranian context, it typically denotes unlicensed performances in secret basements, informal distribution networks (e.g., file sharing, private gatherings) and the overall covert participation in global subcultures under restrictive cultural policies (Nooshin 2005; LeVine 2008).

⁵ Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 12–18

⁶ See Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Silencing Dissent Through Music*, January 24, 2016

⁷ Metal fans are commonly referred to as "metalheads".

could be forged, both physically and digitally. Bands like *Confess* symbolize the scene's resilience, considering its members faced arrest and exile for their activities. Some musicians have sought refuge in Europe, where they continue to produce music in exile, music which amplifies their critiques of censorship and repression. Yet even in the face of brutal crackdowns, the underground community persists, carving out fleeting moments of freedom and solidarity through music. This thesis demonstrates how Heavy metal in Iran is not merely entertainment, but survival, expression and resistance.

Globally, heavy metal music has historically existed on the sidelines of mainstream culture. Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, metal rapidly developed into a subculture characterized by sonic aggression, dark lyrical themes, and visual imagery that challenges norms and what is deemed as normal or socially acceptable, making it a natural conduit for dissent. As *Wallach, Berger, and Greene* (2011) highlight in *Metal Rules the Globe*, Metal adapts flexibly to local conditions while maintaining its global ethos of opposition and outsider identity.⁸ Across various contexts Metal scenes have expressed forms of cultural and political resistance tailored to local struggles. This is a theme that is also explored in this thesis, as one of the logical conclusions of my work was how the adaptability of Heavy Metal music allows its survival and continuous development, even in an authoritarian context.

Metal can consequently be situated globally as a historically rebellious subculture, since it resonates particularly in such contexts. Jacques Attali perfectly encapsulates what music, and consequently Metal, represents in this context, a '*society under construction*', or a way in which to demonstrate subversion. Above all, this is a very human idea of music and its role. A primal perspective, that has been around for centuries and is therefore inherent to our nature. Attali recalls the Dyonisian rites: '*...these rites gathered marginals together in forest clearings and caves: women, slaves, expatriates. At times, society tolerated them, or attempted to integrate them into the official religion; but at other times it brutally repressed them.*'⁹' Not only is this passage applicable to the presented analytical focus, but it also

⁸ Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene, *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5–7. The authors analyze Heavy Metal's global expansion, emphasizing its ability to absorb local cultural influences while maintaining a core ethos of rebellion. They argue that the genre's adaptability allows it to function as a form of dissent in diverse sociopolitical contexts, a framework relevant to its underground manifestations in restrictive environments like Iran.

⁹ Attali references the ancient Greek Dionysian rites which comprised ecstatic and subversive religious ceremonies dedicated to Dionysus (god of wine and vices, known as Bacchus in Roman mythology) that inverted social norms through intoxication and musical frenzy. These rites were particularly associated with marginalized groups excluded from mainstream civic religion, including women, slaves, and foreigners. The tension Attali notes between societal tolerance and repression of these rites parallels modern authoritarian responses to transgressive musical subcultures like Metal in Iran.

highlights how certain musical genres were sidelined yet played an important role in human relations, even several centuries ago.

The interconnection between music and religion can be regarded as a focal introductory point as well. By recalling the musician as the ‘*sacrificed sacrificer*’, music is, in its purest state, something that destroys and domesticates, slowly paving the way for societal reconstruction and order. Moreover, the role of noise as a catalyst for order, which in turn relied on religion to give us societal rites through which such an order could be channeled, reveals a paradoxical role of music. Sound is intemporal and can shape societies and collective behaviour. “*With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world.*”¹⁰. Noise is not just chaos, it marks the boundary between the known and the unknown. Noise precedes and disrupts order, but also leads to the formation of order. Thus, sound is generative and capable of creating organized systems. “*It is at the heart of the progressive rationalization of aesthetics, and it is a refuge for residual irrationality...*”¹¹. Music reflects both reason and irrationality, which mirrors the dual forces that shape any society. Most importantly, within this context: “*It is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal*”¹². Despite being a very theoretical statement, it perfectly encapsulates the context of this research, by demonstrating how authoritarian regimes feel the necessity to crush creative processes, in this case applied to the reality of Heavy Metal music in Iran.

Although religion is not one of the main foci of this thesis, the idea of Heavy Metal as a form of civil resistance in the face of authoritarianism stems partly from the fact that its musical production constitutes blasphemy, which can result in some of the more grave punishments towards individuals. For example, *Article 513* of the *Iranian Penal Code* (IPC) states that insult to sacred figures can result in imprisonment or even capital punishment. *Article 262* affirms that swearing at the Prophet automatically triggers the death penalty. *Article 514* guarantees a prison sentence for insulting the Supreme Leader¹³. These are all enshrouded in the IPC and highlight the inseparability of law and religion. Iran itself is defined as a *Wilayat al-Faqih*: a leadership where religion and politics are blended, where

¹⁰ Attali, “Noise”

¹¹ Attali, “Noise”

¹² Attali, “Noise”

¹³ Article 513 of Iran’s Islamic Penal Code criminalizes any insult to Islamic sanctities, including the Prophet, Imams, or Fatimah, with penalties ranging from one to five years in prison to the death penalty. Article 262 automatically imposes the death penalty on anyone who swears at or insults the Prophet or other sacred figures. Article 514 stipulates prison sentences of up to two years for insulting the Supreme Leader. Iran, *Islamic Penal Code*, Articles 513, 262, and 514.

the insult of sacred religious or state figures is an effective attack on the legitimacy of the entire state. With this in mind, it would be irresponsible not to mention the weight theocratic values hold in Iranian society, which consequently affect the current research.

Logically, the aforementioned themes are all common to extreme music such as Heavy Metal, where dissent towards oppressive governments is screamed through layers of amplified distortion. Such applies even more precisely upon considering the context of Heavy Metal music in contemporary Iran. According to official Islamic law, extreme forms of music are considered *haram*¹⁴ - forbidden and inadmissible, therefore considering musicians and fans alike as possible blasphemers, which entails dangerous consequences.

1.3. Research and Subquestions

Stemming from Attali's groundwork, the foundation for the research question is set. How exactly does Heavy Metal play a role of resistance in contemporary Iranian society? What tools are utilized to do this, or is Heavy Metal itself a tool for resistance? The answer relies on an articulation of several factors that make Heavy Metal a perpetual vehicle of dissent. Analyzing this research question relies on three logical sub-questions that helped reach and organize the results.

Firstly, it is observed how the Iranian state censors and represses Heavy Metal music. This is a tacit analysis, where the goal is understanding the mechanisms of repression put in place. In response, this shone light on how the resistance operates from within. This requires observing Iranian government policies on music censorship, testimonies from musicians and fans that highlight instances of crackdowns on them or even practices of self-censorship. This subquestion is sensical from a logical standpoint, since the first step into answering the research question requires understanding how exactly the Iranian government can be deemed an authoritarian state. Besides the aforementioned legal frameworks, this subquestion observes what strategies Iranian authorities use to enforce their censorship, and how the people respond and adapt to them, bridging the focus towards the second subquestion.

¹⁴ The Arabic term "haram" (حرام) denotes what is forbidden or proscribed under Islamic law (sharī'a), often in contrast to "halal" (permissible). Its usage extends beyond religious jurisprudence to describe socially or culturally taboo acts. See Esposito, John L. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

The second subquestion required a lens shift towards a more contemporary focus, as it explained how Iranians currently navigate the underground Heavy Metal space using social media and the internet. In general, it has highlighted the importance digital platforms play in allowing Iranians to resist state repression and connect globally with others. The research revealed how deep and interconnected the global network of Heavy Metal musicians and fans is, and how vital that is for its survival and spread. This has meant observing western influences in Iranian youth and its consequences for the regime, the widespread use of VPNs (or other forms of encrypted communication) and their importance, as well as the significance of the general presence of Iranian Heavy Metal bands in online spaces. Digital platforms are a key tool for underground musicians and analyzing their usage helps understand transnational support networks. Fundamentally, this step functioned as a connection between theoretical inferences and the reality the people actually inhabit.

The third subquestion pertained to the cultural and political impact of Heavy Metal on the Iranian youth. There are observations regarding Iranian songs' lyrical content and themes, and the general political discourse of fan communities. The logic behind this subquestion is identifying how Heavy Metal music fosters political consciousness among Iranian youth, along with their identity. The thematic analysis of lyrics was key to understanding the political discourse of dissent present in contemporary bands in Iran, along with the common theme of seeing how most bands flee the country upon getting more fan recognition.

All of these questions required the employment of a qualitative research design, based on cultural resistance and sound studies, along with digital ethnography, three online interviews and deep literature and document analysis. The subquestions, along with these methods, provided the tools to answer the research question in a multi-layered manner, offering fresh perspectives and theoretical frameworks relating to the topic. Prior to engaging with the literature review, certain key concepts require clarification. What is the utility behind analyzing resistance through sound and culture? There is a clear objective with this thesis. The analysis of music through resistance practices is crucial in understanding societal dynamics, especially emergent ones.

2. Literature Review

In authoritarian regimes, resistance often takes forms beyond open protest. This means everyday resistance can be represented by the specific forms of language, sound or general aesthetics used by the population. The present literature review brings together key works from cultural resistance theory, sound studies and subcultural theory to understand how music, particularly Heavy Metal, functions as a vehicle for dissent. Scholars such as Jacques Attali (1985) have argued that sound is not a neutral medium but a carrier of power and a potential force for subversion. In contexts of censorship and surveillance, sound and music become critical tools through which marginalized groups negotiate their identity through the articulation of discontent, which builds symbolic resistance over time.

The review first examines how culture and aesthetics operate as forms of resistance under authoritarian rule. It then explores the political power of sound and how music enables alternative expressions of identity and politics. Finally, it turns to Heavy Metal as a global and local phenomenon, focusing on its particular resonance in repressive societies such as Iran. Through this synthesis, the chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for analyzing Iranian heavy metal not as mere entertainment, but as a politically charged practice that speaks back to power, often from the margins and often in noise. As Jacques Attali's (1985) work is utilized extensively as a foundational piece for this research, it is shown how his theoretical frameworks articulate with other relevant pieces of literature. Moreover, the available literature, in combination with my own research, provided a coherent set of thematic points through which the research question could be addressed. These interconnected insights are outlined as follows:

2.1 Power, sound and subversion

2.2 Cultural resistance, authoritarianism and Heavy Metal as a global subculture

2.3 Iranian cultural policy and censorship

By structuring the literature review based on these subtopics, the research question is effectively answered from different prisms. Beginning on a more theoretical perspective, the research develops into a more tacit and palpable plain of analysis, as the information delves deeper into Iranian society and its legal frameworks that pose dangers for those who produce or consume Heavy Metal music. The inferences in this chapter are developed upon further in the **Integrated Results and Discussion** chapter.

2.1. Sound, Power & Subversion

As asserted before, the starting point is that sound is essentially not neutral, but wields power and shapes societies. It is a force that can both forge order and ignite subversion¹⁵. A paradoxical duality that accompanies all research results. Jacques Attali, in *'Noise: The Political Economy of Music'* (1985) contends that music should not be understood solely as a passive reflection of existing social conditions, but rather as a powerful medium that anticipates and shapes future societal developments. He suggests that musical forms and their modes of production often precede broader material transformations to come, exploring the potential within a given cultural code of conduct more rapidly than society itself can evolve. This is a point that can be applied to the current Iranian society, as the youth is developing a "westernised" sense of music in such a manner that the regime simply cannot keep up with and effectively control, as highlighted by the interviews. According to Attali, music "*makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible,*"¹⁶ ultimately guiding and reorganizing the social order. It serves, he writes, as a means of transcending everyday life, becoming a "harbinger" of what is to come. For this reason, music is frequently subject to censorship: its capacity to reveal emerging social tensions and unspoken truths places it alongside other culturally sensitive domains such as sexuality, the family structure or even political discourse. Attali identifies three key ways in which power structures strategically employ music: Ritual power; Representative power and Bureaucratic power. This is a perspective that applies to the current research. All three types can be applied as analytical contrasts, but this analysis focuses mostly on bureaucratic and representative power.

Ritual power is used to make one forget the fear of violence. Above, the Dionysian rites were mentioned, as they serve as an example of ritual power, where music was used to channel and ultimately control collective fears, particularly of violence. Attali frames this as music's first political use where it created a framework where sound was used to deescalate tensions within a given society and create cohesion. The very act of making music could be seen as a way to establish a symbolic order, giving people an illusion of order and harmony. It is a perspective that views music not as something commercial or simply used for consumption, but as something participatory of collective. For example, a simple image of any tribal drumming or chanting session in a traditional society translates the feeling of

¹⁵ Attali, *'Noise'*

¹⁶ Attali, *'Noise'*

feeling apart of something larger than the self, erasing fears of violence and offering comfort and safety among the group.

