



Theories of Cultural Policy and Developing a Model for the Systemic Cycle of Cultural Policy in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Cultural policymaking in the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a multilayered interplay among power structures, institutional mechanisms, and the state's quest to define an "official culture." This study examines how cultural policies operationalize ideological frameworks and regulate meaning-making through institutionalized discourses. Drawing on Habermas's concepts of the colonization of the lifeworld and communicative rationality, as well as Arendt's notions of appearance and the common world, the research adopts a qualitative approach that combines policy document analysis with semi-structured interviews with cultural actors. The findings reveal that Iran's cultural policy primarily institutionalizes a monologic and state-centered interpretation of culture, thereby constraining dialogic and pluralistic expressions within the public sphere. However, the study argues that a shift toward participatory governance and strengthened civil society institutions could foster more inclusive cultural dynamics and facilitate the emergence of a communicative, multi-voiced public realm.

Keywords

Cultural policy, Islamic-Iranian identity, Public sphere, Common world, Cultural diversity.

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1. Introduction

Cultural policy serves as a cornerstone in shaping identity, fostering social cohesion, and guiding cultural development. Within the Islamic Republic of Iran, it holds a particularly central role. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic, founded upon revolutionary and Islamic ideological principles, has regarded culture as a primary domain of governance, institutionalizing its management through entities such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and the Islamic Propagation Organization. These institutions collectively reflect the regime's intent to regulate meaning, identity, and values within an Islamic-revolutionary framework. However, the evolution of Iran's cultural, social, and political structures, together with global transformations such as globalization, digitization, and growing cultural pluralism, has created complex challenges for cultural policy-making. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions of culture. In Iran, culture, deeply intertwined with history, religion, and national identity, is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be effectively governed through prescriptive, top-down, or instrumental policy models.

Theoretical perspectives on cultural policy from classical Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to modern frameworks inspired by Habermas and Arendt, as well as comparative models such as the French, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon systems, offer diverse lenses for analysis. These frameworks illuminate varying orientations: from centralized state control (Platonic) and civic participation (Aristotelian) to the reinforcement of communicative rationality and the public sphere (Habermas), or the cultivation of spaces of appearance and creativity (Arendt). The central question guiding this study is therefore: How can cultural policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran be conceptualized and implemented so as to preserve national and Islamic identity while simultaneously engaging with the demands of a modern, diverse society and an interconnected global environment? To answer this, the research examines the full policy cycle—problem identification, design, implementation, evaluation, and reformulation—within the specific institutional and ideological context of the Islamic Republic. The central question is: How can cultural policy in Iran be designed and implemented to preserve national and Islamic identity while addressing the needs of a modern, diverse society and global transformations? Addressing this requires analysing the cultural policy cycle (problem identification, design, implementation, evaluation, and solution formulation) in the context of Iran.

2. Literature review

Recent research on cultural policymaking in Iran demonstrates that this field is not merely a set of institutional measures for producing and managing cultural goods and organizations, but rather a complex arena situated at the intersection of political interests, moral–religious norms, processes of globalization, and technological transformations. The body of scholarship on Iran’s cultural policy spans a wide spectrum — from foundational theoretical reinterpretations (such as inquiries into the concept of “the human” or the implications of civilizational perspectives) to institutional–historical studies (genealogies of security-oriented policymaking) and analyses of the roles of actors and networks (elites, human–technological assemblages).

Yet, from a critical standpoint, a purely civilizational approach may risk producing identity conservatism and excluding difference. Hence, civilizational-informed policymaking should seek both to reconstruct historical linkages and to build dialectical bridges with global transformations. In their article “Interrogating the Concept of the Human in Approaches to Cultural Policymaking,” [Pourkiani et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that revisiting the notion of “the human” in cultural policy theory serves two key functions: defining the role of the citizen/beneficiary in policy design, and shaping the moral–political expectations of the individual in relation to institutions. Perspectives that regard humans merely as objects of normative regulation render policy instrumental and prescriptive, whereas those that view humans as historical, creative, and rights-bearing agents lead to more participatory and person-centered policies. This line of inquiry highlights the importance of conceptual reflexivity in the theoretical assumptions underpinning Iran’s cultural policy design. In “The Genealogy of Security-Oriented Cultural Policymaking in Iran,” [Jafari et al. \(2022\)](#) trace the emergence of a security-centered approach to cultural policy as a historical product of the intertwined experiences of revolution, war, and the state’s hegemonic need for identity stabilization. Their genealogical analysis identifies mechanisms such as parallel institution-building, surveillance instruments, and identity-driven discourse production as key tools for reproducing securitized cultural policies, while also examining their interaction with the civil sphere and artistic domains. In another article, “Typologies of Religiousness in Approaches to Cultural Policymaking,” [Pourkiani and Eidkazadeh \(2024\)](#) propose a typology of religiosity—including traditionalists, religious modernizers, and “religious seculars”—to illuminate the theoretical and practical divergences in addressing religious culture and cultural affairs.

Their study reveals that differing interpretations of religiosity yield distinct policy paradigms, ranging from normative and prescriptive policies to those that facilitate religious–social

coexistence. Finally, in their paper “Factors Enhancing Elite Participation in Iran’s Cultural Policymaking,” [Moghaddam et al. \(2022\)](#) examine the motivations, mechanisms, and barriers that shape the engagement of intellectual and cultural elites in policymaking processes. Their findings indicate that institutional trust, network capacities, symbolic rewards, and transparency in decision-making pathways play central roles in promoting participation. Conversely, restrictive political environments, professional risks, and institutional resistance to critical thought are identified as major obstacles. In this regard, their findings indicate that cultural policymaking in Iran is characterized by a complex, multi-layered structure that seeks to balance normative and value-oriented goals with practical and administrative requirements. The study highlights the need for systematic mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of cultural policies and ensure their consistency with higher-level strategic documents.

