

THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN IRAN**Alireza Azeri Matin**

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Keywords	Abstract
Iran Focus Group Young Generation Participant Observation Urban Youth Culture	<i>Contemporary Iran often appears misunderstood, both with Western media and Islamic regime propaganda failing to capture the true essence of its young generation's identities and daily lives. At the same time, there is little attention paid to the interpretive paradigm across Iranian social science and humanities academia within which positivism reigns supreme. The present paper addresses these issues by highlighting key sociocultural characteristics relevant for researchers conducting qualitative studies in Iran, particularly through focus group interviews. Drawing from detailed observations in Tehran and personal experiences growing up in Iran, this paper offers practical insights to help researchers design effective research agendas and enhance focus group studies. The aim is to guide researchers in navigating cultural complexities, avoid common pitfalls, and improve the validity of their findings by providing a clearer understanding of Iranian urban youth culture. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the importance of detailed contextual circumstances for effectively designing and successfully executing the focus group discussions.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Focus groups, a qualitative research method, have their origins in the mid-20th century, evolving from early group interview techniques and sociological studies. Developed in the 1950s by sociologist Robert K. Merton and his colleagues, focus groups were initially used to explore complex social phenomena and gather nuanced insights into group dynamics and opinions (Hennink, 2014). Over time, they have become an integral tool in qualitative research, particularly in the humanities, due to their ability to capture the depth and complexity of human experiences and perspectives.

In the humanities, focus groups play a crucial role by facilitating discussions that reveal participants' attitudes, beliefs, and values. This method allows researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning in their lives and interact with cultural narratives, thus providing rich, contextual insights that quantitative methods alone may miss. The interactive nature of focus groups helps uncover shared meanings and social constructs, making them invaluable for understanding cultural and social phenomena.

During my fieldwork for a PhD dissertation focused on media and identity among young Iranians, I encountered a significant paucity in the use of focus groups as a research

method. While participants were familiar with surveys and individual interviews, they had limited exposure to focus group discussions. This lack of familiarity suggests a broader issue within Iranian academia, where quantitative methods and positivist approaches dominate (Ghaneirad, 2011), often overshadowing qualitative methods like focus groups.

For decades, the prevalent reliance on quantitative methodologies in Iranian social science research, emphasized by authors such as Rahbari (2015), Atai et al. (2018) and Bakhshi et al. (2019), highlights a gap in the application of interpretivist methods. The scarcity of focus group studies in this context raises questions about the method's potential contributions to understanding complex social and cultural dynamics in Iran.

This study aims to address the underutilization of focus groups in Iranian research by presenting detailed observations from focus group interviews with young Iranians aged 25 to 29. The research seeks to underline the methodological challenges and opportunities of using focus groups in a culturally specific context. By examining the integration of focus groups into Iranian social science research, the study intends to advocate for a more balanced approach that incorporates qualitative insights alongside traditional quantitative methods.

METHOD

The methodology for this research is grounded in participant observation, a common technique in ethnography that involves the researcher immersing themselves in the setting they are studying. Through a series of focus group interviews conducted in Tehran, I employed an emic-etic continuum approach (Xia, 2011). This involved shifting between an insider perspective (emic), informed by my own cultural background, and an outsider perspective (etic), shaped by my experiences living abroad for over two decades.

The focus group discussions explored cultural identity and media consumption among young Iranians, offering insights into their lived experiences and social interactions. The combination of emic and etic views allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and the cultural subtleties influencing their responses. This methodological approach not only enriched the data collected but also provided a framework for understanding the broader implications of focus group research in Iran.

RESULT

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics is a defining characteristic of focus groups that distinguishes them from other qualitative research methods and group interviews (Bowling, 2002; Freeman, 2006; Kitzinger, 1996;). It pertains to how a group operates as a collective entity rather than merely a collection of individuals. Stewart & Shamdasani (2014) categorize the factors influencing group dynamics into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental. While these categories provide a foundational framework, specific concerns arise when contextualizing research within Iran, warranting further reflection.

Intra/Interpersonal Impacts

The behaviour of individual members significantly impacts the overall dynamics of a focus group. This influence is particularly pronounced in smaller groups compared to larger ones. Hence, the recruitment process, involving the careful selection of participants, is critical. Researchers should aim for demographic homogeneity to enhance communication flow and discussion coherence. My pilot studies underscored the importance of not only demographic similarities but also the hierarchical ordering of these variables according to cultural relevance and population priorities.