In the next phase, representative power, music becomes increasingly professionalized and detached from ritual. It starts functioning as a spectacle, meant to represent a harmonious world that does not necessarily exist. This phase coincides with the rise of capitalism and commercial exchange, where music starts becoming a commodity that can be bought and sold. Music is used to legitimize power by simulating order and beauty while giving us the illusion that everything is in balance: economically, politically and culturally. The most important aspects of societal life seem stable and under control, especially when music becomes predictable and safe and musicians seem to take less risks. Therefore, the listener is turned into a consumer and music becomes a commodity that reflects the values of dominant economic systems: harmony and predictability, where all choices need to be rational, right on par with capitalistic markets. For example, even classical concerts or national anthems serve to project a sense of unity and reinforce state or elite values, even when underlying social contradictions are present. At this stage one can start predicting the importance of Heavy Metal in Iran when it comes to combat such feelings of forced stability and fake harmony. These descriptions herald a call for music capable of disrupting the status quo.

In the final stage. Attali coins the term bureaucratic power, which is more modern to us and mass-mediated. Here, music is produced on an industrial scale, flooding public and private spaces. It seeps through the cracks of every facet human society, even when undesired. The aim is no longer to create harmony or participation, as the commodification of music achieved this through representative power, but to drown out any possible form of dissent. Paradoxically, mass produced music quietly becomes a tool of control, shaping moods and behaviors in workplaces and public spaces such as transportation networks or shopping malls. Not only did music become predictable, it is used to eliminate any unpredictability from the public sphere: other “noises” or forms of unsanctioned expression or dissent are censored. Thus, music becomes a means to suppress alternative voices. This is present in all our daily lives. From the the elevator music in office buildings to the constant radio/TV broadcasts which are acts not to entertain, but to create sterile and regulated environments. It ultimately prevents reflection and substitutes real engagement with passive consumption.

Overall, it can be inferred that Attali’s framework shows how music evolves from a communal expression of the sacred to a regulated product used to uphold social control. While it can still be a site of resistance (especially when it breaks the codes of commodified music) its institutional uses have largely aligned it with dominant political and economic

structures. Naturally, this is key to this thesis, as Heavy Metal's disruptive nature directly contests these uses of music as power, which is why it is often marginalized or censored, especially in authoritarian contexts.

More specifically, the nature of bureaucratic power is the most applicable to this case. The Iranian state uses mass-produced, sanctioned cultural products (such as state-approved music or nationalist songs) to control public discourse¹⁷. Contrarily, Heavy Metal, with its loudness and distortion directly violates the sonic norms of this sanitized, fabricated environment. It disrupts the “deafening silence” imposed by bureaucratic power. The censorship and persecution of underground Metal artists (e.g. the Iranian band *Confess*) perfectly exemplifies how the regime attempts to eliminate musical “noise” that threatens its authority. Therefore, Attali’s theoretical framework can be used to conclude that Heavy Metal becomes an act of making noise as resistance, trying to reclaim the sonic space outside of state control. It is not just that Metal is suppressed, but it is deemed as dangerous to the authoritarian order because it refuses to obey or to be tamed, it operates outside the standard guidelines.

Moreover, instances of Representative Power can be seen when examining Heavy Metal’s aesthetics through this lens of sonic resistance. Iranian state-sanctioned music (like classical Persian music, religious hymns or pop that is accepted and supports moral norms) tries to project a harmonious, idealized image of society. This is the aforementioned “representation” of order and moral legitimacy, as Metal completely breaks with these aesthetic codes. The distortion, the screaming and the anti-establishment lyrics typically found in Heavy Metal music offer a “counter-aesthetic” that is deliberately dark and emotionally intense, going completely against what is deemed socially acceptable. Instead, Heavy Metal reflects the dissonance and alienation Iranians feel towards their government. It can be inferred that Iranian Heavy Metal does not simply resist by “being loud”, but by rejecting the very image of social harmony the state tries to impose. Overall, bureaucratic power can be used as a theoretical lens, with representative power as a contrast. The concept of ritual power is useful to show a historical continuum of how states use music, but the present focus is on how Metal disrupts the present-day “auditory regime” of authoritarian Iran.

To direct the research towards a more Metal-specific direction, it is important to understand how Heavy music can affect people both physical- and emotionally. It is a vital guideline when understanding how the Iranian youth utilizes Heavy Metal as a vehicle for dissent. A pertinent example can be seen in Steve Goodman’s *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Effect and the*

¹⁷ Laudan Nooshin, “Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 463–464.

Ecology of Fear (2009), where the author investigates how sound operates not just as communication or music form, but as a material force capable of modulating spaces and behaviors. He conceptualizes so called "politics of frequency", where sound - particularly at low frequencies, which are common in Heavy Metal - can disorient and disturb bodies, often bypassing conscious cognition. This sonic dominance is tied to techniques of deception and cognitive control in military action, which demonstrates how vibrational forces can shape atmospheres and trigger unexpected emotional responses.

Goodman introduces ideas such as "Bass materialism": a sensory, tactile experience of low-frequency sound that affects us before our thoughts, ideologies or even conscious thoughts can do so. It illustrates how sound resonates physically with bodies, suggesting that bodily emotions precede understanding. This means that before one even processes what music they are listening to, their body reacts and feels something through sheer vibrations. This theory understands bass not merely as a musical element but one that can translate sound into power or even mobilization. Goodman argues that bass sound blurs the boundary between sound and touch, creating a "vibrational ecology". In this ecology, sound acts as a material means of communication, producing felt effects such as agitation, excitement or even disorientation or fear.

Goodman's framework is highly relevant to this study of Iranian Heavy Metal as resistance through sound. Iranian Metal, especially with distorted guitars and deep bass, engages in *bass materialism*: it physically and emotionally moves listeners, even when lyrics are censored or inaudible due to excessive screaming. Even the vocals with low growls, despite hard to understand, convey strong emotions that excite us, be it either in positive or negative ways¹⁸. The intensity of the sound itself becomes political: a visceral reaction against the quietude imposed by state control and the moral order. Hence the complementarity between both author's theories.

Not only that, but underground concerts are common in Iran¹⁹, which means this framework applies in a multitude of ways. Similar actions, like jam sessions or even headphone listening can invoke a shared bodily experience of resistance, before any explicit political meaning is even articulated. This also allows bands to show their dissent through music without using direct lyrics that can put them in jeopardy. Goodman helps explain how resistance does not need to be spoken to be felt, which is used to corroborate the idea that Metal is a *process*, not just a message.

¹⁸ For example, listening to Iranian band Trivax's song "To Liberation and Beyond" is a good way to feel Goodman's theory in action

¹⁹ Eckerström, "Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran," 172–175; Andy R. Brown et al., *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 8–10.

Interestingly, it is paradoxical that while authoritarian regimes such as Iran may engage in their own forms of sonic control through loud propaganda or religious soundscapes²⁰, underground Heavy Metal appropriates the same acoustic tactics to disturb the very dominant order, since here Metal acts as *counter-sonic warfare*, reclaiming sound as subversion instead of submission.

All in all, Goodman's angle can be positioned alongside Attali's to show two complementary threads: while Attali presents music as prophetic noise that reveals the future will of a society and threatens power, Goodman shows a functionality of sound that relies on vibrational forces to mobilize affects and resist control at the most embodied level. One is more emotional, the other more physical, showing the influence Heavy Metal music can have on both planes of human existence.

This examination permits the argument that Iranian Metal is not just a subcultural identity, but a vibrational, physical practice of dissent. It can be physically unsettling, emotionally charged or even disturbing and, above all, politically potent before it is even understood as 'resistance'.

2.2 Cultural resistance, authoritarianism and Heavy Metal as a global subculture

This investigation requires a clear definition of the term 'resistance' in the context of this thesis, and how it translates into real life applications. In this context, Andy R. Brown's et al. *"Global Metal Music and Culture - Current Directions in Metal Studies"* (2016) is seen as a foundational piece that reveals the weight and significance of resistance through Metal music in authoritarian contexts, which can be applied specifically to the current Iranian landscape. Importantly, it sets an important backdrop for the role of Heavy Metal in western societies, which can be contrasted to the Iranian reality.

In these contexts, cultural resistance often emerges not as isolated acts of defiance but as more sustained, intentional practices that build alternative communities over time. This resistance, as argued in the broader literature on subcultures and dissent, manifests across a spectrum. This means expressions of resistance can go from small, personal expressions to more overt cases such as songs against the regime. Brown et al. (2016) emphasize that Metal

²⁰ See Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 142–144, on the use of religious broadcasts and state media to dominate the auditory public sphere in Iran.

operates as a global subculture of resistance, maintaining a persistent oppositional ethos even in the face of commercialization. They argue that the genre provides a symbolic space for challenging dominant ideologies, with “heaviness” functioning as a transgressive aesthetic gesture. This concept is particularly potent in contexts of marginalization, where Metal becomes a vehicle for expressing collective grievances and political frustration, which is exactly what happens in Iran. As the interviews revealed, aesthetics are a large part of what makes Heavy Metal attractive to younger people. From clothing styles to small pieces of jewellery, it is a music genre that encapsulates an entire feeling of constantly showing dissent and marking a contrary position from those who hold power. Such small gestures are useful as they do not call upon too much attention from authority figures.

While heavy metal has been traditionally associated with the white, working-class youth of the Global North, its global diffusion has radically diversified its meaning. According to Brown et al. (2016), Metal's international appeal is linked to global processes such as deindustrialization and political disillusionment, which have generated a transnational “*metal proletariat*.” Even when listeners are middle class, the genre retains its blue-collar ethos through imagery and themes of collective struggle. The volume and intensity of Metal performances are central to its affective power, eliciting a physical response that resists easy assimilation into dominant cultural forms. This idea ends up tying back to Attali's framework that encapsulates music as something politically charged and Goodman's theory of ‘Bass Materialism’, where sound vibrations invoke feeling before ideological thought.

Regarding meaningful literature that examines Iranian society itself, I recall Laudan Nooshin's 2005 article *Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran*, in which she provides a detailed ethnographic account of how Iranian rock and metal musicians navigate censorship during their search for a distinct cultural identity among a culturally homogeneous society. She argues that the underground status of these genres is not simply a function of their content but of their very existence as unsanctioned cultural forms. In Iran, where the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance tightly controls public artistic expression, even the act of playing loud music in a basement privately can be seen as something political. Nooshin emphasizes that while not all Iranian rock is overtly political, the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the music often acquire oppositional meanings due to the broader discursive context in which they operate. For example, the use of English lyrics or diverse stylistic influences (from Jazz to Death Metal) becomes a way to reject the regime's nationalist or religious identity frameworks.

In understanding the Iranian Heavy Metal scene as a form of cultural resistance, the digital realm emerges as a crucial site of subversion. Among the most foundational contributions to the study of digital politics in Iran is “Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran” by Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany (2010). This work presents itself as a vital framework for analyzing how Iranians navigate and resist authoritarian information control through online media. Sreberny and Khiabany argue that Iran’s digital sphere is neither a fully repressive apparatus of state surveillance nor a utopian space of free expression. Rather, it constitutes a “contested terrain”, in which various actors continuously negotiate the boundaries of permissible discourse. This includes state censors, cultural producers, youth and technocrats in an amalgam of hunters and prey. This framing is central to the research question at hand, as it showcases the Iranian Heavy Metal scene’s tactical appropriation of digital platforms such as YouTube, Telegram or Instagram, which allow for creative expressions that would otherwise be impossible under Iran’s heavily policed cultural sphere.

While the authors focus on the blogosphere²¹, their broader analysis of digital political culture can be extended to other user-centric content platforms that Iranian musicians and fans utilize nowadays. The Heavy Metal scene, like the early blog movement, thrives on vernacular creativity²² (a term that will be adopted and reworked further on) and localized resistance. Significantly, the authors highlight that the regime's "dual discourse" of both modernity and moral authority produces an internal contradiction. The state embraces technological modernity to demonstrate national progress but simultaneously represses its democratizing potential. This contradiction is mirrored in the treatment of music: while Iran has a rich classical and pop music tradition²³, genres like Metal are repressed for violating the Islamic moral order, even as the state develops streaming platforms²⁴ and digital censorship infrastructure. Figure A.1 (Appendix) offers an insight into Iran’s largest state-sanctioned social media platform. The paradoxical nuances are a common trend throughout this research.

Moreover, Sreberny and Khiabany highlight the importance of anonymity and pseudonymity. This highlights concerns around circumvention technologies such as VPNs, tools heavily relied upon by Iranian Metal artists, particularly those attempting to reach international audiences or distribute uncensored content. The state's efforts to regulate cyberspace,

²¹ The term *blogosphere* refers to the collective network of blogs and their interconnections. It emerged in the early 2000s as a way to conceptualize blogs not as isolated sites but as part of a dynamic online ecosystem.

²² A term from cultural studies (originally coined by Jean Burgess), which describes how individuals or communities reinterpret global or elite cultural products in locally meaningful ways.

²³ Iran’s musical heritage spans millennia, encompassing classical forms such as *dastgāh* (the Persian modal system), regional folk traditions and a modern popular music scene that flourished both before and after the 1979 Revolution, albeit under different political constraints (During 1991; Nooshin 2005)

²⁴ See “Aparat”, the Iranian state’s official streaming platform.

through projects like the “Halal Internet” or blocking major platforms, are consistently undermined by youth digital literacy and the persistence of informal networks²⁵. This logic aligns with what will further on be referred to as “infrastructural fatigue”: the state’s capacity to monitor and repress becomes increasingly overwhelmed, enabling small but sustained acts of subcultural change.

