



## **A Study of the Challenging Sociocultural Variables Affecting EFL Learners' Identity in an Iranian Context**

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### **Abstract**

The present research probed the sociocultural challenging variables which may affect EFL learners' identity formation during their language studies in an Iranian context. A thorough analysis of the literature encompassing EFL teachers' opinions and EFL coursebook analyses was performed to develop a comprehensive view of the recognized sociocultural domains and variables. Furthermore, an open-ended questionnaire was designed and distributed among 50 adolescent male and female EFL learners at the age range of 13-21 years (M=16) as Erickson's identity confusion stage to identify the newest sociocultural challenging variables in the present Iranian context. The result of the research led to compilation of a Sociocultural Variables Inventory presenting an extended range of variables operating in the context of Iranian EFL learners' identity formation. The inventory could act as a basis for research in the fields of TEFL, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and further interdisciplinary research.

**Keywords:** identity formation, sociocultural variables, language learning, language hegemony, identity diffusion

## **Introduction**

Globalization has resulted in widespread changes in communicative discourse and media technologies, stretching the relations of power and communication across the globe and re-composing social relationships. Nowadays people need to resort to English as the lingua franca, which may in turn result in the loss or marginalization of various national and local languages (Mohammadi, 1997). Krauss (1991, as cited in Fishman, 1999) demonstrated this concern by saying “linguists are convinced that the large majority of languages spoken in the world today should be classified as endangered; there is the fear that half of them will extinct within 100 years” (Krauss 1991, as cited in Fishman, 1999, p. 182).

Research has demonstrated that the surge towards learning English as the established international language may lead to the spread of a huge part of the American and Western culture into the world (Ghahhari, 2013). It may, on one hand, have the positive effect of increasing cultural awareness and quotient and, on the other hand, encompass negative points such as alienation, acculturation, and identity transformation of language learners (Campbell, 1997, as cited in Elmes, 2013). In addition, Berry (2001) stated that “virtually every behavior in a person’s repertoire is a candidate for change following one’s involvement with other cultures” (Berry, 2001, p. 621). By the same token, Brown (2007) believed that along with learning a second language, a second identity is also internalized where a new culture contact may change the learner’s worldview, self-identity, and ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and communicating.

### **Identity and Identity Formation**

Danielewicz (2001) defined identity as how individuals understand who they are and who they think others are. This concept of subjectivity or self is a reflection of one's relationship with the external environment and is considered to be dynamic, multiple, fluid, and constructed during interactions between individuals and the society (Gu, 2010). It is argued that identities are orienting; they provide a meaning-creative lens that focuses one’s attention on some and not all features of the context and make up one’s self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2012).

Any identity individuals might develop throughout their life results from a developmental process that happens within a cultural context. In other words, people acquire identities over time, through their interactions with the social groups and organizations around them (Ryan & Deci, 2012). Individuals engage in ongoing identity-formation processes by using their available cultural resources and adding to their self-understanding; which results in directing their behavior (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998).

### **Sociocultural Identity**

People and communities may enjoy different and multiple identities: age, gender, class, nationality, and racial identities, on one hand, and religious, political, social, cultural, and language identities, on the other. The interrelation of these identities creates individual or group characteristics (Rassokha, 2010).

A major type of identity is *sociocultural identity* which is a combination of social and cultural identities. According to Norton (2006) identity is shaped socioculturally and nowadays there's more similarity between social and cultural identities. Therefore, a look at the identity from a sociocultural perspective seems more comprehensive. Norton (2006) added that sociocultural identity as an integrated form of social and cultural identities refers to how individuals build relationships with the social world as a combination of family, school, workplace, and so on; and also, how this relationship is built between individuals and certain ethnic group members sharing histories, languages, and world perspectives.

Sociocultural identity is a combination of self-related beliefs and attitudes which individuals possess in relation to their membership in certain culture groups (Berry, 2001). These attitudes step up when they are in contact with other, sometimes different, cultures and change people's values and the way they dress, eat, and greet, through leaving aside, intentionally or unintentionally, one way of life and replacing it with another (Berry, 2001).

Since the way people think about themselves is constructed bi-dimensionally, once through identifying with their heritage and ethno-cultural group and then with the larger or dominant society, the pace and extent of individuals change is decided by the degree of cultural maintenance in individuals' own group, which in turn has connections with

demographic, economic, and political condition of the groups which are in contact (Berry, 2001).

### Types and Domains of Sociocultural Identity

Bhugra et al. (1999) named issues such as religion, learned rituals, attitudes to the family, leisure activities, and rites of passages, food, and language as the major concepts of cultural identity. In addition, Hortobágyi (2009) proposed seven different categories for sociocultural identity which are presented in Figure 1.