The authors emphasize concepts such as endogeneity, social participation, and cultural inclusivity, suggesting that cultural policymaking should move away from a top-down approach toward more participatory and dialogical forms of governance.

This study introduces a novel critical framework by integrating Habermasian concepts of lifeworld colonization and communicative rationality with Arendtian notions of appearance and the common world. This synthesis enables a simultaneous analysis of institutional domination and the potential for collective cultural emergence within the Iranian context. The research proposes a systemic model of the cultural policy cycle in Iran that links institutional–discursive analysis with network dynamics and technological (non-human) actors, thereby reframing conventional approaches to cultural policy as network-oriented and adaptive. From a policy perspective, the article advances a pragmatic agenda for gradual transition from a security-centered, hegemonic logic toward participatory mechanisms, introducing measurable indicators such as cultural justice, digital accessibility, and social capital as evaluative tools for effective cultural governance.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Culture, as a multidimensional and historical phenomenon, is central to shaping identity, social cohesion, and societal development. According to Tylor’s definition, culture encompasses beliefs, values, traditions, and material productions arising from human interactions and historical experiences, which cannot be altered through top-down directives. This aligns with Aristotle’s view of culture as a product of society and shared human interests, rather than an expression of elite agendas. Culture is examined through three dimensions:

1. **Ontology of Culture:** Culture is defined as a social and symbolic reality shaped by human interactions and social structures. This dimension focuses on beliefs, symbols, and behaviours transmitted across generations, exploring culture's role in organizing individual and collective life.
2. **Epistemology of Culture:** This dimension addresses how cultural knowledge and meanings are produced and transmitted through language, art, and rituals, serving as a foundation for collective consciousness and shared meanings.
3. **Methodology of Culture:** This involves scientific approaches such as discourse analysis, ethnography, and historical studies to examine culture, aiding in understanding cultural transformations and the role of social institutions in its preservation and production.

Classical cultural policy theories, particularly Platonic and Aristotelian perspectives, offer contrasting approaches. Plato views culture as controllable, assigning its guidance to enlightened philosophers. In *The Republic*, he emphasizes oversight of narratives and myths to preserve societal ideals. Conversely, Aristotle sees culture as an organic product of society, with the state's role being to align with meanings created by people and foster conditions for flourishing and freedom. These perspectives provide a foundation for analysing cultural policy in Iran, where directive approaches (akin to Platonic) emphasizing Islamic and revolutionary values coexist with demands for social participation (akin to Aristotelian). Modern theories, such as those of Habermas and Arendt, offer additional frameworks. Habermas, in his theory of communicative action, examines cultural policy within the "public sphere," where citizens produce values through free, rational dialogue. He distinguishes between the "lifeworld" (where cultural meanings are generated) and the "system" (bureaucratic institutions), warning that the system's dominance over the lifeworld can reduce culture to a tool of control. For Habermas, an ideal cultural policy is democratic, participatory, and supportive of cultural diversity. Arendt, by contrast, views culture as part of a "common world" shaped by individuals' actions and appearances in the public sphere. She emphasizes preserving cultural heritage, avoiding commercialization, and fostering creativity, with a policy facilitating free and democratic interactions. Global models—French (centralized and bureaucratic), Scandinavian (participatory and decentralized), and Anglo-Saxon (market-driven)—complement these theories, offering a multifaceted framework for analysing Iran's cultural policy. In Iran, cultural policy must balance Islamic-Iranian identity with challenges like globalization, cultural diversity, and digitization. The cultural policy cycle (problem identification, design, implementation, evaluation, and solutions) should incorporate components such as identity, justice, diversity, and cultural economy to achieve social and identity-related goals ([Soozanchi and Porkiani, 2020](#))

2.1.1. The nature of culture and its three dimensions (ontology, epistemology, methodology) in Iran

Culture, as a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, exhibits distinctive characteristics in Iran owing to its rich history, national identity, and profound connections to religion and national heritage. Drawing on Edward Burnett Tylor's definition, culture encompasses a complex of beliefs, values, traditions, symbols, and material productions shaped by human interactions and a society's historical experiences (Heshmati and Aghajani, 2018). In Iran, culture not only reflects the Islamic-Iranian identity but also encapsulates national, linguistic, and ritualistic diversity, evolving over centuries through social and historical interactions. This complexity renders the study of culture in Iran an interdisciplinary, multilayered endeavor that necessitates analysis across three dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

2.2. Ontology of culture

The ontology of culture examines its essence and existence as a social and symbolic reality. In Iran, culture emerges from interactions among human groups within the context of the nation's extensive historical trajectory. This dimension defines culture as a constellation of beliefs (e.g., Islamic and nationalist values), symbols (e.g., Ashura or Nowruz rituals), and collective behaviors (e.g., traditions of hospitality) transmitted across generations. In the Islamic Republic era, culture has been redefined as a social reality emphasizing Islamic-Iranian identity, with institutions such as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance playing pivotal roles in its organization. The ontology of culture in Iran underscores a deep interconnection among religion, history, and national identity, reinforced through social institutions and collective rituals. For instance, religious ceremonies such as Muharram serve not only spiritual purposes but also function as mechanisms for social cohesion and identity reproduction (Salehi-Amiri, 2013). This dimension positions culture as a vital force in organizing individual and collective life, remaining resilient and dynamic amidst global transformations such as globalization (See Table 1).