Their discussion of cultural politics is also deeply relevant. The authors emphasize that in Iran, struggles over communication are always simultaneously political, cultural and ethical. This triadic framework resonates with the way Heavy Metal musicians contest not only political repression, but also the moral authority that delegitimizes the genre as “ḥarām” or “Satanic.” Metal, in this context, is not merely an artistic genre since it becomes a symbolic battleground where questions of youth identity and political legitimacy are negotiated.

In sum, Sreberny and Khiabany’s *Blogistan* provides a critical backdrop for understanding the digital lifelines of Iran’s metal underground. Despite somewhat outdated, several of the theoretical lenses are useful for the presented research. Their conceptualizations of the contest of digital space and mentions of vernacular creativity underpin a broader argument of this study: that Heavy Metal in Iran is not simply repressed or silenced it is recontextualized and recirculated through the very digital spaces the state seeks to control. In doing so, it challenges the limits of authoritarian cultural power not through open confrontation, but through subculturally meaningful acts of sonic resistance.

2.3 Iranian cultural policy and censorship

Lastly, this research called for the use of a contemporary case to sway into an analysis of the legal frameworks behind Iran’s cultural repression that often leads to the persecution of musicians. In Pasqualina Eckerström’s 2022 article ‘*Extreme heavy metal and blasphemy in Iran: the case of Confess*’, a compelling case study is made on how extreme Metal is criminalized and suppressed through religious and legal frameworks in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Eckerström focuses on the high-profile arrest of the Iranian metal band *Confess* in 2015. She highlights how state authorities mobilize charges of “blasphemy” and

²⁵ Iran’s National Information Network (*Shabake-ye Melli-ye Ettela’at*) project, colloquially known as “Halal Internet”, was initiated in 2011 to create a state-controlled domestic internet insulated from foreign platforms, ostensibly for “cybersecurity” but widely recognized as a censorship mechanism. This resulted in the filtering of global platforms like YouTube and Facebook, pushing users toward state-approved services. Despite these measures, Iranian youth often circumvent restrictions using VPNs, sustaining informal transnational networks for cultural and political exchange (Sreberny & Khiabany 2010; Reporters Without Borders 2022).

“propaganda against the state” to silence cultural expression that opposes state-sanctioned art. The band’s lyrics and sound and especially their anti-authoritarian themes were deemed violations of Islamic morality and political orthodoxy, which led to their imprisonment and eventual exile. These accusations rest on the articles mentioned earlier of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran, particularly *Article 513*, which punishes insults to “Islamic sanctities” with one to five years in prison, or “sabb al-nabi” (insulting the Prophet or Imams)²⁶. In addition, *Article 500* of the Penal Code criminalizes “propaganda against the Islamic Republic” and carries a sentence of up to five years in prison²⁷. These legal tools are intentionally broad and discretionary, enabling the regime to target musicians and dissidents alike, for a wide range of ‘perceived’ infractions.

Eckerström situates this within a broader pattern of cultural repression that arose with the 1979 revolution, where the state institutionalized moral policing through entities such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Guidance Patrol, commonly known as the morality police (*Gasht-e Ershad*), both of which vet public performances, lyrics, clothing and even audience behavior. The ministry regularly denies performance permits to bands and censors lyrics that challenge religious doctrine or promote “Western values”²⁸. This has forced much of Iran’s rock and metal scene underground - literally - with bands rehearsing in soundproof basements - and metaphorically - with music disseminated through encrypted digital channels, VPNs or simply word-of-mouth. One of the interviews even emphasized the importance of using VPNs, which will be explored and analyzed further on.

As Eckerström reiterates, extreme Metal’s aesthetics are perceived not just as artistic choices but as ideological threats to Iran’s theocratic regime²⁹. The case of *Confess* illustrates how Metal becomes a site of resistance, wherein musicians not only reject the state’s moral codes but actively construct opposing identities. Their music and visual output, from album covers depicting clerics and capitalists as instruments of oppression, are deeply political acts. This aligns Nooshin’s (2005) analysis that repression does not eliminate youth expression but forces it into coded or often more creative forms³⁰. Thus, in the Iranian context, the criminalization of heavy metal paradoxically amplifies its subversive power, transforming what might otherwise be personal artistic expression into cultural resistance with political resonance. One of the assumptions that resulted from this research is this exact paradox: when a form of cultural expression is forcefully prohibited, the will of the people to partake in its production is amplified, as if part of human nature. I could help but recall the myth of

²⁶ Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1996, amended 2013), Article 513.

²⁷ Ibid., Article 500.

²⁸ Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”

²⁹ Eckerström, “Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran”

³⁰ Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”

Sisyphus, where he knows his action of carrying the boulder will have one single result: failure. Yet, he persists. The same logic can be applied to Iranian musicians in this context, as despite probable repercussions, their musical expression must persist, as they adapt and find different ways to be heard.

To summarize, I believe these authors contribute to a nuanced understanding of Heavy Metal as both a global subculture and a locally embedded form of resistance. Attali (1985) offers us a more theoretical basis to our understanding of music in relation to power and politics; Goodman's theories complement this; Brown et al. (2016) provide a macro-level theoretical framing of metal's global diffusion and affective power; Nooshin (2005) provides the ethnographic and physical grounding necessary to understand how resistance is lived and negotiated in daily practice under authoritarianism. Eckerström (2002) sheds light on a specific example of an Iranian band. Therefore, I can assert that this body of literature collectively informs the present study's focus on the Iranian Heavy Metal scene as a case of sonic and cultural resistance, where sound becomes not only expression but confrontation, in a perpetual cycle of messy sounds coated in distortion that clash with a perceived state-mandated moral cleanliness. A clash that, paradoxically, happens rather quietly and underground, but is very much there.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Understanding and effectively answering the presented research question requires an interdisciplinary analytical foundation. This theoretical framework brings together key concepts from several fields, mainly cultural resistance theory, subcultural studies, sound studies and some accounts of digital media research. Rather than applying disparate lenses in isolation, this framework synthesizes selected core thinkers, from Asef Bayat, James C. Scott, Dick Hebdige, to Jacques Attali, Steve Goodman, and Annabelle Sreberny & Gholam Khiabany. Their theories work in articulation to provide the conceptual scaffolding through which the thesis's empirical findings are interpreted. These thinkers offer insights into how marginalized groups perform dissent and are able to navigate surveillance while constructing a personal identity through symbolic and embodied practices. These are all central to Iran's underground Metal community, its survival and more importantly, its development. The following points illuminate the main tools offered by this conceptual framework.

2.4.1 Cultural resistance as everyday practice

A core pillar of this study is that resistance is not always explicitly loud or political. Asef Bayat's (2009) notion of "non-movements" is crucial in this context. These refer to the quiet intrusions of small cumulative actions into the ordinary, dictated by acts of defiance by marginalized individuals. Individuals who generally lack of access to institutional platforms for dissent. For Bayat, these dispersed actions may not form an overt social movement, but they can still transform social norms over time. This is a useful way to understand Iranian Metalheads, whose existence and practices are politically charged even if they are not expressively revolutionary.

In tandem, James C. Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden transcripts" explains how dominated groups develop subtle, symbolic forms of resistance that are not immediately visible to those in power. Iranian Metal musicians and fans often craft identities, built upon song lyrics and performances, that appear apolitical on the surface but carry coded messages of dissent intelligible to insider audiences. Scott's framework allows a view of resistance as actions not always confrontational, but as a tactical navigation of repression through semiotic ambiguity and aesthetic camouflage, as symbols and imagery used in artistic expression can be interpreted in different manners.

2.4.2 Subculture, semiotics and vernacular rebellion

The current inquiry sheds light on another vital framework. To understand the symbolic grammar of Iranian heavy metal, Dick Hebdige's seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) is essential. Hebdige describes how subcultures communicate resistance through aesthetic codes. This includes clothing, music, slang or even common gestures. These are codes that aim to disrupt dominant meanings, and are semiotic practices that enable young people to contest hegemonic norms without necessarily engaging in formal politics. Iranian Metal's adoption of global stylistic elements (e.g. long hair, black clothing, distorted music riddled with growls and blastbeats³¹) and their recombination with local mythological symbols creates a vernacular form of rebellion that challenges both the religious-nationalist ideology of the state and the Western monopoly over subcultural aesthetics. This creates an interesting duality where Iranian Metal tries to balance itself in the middle, carving its own identity.

³¹ A "Blastbeat" is a type of drum beat born in the Hardcore Punk and Grindcore scenes. It involves a rapid succession of alternating strokes on the snare drum and bass drum, often accompanied by cymbal patterns. This creates a powerful and aggressive constant sound.

Furthermore, Laudan Nooshin's (2005) observations about vernacular creativity in Iranian popular music reinforce this point. Although not a central theorist here, her insights underscore how local youth adapt global genres to express hybrid identities. Metal becomes not merely a foreign import but a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, East and West or even submission and subversion. This backdrop enables the development of concepts like *sonic resistance identity*, where identity formation is tied directly to musical expression.

2.4.3 Sound as political force

To move beyond representation and into the realm of embodiment, this framework draws, once again, from Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) and Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare* (2010). Attali argues that music is not merely a reflection of societal conditions, but it precedes them. Music, especially disruptive or "noisy" music, foreshadows social change by expressing what cannot yet be spoken publicly. His view positions Heavy Metal not just as cultural dissent but as a prophetic act that disrupts the hegemonic soundscape of authoritarian control.

Goodman, on the other hand, emphasizes the affective and sensory dimensions of sound, which he calls "vibrational force." He introduces the idea of sonic warfare, showing how sound operates as a tool of control, but also of resistance. His notion of "bass materialism" describes how sub-bass frequencies and vibration affect bodies beyond cognition. These frameworks allow us to interpret the overall visceral energy of Iranian Metal not only as symbolic but as performative disruptions of the state-imposed order. As opposed to just lyrics or imagery, they help theorize sound itself as a medium through which rebellion is embodied and therefore transmitted.

In a state like Iran where conduct and even public emotion are tightly regulated, the physical experience of metal headbanging, moshing and screaming can be read as a reclaiming of affective space and the individual's bodily autonomy. In this way, Goodman's and Attali's work support central proposition in this thesis: that sound can be a site of resistance in its own right, not merely a vessel for political ideas.

2.4.4 Digital resistance and networked autonomy

The final theoretical pillar addresses how Iranian metal survives and adapts within a heavily surveilled and censored digital landscape. Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany's *Blogistan* (2010) introduces the concept of "networked agency", where digital tools are not inherently liberating but become resources for micro-autonomy when skillfully appropriated. A concept which aligns with the thesis's notion of *digital vernacular resistance*, in which musicians and fans use VPNs and other encrypted forms of communication to build subcultural communities beyond the reach of state control. Here, digital infrastructures are not utopian free spaces, but contested terrains. Sreberny and Khiabany emphasize that Iranian users constantly negotiate visibility and cultural survival online, which naturally, entails risks. This is particularly relevant to underground musicians who livestream to trusted fans through Telegram, or release material on foreign-hosted platforms (such as Spotify or Youtube) to avoid domestic repression. Their work helps frame these actions not as acts of avoidance but as tactics of survival within a broader ecology of resistance.

Together, these theoretical foundations allow us to approach Iran's metal scene not just as a musical subculture, as that presents itself a limited scope. Through the literature and digital ethnographic work, it became clear that the field of resistance is multi-layered. Bayat and Scott frame the socio-political conditions of defiance. Hebdige and Nooshin decode the aesthetic and cultural logics of subculture. Attali and Goodman reveal the affective and material power of sound, offering a more theoretical perspective on the matter. Lastly, Sreberny and Khiabany provide the digital lens to understand how resistance adapts under surveillance. This lens is of utmost importance, since contemporary society is ultimately dependant on technological connections, on all aspects of life. When carefully woven together, these theories enable the analytical move from data to interpretation, which is the ultimate goal. Above all, the idea was to gather theories that enabled me to go from hearing music to understanding its political force in the Iranian context. They form the conceptual bedrock upon which the thesis's core contributions are developed.

3. Methodology

Regarding the methodology used for this research, it is heavily qualitative and above all, interpretivist. Individual experiences (be them interviews or analyzed case studies) were

applied to the different frameworks, in a way to build a new, fresh perspective on the research topic. Moreover, this study is highly embedded in resistance research, as given away by the theoretical literature review. The combination of document analysis, interviews and digital ethnography allowed an understanding of the topic in a multifaceted way, especially when applying different views from other disciplines into the research. This resulted in the finding of theoretical paradoxes, some of which have already been mentioned. By digital ethnography the use of social media platforms is accentuated, namely for observing online fan and musician discourse, as well as interacting with people directly. More specifically, I utilized Reddit to dwell in specific forums (known as Subreddits) dedicated to Iran, Metal in Iran, music in Iran and Iranian politics. Here I secured one of my three interviews, with an Iranian girl who did not wish to give away her real name. She claimed to be in her early 20's and a big Heavy Metal fan, and she also stated that she grew up in Iran but now lives abroad (unrelated to the her music taste). She offered great insights into the research topic. Additionally, there were another two interviews. One with a young Iranian Metal fan as well, and one with a Swedish Metal fan and musician. Note that Swedish nationals actually have an interesting connection to this topic, not only due to the country's strong history with Heavy Metal and its subgenres³², but also because several Iranians who flee the country end up finding refuge in Sweden³³.