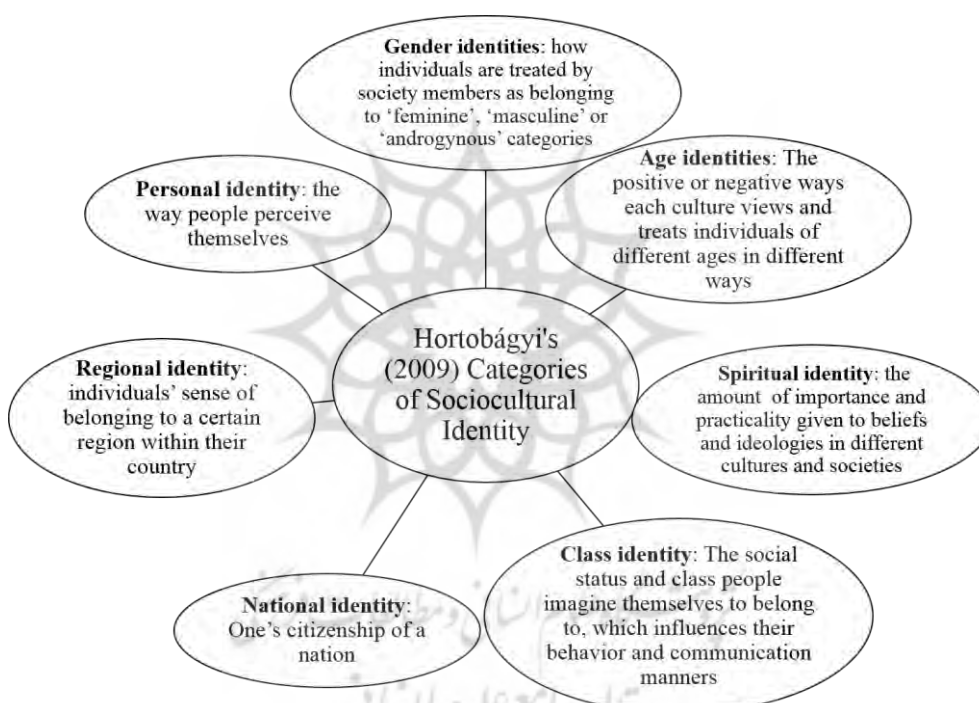


Figure 1. Hortobágyi (2009) Categories of Sociocultural Identity

In addition to types of sociocultural identity proposed in the literature, there has also been various domains identified to be challenging or generally affecting the individuals' sociocultural identity. Some of the most frequent variables found are presented in Figure 2.