In Iran, gender remains a contentious variable. The historical and ongoing debates around gender roles, such as modern Iranian feminism (Millet, 1982; Mahdi, 2004; Sedghi, 2007) and Islamic orthodox perspectives (Tohidi, 1991), reflect deep-seated

power struggles. Despite recent social changes and generational shifts, traditional gender role beliefs persist. The state's stringent gender segregation policies (Samini, 2013) exacerbate communication challenges between men and women, often resulting in discomfort or distraction during mixed-gender focus groups. Male participants may exhibit self-censorship or exaggerated nonchalance, while female participants might display reluctance or aversion. Thus, unless research objectives dictate otherwise, homogeneous gender groups are preferable.

Age, following gender, is another significant demographic factor. The 25-29 age group in my study often struggled with generational identity, perceiving older generations as outdated and younger ones as radical. This generational divide complicated intergenerational communication and highlighted the importance of age-related considerations in focus group settings.

Socioeconomic status, particularly income, plays a pivotal role in Iranian social hierarchies (Hauser, 1994). In Tehran, social status is heavily influenced by one's residential area, with northern districts signalling higher status (Tabrizi & Madanipour, 2006; Faraji et al., 2011; Hadavandi et al., 2011). Thus, income remains the most salient indicator of social status, overshadowing occupation and education.

Religious affiliation also impacts group dynamics. While Shia Islam dominates (Curtis & Hooglund, 2008), younger Iranians often adopt more inclusive views towards religious minorities, reflecting a more humanistic perspective. This shift was evident in my interviews, where participants expressed dissatisfaction with religious discrimination but maintained positive views on interfaith friendships.

Ethnic diversity in Tehran adds another layer of complexity. As a major destination for migrants (Kheirabadi, 2011), Tehran's population reflects a rich ethnic tapestry. Despite the commonality of ethnic diversity in daily interactions, participants in my research exhibited pride in their ethnic backgrounds and saw ethnicity as an opportunity for cultural enrichment rather than a barrier to communication. Ethnic jokes, though popular, are deemed inappropriate for official contexts, underlining the nuanced nature of ethnic identity in social interactions.

Occupational and educational backgrounds are less likely to significantly impact focus group dynamics unless directly related to the discussion topics. However, the high unemployment rate among graduates in Iran (Rad et al., 2015; Habibi, 2015) underscores the frustration felt by those with higher education, often viewing it as a failed investment (Gilavand, 2016).

Physical and Personality Characteristics

Physical attributes and personal appearance influence group behaviour, particularly among unfamiliar participants. Physical attractiveness is often associated with leadership and likability (Stogdill, 1948; Goldman & Lewis, 1977; Adams & Huston, 1975), and clothing style can impact social perceptions (Gibbins, 1969; Bryant, 1975). In Iran, where appearance holds considerable significance, participants in my research demonstrated heightened sensitivity to physical traits, sometimes leading to distraction or superficial judgments.

Personality traits also affect group dynamics. In one of our groups, for instance, a participant exhibiting schizothymic tendencies contributed minimally to discussions, affecting the group's overall engagement. Conversely, a neurotic participant's presence influenced others to avoid disagreement, highlighting the impact of personality on group interaction. The moderator's role becomes crucial in managing such dynamics, requiring social skills, cultural awareness, and psychological insight to ensure effective group performance.

Interpersonal interactions are shaped by participants' expectations, often influenced by stereotypes and prejudices (Sharepour, 2005; Tavakoli et al., 2010; Rafatjah, 2012). These

preconceptions can impact group cohesion and the quality of discussions, necessitating a nuanced understanding of participants' backgrounds and attitudes.

In conclusion, group dynamics in focus groups are multifaceted, influenced by a range of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors. Contextualizing these dynamics within the Iranian setting reveals unique challenges and considerations, underscoring the importance of thoughtful participant selection and moderation to achieve meaningful research outcomes.

Environmental Impacts

The environment in which focus groups are conducted profoundly influences group behaviour and discussion dynamics. While scholars and marketing researchers have extensively debated the ideal setting for focus groups, Green and Hart (1999) concluded that the choice of venue is more a theoretical consideration than a technical one. Thus, researchers should reflect on the theoretical framework and objectives of their study to determine the most appropriate location and setting for their group interviews.

In the context of urban Iran, understanding cultural nuances is essential to avoid hindering group behaviour. The concept of *Khaneh* (home) in Iranian culture denotes warmth, trust, and attentiveness. Consequently, inviting participants to a private home for a discussion is often preferable to more formal settings like offices or cafeterias. This approach is particularly advantageous when dealing with small groups, as it minimizes logistical issues related to parking and space. Moreover, Iranians' renowned hospitality (O'Gorman, 2007) further supports this choice, as hosts are deeply committed to making guests feel welcome, a sentiment reflected in the cultural maxim *Mehman Habibe Khodast* "Guest is God's friend" (Bucar, 2012).