The social network X (formerly known as Twitter) was also used to connect with like minded music fans and Iranians, and to see how they interact within the music space. The interviews were semi-structured, with a lot of space for the participants to show their feelings and personal views. There were several risks regarding security and privacy, which is why no real names were disclosed. For example, one of the interviewee chose to go by her online name of *Zagros*, probably in homage to the mountain range that stretches throughout Iran, Iraq and Turkey. This could have been an indication of her love towards her culture and heritage, which translated beautifully into a genuine and mindful interview. Every interviewee gave consent, but no complete personal data was shared.

Additionally, Youtube and Spotify were great sources of information on music albums and lyrics, as well and underground footage of shows. Not only that, but interview footage that was only accessible there provided great insights into my research³⁴. These are the main sources that I consider as digital ethnography: not simply passive observation, but with

³² See *Bathory*, the 1983 Black Metal project from Stockholm commonly known as the genre's pioneers.

³³ As is the case of Confess. They found exile in Sweden after escaping prison and fleeing Iran.

³⁴ For example the video "*Prison for music: an interview with Nikan Khosravi of Confess*" is a great source to understand the actual punishment musicians can face in Iran, as well as the accounts of the artist's escape from prison https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9As1Ae_lq4

attempts to actually participate and understand group dynamics that happen online. Several musicians and fans express political dissent through metaphorical lyrics and aggressive musical styles. It shows how the sonic elements themselves become tools for articulating dissent without direct political statements that would invite censorship directly. For example, the song ‘*Evin*’ (the name of a notorious prison in Tehran, namely for harbouring mostly political prisoners, see A.2) by the band Confess was a great point to start analyzing lyrics by Iranian bands. Although Confess is the most famous example of a band jailed for their music, there are other, lesser known cases that can be observed for the purposes of this research.³⁵

There were also useful NGO transcripts used as sources of information, namely some *Human Rights Watch* reports³⁶ and *Freemuse’s* (an NGO that defends artistic freedom) reports on Iranian repression on artists and musicians post-2020.³⁷ Amnesty International also provides an interesting insight into jailed artists in Iran and their stories in their reports.³⁸ Several other sources such as articles and academic texts were observed, and are hence properly cited in this document, per usefulness towards the research.

Regarding the issue of personal positionality, it is important to admit that it was difficult to position myself as ‘impartial’ considering I represent a ‘western’ voice. Despite this, I quickly understood the weight of western influence in the Iranian music industry, which helped tear down cultural barriers and gain the trust of the people I interviewed or communicated with.

However, there is an interesting episode that must be shared. The online presence of Iranians is somewhat limited and needs renewal, meaning systematic user account deletions. I had an interview scheduled with an Iranian Heavy Metal fan that I met through a Reddit forum. Unfortunately, due to recent geopolitical escalations between Israel and Iran, I came to find that all the 6 Iranian people I was, or had been in contact with regarding my research, had swiftly deleted their accounts along with all their posts. I could still access chats and messages, but all the user accounts had disappeared, almost simultaneously. Naturally, this took me by surprise. Afterwards, I spoke to an Iranian person online, who promptly told me that it was fairly normal for Iranians to delete their social media accounts every once in a while. Even through the use of VPNs, it is better to ‘*be safe than sorry...*’, according to them. This was a revealing chain of events. Despite ‘costing’ me a potentially useful

³⁵ See *Arsames*, another Iranian Metal band whose members were arrested in 2019

³⁶ The ‘HRW World Report 2016: Iran’ has mentions of cultural and artistic repression

³⁷ Freemuse NGO: Iranian repression of artists.

³⁸ Amnesty International’s 2016 campaign for ‘Free Artists in Iran’

interview, it also highlighted how intricate and dangerous the use of social media in Iran is. All these methods, articulated in a meaningful manner provided interesting results, which will now be scrutinized in the following section.

4. Integrated Results and Discussion

4.1 On repression and censorship: the Sisyphean Logic of *Repetitive Resistance*

With the theoretical foundations established and the methodological approach highlighted, the first piece of result comes by addressing one of the central themes of this study: the actual mechanisms of censorship and repression. This section engages with the first subquestion on how the Iranian state censors and represses heavy metal music. While the legal and theoretical frameworks laid out earlier provide a foundational understanding, this part of the thesis turns to the empirical findings and interlinks them, offering a closer examination of how these dynamics manifest in practice. Drawing from document analysis, NGO reports and interview data, several key patterns emerge to initiate a theoretical debate. There are four main novel terms that I attempt to bring to the discussion, per section names.

Censorship operates not only through formal legal structures such as the Islamic Penal Code's provisions on blasphemy or offenses against public morality. It also relies on informal tactics like surveillance, digital monitoring and the denial of performance permits³⁹. As highlighted in Freemuse's State of Artistic Freedom (2019) and reiterated by Amnesty International (2022), musicians are often targeted for expressing dissent or for transgressing perceived moral boundaries, particularly when lyrics challenge authority or religious orthodoxy. Moreover, traditional gender norms, often bent in Heavy Metal imagery⁴⁰, are also a societal standard the Iranian regime cannot allow to be challenged. The aforementioned case of the band Confess remains emblematic: arrested in 2015 under charges of "blasphemy," "anti-government propaganda," and "running an illegal band," they

³⁹ Sreberny and Khiabany explain that censorship in Iran is not limited to formal legal codes but is enacted through a broader apparatus of informal surveillance such as bureaucratic restrictions. These include the denial of permits for performances and publications. See: *Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 64–68.

⁴⁰ Note for example the 80's rise of *Glam Metal*, where men with long hair would wear short crop tops, feminine boots and makeup typically deemed as feminine, challenging those traditional gender norms

faced prison and potential death sentences⁴¹, which reaffirms that the cultural sphere is not exempt from state control but rather a critical site for ideological enforcement.

Interview material further reveals the chilling effect of this repression. Musicians describe engaging in self-censorship, relocating their creative activities to digital or diasporic spaces and using metaphoric or mythological language (e.g. references to myths where heroes suffered or escaped violent realities) to bypass scrutiny while maintaining subversive undertones. One of the interviewees reveals she started using VPNs to search for new music when her parents forbade her from listening to such “devil music” and took away her standard internet access. Note however, she claimed that her parent’s actions were not only due to cultural conservatism, but for her own safety. Although, she also stated that this happened around 10 years ago, and nowadays Heavy Metal imagery is more present in day to day society, and more widely accepted.

One of the logical conclusions for this is that first, the state apparatus prioritizes censoring musicians. By stopping musical production, there is, reasonably, less “blasphemous” music to listen to. However it should also be considered that the state does not have the infrastructure in place to punish every single person who wears a Heavy Metal shirt or imagery, as that would require a massive infrastructural investment and organization. This means that for some time now, public perception regarding Heavy music has changed. Moreover, the Internet has played a key role in this change, as will be seen further on. Since most of the populace has easy access to a global connection, it is much easier to access new music and bands, especially from western sources⁴². Reiterating, the Iranian state simply does not possess the infrastructure to avoid this, reiterating the idea that a slow, gradual change in societal acceptance has been growing over the last couple of decades. It is important to note that this does not mean that there is no danger for Metal fans in Iran, especially musicians. The legal frameworks for harsh punishments are still in place, and many musicians get shutdown before they even have the chance to spread their music and ideas. The risks are still there, but it is much more difficult for a state to prevent gradual changes in mentality than it is to shutdown physical live shows or album productions. It is still interesting to note these accounts from the interviews, that nowadays there are even some Rock Cafés in Tehran and Heavy music is not as frowned upon as it used to be, despite

⁴¹ Pasqualina Eckerström, “Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal,” *Harvard Kennedy School Student Review*, March 31, 2023,

⁴² According to the Statistical Center of Iran, internet penetration in 2023 reached over 84% of the population, with widespread access to mobile data networks enabling regular use of social media, streaming services, and international websites despite state filtering measures. See Statistical Center of Iran, *Information and Communication Technology Indicators Report (2023)*, and Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023: Iran*, which notes that many Iranians rely on VPNs to circumvent censorship and access global platforms.

the existing risks. One of the reasons for this is the heavy western influence on the Iranian youth's musical consumption.

These findings suggest that the state's efforts to silence resistance have actually pushed the scene from underground into a more surface level, albeit a low one. The scene is slowly becoming less passive and more expressive. This reflects a core contention underpinning the discussion in this chapter. Instead, Heavy Metal becomes a coded language of dissent, embodying both personal and collective defiance. Heavy Metal fans feel confident in defying state regulations, because they know, for the most part, they are safe. As long as they do not "challenge it too much", seemingly. This exact train of thought is what allows the scene to grow over time, slowly but surely. The further the scene gets pushed underground, the more it grows over time. This incremental seepage reframes resistance as iterative rather than teleological, preparing the ground for a logic of repetition and return.

Political resistance is usually framed as goal-oriented or simply transformative. Actions have objectives towards change, and that is the simple logic behind resistance. What about resistance that does not seek victory or radical change, but mere survival? Drawing on Camus's Sisyphus myth once again, a theory of "repetitive resistance" is observable, a form of non-theological and ritualistic resistance in which simply continuing to exist is a political act. Since the goal is not about immediate revolution, despite several song lyrics calling upon change, the point of Heavy Metal is one of endurance and refusal to be erased. This could explain the longevity and persistence of Iranian Metal, despite arrests and exiled musicians. The absurdism of Camus gives a philosophical backbone to this claim, as the "The struggle itself (...) is enough to fill a man's heart"⁴³. This is not to romanticize people's struggles and lives under authoritarianism. Due to the heavy use of Eurocentric literature to draw parallels or describe non-Western realities, an interesting conclusion was observed. Iranian metalheads use local mythological figures (e.g., Gilgamesh, Zoroastrian demons and warriors) to decentralize Western resistance icons and build their own resonant symbols of defiance. This is necessary, as global subcultural literature is riddled with Western imagery of Satan or generally Christian symbols to draw parallels between "different" cultural realities. This results in little attention being paid to how non-Western subcultures reinvent terms of rebellion using their own mythologies. It is definitely something worth analyzing further, as I believe this is somewhat untheorized. Several authors touch on this topic but do not explore the decolonial potential behind it. (e.g. Eckström or LeVine). It serves to show how myths often act as guidance to understanding human nature through our repetitive behaviors, hence the Sisyphus parallel.

⁴³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 123.

Iranian Metal musicians reclaim rebellion in their own terms by crafting hybrid narratives and bridging the gaps between Western and Eastern musical cultures, combining global influences and indigenous meaning in their songs. Ultimately, this is the meaning behind the negotiation Iranian Metal musicians do between their own personal identity and the incorporation of Western musical influence. This forms one of the principal points developed herein.

4.2 On digital resistance and transnational networks: *Digital Vernacular Resistance*

Building on this cultural endurance, the following section traces how these locally reworked symbols and practices circulate under surveillance, what I term digital vernacular resistance. Through encrypted online communications and coded aesthetics, Iranians make dissent legible to insiders yet opaque to censors. Despite the criminalization of Heavy Metal music, which is deemed anti-Islam and satanic (*Eckerström 2022*), musicians and fans alike not only produce it in the face of persecution, but also require platforms to access and distribute their content. This extends the earlier claim that western influences play a significant role on Iranian musical creation, with Heavy Metal influences overflowing to the Persian territory and seeping into the cultural ground. This can be observed as several bands have English lyrics instead of Farsi, hoping for a more international exposure.

As technology evolved over the years, Iranian society did not fall behind. From mixtapes and CDs to online listening parties and discussions in fora dedicated to Heavy music, fans have always found ways to produce and proliferate the scene, even if underground (*Brown et al. 2016*). This signifies a worry from the regime's perspective, one which cannot be ignored. Foreign music infiltrating society heralds a "Westernization" process which can only be seen as "anti-Islam" and must therefore be strongly opposed.

One of the main inferences from the research is that Heavy Metal plays a very specific role in society. It is not a mainstream musical genre because, at the end of the day, that is not its main purpose. Heavy Metal is utilized all over as a tool of outcasts and misfits, but it is much more than that. It is much more than a vehicle of showing political dissent and revolt. As it slowly but surely embeds itself in the deeper, more obscure layers of society, it starts

fulfilling its role of leading to a quiet ‘‘revolution’’, or at least to the dissemination of counter-cultural ideals. As it cannot be ‘‘deleted’’ or avoided, Heavy Metal functions as a virulent panacea that spreads to tackle those who live and suffer under subjugation.