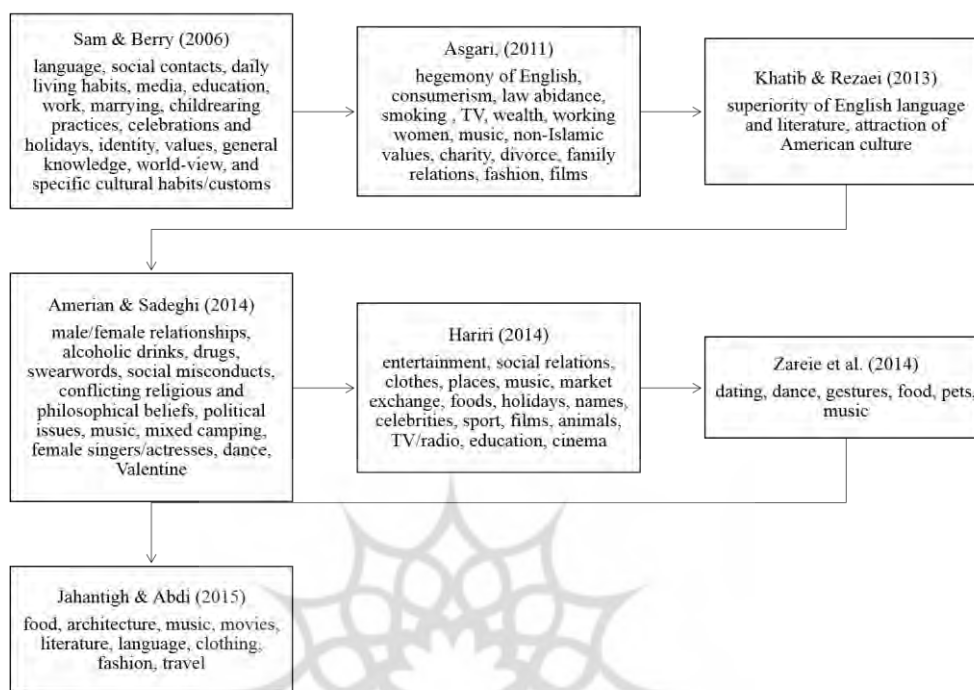


Figure 2. Main Literature on Sociocultural Identity Challenging Variables

### Sociocultural Identity and Language Learning

Bakhtin (1981), as one of the pioneers of identity studies, maintained that language is a complex social practice and language learners show different reactions, based on their identities, to the voices which are within the utterances as well as the discourses of others. Furthermore, from a sociocultural perspective, learning occurs through participation in social activities which are part of larger cultural communities where changes in participation in them support development (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003, as cited in Collett, 2014).

Researchers have argued about the influence of L2 learning on learners' identities (e.g., Norton, 1995; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Belz, 2002; Block, 2007) and that establishing contact with an L2 for a lengthy period of time and its apparently different cultural setting results in irreversible destabilization of the individual's sense of self (Block, 2007). Some English language learners are likely to behave according to the foreign language cultural values and norms and acquire a new identity which may lead to loss of their own cultural values, norms and particularly cultural identity (Pishghadam & Navari, 2009). Sociocultural identities are not

predetermined and dictated constructs which could be possessed by EFL teachers and learners with no prospect of change, but they are “co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language” (Duff & Uchida, 1997, p. 452).

### **Sociocultural Identity and Iranian EFL context**

The English language plays a significant role in the Iranian sociocultural context. In the past few years, there has been a groundswell in ELT institutions all over the country which provide learners with various language learning materials. Such materials generally look at the world through the cultural lens of their developers and designers and perform a crucial role in the process of education and identity construction (Aliakbari, 2004). In addition, Pishghadam and Sadeghi-Ordoubody (2011) highlighted the significance of the role EFL teachers and textbooks play in forming the EFL learners' worldview regarding their home and target language and culture and where to stand within this continuum. They also cited Canagarajah (1999) who accused EFL teachers “of imposing a foreign value system on their learners at the cost of bringing them a common language” (Pishghadam & Sadeghi-Ordoubody, p. 148).

Research on sociocultural variables EFL learners deal with during their studies in the Iranian context has been rare. EFL learners themselves have scarcely been directly involved in the process of factor derivation and data collection, and have mostly been consulted after the factors had been derived from literature. This has put the bulk of the task on the shoulders of field experts in both deriving the factors and judging their fitness. Even in the case of direct involvement, the items EFL learners encountered were not comprehensive enough to cover all areas related to their learning environment, and were mostly related to the EFL material and textbooks.

Another significant point is the specific age range of the EFL learners under study. Not much research has focused on the factors involved in the identity formation process of the 13-21 years old adolescents which are considered to be in the most delicate process of identity development which is identity confusion (Erickson, 1977; Eysenck, 2004) where in order to move from childhood to adulthood, individuals need to establish their identity (Brogan, 2009). Furthermore, as Mirsardou, Kavousi and Ebrahimzadeh (2008) stated, it cannot be taken for granted that identities would be inherited by the newer generation and not reconstructed based on their present experiences. This highlights the importance of newer studies on factors affecting identity formation of younger generations. Studying these factors anew will demonstrate the possible presence of certain features

in the EFL learners' learning environment that may promote or reduce a commitment to national and sociocultural roles.

Therefore, the present research tried to find out in depth and detail the sociocultural variables involved in identity formation of Iranian adolescent EFL learners, both from the related literature and their own viewpoints to gain firsthand information on the variables engaging their minds during their English language studies. The attempt was to see what similarities, differences, highlights, likes or dislikes is out there that makes learning English a sweet or bitter challenge for them.

Taking into account the objectives of the research, the researchers proposed the following research question:

**RQ1:** What are the sociocultural variables affecting the identity of Iranian EFL learners?

## Method

### Participants

In order to identify sociocultural variables affecting the identity of Iranian EFL learners, 50 EFL learners within age range of 13-21 were selected based on convenient sampling to respond to a researcher-made questionnaire consisting of 10 open-ended items. The participants included 31 males and 19 females studying English in different language institutes in Tehran. The language proficiency of the respondents lay between elementary and advanced, with the majority studying in elementary levels (13 advanced, 4 upper-intermediate, 11 intermediate, and 22 elementary students). In addition, five experts in the field of TEFL, sociology and cultural studies were consulted for their judgments on content validity of the questionnaire, who gave their suggestions on the reduction, addition, or rewording of some items in the item pool before the final questionnaire. The choice of EFL learners' age range was relevant to the adolescence age-range proposed by both Erikson (1977) and Eysenck (2004), which is considered the stage of identity confusion in Erickson's classification (1977).