2.3. Epistemology of culture

The epistemology of culture addresses how cultural knowledge and meanings are produced, transmitted, and reproduced within a society. In Iran, culture provides a foundation for the generation of shared knowledge through language (e.g., Persian literature and religious texts),

art (e.g., Islamic miniature painting and architecture), and rituals (e.g., traditional and religious ceremonies). This dimension examines how cultural understandings are shaped in individuals' and groups' minds through educational institutions, media, and social interactions. In the Islamic Republic, cultural epistemology is heavily influenced by revolutionary and Islamic discourse, with institutions such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and the education system serving as primary conduits for transmitting cultural knowledge. For example, media productions such as historical or religious television series contribute to the reproduction of state-endorsed cultural values. However, the advent of digital technologies and social media has introduced new mechanisms for producing and disseminating cultural knowledge, occasionally in tension with official narratives (See Table 1). These developments highlight the dynamic nature of cultural epistemology in Iran, where ongoing cultural dialogues between tradition and modernity, and between state and civil society, continuously unfold ([Heshmati and Aghajani, 2018](#)).

2.4. Methodology of culture

The methodology of culture pertains to the scientific tools and approaches used to study and analyze culture. In Iran, studying culture demands interdisciplinary methods capable of addressing its historical, social, and political complexities. Qualitative methods such as ethnography (for exploring national and local cultures), discourse analysis (for examining religious and media texts), and historical studies (for tracing cultural transformations) are complemented by quantitative approaches like surveys and cultural data analysis, forming the core tools of this field. In the Islamic Republic, discourse analysis has been particularly prominent in the study of cultural policies and the role of state institutions in meaning production. For instance, analyzing the content of textbooks or media outputs can reveal the system's cultural priorities. Ethnography aids in understanding interactions between local and national cultures, fostering a deeper comprehension of cultural diversity within the national narrative. Moreover, the methodology of culture in Iran must adapt to rapid social changes and digitization, as online platforms have emerged as new spaces for cultural production and consumption, necessitating innovative analytical tools such as social media analysis (See Table 1) ([Fazeli and Ghelich, 2013](#)).

Table 1. The nature of culture and its three dimensions in Iran.

Dimension	Definition	Key Features in Iran	Examples and Applications
Ontological Dimension	Culture as a socio-semantic reality formed through human interactions and social structures encompasses beliefs, values, symbols, and inherited behaviors.	In Iran, culture is deeply intertwined with Islamic-Iranian identity, reinforced through social institutions and collective rituals. It functions as an organizing force for both individual and collective life and resists globalization.	Ashura and Nowruz as identity-symbolic rituals – Role of institutions such as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in redefining culture – Religious ceremonies (e.g., Muharram) fostering social cohesion
Epistemological Dimension	Examines how cultural knowledge and meaning are produced, transmitted, and reproduced through language, art, and rituals as vehicles of collective awareness.	Cultural knowledge in Iran is reproduced via Persian literature, religious texts, and state-controlled media. Digital technologies and social networks have introduced new mechanisms that sometimes clash with official discourse	Production of religious-historical TV series by national broadcasting – Educational system's role in promoting Islamic-revolutionary values – social media as a site for emerging cultural meanings.
Methodological Dimension	Scientific approaches (qualitative and quantitative) for studying culture, including ethnography, discourse analysis, and historical studies.	Cultural analysis in Iran requires interdisciplinary methods that address its national, historical, and political complexity. New methods, such as social network analysis, are increasingly important for understanding digital culture.	Ethnographic studies of local cultures (e.g., Kurdish, Turkic, Baloch) within the national framework – Discourse analysis of textbooks and media – Data analysis from online platforms to understand cultural trends.

2.4.1. Platonic and Aristotelian readings of culture and their application in Iran

In his philosophy, Plato considers culture a controllable and malleable phenomenon that should be overseen by enlightened philosophers to achieve society's ideal goals. In *The Republic*, he emphasizes the need to supervise the narratives and myths imparted to children, arguing that these shape the moral education and beliefs of future generations (Porkiani, 2022a). For Plato, culture must serve divine order and ethical values, with philosophers—those attuned to truth and the ideal order—holding the authority to guide society. Emphasizing rationality (logos), law (nomos), and order (taxis), Plato believes culture should be safeguarded from excesses and deviations. This perspective leads to state intervention in cultural affairs, in which the government assumes responsibility for determining cultural content and overseeing its production. Plato views culture as a tool for realizing justice and guiding society toward the common good, deeming any lack of control in this domain dangerous. This approach has fostered centralized, directive cultural policies, particularly in societies with strong ideological frameworks. In contrast, Aristotle regards culture as an inherent phenomenon arising from society and shared human interests, rather than as something fully controllable from above. In works like *Politics*, he argues that humans create cultural meanings through social interactions and diverse ways of life (Vahid, 2003). For Aristotle, the state's role is to align with these

meanings and provide a framework for citizens' flourishing and freedom. He posits that the good and happiness of individuals are realized under a government that respects the diversity of societal needs and talents. Unlike Plato's focus on centralized control, Aristotle prioritizes individual freedom and participation in shaping culture. He critiques governance models such as Sparta's, which constrain culture, and advocates the rule of free individuals over autocracy. From Aristotle's perspective, culture should create a space for the expression of human talents, with the state acting as a facilitator rather than a determiner (Yazdapanah, 2022). The Platonic and Aristotelian readings offer contrasting approaches to cultural policy. Plato's normative, idealist perspective views culture as a means of achieving order and justice, emphasizing the role of elites and the state in its guidance. This approach appeals to societies seeking ideological coherence but may limit creativity and cultural diversity. Conversely, Aristotle's realistic, society-centric view sees culture as a natural product of human interactions, prioritizing participation and freedom. This perspective values cultural diversity and individual creativity but risks fragmentation in societies facing identity or political challenges. Both perspectives are relevant to the analysis of cultural policy in Iran, particularly under the Islamic Republic, where tensions exist between preserving Islamic-Iranian identity and addressing the needs of a modern, diverse society. (See Table 2)