Heavy Metal listeners and producers keep on listening and producing, until one day it is openly accepted. There is no violent turning point, but a quiet, strong installation in everyday society. Ironically enough, considering the typical elements of aggression and violence portrayed in Heavy Metal songs. As *Zagros* stated earlier, and I reiterate: ‘‘ *we now have Rock Cafés on the streets of Tehran. (...) Past a certain point, no one really cares that much*’’ This societal acceptance highlights a contradiction. How can something prohibited, in a society apparently ruled by an iron fist, simply appear widely accepted?

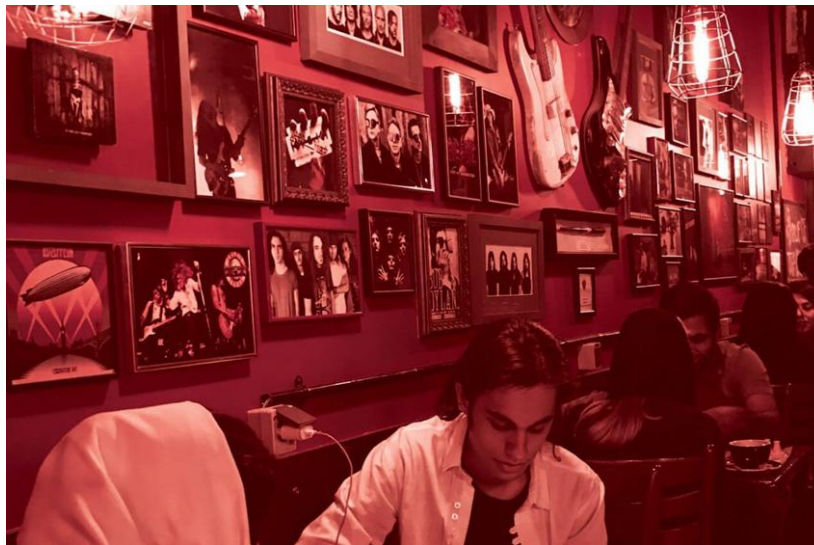


Fig 1: Picture of *Paradiso Café*, a popular restaurant in Tehran that is heavily rock/american themed. Can be seen as an equivalent to the western ‘‘Hard Rock Cafés’’. Source: AskAnIranian.com <https://askaniranian.com/is-there-a-hard-rock-cafe-in-tehran-iran/>

The role played by online transnational networks is significant in explaining this. As websites continuously get shutdown by the Iranian government, the citizens find workarounds and alternatives. VPNs (Virtual Private Networks - services that allow someone to virtually change their online location, allowing access to websites that are geographically restricted) take on a vital role in allowing people to find these alternatives and ultimately allowing Heavy Metal music to be accessed and to proliferate. But still, music containing violent, satanic and insurgent lyrical content should be frowned upon by society, according to the Iranian morality police. To underline the argument, it can be argued that the

very sonic composition of Heavy Metal supports it in this role of slowly revolutionizing the youth.

Despite its aggressiveness, Heavy music is predominantly fun to listen to. On a cultural level, this is what matters the most. The energy and emotion behind the music are what resonate the most with people, at least at a surface level. The screaming, distortion and riffs are part of a recipe that comes together to convey very specific emotions that people resonate with (Brown et al. 2016). However, the screams and distortion can also drown out most of the lyrical content, which makes any politically charged motifs harder to capture. At first glance, it might seem reductionist, but the term ‘fun’ is surprisingly important in this context. As fun is not legally forbidden, it is the perfect way for Heavy Metal to keep spreading.

The role VPNs play in this spread cannot be understated. They allow for constant, renewed access to music. During our interview, *Zagros* claimed VPNs are an integral part of living in Iran, as they are the only tool that permits access to popular websites and services such as Youtube or Spotify. Each Iranian citizen that shares a newly discovered song is blowing a sapling into the wind. As governments become more tech-savvy, so do the people. Therefore the connection can be made that if not for the widespread use of VPNs, access to Heavy music would be much more limited, and its acceptance in general society would be far more difficult than it already is. As stated by Eckerström:⁴⁴ ‘*On the web, musicians, such as metal artists, and fans have found a space to create communities, learn from each other, spread original music, and collect fans.*’ This quote not only perfectly encapsulates the feelings of the populace towards the Internet but the necessity of its existence as well.

There is a large necessity to build networks of people with similar tastes, as songs spread. As Iranians integrate western-dominated online fora, such as on Reddit or X (formerly known as Twitter), cultural discourse is shared and compared. *Zagros* highlighted how the current Iranian youth deems listening to Heavy Metal as something ‘cool’ and ‘exciting’, and not generally hidden, despite its prohibition. It further highlights Heavy Metal’s utility at showing dissent. This represents a slow yet clear defeat in the cultural battleground for the Iranian regime, as transnational networks keep growing, and above all, showing tacit results of their growth. Tackling Western influence is one of the regime’s priorities. Similar types of music, which had been promoted by the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi monarchy as part of its modernization policies, were subsequently seen by the post-1979 government as a symbol of

⁴⁴ Eckerström, “*Resistance in Persian Black Metal*”

Western cultural hegemony⁴⁵. Yet, the more artists get imprisoned, tortured or exiled, the more the feeling of political dissent grows.

This refines a previous argument, since is exactly one of Heavy Metal's main roles, and one of the ways it functions as a tool of resistance. Loudly through music, but quietly through culture. And the louder the music, the more attention the musician gets. If too much attention is called, the risk of imprisonment or punishment grows. If it comes to that point, the music will get even more attention, maybe even internationally, causing shock waves in the cultural tissue. The cycle continues, where music garners attention, the musician gets punished for it, which causes even more attention to be drawn to the music.

Heavy Metal can be present in everyday life, but it seeks not full integration into the mainstream, but simply a light touch on the higher layers of society, occasionally. Full mainstream integration would risk breaking the cycle too soon, before its roots are deep enough. This means that Heavy Metal music, in this sequence, fulfills its purpose as a vehicle for political dissent in a steady, continuous and non-mainstream manner. Logically, digital networks are vital for this.

This argument can be supported by the idea that Metal fans, no matter their origins, have a general dislike towards their favorite band "going mainstream"⁴⁶ or becoming "too famous". As Brown et al. (2016) argue, Heavy music fans often disapprove of bands crossing over into mainstream commercial success, viewing such moves as direct violations of subcultural and underground values. Such was the case with Metallica in the 1980s, who went from being respected for being pioneers in the Thrash Metal scene to showing how a band could become extremely popular despite not conforming to traditional musical norms. This angered fans, who even went as far as organizing gatherings to carry out Metallica "CD burnings" or creating anti-Metallica websites. (Brown et al. 2016)

This logic aligns with the aforementioned cycle, and is therefore an active contributor to Heavy Metal's role as an inherently political tool, even if unintendedly. The notion of maintaining the scene underground is vital to keeping its role as a way to spread resistance ideals in authoritarian contexts. The digital networks simply amplify the reach of the scene, allowing ideas to spread faster and, most importantly, anonymously, guaranteeing the safety

⁴⁵ Eckerström, *The Case of Confess*

⁴⁶ "Going mainstream" refers to when Metal bands achieve widespread commercial success, often accompanied by perceived compromises to their musical style (e.g. simplified song structures or softer lyrical content, or a more media-friendly image). For many Metal fans, this represents a betrayal of the genre's countercultural ethos, as authenticity in Metal is often tied to maintaining outsider status and opposition to commercialized popular music.

of listeners and musicians alike⁴⁷. If Metal is seen as a genre for the misunderstood and the rebellious, it must be kept that way, otherwise its whole essence would vanish. The international heavy music scene has existed long before internet access was generalized, but now its entry barriers are almost non-existent. VPNs essentially allow Heavy Metal musicians to expand and spread their music, despite predictable or even unavoidable retaliation.

This chapter serves to show how the generalized use of VPNs enables the existence and expansion of digital transnational networks, which in turn allow for the aforementioned Heavy Metal cycle to exist. The paradox continues, where music spreads, but not too much, which permits the maintenance of the rebellious and resistance essences. Thus, Heavy Metal functions as a means of resistance in the face of authoritarian measures, albeit both loudly and silently, maintaining the trend of paradoxical inferences. However integral VPNs may be in fulfilling this role, they are not the only commonly used tool by Iranians.

It is noteworthy that while there is emerging work on digital resistance, I believe that few studies analyze how subcultures adapt their codes to remain legible to insiders but illegible to censors. The theme of vernacular resistance was mentioned, and therefore, one can see *“digital vernacular resistance”* as the process by which Iranian Metalheads modify language and aesthetics to bypass surveillance algorithms and general moral policing to distribute their music, while preserving subcultural identity. Nowadays, this process is heavily reliant on digital footprints (or lack thereof) hence the adaptation of the term to a digital reality. From the use of English lyrics in songs, coded album art, VPNs, diaspora uploads etc., there are several signs that lead to the conclusion that a large part of resistance and adaptation is facilitated by online tools, as they also permit the development of a personal political persona of the self. Aided by infrastructural fatigue, the Iranian regime cannot avoid the widespread use of VPNs to access outlawed social networks such as Telegram or Facebook. In turn, these aid in the proliferation of music and contact with the Western world, where the majority of popular Metal music is produced. In this context, the Western world is used not as a source of “enlightenment” for Iranians, but as the main source of Heavy Metal music and bands.

Bringing back some ideas of Sreberny and Khiabany’s work, their notion of “networked agency” is useful here. It translates into a reality where individuals use digital tools within authoritarian contexts to carve out “micro-scale” pockets of autonomy. This directly

⁴⁷ Brown et al., *Current Directions in Metal Studies*

correlates to this thesis's conception of Digital Vernacular Resistance. The theory builds on their work by suggesting that Iranian Metal musicians and fans deploy coded communication strategies, drawing from both global subcultural codes and local semiotic registers, to remain legible to insiders while eluding state censors. For example, some stylistic choices are not merely aesthetic but are actually strategic decisions shaped by the political conditions of cultural production, even if subconsciously.

For instance, upon inspecting Iranian Black Metal band Akvan's album *Forgotten Glory* (2017), there are common employments of symbolism drawn from Persian history and pre-Islamic mythology. The title itself evokes a historical resurgence, while track names like "*Blood Ov Zal*" reference legendary heroes from the *Shahnameh*⁴⁸, such as Zal and his son Rostam. These are figures resonant within Iranian mythic memory, and deliberate choices that operate as coded cultural signposts: legible to listeners familiar with Persian mythology, yet ambiguous enough to avoid overt political reading by censors. Naturally, the regime has a strong disdain towards such mythical manifestos, considering the Islamic Republic grounds much of its legitimacy in Islamic history and Shi'a religious identity. Referencing figures like Zal or Rostam from the *Shahnameh* emphasizes a Persian identity that predates Islam, implicitly contesting the monopoly of the Islamic narrative over Iranian identity. For insiders familiar with Persian myth, "Blood Ov Zal" carries cultural pride and heroism, yet to censors unfamiliar with subcultural codes or inclined to focus on overt political slogans, it appears as harmless folklore. Moreover, using "ov" instead of "of" mimics typical Black Metal stylization, which can be seen as a connection of local resistance to global subcultural codes. This hybrid style resists cultural isolation by trying to assert a type of membership in a global, broader oppositional scene.

A common trope within the Iranian Metal community is song sharing as MP3 files⁴⁹. Although that might sound outdated, this may be for several reasons. MP3 files are often shared privately or semi-publicly (via direct messages or social media posts, for example) making them less traceable than streaming platforms like Spotify or YouTube, which are often monitored or blocked in Iran. Moreover, direct file sharing avoids surveillance algorithms that track subversive content (See A.3). Since MP3 files are easily compressed and shared, they are essentially "encryption-friendly", namely in previously encrypted

⁴⁸ The *Shahnameh* ("Book of Kings"), written by the poet Ferdowsi around 1010 CE, is Iran's national epic and one of the world's longest epic poems. It chronicles the mythological and historical past of Greater Iran from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquest, preserving pre-Islamic Persian cultural memory and identity.

⁴⁹ See social media posts of the Iranian band *Master of Persia*, where mp3 download links always accompany their song posts. Probably for Iranian audiences, as western ones have easier access to YouTube or Spotify.

applications such as Telegram or Signal⁵⁰. It is also a type of file that is generally lightweight, allowing low-bandwidth downloads, which is crucial in areas with slow or monitored internet. They also allow for fans to download and store music files locally, rather than relying on blocked or unstable Internet connections. Metal scenes worldwide often embrace a DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic, which is an ethos that in Iran might be amplified by necessity. Essentially, the simple act of sharing MP3 files creates a coded network of distribution, aligning with the term of Digital Vernacular Resistance, where cultural production avoids mainstream pathways in favor of semi-clandestine (or in this case, outdated) ones.



Fig. 2: Album cover of Akvan's *Forgotten Glory* (2017), incorporating pre-Islamic mythological references as symbolic resistance. E.g. The barren wasteland is a common metaphor for the oppressed state; shadowy figures emerge in the background giving an idea of deception and the demon Akvan is often portrayed as a vaguely humanoid figure. Source: Akvan, *Forgotten Glory*, 2017, album cover art.