### Instruments

To have an update on the challenging sociocultural variables that Iranian EFL learners face while learning English as a foreign language, and also to derive the items directly from the learners themselves, the researchers made a 10-item open-ended Persian language questionnaire out of an item pool made on the basis of variables found in existing literature (Figure 2). The

content validity of the questionnaire was determined by five experts mentioned earlier who made some suggestions regarding suitability, reduction or addition of some items. The choice of Persian rather than English language for the questionnaire was to ensure clarity of the items and equal level of understanding for all the participants who had different levels of English proficiency. The English translation summary of the questionnaire items is presented in Table 1. The original Persian questionnaire is given in the Appendix.

Table 1

*English Translation of Questionnaire Items*

(1) Reasons for EFL attraction
(2) Reasons for dislike towards EFL
(3) Cultural similarities
(4) Cultural differences
(5) Typical attractive behaviors of EFL teachers & peers
(6) Typical annoying behaviors of EFL teachers & peers
(7) Positive or negative connotations of EFL
(8) Thematic & behavioral attractions in English books & movies
(9) Personality type attractions in English books & movies
(10) Reasons for the need to learn English

As can be seen in Table 1, there was an attempt to include items in a way that important social and cultural aspects of learning English confronted by learners be addressed. Furthermore, the items were reduced to 10 to avoid a lengthy questionnaire and preserve its face validity.

**Procedure**

After thorough analysis of the existing literature (Figure 2), some sociocultural challenging variables were found to be of importance for identity formation of the learners (Table 2). The main themes found in Table 2 were then chosen to be used in the construction of the open-ended questionnaire. An item pool was created based on the variables found which were given to experts for their opinion. The suggestions made led to the final 10-items questionnaire which was distributed among the selected EFL



learners. The participants were also asked to provide their age, gender and English proficiency level within the same questionnaire.

A detailed analysis of the sociocultural variables revealed through the participants' responses to the questionnaire resulted in distinguishing some similar and some new challenging variables (Table 3). The combination of the results of the literature and the questionnaire (Tables 2 & 3) led the researchers towards the development of the Sociocultural Variables Inventory or SVI (Table 4) encompassing 17 main sociocultural domains and their subcategories which may affect the identity of the EFL learners.

### **Results**

The literature studied (Figure 2) which was a combination of studies on EFL coursebooks and EFL teachers' opinions about sociocultural challenging variables showed a total of 31 challenging variables. These are all presented in Table 2.



Table 2  
Sociocultural Variables

NO	Sociocultural Variables	Subcategories
1	Alcoholic Drinks	Wine / beer
2	Architecture	
3	Civilization	
4	Clothing	Tie / fashion / make up
5	Dance	
6	Entertainment	Games/ restaurants/Gym
7	Equality Of Sexes	Female singers/actresses/ working women
8	Family Relationships	Independence from parents
9	Food	Pork / certain forbidden sea food
10	Literature	Writers / stories & novels/ illustrations
11	Lottery	Chance / gambling/cards
12	M/F Relationships	Boyfriend/girlfriend/love/falling in love/ dating/ kissing/ gay/lesbian
13	Marriage Customs	Divorce
14	Mixed Parties	
15	Music	
16	Naming	
17	National Identity	
18	Occasions	Christmas / Nourouz/ Valentine
19	Pets	
20	Physiological Health	Mentioning sexual organs
21	Political Positions	
22	Religiosity	Religious deeds & ceremonies/ hijab/ prayer/ black dress / charity
23	Scholars & Celebrities	
24	Smoking & Drugs	
25	Social Misconducts	Dirty/impolite words/stealing
26	EL Superiority	Accents / alphabet/immigration
27	TV & Movies	Actor/actresses /controversial directors
28	Travelling	
29	Code-Switching	
30	Wealth	
31	Western Gestures	

The results of each item in the researcher-made questionnaire were analyzed in detail and in total a categorical presentation of the prototypical variables was derived from all the responses. These are presented in detail in Table 3. The variables found are presented in the order of significance found. The number of cases shows the number of times the variable has been repeated in the responded questionnaires. Reference by individuals shows the number of participants who mentioned the variable.