Conversely, the notion of *Biroon* (outside the home) contrasts sharply with *Khaneh*, connoting distrust, suspicion, and discomfort. Public spaces in Iran are often associated with surveillance and lack of privacy, making home settings more conducive to open and genuine discussions. This cultural context highlights the importance of selecting a familiar and comfortable environment for focus group discussions in Iran.

Moderator

The moderator plays a crucial role in focus group research, influencing both group dynamics and the quality of interactions. Researchers must carefully decide whether to take on this role themselves or hire a local moderator, considering factors such as the research topic, the specific context, and the resources available to them.

For researchers who are not based in the region, hiring a local moderator fluent in Farsi is essential. While a general understanding of the language is helpful, cultural nuances in communication require a moderator who is deeply familiar with local expressions and context. Two important factors to consider when selecting a moderator are demographic similarity and proper training.

A moderator should closely match the demographic profile of the research participants to better grasp cultural subtleties and encourage meaningful interactions. This is particularly important in Iran, where factors such as gender, age, and religious stance significantly shape social and cultural perspectives. A moderator who shares similar characteristics with the participants can foster a sense of trust and openness, leading to more insightful discussions.

Beyond demographic alignment, thorough training and preparation are essential. A moderator must engage in pilot studies, practice with dummy interviews, and become well-versed in the interview guide before conducting actual focus groups. Even with deep cultural knowledge, effective moderation requires specific skills to manage group interactions, guide discussions, and ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute.

For Iranian researchers or those fluent in Farsi who have spent considerable time in Iran, taking on the role of moderator can be highly beneficial. This approach works particularly well in smaller focus groups, where the researcher's in-depth understanding of both the subject matter and participant dynamics enhances the quality of discussions. By moderating their own groups, researchers gain firsthand insight into participant responses and can navigate challenges related to recruitment and engagement with greater ease.

Interview Guide

Designing an effective interview guide is a crucial element of focus group research. Striking a balance between structure and flexibility allows the guide to adapt to the natural language and expressions of participants. While academic literature offers various approaches to structuring and sequencing questions, the final design often evolves through pilot studies and early focus group sessions.

Questions should be crafted in a way that aligns with the everyday language and cultural context of participants. This requires careful attention to tone, slang, and common expressions to ensure that questions feel natural and relatable. Language is constantly evolving, and new slang or shifts in meaning can emerge over time, making it necessary to update the interview guide regularly to maintain its relevance.

Although following a structured sequence of questions is beneficial, the fluid nature of focus group discussions may require occasional deviations from the planned order. Allowing conversations to flow naturally can lead to richer insights and prevent disruptions that might hinder participant engagement. A flexible approach enables researchers to capture more authentic responses while maintaining the overall objectives of the discussion.

Recruiting the Participants

Recruiting participants for focus groups requires selecting individuals based on a well-defined sampling framework while ensuring their willingness to take part in the discussions. Although convenience sampling offers a practical approach, it must be balanced with the need to accurately represent the characteristics of the target population. In situations where access to participants is limited, snowball sampling can be particularly effective.

The process of snowball sampling begins with identifying a small group of initial participants who can then invite others from their personal networks. When reaching out to potential participants, it is important to use culturally sensitive language to encourage participation. In Iran, for example, the term "interview" may carry negative connotations, making phrases like "friendly discussion" a more inviting and reassuring alternative.

Maintaining the integrity of the research requires careful attention to the selection of participants. It is crucial to avoid recruiting individuals who may have a predetermined agenda or who are overly eager to participate, as their responses may not provide genuine insights. Ensuring that participants engage in the discussion with openness and authenticity helps preserve the reliability of the findings.

Conducting Interviews

The initial impression created by the moderator plays a crucial role in setting the tone for a successful focus group. Iranians tend to be reserved when interacting with strangers but become more open once they feel at ease. A skilled moderator must create a comfortable atmosphere while managing time effectively and ensuring that all key topics are thoroughly explored.

Keeping discussions on track requires strong time management skills. A moderator must be able to guide the conversation in a way that covers essential topics within the allocated time while handling any disruptions with sensitivity. Unexpected interruptions

such as emergency phone calls or late arrivals can disturb the flow of discussion, making it essential for the moderator to address them tactfully to maintain group cohesion.