The commonly used English lyrics serve not only to align with global Metal norms but to try and render subversive messages less intelligible to domestic censors, who may lack the linguistic nuance to fully decode their implications. Similarly, the use of mythological references⁵¹ may function as a layered strategy. On one level, these symbols allow musicians to express rebellion without directly naming political targets, while on another, they reclaim pre-Islamic cultural heritage as an alternative moral framework that ever so subtly challenges the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's ideological narrative. Similar tactics have

⁵⁰ Some digital communication platforms use encryption protocols to protect the confidentiality of messages, making them accessible only to the sender and intended recipient(s). Examples include end-to-end encrypted services like Signal, WhatsApp, and Telegram's "Secret Chat" mode, which prevent intermediaries (including service providers and state authorities) from reading the content of communications. However, some experts argue these are not totally safe and can be worked around. See Bruce Schneier, *Applied Cryptography: Protocols, Algorithms, and Source Code in C* (New York: Wiley, 2015), 35–37.

⁵¹ such as invoking Gilgamesh or the demon Akvan from the *Shahnameh*, as seen earlier.

been used throughout history to avoid censorship in cultural production⁵², which makes this a plausible connection. However, the imagery must be extremely subtle or it risks censorship or repercussions towards musicians, as highlighted in Pasqualina Eckerström's article upon referencing an Iranian Black Metal musician: *'In addition, the lyrical content featured in Sina's work is controversial, as he celebrates a heritage that the Islamic Republic wishes to eradicate from the collective consciousness.'*⁵³ The use of Iranian heritage symbols still presents itself a risk and therefore an act of revolt itself.

Coded album art offers visual tactics of subversion. Rather than adopting overtly Satanic or Western anti-Christian symbols (which could provoke immediate repression) bands may use Zoroastrian fire imagery or ambiguous depictions of veiled figures and imprisonment. Mainly because these may remain open to interpretation but clearly resonate with themes of spiritual or political confinement, feelings known well by several Iranian musicians. Other allegorical or metaphorical references to mythology or psychological pain act as indirect critiques towards the state, becoming a way to signal discontent without attracting direct legal risk. These forms of symbolic ambiguity echo what James Scott (1990) terms the "hidden transcript", a repertoire of indirect resistance that can be "read" only by those who share the cultural code but remain opaque to authority.

It is important to keep in mind that several of these creative decisions are not always fully conscious or strategically planned. As Jacques Attali (1985) argues, music often foreshadows social transformation without necessarily articulating it in an explicit manner. The affective and sensory dimensions of sound can express discontent and rebellion even when the lyrics do not. Thus, even the sheer sonic violence of distorted guitar riffs and growls⁵⁴ become an embodied protest against the order of things, something that bypasses rational discourse. This also relates to the theory of *'bass materialism'* presented by Goodman (2010), in which sound operates at a subsignifying level, shaking the listener into awareness and carving out space for collective subjectivity. These frameworks work in conjunction to be applied to the current Iranian reality, as they form an evolving vernacular strategy of survival and resistance. Iranian Metalheads operate in a dual reality: while formally (and sometimes legally) excluded from public cultural life, they develop their own audiences and support foundations online through encrypted Internet connections by using VPNs. This often happens with the support of the diaspora, which plays a key role in

⁵² As a lighthearted example, take the Portuguese fascist dictatorship (1933-1975), where the censorship state organ, nicknamed the "Blue Pencil" was often tricked into allowing books by Karl Marx into circulation. This happened by people changing the author's name to "Carlos Marques", its direct Portuguese translation.

⁵³ Pasqualina Eckerström, "Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal," *Harvard Kennedy School Student Review*, March 31, 2023,

⁵⁴ Heavy Metal screams are commonly referred to as *'growls'* by the community, as if evoking a beast or monster.

translating and spreading their work globally. The interviewee from Sweden, a 24 year old male, claimed: ‘I have discovered several new (metal) bands from the Middle East due to the news stories of exiled musicians here in Sweden. (...) It’s a cool rabbit hole.’⁵⁵ This statement reveals that the diaspora has had a positive effect in proliferating not only Iranian Metal music, but also their struggles and stories that inevitably come with it.



Fig. 3: A flyer from Persian Metal Fest 2015, a Metal festival in Turkey founded partly by Iranian band Master of Persia. This is an example of diaspora bands gaining traction and influence abroad. Source: Metalodyssey
<https://metalodyssey.net/2015/02/28/persian-metal-festival-2015-peace-love-and-rock-in-the-middle-east/>

Hamid Naficy’s (2001) concept of the “*accented cinema*” resonate here. Despite focusing on film and not music, he argues that exiled or transnational Iranian artists construct cultural products that are simultaneously shaped by homeland repression and diasporic freedom. This is a translation of the general duality between Iranian artists using their own cultural heritage in their music albeit with western influences. Similarly, Iranian Metal musicians, even if not physically in exile, produce music through a hybrid digital-exilic aesthetic, shaped by both domestic restrictions and external platforms.

These examples support the broader claim that the Iranian Metal scene does not survive in spite of repression, but rather through it. By constantly adjusting its expressive toolkit to

⁵⁵ Several Iranian Metal bands are or have been exiled in Sweden, as it is known for its vibrant Metal scene. This includes bands like *Confess*, *Trivax* or *Ahoora*.

remain semi-visible but also emotionally resonant with the masses. In this way, Digital Vernacular Resistance offers a compelling lens to understand the adaptability of subcultures in surveillance states. Sound and symbolism, although often overlooked, together with a developing digital infrastructure, are useful in sustaining long-term cultural dissent.

4.3 On political consciousness, youth identity and Gender: *Subcultural Infiltration*

If digital vernacular tactics explain *how* metal survives online, subcultural infiltration clarifies *where* these codes sediment. Mainly from youth identity and everyday style, thus shifting resistance from a discrete act to a lived social practice. One of the most salient themes here relates to how Iranian youth, particularly fans of Heavy Metal, navigate and construct a form of political consciousness and personal identity in an environment characterized by systemic censorship and moral policing. It is vital to integrate gender into this discussion, as it helps in understanding the argument regarding identity formation and also addresses a critical intersectional dimension: the compounded risk faced by women who participate in a subculture already marked as deviant in a deeply patriarchal context. Inspired by the interview with *Zagros*, a 23-year-old Iranian female Metal fan now living abroad, and supported by relevant literature, this section explores how Metal becomes a conduit for youth expression and identity-building.

Contrary to general assumptions that Iranian youth engage with Heavy Metal solely as an act of overt rebellion, the data reveals a more nuanced picture. The participant expressed that she, much like her Metalhead friends, listens to Metal not for political reasons specifically, but out of personal affinity. However, this apolitical stance does not negate the genre's inherently oppositional aesthetic. As argued before, sound operates at a "subsignifying level⁵⁶," shaping affect and resistance even outside conscious intention.

In authoritarian contexts, such as in the Iranian case, this form of affective resistance (where cultural participation itself becomes an act of disobedience) manifests itself in listening habits and aesthetics, built in part thanks to online communities. Even when young Iranians don't engage in metal with explicitly political motives, the act of embracing it is perceived

⁵⁶ Goodman, "Sonic Warfare"

by state apparatuses as deviant from the norm, especially when it is associated with “satanic” imagery or “Western immorality”⁵⁷.

As Zagros stated in our interview: “A lot of Gen Z in Iran even pretend to / listen to metal just to look ‘cool’... the youth is definitely westernized.” This statement reflects the growing aspirational subcultural affiliation among Iranian youth, where identification with global genres becomes a proxy for modernity or a broader form of cosmopolitanism, mirroring desires for a break from state-imposed morality. It is a reflection of an inclination for change and openness, at least in cultural terms. I conclude that more often than not, Metal offers a rather subtle political consciousness which might not always be intentional.

However, these processes of identification and participation carry vastly different implications for Iranian women, who must navigate additional layers of surveillance and legal risks. The very act of performing or even consuming Metal as a woman becomes inherently political. As noted in Freemuse and Human Rights Watch reports, female musicians in Iran face bans not only on genre or content, but on singing in public altogether⁵⁸. It is widely known that Iranian women are not allowed to sing publicly or in front of men, or mixed-gender audiences for that matter⁵⁹. Women’s participation in Metal thus entails a double dissidence, first against the Islamic Republic’s gender norms and second against the moral codes policing metal itself. An illustrative example is the case of Master of Persia’s lead singer Anahid, which perfectly encapsulates the dire reality faced by Iranian female Heavy Metal musicians.

While relatively uncommon, there are reports and testimonies of female-fronted Iranian Metal bands, though many operate anonymously or rely on diasporic networks for visibility⁶⁰. The progressive death metal band Master of Persia is an example of this, by presenting a frontwoman instead of a frontman, namely for guttural singing⁶¹. Their existence, while often hidden, signals an emergent gendered identity in the metal scene. In interviews and public accounts, the lead singer Anahid expresses how metal gives them a

⁵⁷ Eckerström, “Resistance in Persian Black Metal”

⁵⁸ See Freemuse, “Creativity Wronged: How Women’s Right to Artistic Freedom is Denied and Marginalized” (2018), and Human Rights Watch, “Iran: Silencing Dissent Through Music” (2016), both documenting bans on female public singing and artistic repression in Iran

⁵⁹ According to a fatwa issued by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, women singing is forbidden because it may “cause corruption or incite lust,” even if the intent is not for pleasure.

⁶⁰ Again, see Freemuse, *Creativity Wronged: How Women’s Right to Artistic Freedom is Denied and Marginalized* (2018), 25–28, documenting restrictions on female musicians in Iran and noting cases of women in underground rock/metal bands; Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Silencing Dissent Through Music* (2016), which references women musicians facing bans and persecution; and BBC News, “Iran’s Female Metal Singer Who Defies the Rules” (2020), profiling Anahid of Master of Persia, who performed underground before relocating abroad. See also Sanam Pasha, an Iranian singer-songwriter who organised all-female rock performances and is often referenced in coverage of women in Iranian rock.

⁶¹ In Metal music, *guttural* refers to an extreme vocal technique producing deep growling sounds generated from the throat and diaphragm rather than the head voice. Guttural vocals are used to convey aggression and often require specialized breathing techniques.

sense of embodied empowerment, rejecting norms of passivity or silence typically imposed on women. The screams and growls of metal, for instance, symbolically and physically reject those expectations. In an interview with the BBC in 2020, Anahid states that “*Metal music gives (me) power and strength... it helps guide my future and dreams (...) By screaming I release my negativity and energy*”. One can consider Anahid’s story a staple of Iranian Metal survival stories. From being rejected by her family, to being arrested for playing in underground shows, her experiences are a reminder of the persecution Metal musicians in Iran face. She makes a glaring statement: “*I was always scared of police... There were only shows in underground venues in Iran, and always after midnight. I once got arrested by police and they asked if I was a satanist because of my haircut and tattoos*⁶²”. Anahid sports a half straight, half shaved haircut and a skull tattoo on her head. Simply for this, she could be persecuted in Islamic law for being considered a “Satanist”, which in some cases could even lead to capital punishment: “*We were told we should die because of our Satanism*” she stated. Shortly after, she and her band fled the country to Armenia, where they played their first show in an actual stage in front of an audience. Nowadays they live in Turkey.

Anahid has showed her appreciation for female-led western Metal bands, namely across her social media profiles. Female-fronted Metal bands enjoy significant popularity among Iranian women. Their global visibility, combined with an assertive presence on stage, offers alternative models of female agency that contrast starkly with representations of femininity in state media. Even for Western standards, some female-led bands have risen meteorically in popularity in the last decade. Bands such as Arch Enemy, Jinjer, and Spiritbox have gained significant international recognition in recent years. For example, Arch Enemy’s album *War Eternal* (2014) debuted at number 44 on the *Billboard* 200, signaling major commercial success for a Power Metal⁶³ band in a usually male-dominated space. Spiritbox, emerging rapidly in the modern Metal scene, achieved number 13 on the *Billboard* 200 with their debut *Eternal Blue* and earned consecutive Grammy nominations and sold-out tours⁶⁴. This cultural importation acts as both a source of inspiration and a strategy: many Iranian women choose to cover these bands in private jam sessions or circulate their music via protected platforms and VPNs, and are generally inspired by the possibility of women having success in a Heavy Metal career.

⁶² BBC World Service, Interview with Anahid in 2020

⁶³ Power metal is a subgenre of Heavy Metal that emerged in the late 1980s, characterized by themes often centered on fantasy, mythology (Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, 2000). Its visual and lyrical imagery frequently draws on epic battles and medieval battles, tropes historically coded as masculine. Although female musicians have increasingly participated in Power Metal, the genre’s traditional aesthetics have reinforced gendered norms in Metal culture.

⁶⁴ See Forbe’s article “*Spiritbox Continue To Carry A Bright Torch For Heavy Music’s Future*”

These gendered dynamics complicate the framework of vernacular creativity, as women must often navigate censorship both from the state and within subcultural spaces themselves. The male-dominated structure of Iranian society, which includes underground music, sometimes replicates patriarchal dynamics even as it resists state power. Thus, Iranian women in Metal craft a type of “gendered vernaculars of resistance”, which translate into locally coded practices that subvert gendered norms through sound and style. For example, Anahid states that her bandmates (all male) were an important support tool in her journey, especially by giving the role of main vocalist to a woman. This means that in Iran, patriarchal standards can diminish over time or even be broken, but mostly when supported by male counterparts.