Table 3  
Sociolinguistic Variables Found in the Open-Ended Questionnaire

No	Sociolinguistic Variable	Total Cases	1st Subcategories	2nd Subcategories	Cases	Reference by individuals	Frequency
1	English as a language and learning it	402	Features related to learning the language	Similarities & differences between L1 & L2	123	33	66%
				Learning procedures	49	20	40%
			Features related to language itself	phonological, grammatical & lexical aesthetics	87	29	58%
				phonological, grammatical & lexical inaesthetics	148	37	74%
2	Teachers	204	Personality & Appearance	Appearance, covering, makeup	11	5	10%
				happiness & positive energy	17	15	30%
			Manners	Negative body language	11	7	14%
				Unprofessional behaviors	7	3	6%
				unattractiveness	17	15	30%
				Insulting & bad manners	11	7	14%
				Lack of good instructors	25	20	40%
				accents	11	7	14%
			Literacy & Mastery	Dominance on the lesson	11	7	14%
				Use of L1	11	10	20%
				Attempt in adding to the student's body of vocabulary	11	7	14%
				Speaking fast without caring for others to understand	12	12	24%
				Being selective in interaction choices	7	7	14%
				Class management	Too much assignments	20	7
Closeness to foreign culture	11	7	14%				
Using pictures, films, and entertainments	11	7	14%				

3	The language of media, movies & and actors, and animation	165	—	—	165	50	100%
			freedom	of action	10	8	16%
			freedom	Unlimited male/female relationship	45	40	80%
				Freedom in choosing hijab	11	8	16%
				Coexistence with animals	10	10	20%
			Religious rules	belief in God and rejection of bad things	16	10	20%
4	A taste of politics & religion	162		mentioning church & non-Islamic materials	5	4	8%
				British exploitation	6	6	12%
				Domestic deficiencies	5	5	10%
				Homeland love	6	3	6%
			politics	Interest in kings & queens	7	5	10%
				Relationship with the world	34	30	60%
				immigration	11	11	22%
				Increasing cultural intelligence	7	7	14%
				Authentic characters	1	1	2%
			Scholastic	Philosophical characters	3	2	4%
				Police officers	26	26	52%
				Teachers	7	3	6%
5	Favorite movies personalities	159		Strong characters	2	1	2%
			Positive figures				
				Kids	17	15	30%
				Mothers	8	8	16%
				Powerful, pretty & slim women	12	12	24%
				Emotional	11	11	22%

			characters			
			Protagonists	5	4	8%
			Those who use vulgar language	13	12	24%
			Gang of fighters	14	12	24%
			Thieves	12	12	24%
6	The language of science & technology & advancement	126	Science, IT & Technology	104	43	86%
			New opportunities for progress	22	15	30%
7	Books, stories & articles	104	Common fables and stories	14	10	20%
			Attractive pictures	11	7	14%
			Nice writing methods	9	6	12%
			Language of scientific & interesting books & articles	70	34	68%
8	Communication with the world	80	International language	43	48	96%
			Interest to be a member of lingua franca	37	40	80%
9	New & different experience	78	Novelty	49	17	34%
			Difference	28	10	20%
10	Peers	54	Boasting and Mockery	14	14	28%
			Unprofessional behavior	15	12	24%
			Use of a common L	11	8	16%
			Mutual interaction	14	12	24%
11	Entertainment	48	Sports and sportsmen	24	20	40%
			games	17	17	34%
			travelling	7	7	14%
			Hair style	4	4	8%

12	Family relationship	13	Family respect	-----	11	9	18%
			Social gap between Parents & children	-----	2	2	4%
13	Different behaviors	10	-----	-----	-----	7	14%
14	Peer friendship	6	-----	-----	-----	4	8%
15	Hair style	4	-----	-----	-----	4	8%

The results of the questionnaire analysis represented in Table 3 showed that 15 main sociolinguistic challenging domains and their subcategories are at work for Iranian EFL learners' identity formation. In addition, the comparison between literature and questionnaire analyses showed many shared variables; thus, in order to come up with the final SVI the main shared categories were unified. Table 4 demonstrates the results. The variables are presented in the alphabetical order.