Navigating group dynamics is another critical aspect of effective moderation. Some participants, such as experts, may dominate discussions, while others may exhibit hostility that disrupts the conversation. A moderator must employ strategies to ensure that all voices are heard and that the discussion remains balanced. Encouraging equitable participation helps create a productive and respectful environment where diverse perspectives can be shared.

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in Iranian culture, making it essential for the moderator to be attuned to body language and other subtle cues. By recognizing these signals, a moderator can probe deeper into participants' responses and gain a more accurate understanding of their perspectives.

Conducting focus group research in Iran requires careful attention to environmental, cultural, and interpersonal factors. By thoughtfully addressing these elements, researchers can improve the quality and validity of their data, leading to deeper and more meaningful insights.

DISCUSSION

This study provided crucial insights into the cultural and social dynamics of urban youth in Tehran, highlighting their negotiation between tradition and modernity. Highly educated but often facing unemployment, they turn to digital entrepreneurship and social media, frequently bypassing internet restrictions. Creative outlets such as fashion, music, and underground art scenes play a significant role, while cafés and private gatherings serve as social hubs. Politically aware, many push for greater freedoms, while others seek opportunities abroad. Balancing cultural heritage with global influences, they redefine identity where self-expression is both an act of defiance and a symbol of hope. As such, young generation in Iran are regarded as a distinctive social group who claim to have their own specific norms, values and unique experiences of living in Iran (Matin, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

This study underscored the need to refine traditional focus group methodologies to accommodate the unique characteristics of Iranian youth. These findings contribute to the limited use of qualitative research methods in Iranian social sciences, emphasizing the role of context-specific factors in shaping group dynamics, identity formation, and social interactions.

Iran's cultural and social context significantly influences focus group dynamics. Gender and age play critical roles, with male and female participants exhibiting discomfort in mixed-gender settings due to ingrained norms and state-imposed restrictions. A generational divide was also observed, where individuals aged 25-29 struggled to relate to both younger and older cohorts, reflecting rapid social change and globalization's impact on identity markers.

Socioeconomic status affects participation, with income levels influencing confidence in discussions. Tehran's stark economic divide is evident in focus group interactions, where individuals from higher-income backgrounds often dominated, while those from lower-income areas were more reserved. Additionally, religious and ethnic backgrounds shape social interactions. While Shia Islam remains dominant, younger Iranians increasingly embrace inclusivity toward religious minorities, indicating shifting societal attitudes.

The setting of focus groups also plays a crucial role. Informal, home-like environments facilitated more open discussions compared to institutional settings, which were associated with surveillance. The cultural significance of hospitality in Iran further enhanced the effectiveness of home-based discussions, fostering genuine dialogue.

The moderator's role was essential in ensuring balanced participation and reducing social barriers. Moderators with demographic similarities to participants were more effective in facilitating discussions. A flexible interview guide accommodating linguistic and cultural nuances proved beneficial, as rigidly structured questions often hindered spontaneous responses.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The sample was restricted to urban Tehran, limiting generalizability to other Iranian regions, particularly rural areas. The researcher's dual insider-outsider perspective, while offering a unique 'emic-etic balance' (Galperin et al., 2022), may have introduced biases. Additionally, the focus on a specific age group (25-29 years) limits broader applicability. Future research should explore focus group dynamics across different Iranian regions and age groups to better understand generational shifts in identity and social behaviour. Investigating the impact of digital and social media on group interactions would also be valuable, given the growing influence of global digital culture.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complexities of conducting focus group research in Iran, particularly among urban youth. The findings emphasize the importance of considering sociocultural contexts, as cultural norms and state-imposed restrictions significantly influence group dynamics and data quality. By contributing to the limited qualitative research literature in Iran, this study provides practical insights for researchers exploring Iranian youth's lived experiences and cultural identities. Given the Islamic regime's restrictive foreign policies, qualitative methodologies such as focus groups are increasingly crucial in Iran's predominantly positivist social sciences. These methods offer valuable insights into cultural and societal dimensions that quantitative approaches may overlook. Researchers must adapt their methodologies to fit Iran's social and cultural settings to enhance data validity and mitigate fieldwork challenges. This paper serves as a guide for novice Iranian researchers and non-native researchers conducting focus group studies in Iran, advocating for greater methodological adaptability. It underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in research training programs and encourages the broader adoption of qualitative methods within Iranian social sciences. Future research should build on these findings, further refining context-sensitive qualitative strategies and expanding methodological diversity in Iranian research.

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