To deepen this dimension and provide a more analytically grounded expansion, it is beneficial to observe the issue through a “gendered” sonic resistance lens. This serves to theorize how women in patriarchal-authoritarian contexts engage with subcultural music (such as Heavy Metal), not only as aesthetic or emotional expression, but as a gendered form of embodied resistance. In Iran, this means simultaneously resisting both state repression and patriarchal norms, including those present within the underground Metal communities themselves. It essentially illustrates how the body, voice and performance become actual gendered sites of rebellion in double-oppressive contexts. From specific haircuts, tattoos, clothing and general aesthetics, these forms of gendered performance allow us to introduce a conceptual extension of sonic resistance identity, a framework that will be observed in the following subchapter. This idea addresses how women in Iran use sound as a site of defiance against multiple overlapping systems of repression. The voice itself is something often policed in gendered terms, yet here it becomes an instrument of confrontation. Drawing on Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of “*gender performativity*”, Anahid’s scream is understood as a rupture in the gendered soundscape of authoritarian Iran instead of a simple vocalization or singing technique. It becomes a performance of resistance. Butler (1990) argued that gender is not a stable identity but something performed through repeated acts. Anahid’s guttural screams, her tattoos and haircut, embellished by a powerful stage presence, can be read as a form of gender performance that actively rejects this “feminine docility” imposed by Iran’s religious-legal framework. Her musical performance becomes a re-articulation of womanhood through sonic aggression. Her story illustrates this double dissidence in practice.



Fig. 4: Anahid during a live show, likely at Persian Metal Fest 2015. Her presence clearly challenges both state-enforced gender restrictions and patriarchal norms in the metal scene. Source: Master of Persia Youtube channel

This is consistent with the earlier discussion that low-frequency and aggressive soundscapes condition affect beyond cognition⁶⁵. Thus, for a female vocalist in Iran to engage in guttural growls is to engage in a kind of embodied transgression, where sound and gender collide with political illegitimacy. As such, her scream is not just heard but also felt, viscerally and culturally. It can be seen as a counter-sonic act against the silence and submission that is expected of her.

To support an idea of political consciousness formation, it is wise to draw from Brown et al. (2016), where the authors suggest that Metal has a status as a global subculture, by providing shared symbols and aesthetic codes that enable youth across contexts to develop oppositional identities. In Iran, this global framework is reworked through vernacular creativity, which translates into a negotiation between global subcultural norms and the local realities. Mainly because in non-Western or authoritarian contexts, such as Iran, these codes are not simply adopted as a whole. Instead, they are reworked to fit local socio-political conditions. This identity work is not only personal but inherently political. It is assumed that music is prophetic⁶⁶, as it reveals future social tensions and reorganizations. The slow embrace of Metal in Iran suggests an emergent identity that is both globally connected and politically aware, but not always overtly radical due to fears of legal repercussions. This however, is what ensures its very survival. In Iran, this negotiation naturally takes place under the shadow of censorship and a religiously-infused legal system that bans certain kinds of cultural production (like Western music or Satanic imagery). Metalheads, in general, do not simply mimic Western styles, although the musical inspirations are clear. Instead, they have to re-code them in ways that make sense within Iran's unique context of repression. The following examples illustrate where this vernacular creativity takes place.

⁶⁵ Goodman, *“Sonic Warfare”*

⁶⁶ Attali, *“Noise”*

A common identity negotiation archetype is seen on the use of Persian instruments or musical scales (for example by incorporating the setar or traditional Persian melodic modes like *dastgah*⁶⁷) in metal compositions. Consider the following case of an interview with Masoud Moghaddari, guitarist of *Integral Rigor* (an Iranian band formed in 2009), where he explicitly discusses incorporating *dastgāh* modal structures into their death/thrash metal composition. In the interview Rostamian mentions: “*There are lots of scales in traditional Persian music which we call ‘Dastgāh’ [...] some scales have different ascending and descending patterns, or quarter notes... used to create unique sounds.*”⁶⁸ This is a clear example of style adaptation to form an own identity, potentially based on western influences.

Another pertinent example can be seen upon observing typical album artwork that draws from Iranian mythology (e.g., Gilgamesh, Zoroastrian symbols) instead of Euro-American Satanic imagery, to express rebellion using their own culturally embedded symbols. This is seen in Arsames’ *Immortal Identity* album, where the Mashhad-based Death Metal band employs ancient Persian imperial imagery, with album artwork featuring Achaemenid⁶⁹ motifs and several other stylized symbols of Persia’s ancient empires.

Although not a complete album cover, it is useful to once again recall the Iranian black-metal band Akvan’s projects, which emphasizes Zoroastrian⁷⁰ and Persian mythological themes (e.g. their name Akvan derives from the *Shahnameh*⁷¹) in symbolism and identity around their EPs and artwork. Rather than occult or “typical” Western satanism, their aesthetic is drawn directly from regional pre-Islamic mythology, emphasizing the idea of identity negotiation. This represents a balance between Western influence in the music sphere and respect for one’s own cultural roots, in an attempt to give an identity to Iranian Metal figures. By showing that these are musicians that originate from a culture which has stood the test of time, these artworks also emphasize that no regime will outlast the cultural spirit, no matter how repressive its actions.

⁶⁷ Dastgāh is the standard modal system in Persian classical music, consisting of a collection of melodic patterns and motifs that form the basis for improvisation and composition, arising in the 19th century

⁶⁸ The song “Fallen” by Integral Rigor is a good example for this, in which different scales are used to give us a feeling commonly found in “Middle Eastern” inspired music, but here adapted to Metal

⁶⁹ Commonly known as Persia’s first empire, founded 550 B.C.

⁷⁰ Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion and one of the world’s oldest monotheistic faiths, founded by the prophet Zoroaster (also known as *Zarathushtra*)

⁷¹ Akvan is a demon from the *Shahnameh*, Iran’s national epic by Ferdowsi, known for his trickery and invisibility. He symbolizes chaos and opposition to heroic order, often used to represent inner or societal conflict in Iranian cultural narratives.



Fig. 5: Album cover of Arsames' *Immortal Identity* (2012), featuring Achaemenid imperial motifs as a form of localized resistance. Source: Arsames, *Immortal Identity*, 2012, album cover art.

As evidenced by the results, there is a logical inference to be made regarding subcultural infiltration. While most works focus on more visible and organized forms of resistance, Heavy Metal, or at least its imagery or aesthetic properties, is arguably becoming less underground in Iran. This is not because of state approval but because of structural exhaustion of the censorship mechanisms. Therefore, this idea of ‘subcultural infiltration’ could be translated into a model where subcultural forms resist by outlasting the state's ability to police them, spreading quietly but irreversibly through digital platforms and other informal youth networks that amplify the aesthetic value of Heavy Metal as a whole. Recalling James Scott's ‘weapons of the weak’ (1985), the idea of infrastructural fatigue can be applied here, since states cannot surveil everything forever, especially when prioritizing more important geopolitical matters. Over time, repression gives way to normalization but by saturation of culture and not by change in law. To see how this theory applies, one can rely on examples from Iran's past. For instance, Satellite dishes have been technically illegal in Iran since the 1990s, with authorities repeatedly attempting crackdowns, confiscations and fines. Despite these efforts, by the early 2010s, estimates showed that over 70% of Iranian households used illegal satellite dishes to access foreign entertainment and news channels.⁷² This is a clear case of infrastructural fatigue, as the state lacked the resources to police every rooftop, and the ubiquity of satellite dishes eventually led to quiet tolerance, especially in urban areas. Similar to Metal, access to foreign content became a normalized part of youth culture.

⁷² ‘‘Although private ownership of satellite TV receiving equipment is technically illegal, there is a big audience for foreign-based Persian-language satellite channels. Around 70% of households have a satellite dish.’’ BBC Iran Media Guide

4.4. On the path towards a new framework: *Sonic Resistance Identity*

If infiltration describes the processes of diffusion, sonic resistance identity specifies the mechanism by which resistance is embodied and felt: Metal's timbre and distortion organize a form of political subjectivity that is performed through sound rather than declared in text. At this point, the presented data manifests the emergence of a '*sonic resistance identity*', where youth use sound and musical participation as a framework to articulate political discontent but also self-definition and some type of personal agency. This moves beyond seeing Metal as simply a form of opposition or counter current. Instead, it reveals how it functions as a space where subjectivity is performed, not just declared. The main goal of this framework, as a contributor to resistance studies, is to focus less on overt protest and more on the slow cultural undercurrents that steadily erode authoritarian control. This happens through aesthetics, digital presence and the technological development of the population, which in turn enables transnational community-building. The idea encompasses the use of Heavy Metal as a form of resistance but not in a typical sense, but one that slowly develops the political identity of listeners and musicians even when unintended. In turn, this political identity serves as a vehicle for dissent, connecting the dots between Heavy Metal and it being a form of political and cultural dissent. This is a framework that is heavily reliant on the technological tools used by the population. For example, the theme of vernacular resistance allies itself with the existing digital platforms to create a new framework where digital tools are a utility instrument for creating coded communications between Iranians, be it through the music they share or simply the involving aesthetics.

This idea is borne out of the observations made throughout the research at hand. Plenty of Iranians are aware that over political expressions comes with risks, and Heavy Metal functions, paradoxically, as a way to quietly present dissent while avoiding state censorship radars. One of the interviewees stated that '*...now you can wear Metal t-shirts outside in Tehran, in general people won't really care (...) and that is how you know someone is cool and shares the same music taste as you (...) but attending underground shows, that's a whole different story.*' This reiterates the notion of a silent change in customs, albeit not overtly political. The limits of this, however, are clear, as they stated: '*... when it comes to underground shows, I've never been to one. Only the state approved ones. I know they exist, and I have friends who have attended them, but to be honest I was always kind of afraid*'. There is a fine line between overt and covert notions of dissent, and one can cross from 'simple musical preference' to 'anti-Islam discourse' quickly and unintentionally.

Public shows in Iran must be state-sanctioned, and the government produces permits to which the artists can apply for. If granted, the show is allowed. The idea of sonic resistance identity synthesizes existing scholarship in an attempt to carve out a personal conceptual contribution. By deepening this concept, it can be connected to relevant theoretical and empirical frameworks as to observe the role it can fill within relevant gaps.

Sonic resistance identity refers to the ways in which youth in authoritarian contexts such as Iran use sound not merely as symbolic opposition but as a medium through which political subjectivity and social belonging are continuously produced and contested. It aims to highlight how people, mainly the youth, attempt to forge a political self through sound. This identity is not simply declared through lyrics, imagery or ideology but actually expressed through a multi-sensory engagement with Heavy Metal's sonic elements (distortion, volume, rhythm, screaming etc.) that operate on different layers simultaneously: beneath the level of language and beyond overt political speech. As such, this concept weaves together embodiment and collectivity, building on and expanding upon existing frameworks in three core ways.

This aligns with Jacques Attali's (1985) concept of music not being merely a reflection but a prophetic force, capable of shaping political and economic realities before they materialize. Thus, resistance is not only what the lyrics say but what the sonic form itself embodies, be it disorder, rupture or simply noise. On equal measure, Metal's distortion and intensity become a performative enactment of rebellion. Steve Goodman's (2010) notion of "*sonic warfare*" adds that sound conditions behaviours and physical spaces, often at a pre-cognitive level. Thus, Metal's vibrational aesthetics, where low frequencies are common, mobilize an affective resistance, where politics take shape due to sensation, not just content.

Drawing on his notion of "vibrational force", sonic resistance identity foregrounds how music operates on both planes: sensorial and affective. This means that sound literally moves bodies and modulates emotion, which in turn end up transforming spaces. In this analytical context it means that for Iranian Metal fans and musicians, headbanging or playing in secret underground jam sessions, or even wearing band t-shirts in public is not a mere aesthetic expression, but a reclamation of the body in defiance of state power, particularly in a regime that polices conduct through moral enforcement.

In this sense, sonic resistance identity allows for a political subjectivity that is not discursive but vibrational, where imagery and feeling overcome the actual musical content. As Attali (1985) argues, music is a force that "*makes audible the new world*" and in authoritarian contexts this noise creates brief but powerful ruptures in the hegemonic order. The body

itself becomes a resonating site of dissent. Importantly, this form of identity does not rely on slogans or manifestos. Sonic resistance often escapes surveillance by avoiding direct confrontation. Even seemingly apolitical bands are engaging in affective resistance, since noise becomes a refusal of the state-mandated moral purity.

The earlier interview quote that described how “...a lot of Gen Z in Iran even pretend to listen to metal just to look cool.” may sound superficial at first, but it actually speaks to how subcultural codes infiltrate everyday life. It essentially sheds light into how Metal becomes a social language of non-conformity even if not all its speakers are fully aware of its political implications.