Table 4  
*Domains and Sub-domains of Sociocultural Variables Inventory*

NO	Main Variable	Subcategories
1	Clothing & appearance	tie, fashion, make up, hair style
2	Cultural Norms	dirty/impolite words, smoking & drugs, pets, western gestures, abnormal behaviors, foreign culture imitation, mentioning genital organs
3	English Instructors & Peers	friendships, not literate enough, nice appearance, make-up, nice accents, striving, happy face, positive energy, frowning, not good with religious students, bad behavior, verbal abuse, show off, univocal
4	Entertainment	games, restaurants, mixed parties, gym, music, dance, peer gatherings, sports, pictures, humor
5	Family Relationships	adolescent independence, fragile respects, happy family gatherings, generation gaps
6	Food & Drinks	alcoholic drinks, pork, and certain forbidden sea food
7	Gender Equality	female singers/actresses, working women
8	Literature	writers, stories & novels, illustrations, study habits, shared fables and proverbs, picture books, Manga, writing style, nice papers
9	Male/Females Relationships	boyfriend/girlfriend, dating, love/falling in love, kissing, homo/trans-sexual, marriage customs, divorce,
10	Media , TV & Movies	actor/actresses, politically/religiously problematic directors, censorship, animations, films, TV series, nostalgic movies, news media
11	Occasions	Christmas, Nourouz, Valentine, Muharram, Ramadan, Halloween
12	Politics	national identity, homeland love, British colonialism, American imperialism, sanctions, kings and queens, freedom of speech
13	Religiosity	religious deeds, Hijab, prayer, charity, honesty, lottery, gambling, cards, disrespect to god and prophets, religious imposition, naming

14	Scholars Celebrities	&	actors and actresses, artists, slim capable women figures, nicely behaving gentlemen, educated knowledgeable people, police and athlete figures, positive personalities
15	Source Information Progress	Of &	education, all good things there is; language of science, computer & internet, mental exercise
16	Superiority Of EL		alphabet, nice accent, positive memories, new chances, English words in daily talk, international language, language of communication; meeting new people, civilization, architecture, wealth
17	Travel Immigration	&	forbidden cities, better places to live

Items 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, in Table 3 were very much similar to items 27, 23, 6, 10, 31 in Table 2 respectively. Therefore, these items were directly included in the final SVI with the headings of media, TV and movies, scholars and celebrities, literature and entertainment. Items 13 and 31 in the two tables which were related to the behaviors of English speakers were categorized under the heading of cultural norms (item 2, Table 4) which also covers other areas related to culture specific factors.

In addition to total similarity between the four items above, some overlap was found between items in the two tables. For instance, item 1 in Table 3 which refers to the features of English language, the subcategory of phonological, grammatical and lexical aesthetics is partly similar to item 26 in Table 2 in that the aesthetics of the accents and alphabet of English language have been taken into account. However, there is no total similarity between the two items in that ‘immigration’ included in item 26 (Table 2) is considered as a taste of politics in Table 3 (item 4, subcategory of politics).

The questionnaire analysis (Table 3) revealed that English Language and its learning is the most frequently repeated sociolinguistic variable pointed out by EFL learners, either in praise or dispraise. As stated earlier, this factor was also partly derived from literature (Table 2) which enhances the selection of this variable in the SVI (Table 4, item 16).

Another significant overlap seen is between item 14 in Table 3 and items 4 in Table 2 in that hair style has been included under the heading of clothing. This item was included in the final SVI under the same heading ‘clothing’ (Table 4, variable 1) because the latter covers a bigger area. In addition, item 28 in Table 2 has been acknowledged by EFL learners in the questionnaire but has been categorized under the heading of ‘entertainment’

in Table 2. In the final SVI, however, together with ‘immigration’, previously under a separate category (item 26 in Table 2), stands as a distinct item (Table 4, variable 17). Furthermore, the subcategories of item 4 in Table 3 have some overlap with items 17, 21 and 22 in Table 2 and due to the excess of subcategories found in literature analysis (Table 2), these have been separately headed in SVI as ‘politics’ and ‘religiosity’. The same item 4 in Table 3 (the first in the second subcategories) has another overlap with item 12 in Table 2, both referring (partly) to unlimited relationships between males and females. Due to the broad nature of the heading ‘male/female relationships’, these were included under the same domain in the SVI.

Items 12 and 8 in Tables 3 and 2 respectively have been categorized differently, that is, in Table 3 family relationship covers areas of family respect and social gap between parents and children but in Table 2, this has been referred to as independence from parents.

In addition to common factors or domains found in both stages (literature review and questionnaire analysis), there were some factors found in the former that were not distinguished in the latter and vice versa. The literature review revealed 16 factors that were distinguished among challenging sociocultural variables in an EFL learning context. These include items 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 24, 29, and 30 in Table 2 which were not discovered by EFL learners in the questionnaire analysis. These were included in the final SVI either as a separate factor or under another major domain (e.g., items 1 & 9 as subcategories of item 6 in Table 4; items 2 & 3 as subcategories of item 16 in Table 4).

Similarly, there were factors pointed out by EFL learners in the sample studied by the questionnaire in the present research that were not seen previously in the literature. These factors include items 2, 6, 8, and 10 in Table 3 related to EFL teachers, technology, communication and peers respectively.

As can be seen in Table 3, the newly found factor ‘teacher’ (item 2) stands as the second top factor distinguished by respondents (with a reference case of 204). The other factor ‘peers’ was also found to be of significance (with 54 reference cases) and due to the close nature of the teachers and peers-being both players in the EFL contexts- they were considered as an



integrated factor in the final SVI (Table 4, item 3). The other two factors (items 6 and 8 in Table 3) were not previously found of importance in the literature, but were given significance in the questionnaire with 126 and 80 reference cases (above 86% and 96% respectively). The items were then, either put as a separate category (Table 4, item 15) or included within a bigger domain (Table 4, item 16). The final SVI thus contains 17 main categories, each with various subcategories related to the main heading. The basis for the categorization was the differences, similarities, and overlaps found between Tables 2 and 3.

### **Discussion**

Finding similar variables in the two stages of data collection shows that they are of utmost importance for EFL learners' identity formation. Highlighting TV and Movies as a challenging variable attests to Lule's (2013) assumption that American media industry influences people's culture as its consumers. It not only affects individuals' cultures who resort to them as an entertaining source but, reflecting the true American life style, it also introduces them a particular way of life (Lule, 2013). In other words, since the audience adopts the attitudes and styles of the movie characters they watch, film industry can shape cultural attitudes and customs (Lule, 2013).

Same destiny lays there for the challenging effect of celebrities, especially those within the media industry who are always at the center of attention in the real world. The stereotypical figures of males and females in the movies manipulate adolescents' self-identity and the accepted image of an ideal and attractive body type (Jain, Lata, Goyal, Khandelwal, & Jaine, 2015). If they were previously seen just as a character in the film with a particular fashion and bodily attraction, they now exert influence more for their life style, relationships, custom and traditions, health and education (Jain et al., 2015). The respondents' reception of movies, their attention to positive and negative characters, and the huge number of foreign films available online and offline "lead us to argue that celebrities whether from films, modeling or advertising, leave an indelible imprint on our social and cultural values" (Jain et al., 2015, p. 310).

English literature, including novels, storybooks, poetry, and any literary or non-literary text, has been demonstrated as an important variable affecting identity construction and reconstruction (e.g., Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, &

Peterson, 2009; Fialho, 2012). It is believed that literature "can promote self-reflection, increase self-awareness and even change or expand people's sense of self" (Brokerhof et al., 2019; p. 3). Reading books is reported to have caused a powerful self-change and shifts in beliefs and self-images of young people (Brokerhof et al., 2019). Similarly, EFL textbooks presented with high quality papers and graphics provide learners with materials designed out of the cultural lens of their authors and perform a crucial role in the process of identity construction (Aliakbari, 2004).

Another important outcome of the research was deriving various subcategories related to the challenging variable of entertainment, among which the effect of online video games stood high. The evolution of video games to online version in recent years has attracted players from all ages and genders to gaming industry and has created newer ways of social communication (Shaw, 2010; Lule, 2013). They are considered cultural artifacts (Steinkuehler, 2006) and are so popular and widespread that they stand as the second online activity after the streaming videos (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020), and in this way they change world's technology, art, learning methods, and individuals' expectations from the world (Copeland, 2000). In fact, the scope of influence of video games exceeds other forms of media, and makes it difficult to tell which one is now a major learning source welcomed by younger generations: textbooks or video games (Greenfield, 2004).

For these reasons, it can be concluded that personal and cultural identities are at the danger of being (re)shaped by online games where young people create and construct new identities for themselves by playing in an online environment without being known by their real world identities that might be far from that they create in the cyberspace (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Individuals tend to create new identities by showing different selves to specific audiences and playing different roles in each (Liu, 2013).

Additionally, importance was given to English by respondents, as a language in the pure sense of the word and also as a language to be learned. This shows the huge interest of Iranian adolescent EFL learners in English language and communication through it in order to be considered a member of lingua franca. The importance of this finding is due to the fact that

language is connected to one's identity and is a medium of reminding and re-establishing the cultural heritage within groups of individuals (Villegas-Torres & Mora-Pablo, 2018). Speakers of languages have a sense of cohesion and unity provided by it, which contributes to nationalist identity formation. Therefore, the interest shown by Iranian adolescent EFL learners in English language not only threatens their personal and social identity, but also their national identity. The imagined identity assumed from the imagined community created in the EFL classrooms, and the consequent learner investment in the English as the target language (Norton, 2010), increases the concern over Westernization or Americanization of Iranian adolescent EFL learners that may happen through the spread of global English and spreading American culture and values, so as to facilitate American global hegemony and domination (Barghouthi, 2008).

Additionally, the significant role played by teachers and peers in learners' identity formation was prominent, which was compatible with the findings of others such as Canagarajah (1999) and Pishghadam and Sadeghi-Ordoubody (2011). Admittedly, sociocultural identities are changeable constructs in an EFL context with teachers and students at the center of change, where each of them acts in co-constructing, negotiating, and transforming the other in an ongoing basis through language (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Moreover, as Vygotsky (1978) stated, influence of external factors (such as EFL teachers, peers, materials, class) cognitively changes and shapes individuals' interpretation, perceptions, and meaning of the world ; their sociocultural identity may be a combination of sociocultural interactive origins and environmental contexts that shape their sense of self and identity.

Besides, EFL learners considered technology as an important challenging variable in their studies, which in spite of looking as an innocent phenomenon, it has proved to be hazardous. Technology is not merely a machine conveying information, but rather a vehicle for transferring social and cultural loads for shaping societies (KOÇ, 2006), and therefore using foreign technologies may have grave consequences for individuals' way of life and culture. Therefore, there needs to be great care taken while using a technology regarding the way it is represented, the social identities

associated with it, its production and consumption, and the mechanisms regulating its distribution and use (Du-Gay et al, 1997).

As was demonstrated by the results of the study, EFL learners dealt with 17 main sociocultural challenging domains which could affect their identity formation during the course of learning English language. The variables found were all seemingly innocent and routine in individuals' daily life, but work in the benefit of identity change. Each variable opens a huge path towards identity reconstruction and makes EFL learning a sensitive and significant context. The Sociocultural Variables Inventory can serve as a basis for further research on TEFL, sociolinguistics, and cultural, religious, political and gender studies. Having the variables at hand helps EFL and non-EFL teachers to prioritize issues to be taught in the classroom and adopt methods that will pose the least challenges for their classes and pupils. SVI also helps EFL learners become aware of the elements that may affect their personality while learning English and systematize their learning based on their motivations and goals they pursue.

Another implication of the research can be for the top educational policy makers regarding the identity changing variables that impact adolescents and need extra care and emphasis. It can help them in designing domestic EFL textbooks that have less identity challenging issues, or to supervise the selection of foreign materials to be used in EFL institutes throughout the country.

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### Appendix

- زبان آموز عزیز، سلام!  
 لطفاً پس از پر کردن فرم زیر نظرات خود را نسبت به موارد خواسته شده بیان کنید.
- جنسیت: \_\_\_\_\_ ن \_\_\_\_\_ مرد زن: \_\_\_\_\_ سطح زبان: Beginner\_\_\_\_, Elementary\_\_\_\_, Intermediate\_\_\_\_, Advanced\_\_\_\_
- 1- یادگیری زبان انگلیسی به دلایل زیر جذاب و آسان است:  
 الف.....  
 ب.....  
 ج.....  
 د.....
- 2- یادگیری زبان انگلیسی به دلایل زیر آزاردهنده و دشوار است:  
 الف.....  
 ب.....  
 ج.....  
 د.....
- 3- هنگام یادگیری زبان انگلیسی در این موارد نسبت به فرهنگ خود احساس شباهت می‌کنم:  
 الف.....  
 ب.....  
 ج.....  
 د.....
- 4- هنگام یادگیری زبان انگلیسی در این موارد نسبت به فرهنگ خود احساس تفاوت می‌کنم:  
 الف.....  
 ب.....  
 ج.....  
 د.....
- 5- این رفتارهای ظاهری و ارتباطی مدرسان زبان انگلیسی و زبان‌آموزان برایم جذابیت دارد:  
 الف.....  
 ب.....  
 ج.....  
 د.....

6- این رفتارهای ظاهری و ارتباطی مدرسان زبان انگلیسی و زبان آموزان برایم آزردهنده است:  
 لالف.....

لا.....

ج.....

لا.....

7- لا لا گیسلا برای ملا یادآور لالام (مثلا یا منفی) زیر لا لا:

ا لا.....

ب.....

ج.....

د.....

8- لانگام تماشای فیلاها و مطالعه کتا لاهای لانگلیسی لالا لات و رفتارها لالا لالا برای ملا  
 جذبالا دارند:

الف.....

ب.....

ج.....

د.....

9- لانگام تماشای فیلا لا و مطالعه لابها لالا لایی شخصیت های زیر برالا من جذاب هس لا:  
 لالف.....

لا.....

ج.....

لا.....

10- بلالیری زبان انگلیسی را به دلایل زیر لازم می دانم:

الف.....

ب.....

ج.....

د.....

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