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Platonic approach is prominently evident in cultural policy. The state's revolutionary and Islamic discourse views culture as a tool for preserving religious and national identity and achieving social justice. Institutions such as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the Islamic Propagation Organization embody Plato's "philosophers," tasked with guiding and overseeing cultural content. For instance, censorship of books, films, and media reflects a centralized, directive approach aimed at promoting Islamic and revolutionary values while preventing cultural deviations (Zarei and Sam, 2021). This aligns with Plato's emphasis on supervising narratives, ensuring cultural content supports the system's ideal goals, such as promoting an Islamic lifestyle or resisting cultural imperialism. However, this approach faces challenges: it restricts artistic creativity, encounters resistance from diverse social groups, and struggles to regulate digital platforms such as social media. Excessive oversight may also alienate segments of society, particularly youth, from official culture. The Aristotelian approach, though less dominant, is evident in certain cultural policies and practices. Emphasis on grassroots participation in religious rituals (e.g., Ashura ceremonies) and local festivals (e.g., traditional music or handicraft exhibitions) reflects a view of culture as a product of societal

interactions. For example, support for local artists and indigenous productions, such as carpet weaving or regional music, aligns with Aristotle's focus on fostering societal talents. The emergence of informal spaces like cultural cafes and independent art groups indicates society's efforts to create cultural meanings independent of state control. However, this approach is constrained by Iran's centralized political and cultural structure, ideological priorities, and insufficient infrastructure, which limit broad civic participation (Qomishian, 2019). To effectively apply the Aristotelian perspective, the state could establish local cultural councils, support civil initiatives, and reduce prescriptive oversight, creating a space for cultural creativity and diversity to flourish. Overall, the Platonic approach dominates Iran's cultural policy due to the system's political and ideological structure, emphasizing identity preservation and content control. However, it faces challenges posed by cultural diversity and digital transformation. The Aristotelian approach, though less prevalent, could enhance cultural dynamism by promoting civic participation and supporting local creativity. A balanced synthesis—Platonic guidance for maintaining identity and cohesion, combined with Aristotelian participation to address diversity and creativity—could provide a robust framework for cultural policy in Iran (See Table 2). This synthesis requires rethinking the role of cultural institutions, increasing transparency, and strengthening the public sphere for cultural dialogue (Araei et al., 2023).

Table 2. Platonic vs. Aristotelian readings of culture and cultural policy in Iran

Component	Platonic Approach	Aristotelian approach
Definition of Culture	Culture as a controllable tool for achieving social order, justice, and ideal values, guided by philosophical elites	Culture as an intrinsic phenomenon emerging from social interaction and shared human interests, flourishing through freedom.
Role of the State	The state as guide and overseer, responsible for determining content and preventing deviations.	The state as facilitator, adapting to the needs and capacities of society to foster individual flourishing and freedom.
Implementation Mechanism	Centralized supervision, censorship, and ideological coherence.	Civic participation, decentralization, and support for local initiatives and individual creativity
Main Objective	Preserve Islamic-Iranian identity, strengthen social cohesion, and resist foreign cultural influence.	Promote cultural diversity, support creativity, and build spaces for collective well-being and participation
Examples in Iran	Book and film censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance – State-sponsored religious and national media (e.g., Mokhtarnameh) – Official events like Arbacen marches – Regulation of social media content	Support for local festivals (e.g., Iranian Regional Music Festival) – Grassroots Ashura rituals – Handicraft production (e.g., carpet weaving) – Independent cultural cafés and theatre groups.
Challenges in Iran	Artistic creativity limited by strict oversight – Social resistance from diverse groups (e.g., youth) – Difficult control in digital space – Disconnection from official culture.	Misalignment with centralized political-cultural structure – Lack of infrastructure for widespread participation – Financial constraints – Cultural fragmentation in the absence of coherent frameworks.
Policy Suggestions	Enhance intelligent oversight through technology: create advisory councils comprising cultural elites to design more flexible policies.	Establish local cultural councils for public engagement – Provide financial/infrastructural support to independent artists – Develop digital platforms for showcasing local content

2.4.2. *Habermasian reading of cultural policy and its application in Iran*

Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher and Frankfurt School theorist, introduces the concept of the "public sphere" as a cornerstone of his theory of communicative action. The public sphere refers to a social arena where individuals engage freely and equally in rational-critical dialogue, exchanging ideas to produce and reproduce cultural values, norms, and meanings (Blau, 2022). This concept holds particular significance for analysing cultural policy and the nature of culture, as Habermas views culture not merely as a product of social interactions but as the outcome of rational dialogues within the public sphere, shielded from the domination of power structures (the "system") and commercial interests. In an ideal public sphere, individuals reach collective agreement through reasoned, logic-based discourse, free from coercion, domination, or particular interests. Habermas situates culture within the "lifeworld" the domain where cultural values and meanings are generated through everyday social interactions and dialogues. In contrast, the "system"—comprising bureaucratic and economic institutions such as the state and market—can encroach upon the lifeworld, transforming culture into a tool for control or profit (Heshmati and Aghajani, 2018). The ideal public sphere is a democratic space where all citizens, regardless of social status, can participate, a prerequisite for fostering a vibrant and diverse culture. As a critical arena, the public sphere enables the evaluation and refinement of cultural policies, safeguarding culture's autonomy against systemic domination. For Habermas, culture is rooted in the lifeworld and shaped through free dialogues in the public sphere. He warns that the system's intrusion—whether through state or market forces—can strip culture of its authenticity, reducing it to a tool for legitimizing power or commercialization (Chambers, 2018). For instance, state or commercial media may represent cultural values in ways that prioritize specific group interests over collective ones. According to Habermas, effective cultural policy should strengthen the public sphere to enable citizen participation in producing and critiquing cultural meanings, prevent the system's domination of the lifeworld to preserve cultural authenticity, and ensure cultural diversity and justice to guarantee inclusive participation (Czobor-Lupp, 2008). Habermas argues that in modern societies, the public sphere has been weakened by the influence of commercial media and state bureaucracy. Consequently, cultural policy must create spaces—such as civil associations, independent media, and educational institutions—that facilitate free and rational dialogue. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, characterized by a centralized political structure, an ideological Islamic-revolutionary discourse, and a rich national culture, applying a Habermasian framework presents a complex challenge. The public sphere in Iran is

constrained by political restrictions, state oversight of the media and cultural institutions, and ideological priorities. Nevertheless, traces of a public sphere are evident in grassroots rituals, informal spaces (e.g., cultural cafes), and social media platforms. Applying Habermas's framework in Iran requires analyzing this context to identify opportunities and obstacles.

Religious rituals, such as Ashura ceremonies, and national celebrations, like Nowruz, provide spaces for social interaction and the production of cultural meanings. These rituals can serve as nuclei of the public sphere, where individuals, largely free from direct state oversight, reproduce shared values and identities. For example, religious congregations (hey'ats) function as spaces for theological and social dialogue, exemplifying the cultural lifeworld. The performance of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in formulating the *National Media Vision Document* (2018)—which explicitly defines its mission as “guiding society culturally based on Islamic values”—illustrates that the media is conceived not as a forum for dialogue but as an instrument of cultural guidance and control.

The rise of digital platforms, such as Instagram and Telegram, has created a new public sphere in Iran, particularly among youth, who engage in discussions, critique cultural policies, and produce local content. Though subject to oversight, these platforms enable rational dialogue and broad participation. Civil society groups, including literary associations, independent theater troupes, and cultural NGOs, represent efforts to establish a public sphere in Iran. These groups create spaces for cultural critique and creativity, strengthening the lifeworld. The diversity of ideas and cultural schools of thought offers opportunities to strengthen the public sphere, as intercultural dialogue among diverse groups can foster a dynamic and diverse culture. However, applying this model to Iran's cultural policy encounters several challenges:

1. **System's Domination of the Lifeworld:** In Iran, bureaucratic institutions like the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) play a dominant role in shaping culture. This influence, manifested through censorship of books, films, and media, subordinates the lifeworld to the system, restricting free dialogue and weakening the public sphere (Salehi-Amiri, 2013). For instance, stringent oversight of cinematic productions limits artistic creativity and undermines the public sphere.
2. **Political Constraints:** Iran's centralized political structure and ideological priorities hinder free and equal participation in the public sphere. Legal restrictions on civil activities and independent media impede the formation of rational-critical dialogues.
3. **Unequal Access to the Public Sphere:** Marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and women in certain regions, face economic and social barriers that limit their access to dialogic spaces, jeopardizing the cultural justice emphasized by Habermas.
4. **Commercialization of Culture:** The market's influence in certain cultural domains, such as pop music or commercial streaming platform series, risks transforming the lifeworld into a commodity for profit, conflicting with Habermasian ideals.

To apply the Habermasian framework to Iran's cultural sphere, policy-making must prioritize strengthening the public sphere and preserving the autonomy of the lifeworld. Proposed strategies include:

1. **Creating Spaces for Cultural Dialogue:** The state can support cultural associations, literary cafes, and local cultural centers to foster free dialogue. For instance, establishing national cultural houses grounded in citizenship rights could enhance intercultural exchanges.
2. **Reducing Oversight and Supporting Independent Media:** Easing stringent censorship and promoting independent media, such as cultural publications or non-commercial digital platforms, can invigorate the public sphere. This requires revising regulations and increasing transparency in oversight processes.
3. **Enhancing Civic Participation:** Establishing local cultural councils with representatives from ethnic groups, artists, and citizens can bolster inclusive participation. These councils could contribute to the formulation of regional cultural policies.
4. **Promoting Cultural Justice:** Allocating budgets to ensure marginalized groups' access to cultural resources, such as libraries and art education, and supporting ethnic cultural productions can secure cultural justice and make the public sphere more inclusive.
5. **Managing Digital Spaces:** Rather than widespread censorship, the state could develop local digital platforms and support high-quality cultural content to facilitate constructive online dialogues.

Given Iran's political and cultural constraints, fully implementing the Habermasian framework is challenging, but elements of it can be applied incrementally. Strengthening informal spaces, such as grassroots rituals and civil society groups, and leveraging social media's potential can foster a limited public sphere. However, success hinges on structural reforms, including reducing centralization, building social trust, and enhancing civil infrastructure. Without these reforms, the system's dominance over the lifeworld will persist, marginalizing the public sphere (Aslanzadeh, 2015). The resolutions of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution since the 1980s—particularly the *Comprehensive Cultural Engineering Map* (2011) and the *Fundamental Transformation Document of Education* (2010)—serve as clear examples of cultural policymaking centered on Islamic–national identity and the regulation of cultural discourse. These documents demonstrate that cultural governance in Iran is predominantly top-down and institutionally driven.

2.4.3. *Arendtian reading of cultural policy and its application in Iran*

Hannah Arendt, the German political philosopher, in works such as *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*, conceptualizes culture as an integral part of the "common world"^[3] shaped through human actions in the public sphere. Rejecting instrumentalist perspectives that view culture as a means to political or economic ends, Arendt sees culture as an authentic, self-sufficient phenomenon rooted in creativity, interaction, and the "appearance"^[4] of individuals

in public spaces ([Dewandre, 2018](#)). This perspective offers a distinctive framework for cultural policy, emphasizing freedom, creativity, and the preservation of cultural heritage. For Arendt, culture comprises enduring works, ideas, and symbols—such as art, literature, and architecture—created through human actions, particularly speech and creative endeavours, in the public sphere. These works form a common world that connects individuals and imbues their lives with meaning. The public sphere, in Arendt's view, is the arena where individuals express their identities and creativity through dialogue and action ([Porkiani, 2022a](#)). Culture emerges from the appearance of individuals in this space, where their free, non-instrumental actions reveal their uniqueness, fostering cultural creativity and innovation independent of power or market domination. Arendt underscores the importance of preserving cultural artifacts as essential components of the common world. These artifacts, such as historical monuments or literary texts, link the past to the present and provide a foundation for future actions. Their destruction or commercialization weakens the common world. Opposing the use of culture as a tool for political legitimization or profit, Arendt insists that culture must be valued for its own sake. From her perspective, effective cultural policy creates a public space in which individuals can act freely, express creativity, and contribute to enduring cultural works. Key features of an Arendtian cultural policy include ([Korsgaard, 2018](#)) Fostering the Public Sphere: The state should establish spaces—such as theaters, galleries, and cultural associations—that enable free and creative actions. Preserving Cultural Heritage: Policies must protect cultural artifacts, such as historical sites, from destruction and maintain them as part of the common world ([Roy, 2024](#)). Avoiding Commercialization and Control: Culture should not be reduced to a commercial commodity or political instrument. Policy must shield creativity from market and state domination. Promoting Diversity and Freedom: Policies should respect cultural diversity and create opportunities for diverse actors, including ethnic groups, women, and marginalized communities, to appear. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, characterized by a centralized political structure, an ideological Islamic-revolutionary discourse, a modern national and constitutional culture, and a rich historical legacy, applying an Arendtian framework presents a complex challenge. Culture in Iran is often viewed as a tool for preserving Islamic-Iranian identity and fostering social cohesion, sometimes accompanied by instrumentalist approaches. However, grassroots rituals, local artistic productions, and informal spaces—such as cultural cafes and social media—demonstrate potential for the appearance of cultural actors. Applying Arendt's framework requires analysing opportunities and obstacles within this context. Religious rituals, such as Ashura and Arbaeen ceremonies, and national celebrations, such as Nowruz, provide

spaces for collective action in which individuals express identity and creativity, contributing to a common world that connects people and produces enduring cultural meanings. For instance, creative elegies performed in religious congregations exemplify the appearance of actors in the public sphere. Iran's diverse national culture and rich local traditions offer significant potential for the creation of diverse cultural works. Supporting regional music, handicrafts, and local literature can facilitate the emergence of cultural actors from diverse groups. Cultural cafes, private art galleries, and social media platforms, such as Instagram and Telegram, serve as informal public spheres where artists, writers, and ordinary citizens share ideas and works. For example, Instagram pages of young poets or independent theater groups illustrate cultural appearance in digital spaces. Iran's historical monuments (e.g., Persepolis, Naqsh-e Jahan Square), literary texts (e.g., Shahnameh, Hafez's Divan), and ritual traditions form a robust common world, offering a foundation for Arendtian policy. For example, Initiatives such as the *Marivan Street Theater Festival* and the *Tehran Short Film Festival*, which involve private-sector participation and independent artists, have provided limited space for the emergence of cultural dialogue—although these events remain under institutional supervision.

Preserving this heritage strengthens identity and intergenerational bonds. However, several obstacles hinder the application of an Arendtian approach to Iran's cultural policy: State Oversight and Control: Iran's centralized bureaucratic structure, with stringent censorship of books, films, and media, restricts the freedom of cultural actors. These controls, aimed at upholding Islamic-revolutionary values, conflict with Arendt's emphasis on cultural freedom and autonomy (Salehi-Amiri, 2013). For instance, restrictions on independent filmmaker's stifle new creative expressions. Instrumentalist Approach to Culture: Culture is often used to legitimize political discourse or promote official values. State media productions, such as IRIB series, sometimes prioritize ideological goals over creativity, contradicting Arendt's rejection of instrumentalism. Commercialization of Culture: The market's influence in areas like commercial pop music or online streaming series risks turning culture into a profit-driven commodity, undermining the common world and clashing with Arendt's view of culture's self-sufficiency. Constraints on the Public Sphere: Political and social restrictions, such as bans on certain gatherings or oversight of civil activities, weaken Iran's public sphere. These limitations hinder free action and the appearance of cultural actors, particularly from marginalized groups like women and ethnic minorities. To apply an Arendtian framework to Iran's cultural policy, a public sphere that fosters creative action and preserves the common world must be cultivated. Proposed strategies include: Supporting Cultural Spaces: The state can fund local cultural

centres, art galleries, theatres, and literary cafes to create spaces for free action. For example, establishing national cultural houses rooted in Iran's ancient and constitutional traditions could empower local artists. Preserving Heritage: Investing in the restoration of historical sites, digitizing literary texts, and supporting local museums can strengthen the common world. Projects like restoring caravanserais or creating digital archives for classical texts would preserve heritage. Reducing Bureaucratic Restrictions: Easing censorship on cultural productions (e.g., films, music, books) and establishing transparent oversight mechanisms can enhance creativity. This requires revising censorship laws and involving cultural elites in decision-making. Empowering Independent Actors: Providing financial and infrastructural support to independent artists, writers, and cultural groups—such as street theater troupes or regional poets—can promote diversity. Grants for regional music groups, for instance, would bolster cultural variety. Ensuring Inclusivity: Policies should create opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and youth. National cultural festivals or support for women's artistic productions can advance this goal.

Leveraging Digital Spaces: Rather than imposing widespread censorship, the state can support local digital platforms and high-quality cultural content, transforming the digital sphere into a space for cultural expression. Given Iran's centralized and ideological context, fully implementing an Arendtian framework faces significant challenges, including state oversight, cultural instrumentalism, and a constrained public sphere. However, opportunities such as grassroots rituals, cultural diversity, and digital platforms enable its gradual, limited application. Success requires moving away from bureaucratic approaches toward fostering free spaces and supporting independent actors. Structural reforms—reducing centralization, strengthening civil organizations, and building social trust—are essential. Examples such as the Iran Regional Music Festival in Kerman, which brings local artists together in a public setting, and private galleries in Tehran that showcase creativity in informal spaces illustrate cultural appearance. Initiatives such as literary festivals for young poets, support for street theater in underserved areas, and the digitization of Persian literary works can further strengthen the common world and empower cultural actors.

2.4.4. The cultural policy cycle and its implementation in Iran

The cultural policy cycle, as an analytical framework, systematically structures the design, implementation, and evaluation of cultural policies. As outlined in the final table³, this cycle comprises problem identification, policy design, policy implementation, outcome evaluation,

and solution formulation. Drawing on public policy theories, particularly David Easton's systems model and Harold Laswell's policy cycle, this framework facilitates the analysis of cultural issues and the development of contextually relevant solutions (Sharifi and Fazeli, 2012). In Iran, given its intricate cultural, political, and social landscape, examining the cultural policy cycle requires an interdisciplinary, meticulous approach that accounts for both local and global factors. The cycle is an iterative process that supports policymakers in identifying cultural challenges, crafting solutions, implementing policies, and evaluating outcomes. Analysing the implementation of cultural policies—a pivotal stage of the cycle—requires a comprehensive, multifaceted examination encompassing institutional, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. This process is shaped not only by the mechanisms of policy execution by responsible institutions but also by Iran's complex cultural-political context, its diverse national and civic identities, and the impacts of globalization and digital technologies. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the implementation of cultural policy is influenced by an ideological Islamic-revolutionary discourse, a centralized political structure, and a focus on preserving national identity (See Table 3). A thorough analysis of this stage involves several critical dimensions, which are systematically explored below (Ashtarian, 2002; Bayat and Janbaz, 2011).

2.5. Institutional structure and inter-sectoral coordination

The implementation of cultural policies in Iran involves a network of institutions, each with distinct roles and priorities. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as the primary institution, oversees cultural productions (e.g., books, films, music, theater), issues permits, and supports artistic activities, aligning policies with Islamic-Iranian values through taxation and funding allocation. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, a higher authority, formulates overarching cultural policies and oversees domains such as education, media, and scientific and cultural outputs. Through documents like the Cultural Strategy Plan, it provides a blueprint for implementation. The Islamic Propagation Organization promotes religious culture by organizing ceremonies and producing Islamic content, playing a key role in policy execution. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), as the state's media arm, advances official values through religious, national, and historical programming. Additionally, institutions such as the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism preserve cultural heritage, while the Ministry of Education fosters Iranian Islamic identity through curricula. However, institutional misalignment, often stemming from divergent priorities and

bureaucratic complexity, poses a significant challenge. Analyzing this dimension requires assessing inter-sectoral collaboration, transparency in role allocation, and the efficiency of implementation processes.

2.6. Resources and infrastructure

Effective policy implementation hinges on adequate financial, human, and infrastructural resources. In Iran, cultural budgets are primarily state-funded, but insufficient or inequitable allocation, particularly in underserved regions or for marginalized groups (e.g., ethnic minorities), can hinder execution. For instance, the scarcity of theaters or public libraries in rural areas limits access to cultural services. Moreover, the capacity of specialized human resources—such as experts in digital technologies or cultural analysts—is critical for modern policy implementation. Evaluating this dimension involves analyzing budgetary data, assessing cultural infrastructure (e.g., the number of museums or cultural centers), and measuring workforce capabilities (Javaheri and Jalali, 2021; Hosseini, 2017).

2.7. Oversight and censorship

Stringent oversight and censorship, aimed at ensuring alignment with Islamic-revolutionary values, are defining features of Iran's cultural policy implementation. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's censorship of books, films, music, and media exemplifies this approach. While effective in upholding official discourse, such measures often stifle artistic creativity and alienate segments of society, particularly youth, from official culture. Analyzing this dimension requires examining the impact of censorship on cultural outputs, artists' satisfaction, and public acceptance of policies. The rise of digital spaces and social media, which challenge centralized control, necessitates a shift toward smarter, less intrusive oversight mechanisms.

2.8. Social participation and policy acceptance

The success of cultural policy implementation depends on the engagement of citizens, artists, and civil society organizations. Social trust in cultural institutions is crucial for policy acceptance. For example, resistance among youth to IRIB's programming highlights a disconnect between official culture and societal needs. Evaluating this dimension involves assessing levels of civic participation and public trust in cultural initiatives.

2.9. Global influences and emerging technologies

Globalization and digitization profoundly shape the implementation of cultural policy in Iran. Social media and online platforms (e.g., Instagram, Filimo) have become spaces for cultural production and consumption, often beyond direct state control. Analyzing this dimension requires exploring how global trends and technologies influence policy outcomes and how Iran can leverage digital tools to enhance cultural engagement.

2.10. Cultural justice and diversity

Iran's diverse national and regional cultures necessitate policies that ensure cultural justice. Implementation must prioritize equitable access to cultural resources (e.g., art education, libraries) and support for ethnic cultural productions. The Iran Regional Music Festival, for instance, promotes diversity, but insufficient support for local artists in remote areas undermines cultural justice. This dimension requires analysing access data and gauging marginalized groups' satisfaction.

2.11. Political and ideological challenges

The Islamic-revolutionary discourse shapes policy priorities, fostering identity cohesion but sometimes limiting cultural diversity and actors' freedom. For example, ideological oversight of films constrains filmmakers' creativity. Analyzing this dimension involves assessing the impact of political priorities on implementation, identifying tensions between traditional and modern values, and evaluating effects on social acceptance.

3. Policy design in Iran

Designing cultural policies in the Islamic Republic is a complex, multi-layered process driven by key institutions within the Islamic-revolutionary framework. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, as the primary authority, formulates macro-level policies and issues strategic documents, such as the Cultural Strategy Plan, to preserve Islamic-Iranian identity and social cohesion. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as the operational arm, designs detailed policies for cultural productions and artistic oversight. The Islamic Propagation Organization focuses on promoting religious culture through policies that support religious rituals and Islamic content. IRIB shapes media-related cultural policies and produces programs that advance national and religious values (See Table 3). The Ministries of Education and Cultural Heritage contribute through educational curricula and heritage preservation,

respectively. While aimed at safeguarding identity and addressing globalization, this process faces challenges such as centralization and limited civic participation, and it requires analysis of policy documents, institutional roles, and alignment with cultural diversity and societal needs.

4. Implementation of cultural policies

Implementation is a structured process executed by specialized institutions within the Islamic-revolutionary framework. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance leads by overseeing cultural productions, issuing permits, and supporting artistic activities. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution ensures inter-sectoral coordination and adherence to macro policies. The Islamic Propagation Organization implements policies for religious rituals (e.g., Ashura, Arbaeen) and Islamic content. IRIB executes media policies through religious and national programming. The Ministries of Education and Cultural Heritage contribute via curricula and heritage preservation. Despite its coherence, implementation faces challenges such as institutional misalignment, complex bureaucracy, and stringent oversight, necessitating an analysis of coordination, resource allocation, and the impacts of oversight (See Table 3).

5. Evaluation, analysis, and solution formulation

Evaluating outcomes and formulating solutions, the final stages of the cycle, require the analysis of multiple variables across cultural, social, institutional, political, economic, and global dimensions. Effectiveness in achieving goals (e.g., strengthening Islamic-Iranian identity, enhancing cohesion) is measured through quantitative indicators (e.g., number of cultural outputs, access in underserved areas) and qualitative metrics (e.g., citizen and artist satisfaction). Cultural justice is assessed by examining equitable access for diverse groups (e.g., ethnicities, women, youth) and support for local cultures. Diversity is evaluated through policies promoting national and regional cultures. The impact of censorship on creativity and social acceptance is critical, as excessive oversight can limit outputs. Social variables, like trust in institutions and civic participation, determine policy sustainability. Global and technological influences, such as social media's role in cultural consumption, are analysed to gauge adaptability to globalization (Vahid, 2003; Porkiani, 2022a; Mashbaki and Khademi, 2008). Proposed solutions address institutional reforms, such as improving coordination among entities (e.g., the Ministry of Culture, the Supreme Council, and IRIB) and reducing bureaucracy. Financial and infrastructural resources, including equitable budget allocation and

the development of cultural infrastructure (e.g., libraries, theatres), are vital to future policies. Enhancing civic participation through local cultural councils and NGOs can increase citizen involvement. Balancing the Islamic-revolutionary discourse with modern, diverse societal needs requires flexible, inclusive policies. Digital technologies, through local platforms and smart online management, can support the production of high-quality cultural content. Cultural diplomacy, through international festivals, can enhance Iran's global cultural influence. These solutions demand interdisciplinary methods—data analysis, social surveys, ethnographic studies, and impact assessments—to ensure Iran's cultural policy evolves toward efficiency, inclusivity, and global adaptability (See Table 3).

Table 3. Examination of the cultural policy cycle in Iran

Policy cycle stage	Context in Iran	Examples
Problem Identification	Identification of key issues related to national and Islamic identity formation; addressing global and technological transformations; analyzing social and cultural conflicts.	– Study of the impact of social networks on youth identity. – Discourse analysis of Islamic culture in the media. – Analysis of cultural texts and national identity narratives.
Policy Design	Designing strategies for preserving Islamic–Iranian identity and strengthening cultural resilience, emphasizing the integration of cultural, educational, and economic sectors.	– Cultural support policies for art and literature (Islamic model). – Planning national media programs to promote Islamic lifestyle. – Developing curricula to reinforce cultural values.
Policy Implementation	Operationalizing cultural policies through ministries and cultural organizations; ensuring inter-agency coordination.	– Producing films and artistic works with Islamic values. – Organizing cultural festivals with public participation. – Launching local cultural initiatives in deprived areas.
Policy Evaluation	Evaluating the effectiveness of cultural programs and institutions; identifying policy gaps and deficiencies.	– Assessing cultural indicators and public satisfaction. – Examining the impact of cultural expenditures on local development. – Analyzing feedback from cultural producers and artists.
Policy Recommendation / Solution Formulation	Proposing strategies to reduce cultural gaps and enhance participation, strengthening digital infrastructure and innovation ecosystems.	– Establishing local cultural houses and digital platforms. – Encouraging creative industries and cultural entrepreneurship. – Designing incentive systems to attract cultural elites.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the theoretical foundations and practical mechanisms of cultural policymaking in the Islamic Republic of Iran, emphasizing its complex relationship with ideology, power, and identity formation. By integrating Habermas's concepts of *lifeworld* colonization and *communicative rationality* with Arendt's notions of *appearance* and the *common world*, the research developed a critical framework capable of revealing both the institutional domination and the latent possibilities of dialogic emergence within Iran's cultural

sphere. Empirical evidence, ranging from the Comprehensive Cultural Engineering Map and the National Media Vision Document to digital governance policies such as the User Protection Bill, indicates that Iranian cultural policy remains predominantly top-down, with limited channels for civic participation and pluralistic dialogue. Nevertheless, emerging initiatives such as independent cultural festivals and artistic networks suggest the gradual formation of spaces for communicative interaction and collective creativity. Building upon these findings, the article proposed a systemic model of the cultural policy cycle for Iran, connecting institutional–discursive dynamics with networked and technological dimensions. This model provides a foundation for reorienting policy from a security-centered logic toward participatory, justice-oriented, and adaptive governance. In doing so, it highlights the importance of enhancing cultural justice, expanding digital accessibility, and strengthening social capital as key indicators of effective and sustainable cultural development in Iran

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