In 2005, Laudan Nooshin documented how Iranian youth use global music genres like metal to negotiate between modernity and tradition by re-embedding meaning through vernacular creativity. A logic that aligns with sonic resistance identity, as it becomes a type of third space, where hybridity allows for belonging without full assimilation to either state narratives or Western subcultural orthodoxy. In the Iranian context, sonic resistance identity also functions as a collective shield by allowing youth to construct an alternative community that defies the state's atomizing logic. The underground scene, which is generally fractured and dispersed, creates networks of solidarity and feelings of common struggle, facilitated by VPNs, Telegram channels or any other type of coded digital presence.

Summarily, this is a framework that emphasizes sound as embodied resistance. Identity is framed as something performed through music itself, not just represented. Therefore, music is seen as a type of agency in action, instead of the typical view of it as symbolic opposition. An idea that also helps answer a critical tension in this thesis: why Metal in Iran, despite the existing censorship, remains powerful without necessarily being overtly revolutionary. However, there are other gaps that can be filled through theory-crafting.

Beyond the musical structures and theoretical frameworks, there is a point of analysis in which it is comprehensible that Heavy Metal is not only a viable vehicle for dissent, but its inherent characteristics force it to act as such, “condemning” it to a musical genre that cannot and should not become the mainstream, for that would force it to lose its capabilities as a medium for genuine societal and political change.

Heavy metal, particularly in this context, functions not as a utopian resolution to repression, but as a continual process of resistance, a means of revolt, but not its final aim. Unlike overt political movements that strive toward systemic change, Heavy Metal offers aesthetic and

affective tools for enduring and actually articulating marginality. It ultimately provides a space of expression for those who exist outside dominant cultural narratives.

This positions Heavy Metal as inherently non-mainstream. Not merely because of its sonic abrasiveness or lyrical extremity, but because of its structural and cultural role: it thrives in the underground, and gains its power from being on the margins. To become mainstream would be to lose that logic of resistance as the genre's essence lies in pushing people to think outside the norm, not reinforcing them. As such, Metal is not revolutionary in the traditional political sense but as a precursor for revolt through symbolic expression. It admonishes society that marginalized people exist and they cannot be silenced forever.

Since this research lies on the premise that Heavy Metal is not only cognitively processed but felt viscerally, shaking both the body and the psyche, one can infer that it does not need to become institutionalized or recognized by the state to be effective, since its very existence in forbidden spaces is a form of resistance. Therefore, Iranian Metal seeps slowly into the cultural bloodstream despite censorship. Its spread through VPNs and online platforms, diaspora networks and aesthetic codes (be it through artwork or mythological metaphors) forms what was earlier termed a “*sonic resistance identity*”. It is not about toppling regimes overnight, as that would be unrealistic and dangerous for musicians and fans. It is about reclaiming a personal presence in society despite state-imposed prohibitions and regulations.

Recalling earlier metaphors, I state that this positions Iranian Metal musicians and fans as modern Sisyphian figures. This is because musicians and fans produce and listen to Heavy Metal, hence pushing cultural boundaries uphill against political repression, only to be knocked down again, yet returning. That very repetition becomes a ritual of defiance, embedding metal into the fabric of Iranian youth culture not as mainstream trend, but as a persistent undercurrent of resistance. Overall, this is Heavy Metal’s primary role in society and its way of functioning as a force for dissent.

This encapsulates Asef Bayat’s concept of “*non-movements*”, which explains how Middle Eastern youth engage in quiet encroachments of public space, translating into incremental acts of autonomy that may not be framed as “political” but accumulate into resistance. Bayat cites examples like women in Iran establishing new norms in public and private life through daily struggles that turn into action or the use of public space for unauthorized housing and informal markets as instances of non-movement. Similarly, James C. Scott’s (1985) “*Weapons of the Weak*” shows how everyday acts (like adopting certain clothes or in this case, sounds) form a “hidden transcript” of dissent. These are precise examples of sonic resistance identity happening in real time in Iran, as they are the micro-performative process

by which youth “sound out” their discontent even when overt rebellion is impossible or dangerous. As *Zagros* stated in our interview, “(...) *you can now wear Metal band shirts outside, and for the most part, people won't care*”. As seen from the hundreds of available testimonies from several years ago, people truly did care, but over time public perception has been shifting in regards to Heavy Metal.

I position sonic resistance identity as a hybrid concept. By drawing on affect theory, subcultural identity and generally resistance studies. In other words, Metal fans do not just listen to protest but they become the protest through sound. One interviewee made a remarkable statement: “*Me and my friends listen (to Metal music) because we like it, not because it is (inherently) political. But just listening to something prohibited makes it political (whether) we like it or not.*” Their sonic practices (listening, playing, sharing or just talking about it) become embodied rituals of resistance because these very practices are political due to the environment they are inserted in, with no real possibility of avoiding it. This framework could be a valuable lens for intervention in both Iranian cultural studies and global subcultural literature, as the majority of current studies still treat Metal as oppositional in content, but not in form or affect. There is more beyond the surface of the music and imagery itself, and its effects on the Iranian youth reflect that. It could be useful to specifically examine how sonic resistance produces political subjectivity in authoritarian contexts.

5. Conclusion: reframing resistance through sound

This thesis has examined how Iran’s underground Heavy Metal scene functions as a dynamic form of cultural and political resistance. This study is grounded in sound and affect, as well as the current digital adaptation in Iran. Drawing on digital ethnographic data, document analysis, interviews and theoretical literature across sound studies, resistance theory and digital culture, the research attempts to contribute four original conceptual frameworks to the study of subcultural dissent in authoritarian regimes.

Sonic Resistance Identity emerged as a key theoretical contribution, framing sound not merely as expressive or symbolic, or as a political tool of dissent but as an embodied political act in itself. Iranian Metal fans and musicians engage in affective resistance through performative intensity that defies the state-imposed moral order. Drawing from Attali’s theory of music as prophetic and Goodman’s notion of vibrational force, this identity formation is enacted through bodily engagement and community building rather than

explicit ideological messaging. In this context, sound becomes a vehicle for lived dissent, which translates into acts of presence in the face of systemic erasure.

Repetitive Resistance, drawing a parallel with Camus' myth of Sisyphus, reframes Iranian Metal activism not as goal-oriented revolution, but as an ongoing ritual of endurance. The genre's continued existence symbolizes defiance through repetition. This happens in spite of prohibition, not merely because of it. This logic resonates with James C. Scott's "weapons of the weak" and Asef Bayat's concept of "non-movements," where minor, accumulative acts of resistance become politically and culturally significant⁷³. Although observed in similar contexts throughout history, this term embodies the necessity of this type of resistance for the genre to succeed, it is not simply an acknowledgment of its existence.

Subcultural Infiltration accounts for how Metal gradually permeates Iranian youth culture, not by state permission but due to infrastructural fatigue. This has been happening for several years and the results have started to crack through the surface of the societal tissue, as highlighted by some of the interview responses from Iranian Metal fans. As with satellite dishes or unregulated fashion trends, the inability of the state to monitor every node of cultural activity has led to a slow normalization of forms of expressions that were once considered taboo. This concept reframes resistance as not just oppositional but as entropic, since censorship erodes under the weight of cultural saturation, which in turn leads to a certain degree of unpredictability in the development of societal norms.

Digital Vernacular Resistance is a term that attempts to capture the innovative and localized digital strategies Metalheads currently deploy to bypass surveillance while maintaining subcultural integrity. Building on Sreberny and Khiabany's concept of "networked agency" and Scott's "hidden transcripts," this includes the use of English lyrics, mythological allegories, coded visuals, VPNs and diaspora support networks. These adaptations are not just technical but semiotic and emotional, preserving dissent in legible-yet-obscured forms. It attempts to explain how people build (a)political identities when under pressure by a strict state apparatus.

Together, these concepts challenge conventional understandings of resistance as overt or revolutionary. Instead, this thesis presents resistance as embodied, affective albeit dispersed and sometimes unnoticeable, but still persistent. Shaped by both repression and ingenuity.

⁷³ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 14–20, 119–123. Bayat's concept of "non-movements" describes how dispersed, unorganized actions by ordinary people (e.g. squatting, street vending) can collectively reshape social and political realities over time under authoritarian constraints.

Heavy metal in Iran is not a solution to authoritarianism per se, but a tool for carving spaces of autonomy. It has a specific role to fulfill as a social tool, not just a musical genre.

This work also identifies gaps in the literature, particularly around how sound operates as a producer of political subjectivity in authoritarian contexts. Few existing studies analyze how global subcultures like metal are vernacularized to resist specific forms of state control. Even fewer explore the decolonial dimensions of symbolic resistance in non-Western settings. While there is extensive literature on subcultures and resistance (e.g., Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1979; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1985) and on global metal scenes (e.g., Wallach, Berger, and Greene, *Metal Rules the Globe*, 2011), few studies examine how sound itself operates as a producer of political subjectivity in authoritarian contexts. Notable exceptions include Goodman, *Sonic Warfare* (2010), Nooshin, “Underground, Overground” (2005), and LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam* (2008), but the decolonial dimensions of symbolic resistance in non-Western settings remain underexplored. In that sense, this thesis attempts to open new avenues for future research into sonic resistance, digital dissent or even the aesthetic politics of marginalized communities under surveillance. Ultimately, Iranian Heavy Metal functions as a sonic archive of disobedience. It forms sites, physical and digital, where noise becomes narrative and distortion becomes dialogue. These concepts bridge the gap between the existing theory and the palpable reality Iranians live in. While far from perfect, I am hopeful that this research inspires other to learn (and listen) more about Heavy Metal and its extraordinarily rich subcultures.

6. Appendices

ورود به آپارات

جستجوی ویدیو در آپارات

آپارات

خانه

پخش زنده

مرور کانالها

برای شما

برای دنبال کردن کانالها، مشاهده ویدیوهای پیشنهادی مطابق با سلیقه شما و تجربه کاربری بهتر، وارد شوید.

ورود به آپارات

تنظیمات

حالت شب

سرویسها

آپارات گیم

با ویدیوهای پول جذب کن

دنبال کردن

آپارات

۱.۱ میلیارد بازدید کن

۱۲۲.۱ هزار دنبال کننده

خانه

ویدیوها

لیستهای پخش

درباره کانال

آپارات شورتس؛ دنیای بی پایان ویدیوهای کوتاه!

هر سلیقه ای داری، اینجا هزاران ویدیو کوتاه و عمودی منتظرت؛ از خنده دار و سرگرم کننده، تا هیجان انگیز، آموزشی و الهام بخش. بی وقفه بگرد، کشف کن و لذت ببر! همین حالا اپلیکیشن آپارات رو نصب کن...

آپارات

۱۰.۴ هزار بازدید - ۶ ساعت پیش

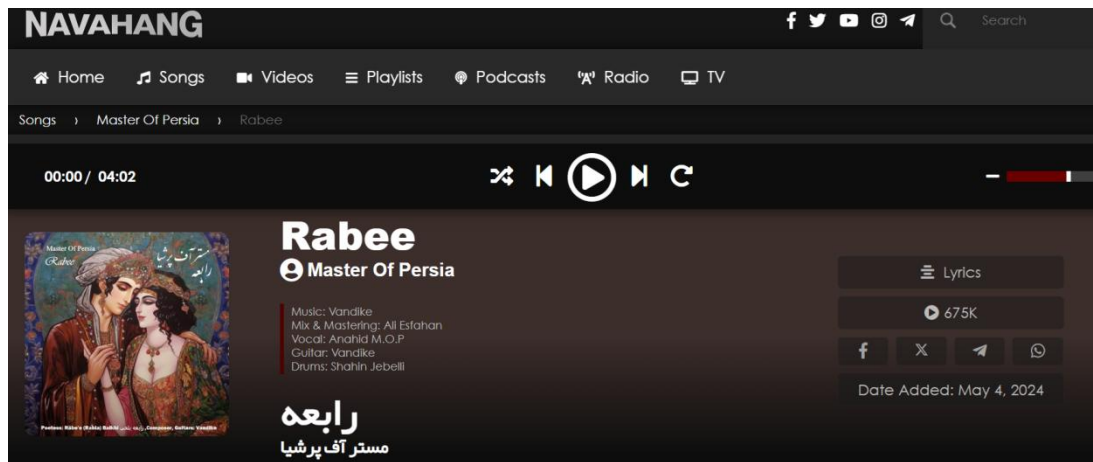
سرگرمی بی نهایت

Aparat Short's

A.1: Homepage of Aparat, Iran's domestic video-sharing service, which operates under state-imposed content restrictions. It shares strong similarities to popular social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Source: aparat.com, accessed August 2025



A.2: Picture showing an overcrowded cell at Evin prison, highlighting the inhumane conditions of the prisoners. Source: Radio Free Europe <https://www.rferl.org/a/leaked-video-evin-abuses/31760193.html>



A.3: A screenshot from Navahang, a popular website that functions as a Persian music archive. Users can download tracks directly as mp3 files and listen to the offline. When promoting their songs on Instagram or Facebook, Iranian Metal musician often post a Navahang link to download the song, likely for their Iranian audience. Source from the author: <https://www.navahang.com/mp3/master-of-persia-rabee/>

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Youtube: VICE: Heavy Metal in Baghdad, Documentary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjpspfuGQZg>