



## Iranian Shiite Cultural Identity Transformation in Manila as a Catholic-Dominant Society

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 22 February 2026 Revised: 11 May 2026 Accepted: 16 June 2026 Online: 24 June 2026</p>	<p>This study aims to explore the transformation of identity among Iranian Shiites living in Manila as a predominantly Catholic society. A qualitative approach was adopted using the Grounded Theory framework, in which data collection methods were employed iteratively as part of the constant comparative analysis. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and the researcher's lived experience. In addition, secondary literature on identity, migration, religion, and Iranian and Filipino cultural traditions was used. The findings revealed that although Shiite religious identity remains a reference point, it is no longer perceived as the central axis of self-definition in the diasporic context. Different causal, contextual, and intervening conditions such as cultural dissonance, religious minority status, and social adaptation pressures can play a significant role in creating identity transformations. Most participants indicated a degree of acceptance toward change. However, fewer number of them adopted resistance or withdrawal.</p>
<p><b>KEYWORDS</b></p> <p>Catholicism Identity Transformation Religious Identity Shiite Islam</p>	

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## **1. Introduction**

Identity is a complex and evolving concept which is influenced by various factors such as time, space, and globalization. According to Buckingham (2008) identity can be defined as a multifaceted and ambiguous term that plays a vital role in self-awareness and social relations. Similarly, Jenkins (2008) and Correa (2012) emphasized on the dynamic nature of the identity which is continuously shaped by historical and personal experiences. Brah (1996) further highlighted identity's fluidity across varying contexts which implies that identity should be understood as an ongoing process of self-understanding rather than a fixed attribute.

In multicultural societies like the Philippines, and particularly in its capital Manila, the process of shaping and understanding identity becomes especially complex. Thasleema and Mohamad Mohideen (2016) stated that migrants bring with them diverse national identities, cultural norms, worldviews, and religious values, which they often seek to maintain despite pressures toward assimilation. Multicultural environments which are characterized by the coexistence of different cultures, religions, and languages presents many challenges and opportunities for identity formation. Manila, as a historic crossroads of cultural, religious, and economic exchange can exemplify this complexity due to its mosaic of ethnicities and multi-religious composition including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and others.

Globalization has increased social interactions all over the world. It connects distant places and affects how people understand themselves and others (Alavi, 2014). At the local level, these global processes can shape social contexts and provide individuals with a broader global perspective (Alavi, 2014). Maintaining a coherent sense of self is increasingly challenging in such an interconnected world. It can be particularly difficult for immigrants from cultures with distinct religious, cultural, and normative frameworks compared to their host countries. Immigration can be seen as a growing global phenomenon. More than 244 million people are classified as immigrants worldwide (UN, 2016). Iranian migration has been extended to many countries including the United States, Europe, Australia, and the Persian Gulf states (Kinvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011).

Historically, Iranian migration to the Philippines was limited. However, this trend changed significantly in the mid-20th century. The presence of Filipino professionals in Iran and the availability of affordable, English-medium education began attracting Iranian students in the 1960s. The number of migrants has increased steadily since 1970s and beyond (Cabayan, 2012). Another reason which also facilitated permanent residency and social integration for some Iranians was intermarriage. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian immigration to the Philippines

accelerated due to some political, economic, and religious factors. This brought a Shiite community into contact with Manila's predominantly Catholic environment. For Iranian immigrants in the Philippines, understanding the identity transformation is crucial to comprehending their integration experiences. Many of them are young Shiite individuals from urban, upper- and middle-class families in Iran, primarily from Tehran. They often have formal educational qualifications and show a blend of Islamic and Western cultural influences. They face different identity negotiations in Manila's multicultural and multi-religious environment (Kinvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). This raises an important question about how Shiite Iranians stabilize or transform their religious identity while living in a Catholic city like Manila? This study aims to explore the processes of Iranian identity transformation within this multicultural and religiously pluralistic setting. Examining Iranian immigrants in the Philippines can offer valuable insights into how immigrants from culturally distinct backgrounds navigate identity challenges. The findings may inform community support efforts to promote mental health, cultural learning, and successful integration.

## **2. Literature Review**

Identity transformation has received much attention in social sciences, particularly in relation to immigrant populations. After the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian immigrants increased worldwide which resulted in a globally dispersed community. However, a common sense of Iranian nationality frequently continues to serve as a unifying basis for their collective identity (Ansari, 1988; Bozorgmehr et al., 1996; Malek, 2015). The studies on Iranians abroad have investigated issues such as identity, religion, and cultural adjustment. They have often focused on single-country contexts (Ahmadi, 2003; Mahdi, 2003). In Western contexts like Sweden where Iranians are regarded as the second-largest non-European group, cultural tensions are noticeable. In fact, Iran's collectivist and patriarchal society contrasts with Sweden's individualistic and egalitarian values (Hosseini-Kaladjahi & Kelly, 2012). Alavi (2014) noted that Iranian men often experience identity crises due to the lack of social status. However, women tend to integrate more effectively. Khosravi (2009) also stated how Iranian masculinity is challenged in Sweden's gender-equal environment and resulted in complicating male integration.

Developing a theoretical framework for such studies is essential since it guides research design, literature review, and methodology (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Iqbal, 2007). In studies on identity, this often requires drawing from multiple disciplines to reflect the complex and hybrid nature of identity across cultural contexts. Hybrid identities develop when individuals navigate different value systems and embody multiple cultural elements simultaneously. Identity can refer

to how individuals understand themselves which is shaped by past, present, and future experiences (Marcia, 1993). Ethnic identity can link heritage to aspirations (Weinreich, 1988). However, Jenkins (2008) and Oyserman et al. (2012) described identity through social interaction and personal traits. Individuals often have multiple identities across roles, features, and affiliations (Lopes, 2018). However, identity remains a complex and elusive construct (Fearon, 1999).

Since the 1980s, identity has become a main theme in the human and social sciences. The increasing focus was on how meanings, expectations, and sociopolitical factors form both individual and group identities (La Barbera, 2014). Immigration can lead to identity transformation. Therefore, it is essential to understand how immigrant youth form their sense of belonging within host societies. National narratives, language, religion, collective symbols, and whether the host context is inclusive or discriminatory significantly affect this process (Kayaalp, 2018). Given the complexity of identity, researchers must be engaged with a variety of theoretical frameworks. One prominent model is Social Identity Theory which is developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986). It claims that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group affiliations which leads to in-group favoritism and potential out-group bias (Jenkins, 2008; Bell et al., 2010; Harrison 2019). While relational demography has indicated that shared attributes like race and gender can have positive impacts on the group dynamics, immigration background remains underexplored (Dwertmann & Kunze, 2021).

Islamic identity can act as an important source of ego support and psychological integration. It provides the individuals with a sense of continuity and coherence amid at shifting social roles and historical changes (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2007; Alwin et al., 2006). This study is focused on the religious identity of Iranian Muslims in Manila in which identities are created by both socio-cultural and socio-psychological factors. Despite the fact that Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, the existing research on Muslim identity is primarily based on issues like gender roles, religious transmission, and identity politics, especially within Western contexts (Read, 2003; Marshall & Read, 2003; Barazangi, 1989; Walbridge, 1999; Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2005). However, little attention has been given to how Iranian Muslims construct their religious identities in Southeast Asia, such as in the Philippines. Recognizing the diversity within Islam and its local, regional, and global manifestations is vital for understanding identity formation in such contexts (Manger, 1993; Ramadan, 2003).

Shiite Islam, or Shia represents one of the two primary branches of Islam which distinguished by the belief that the Prophet Muhammad appointed his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, as his rightful successor at the event of Ghadir Khumm. However, Ali was denied

leadership due to the Saqifah incident, which led to the selection of Abu Bakr as caliph by a small group—an event accepted by Sunnis but rejected by Shias (Hysten, 2018; Triana, 2017). Shia Islam, particularly its largest sect, the Twelvers, venerates the Ahl al-Bayt (family of the Prophet) and believes that a divinely guided line of Imams—beginning with Ali and continuing through his descendants with Fatimah—holds both spiritual and political authority (Esposito, 2002). Central to Shia belief are five theological tenets: *tawhīd* (oneness of God), *‘adl* (divine justice), *nubūwah* (prophethood), *imāmah* (leadership by Imams), and *ma‘ād* (resurrection), which distinguish it from Sunni doctrine (Zulkifli, 2013). A defining historical moment in Shia identity is the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, Ali’s son, at Karbala in 680 CE, symbolizing resistance against tyranny and unjust rule (Gleave, 2004).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran elevated Shia Islam to the heart of national identity through the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, which merged Persian republican ideals with Shia religious authority. This doctrine granted the supreme leader, or Ayatollah, vast control over Iran’s political, judicial, and military institutions, making the state a theocratic republic (Pradana & Radityatama, 2019). Twelver Shia Islam was institutionalized as the state religion, embedding Shia theological values into the country’s political framework. Though figures like President Hassan Rouhani have led the executive branch, ultimate authority resides with the Ayatollah, especially during crises such as economic sanctions (Pradana & Radityatama, 2019). Iran’s governance structure reflects a collective identity that combines Persian cultural traditions with Shia Islamic values. The revolution also transformed Iran into a transnational center of Shia mobilization, resisting Western influence and promoting Eastern values (Ward, 2009; Esposito, 2002). Ultimately, Iran’s modern identity remains rooted in its Shia Islamic foundation, acknowledging ethnic diversity while asserting a theocratic model of governance.

The term *Catholic* has historically carried multiple meanings within Christianity. While it broadly denotes universality within the Christian tradition, it is most commonly associated today with the Roman Catholic Church as the largest Christian institution (Gaddis, 2005). Historically, various Christian traditions—including Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches—have also identified as Catholic in the sense of apostolic continuity and adherence to the Nicene Creed (Bettenson, 1967). In contemporary contexts, however, Catholicism often functions not only as a theological identity but also as a dominant socio-cultural marker, particularly in societies where it constitutes the religious majority, such as the Philippines. In Manila, Catholicism structures public rituals, moral norms, and social expectations, thereby forming a contrasting backdrop for non-Catholic minorities and shaping how religious difference is experienced and negotiated.

Within Shiism, identity has historically been shaped by experiences of marginalization and resistance. Central to Shiite collective identity is the symbolism of Karbala, which represents suffering, martyrdom, and moral opposition to injustice. The narrative of Imam Husayn's martyrdom provides Shiites with a powerful framework for understanding minority status, perseverance, and ethical struggle. For Shiite communities living outside Muslim-majority contexts, Karbala symbolism often becomes a key resource for maintaining communal boundaries and articulating a distinct religious identity.

In the Iranian context, Shiite identity is further institutionalized through the political-religious system established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) integrates Shiite theology with state governance, positioning religious authority at the center of political power. Under this system, the Shia Imamiyyah school became the official state ideology, and the Ayatollah was granted supreme authority over political, military, and judicial institutions (Pradana & Radityatama, 2019). This fusion of religion and state has produced a distinct Iranian political-religious identity in which Shiism is not merely a faith tradition but a governing framework that shapes national identity, citizenship, and perceptions of authority.

Understanding identity transformation among Iranian Shiite immigrants in Manila requires examining the city's historical racial and ethnic social construction. Over the past seventy years, Asian Americans' racial status shifted dramatically from the negative stereotype of "yellow peril" to the more positive "model minority," reflecting changing societal views (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015). Chinese and Japanese immigrants were historically marginalized and racialized as "almost blacks but not black," evolving into perceptions of being "almost whites but not whites" (Espiritu, 1997). This change followed long-standing institutional discrimination, including exclusionary laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and continued restrictions until the mid-20th century (Kurien, 2018).

Cultural identity connects individual psychology with broader group affiliations, such as religious communities, families, or nations, and includes concepts like individualism versus collectivism, acculturation styles, ethnic identity, and self-construal (Berry, 1994; Phinney, 1990). In Iran, identity is shaped by three core elements: religious, national, and Western (Karimifard, 2012; Haghghat, 2012). The national identity traces back over 2,500 years to the Persian Empire, while Islamic identity was institutionalized following the 7th-century Muslim conquest and the Safavid era's Shiite establishment. The Western identity emerged through Iran's encounter with Western modernity during the early 20th century, introducing cultural tensions between tradition and modernity. This tripartite framework has produced an ongoing "Iranian identity crisis,"

characterized by ideological conflict between Islamism and nationalism, and tensions between Western influences and the Islamic-national identity promoted post-revolution (Zahed, 2004; Haghighat, 2012; Mozaffari, 2014). While research has addressed ethnic identity, globalization, and aspects of identity crisis in Iran, comprehensive studies on the cultural foundations shaping these identities remain limited (Adibi et al., 2008).

The Republic of the Philippines is an archipelagic country in Southeast Asia composed of about 7,641 islands grouped into three main regions: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, covering an area of 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>. As of 2015, its population exceeded 100 million, making it the 12th most populous country worldwide and the eighth most populous in Asia by 2018 (Philippine Government, 2016). Approximately 10.2 million Filipinos live or work abroad which accounts for roughly 11% of the population (Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 2013). The origins of the Filipino people are debated, with theories ranging from local evolution (Eder, 2004) to migration through ancient trade networks from Sundaland (Solheim & Flavel, 2006). The widely supported Austronesian Expansion Theory suggests migration from Taiwan around 4000 BC (Mijares, 2006), while recent archaeological evidence reveals human presence in the Philippines dating back as far as 709,000 years (Ingicco, 2018). Komasi (2023) conducted an ethnographic study in Iranian junior high schools, revealing that Afghan refugee students, many of whom were born and raised in Iran, largely identified as Iranians. Their willingness to engage with local peers facilitated integration, while Iranian students prioritized ethical behavior over nationality in their interactions.

However, the study also expressed concern over these students' limited knowledge of their Afghan heritage, recommending that educational efforts be made to preserve their original cultural identity (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2012). In a different context, Basouli and Derakhsh (2022) explored the Iranian Hosseiniyeh and Tekiyeh—sacred Shiite spaces—arguing that their multifunctional social, cultural, and religious roles could position them as significant religious tourism sites due to their unique urban identity and spiritual resonance. Skinner (2022) examined identity classification among traditional medicinal practitioners in southern Lesotho and South Africa, focusing on symbolic motifs like snakes and rivers. His study suggested persistent syncretic ideologies rooted in historical narratives, challenging conventional anthropological interpretations and emphasizing the need to engage local perspectives in identity analysis. Similarly, Halim et al. (2021) studied the Dayak people of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, to understand how Islam and Christianity influence indigenous identity. The emergence of the "Senganan Dayak" identity reflects a hybrid cultural adaptation, where converts to Islam retain Dayak identity. Traditional rituals have also undergone transformation, exemplified by the replacement of ancestral practices with Islamic expressions,

such as replacing magical chants with religious prayers. Collectively, these studies illustrate the fluidity of cultural identity and how it is continually redefined through education, religion, migration, and intercultural interaction. Razaghi (2020) explored the dynamics between religious fundamentalism, collective identity, and individuality by analyzing two student organizations including Basij and Welayat Lovers at the University of Guilan. The findings revealed that although these organizations attempt to enforce a unified ideological identity, rising secularism in higher education and the expanding personal autonomy and skills of students hinder the growth of fundamentalist collectivity.

In a related exploration of identity, Martiny et al. (2020) studied young immigrants in Norway and found that stronger national (Norwegian) identity among immigrants was typically associated with a weaker endorsement of ethnic identity (e.g., Kurdish). However, those who embraced national identity were also more likely to adopt a dual identity, integrating both ethnic and national affiliations. Positive interactions with native Norwegians promoted national identity, which in turn supported immigrants' sense of integration into Norwegian society.

### **3. Research Method**

The aim of this study was to explore the transformation of Iranian Shiite identity within the multicultural and predominantly Catholic context of Manila, Philippines. Due to the limited existing research on this specific diaspora group, a qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived religious and cultural experiences of the participants, with particular attention to identity formation beyond conventional assimilation and multicultural models. This study employed a Straussian Grounded Theory approach developed by Corbin and Strauss. This methodological framework was selected since it allows for the systematic exploration of social processes and meaning-making through inductive theory development grounded in empirical data. The research questions focused on how Iranian Shiites define and negotiate their identity, the elements that constitute it, its distinction from local identities, the influence of Manila's socio-religious environment, and the factors contributing to identity transformation following migration. The study started with initial purposive sampling.

The participants were selected based on their Iranian Shiite identity and relevance to the research objectives. As data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, theoretical sampling was used in line with Grounded Theory principles. Emerging categories such as gender, migration wave, student versus non-student status, and length of residence guided the selection of

subsequent participants in order to refine categories, explore variation, and strengthen theoretical development. In total, 43 Iranian Shiite individuals residing in Manila participated in the study. The participants included both males and females over the age of 20, students and non-students with a minimum residency of two years in Manila. This diverse sample was necessary to capture a wide range of experiences and to achieve theoretical saturation across all major categories within the paradigm model. Sampling ceased when additional interviews no longer produced new properties or insights relevant to the emerging theory.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility while ensuring alignment with the research objectives. Interviews began with open-ended questions encouraging participants to share narratives about their background, migration experiences, and perceptions of identity. Interviews were conducted in Farsi to facilitate natural and nuanced communication and were held in locations convenient for participants, including universities, restaurants, and public parks. Some participants were interviewed more than once to deepen emerging categories and ensure analytic completeness. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through signed consent forms and the use of pseudonyms. The researcher maintained clarity and simplicity in question phrasing to create a comfortable interview environment and to avoid academic jargon.

Data analysis followed the Straussian Grounded Theory coding procedures. The data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously through constant comparative analysis. The coding process involved three stages:

- *Open coding* in which concepts were identified and labeled from the data;
- *Axial coding* in which relationships between categories and subcategories were developed using the paradigm model (conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences);
- *Selective coding*, which integrated core categories into a coherent theoretical framework explaining identity transformation.

Throughout analysis, interview transcripts were examined inductively. The units of meaning were condensed into subcategories, main categories, and overarching themes. The paradigm model was used to enhance explanatory depth and to systematically organize findings. The resulting theoretical framework is visually summarized in the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

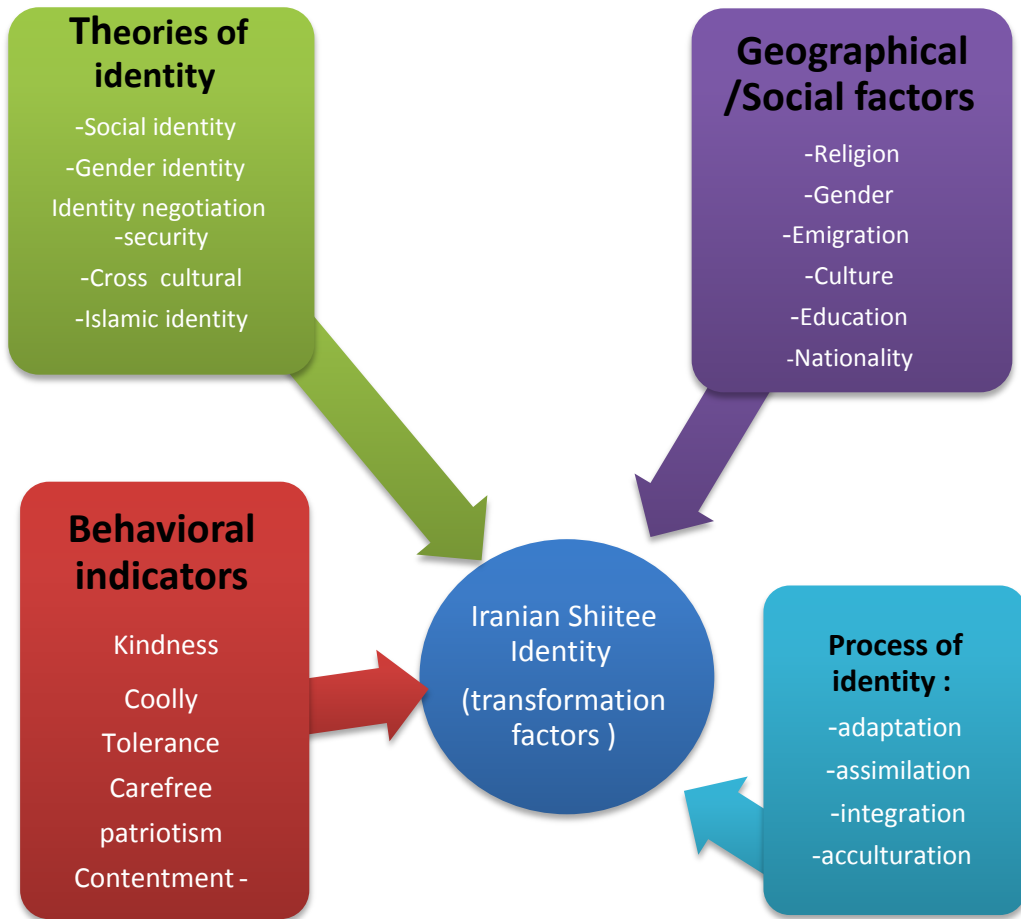


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

#### 4. Findings

The study interviewed 43 Iranian Shiite participants living in Manila. They were categorized based on their migration waves as identified by Shishehgar et al. (2015). Fourteen participants belonged to the first two waves (1950–1979 and post-1979 Revolution), while 29 were from the third wave (post-1995). The older generations averaged 61 years of age and had lived in the Philippines for more than three decades, primarily settling in Manila. Many were married to Filipino women. Although they were highly educated, most of them worked outside their trained professions due to local employment restrictions. These migrants were well-acquainted with Filipino culture and the Catholic religious context. In contrast, the younger third-wave participants averaged 26 years old. They were predominantly single students and had lived in Manila for just over four years. They were born and raised under the Islamic Republic of Iran and were less familiar with the Catholic

environment and more open to cultural, religious, and social adaptation due to their youth and recent migration. Despite generational and experiential differences, all the participants shared a central Shiite religious identity.

### *Religious Identity and Engagement*

The participants' religious engagement ranged across a spectrum from:

- *Very religious*, ("Well, I grew up in a completely religious city with very traditional parents. As a child, I participated in all traditional religious ceremonies. I still do all the religious rites. Yes, I am a religious person." (Participant #4)
- *Somewhat religious* ("I'm not a very orthodox person, but I practice religious rites. Of course, I don't put pressure on my children to do the same. I myself like religion. "(Participant #11),
- *Not very religious* ("Yes, Good, most Iranians have grown up in traditional families, but I pay more attention to other issues in life than religion, and I don't have much time for religious issues, and I still don't." (Participant #7), and
- *Not religious at all* (I have never seriously considered religion. Of course, as a child, I used to attend some religious ceremonies with my mother, but you know, it's a childhood memory.... (Loud laughs). I've only been looking for money for thirty or forty years (loud laugh). (Participant #3).

Older participants typically maintained stronger ritualistic ties. However, younger participants often expressed more critical and individualized interpretations of their faith. Most of the participants acknowledged their Shiite background. However, their understanding was often rooted in tradition rather than critical reflection. Being part of a minority worldwide and living in a mostly Catholic society influenced the participants' awareness of their religious identity. Participation in religious events varied from attending Ashura commemorations to embassy-organized activities. However, many engaged in religious practices more as cultural traditions than theological obligations. Importantly, all the participants rejected religious conversion and claimed cultural ties and religious laws. However, younger individuals were more open to reinterpreting religious practices.

The second question was whether the interviewees had an explicit sense or perception of their religious identity. Have they ever thought of a subject called "religious identity"? For some

participants, the response was clearly positive. If we pay attention to the participants' average age as well as their level of education, it becomes clear to us that they are well aware of their religious background.

*"Yeah, Yeah, I have a clear sense of my religious background and what it means to me. I think all Iranians have good information about Islam because they have been attending religious ceremonies since childhood. In our generation, that was it.*  
(Participant #9)

These answers refer to two social and historical realities. First, as more than 90% of Iranians are Shiites, therefore most respondents attended religious ceremonies with their parents from childhood. In fact, attending religious ceremonies has been more of a fun for the younger generation. Second, because about 10 percent of the Muslims of world are Shiites, many Iranians from an early age have a sense about their religious minority position and placed special emphasis on their religious identity. In addition to literal expression, the researcher wanted to be more certain about the religious identity of the respondents. So, the researcher asked them if they would attend a Shiite religious event.

The other research question was that "Will the identity of Iranian Shiites change after arriving in Manila? In fact, the basic premise of this question is whether Manila, as a Catholic city, has influenced the character of Shiite Iranians. In a natural process, this question may not need a definitive answer. It is obvious that social climate in a Catholic city like Manila is different from a Shiite city (for example, Tehran). But the more important question is that whether and to what extent the atmosphere of a Catholic city affects the character of a Shiite. The analysis of the interviews and the experience of face-to-face interviews with participants again showed that the response of first- and second-generation groups of Iranian living in Manila is not necessarily the same, although many similarities can be found. The first thing that can be examined is the influence of Shiite Iranians on the people of Manila. These issues will greatly affect behavioral modeling. In this regard, one of the participants says:

*"I like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic, religion or cultural groups other than my own. During all these long years of living in Manila, I often compared myself to them, perhaps even unknowingly* (Participant #5).

- *Generational Differences in Identity Perception:* An important intergenerational difference emerged regarding Shiite identity and cultural assimilation. Older participants who have spent decades in the Philippines demonstrated reflections on integrating Filipino cultural values such as respect for privacy, gender equality, and humility. However, they have maintained their religious identity. Younger participants who were often students and recent migrants, were more influenced by Filipino social freedoms, gender inclusivity, and religious tolerance. Many admired the relaxed and nonjudgmental Filipino lifestyle which was in contrast with the restrictive political-religious environment in Iran. Especially, female participants highlighted the appeal of gender equality and personal freedoms in the Philippines.
- *Cultural, Linguistic, and Ethnic Influences:* The cultural openness and linguistic diversity of Manila impacted the participants' identity transformation. Exposure to a multicultural, multilingual environment contrasted with the more rigid, gender-segregated norms of Iranian society. The fluency in English which is common in the Philippines but limited in Iran, was a significant factor in broadening the participants' worldviews and self-perceptions. Ethnic identity played a minimal role among Iranian migrants in Manila. This reflects the diminished significance of ethnic divisions in Iran's urban centers and the limited ethnic differentiation perceived within Filipino society. In contrast, religious identity remained important but it was understood differently in the less ideological and politicized society compared to Iran.
- *Identity Transformation and Adaptation:* The findings revealed that Iranian Shiites in Manila negotiate a complex, multifaceted identity shaped by migration generation, religious unity, and exposure to Filipino culture. They participants have maintained connections to Shiite religious roots. However, they exhibited varying degrees of religious observance and reflection. The older generation tended to blend Iranian religious and cultural values with Filipino social norms. Whereas, the younger generation showed greater openness to pluralism, critical religious perspectives, and cultural adaptation. Economic factors, educational motivations, national and cultural identity, and personal freedoms contributed to this transformation. The participants valued Manila's cultural inclusivity, warmth, and tolerance which fostered behavioral adaptations and a more pluralistic worldview. The lexical analysis performed in the study reinforced these themes. The main emphasis was on terms such as identity,

culture, family, education, tolerance, and assimilation which highlight their centrality to the participants lived experiences.

- *Grounded Theory Analysis: The Paradigm Model* : The main research question explored how Shiite Iranians interpret their experiences and evolving realities while living in a predominantly Catholic city like Manila. Through direct observation and interviews, it was evident that despite variations by gender and age, many Iranian immigrants share common experiences that can be generalized globally. To fully understand these perceptions and their deeper meanings, a qualitative approach was used to explore the lived experience of participants. The analysis of interview data was conducted in three coding stages. The open coding stage identified 60 basic concepts, axial coding grouped these into 19 major categories, and selective coding distilled a single core concept. This core concept which was shaped by six main categories indicated that how Shiite Iranians make sense of their past, present, and future within the cultural and social context of Manila.

#### A) *Causal Conditions*

Among the causal conditions which shaped how Shiite Iranians interpret their experiences in Manila, religious identity played a significant and multifaceted role. The participants' religious beliefs and practices influenced their interactions with the predominantly Catholic host society. This impacted their attitudes, behaviors, and sense of purpose. Most of the participants claimed that exposure to Manila's religious diversity such as the visible respect for the Virgin Mary and Christian clergy challenged preconceived notions about religion and encouraged identity transformation. Unlike Iran in which religion is often intertwined with politics and social pressure, many Iranian immigrants in Manila experienced religion as a more personal and voluntary choice which is distinct from governmental influence. Some interviewees noted that religious participation in Iran was sometimes habitual or imposed. However, religious identity appeared less politically charged and more culturally embedded in Manila. Furthermore, the emphasis on ethics over religion among Iranians suggested that religious identity is only one facet of their broader self-understanding. Overall, religious identity acted as both a source of cultural connection and a catalyst for personal transformation. This demonstrates the importance of understanding its role to better support Iranian immigrants' integration and well-being in the host society.

Gender Identity played an important role in the identity transformation of Iranian immigrants in Manila, shaped by their experiences in Iran and exposure to the social position of women in the Philippines. Many Iranian participants stated that gender identity is influenced by biological sex as well as social and cultural contexts. In Iran, women's labor market participation is low. Also, cultural norms impose restrictions on women's roles. However, witnessing the prominent role of women in Manila's society including higher labor participation and leadership opportunities often evoked admiration and sometimes jealousy among Iranian immigrants. This exposure challenged their views on gender roles and motivated identity transformation.

Several interviewees stated the intersection of gender identity with success. They emphasized that women's achievements are culturally recognized and valued alongside men in the Philippines. This is in contrast with the Iranian context where legal and societal barriers exist. Moreover, gender norms in Iranian culture affect attitudes toward material wealth and lifestyle choices. This contributes to the differences in life satisfaction and social engagement compared to Filipinos. Gendered expectations, such as men are supposed to be providers and women prioritizing family affect how Iranians adapt to the host society's cultural environment.

One of the complex dimensions of gender identity among Shiite Iranian immigrants involved the wearing of the Hijab. In Iran, the Hijab is compulsory. In Manila, encountering unveiled women challenged immigrants' established norms and encouraged reflection on religious expression, autonomy, and personal agency. This often leads to varied responses from continued adherence to the Hijab as a religious symbol to questioning or rejecting it in favor of personal choice. This intersection of gender identity, religious belief, and cultural freedom shows the broader identity negotiation Iranian Shiite immigrants experience as they adapt to life in a Catholic society.

Cultural Identity played a crucial role in the identity transformation of Iranian individuals living in Manila. The participation in local cultural events exposed Iranians to diverse art forms, music, and traditions. This can broaden their perspectives and foster personal growth. This exposure nurtures appreciation for cultural diversity and encourages the blending of Iranian and Filipino cultural elements which leads to the emergence of a unique, hybrid identity.

Interviewees described cultural events in Manila as beautiful and valuable opportunities which provide chances to be engaged with different artistic expressions and find a sense of belonging. This engagement can strengthen their cultural pride and their adaptation to a new cultural environment by negotiating multiple cultural identities.

One important aspect is the comparative awareness of cultural freedoms, particularly regarding girls and women. For example, Iranian participants expressed sadness over the limited

cultural freedoms for women in Iran compared to the greater freedoms they observed in Manila. This can spark empathy, solidarity, and critical reflection on Iranian cultural norms, motivating desires for social change and fostering cultural identity transformation.

The experience of living in Manila's environment which is culturally diverse is in contrast with the cultural homogeneity enforced in Iran. The interviewees noted greater tolerance and acceptance in Manila, which challenges their preconceived notions and encourages a more open-minded and pluralistic cultural identity. The lack of enforced cultural uniformity in Manila allows Iranian immigrants to express their heritage. They can also explore and adopt new cultural influences. This environment can empower them to question restrictive cultural values and embrace alternative perspectives which can result in promoting a dynamic sense of self. National Identity can play a vital role in creating the experiences and self-perceptions of Shiite Iranians living in Manila. It can influence their sense of belonging, cultural identity, worldview, social interactions, and emotional connection to Iran.

Comparisons between Iranians and Filipinos were frequently demonstrated. Some participants observed that Filipinos show a stronger collective sense of patriotism which is demonstrated through enthusiastic national ceremonies, respect for symbols like the flag, and financial support for their country from abroad (such as remittances from overseas workers). Interviewee No#14 described Manila's national celebrations as more spirited than those he experienced in Iran, which resulted in reflections on the nature of patriotism and national pride.

### *B) Contextual Conditions*

The analysis of participants' responses revealed six main contextual factors which shape the causal conditions that influence Iranian immigrants, particularly Shiite Iranians, in the Philippines. These factors include family, educational, occupational, and economic conditions, as well as the broader social climate in both Iran and Manila. In Iran, strong family pressure to continue higher education, particularly in competitive and financially rewarding fields such as engineering, medicine, and business has a significant influence on the decision of many Shiites Iranians to seek academic opportunities abroad. The educational environment in Manila that values education can provide a supportive setting for these aspirations. This allows immigrants to access a wider range of disciplines and improve their qualifications for both local and international job markets. Economic challenges in Iran, including inflation, stagnation, and the pressure of Western sanctions also motivate Shiite Iranians to seek better financial prospects overseas. Manila's relatively growing economy is regarded as offering better employment opportunities and career advancement. This

makes it an attractive destination. Furthermore, due to the religious and cultural diversity of Manila, Shiite Iranians are exposed to new social norms and interfaith interactions, which they may view as enriching experiences or, alternatively, as challenges depending on their personal beliefs and adaptability. The intense competition for “money-making” university disciplines in Iran, combined with sanctions limiting economic growth, reinforces the appeal of educational and occupational opportunities abroad. Consequently, these contextual factors create practical opportunities and shape how Shiite Iranians interpret their current situation, adapt to cultural and religious differences, and negotiate their identity in a new environment.

Two additional concepts emerged from the interviews including the lower cost of education in the Philippines and the promise of more job opportunities in the future. These concepts play significant roles in shaping the causal conditions for Shiite Iranians migrating to Manila. The affordability of education can act as a strong factor which makes the Philippines an attractive destination for Iranian students seeking higher education or skill acquisition without the financial burdens faced at home. This economic advantage can foster a more optimistic outlook among Shiite Iranians about their academic and professional prospects. Complementing this, the anticipation of greater job opportunities in Manila creates a hopeful environment and suggests potential for career advancement and improved livelihoods. These factors contribute to making Manila a desirable destination, encouraging more Iranian immigrants to settle and shape diverse communities. Within this Catholic city, Iranian immigrants must navigate cultural adaptation and try to balance the preservation of their Shiite Muslim identity with exposure to Manila’s religious pluralism and social norms. This intercultural exchange can enrich their experiences, promote understanding and integration and foster a unique hybrid identity. The coexistence of multiple religions in Manila provides opportunities for interfaith dialogue. It broadens Shiite Iranians’ perspectives on religious tolerance and pluralism. Moreover, the more liberal social dynamics such as freer interactions between girls and boys, contrast with more conservative gender norms from their home country. Therefore, some individuals reassess their views on gender roles and personal freedoms. These cultural differences necessitate adaptation and negotiation. As a result, they shape how Shiite Iranians interpret their new environment and current situation. Overall, the interplay of affordable education, future job prospects, religious coexistence, and evolving social norms attracts Iranian immigrants and influences their identity formation, cultural adaptation, and perceptions of belonging in a multicultural city like Manila.

*C) Interventional Conditions*

Interventional conditions are different from contextual conditions. While the latter have prompted the migration of Iranians to the Philippines, the former refer to the factors within the Philippines and Manila that influence the identity transformation and potential identity crisis experienced by Shiite Iranians. These conditions include the different roles played by the state, Ministry of Higher Education, religious institutions such as the Church and Mosque, as well as family and friends. All of them contribute positively or negatively to the evolving identity of Shiite Iranians in Manila. For example, an Iranian student's experience is created by how the Philippine government supports immigrant integration, the performance of local universities, and how Filipino society treats them both as individuals and as Muslims. The political systems of Iran and the Philippines have great influences on how Shiite Iranians perceive and interpret their circumstances. In Iran, political challenges including issues of the governance and social freedoms often motivate their migration. However, a stable and inclusive political environment in the Philippines can provide a sense of security and belonging. Educational regulations and government policies impact opportunities for higher education and professional advancement, such as through recognition of foreign credentials and scholarship availability. They influence their understanding of their current status. Religiously, Shiite Iranians come from a predominantly Shiite Muslim background and find themselves in a largely Catholic context in Manila.

This religious difference creates their experiences and offer exposure to different spiritual perspectives and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, especially through the presence of both churches and mosques. The extent to which religious freedom is protected can affect whether they view their situation positively or as restrictive. Family and friends can play a vital supportive role. They can provide emotional and practical assistance that helps Shiite Iranians navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation. Together, these interventional conditions such as political stability and inclusiveness, religious diversity and freedom, and strong social support networks can facilitate cultural adaptation, influence the blending of Iranian and Filipino cultural elements, and affect the social integration of Shiite Iranians in Manila. This interconnection creates their evolving cultural identity and understanding of their current situation in a multicultural, Catholic city. Ultimately, it impacts their perception of opportunities and challenges as they adjust to their new environment.

#### *D) Phenomenon*

As a result of the preceding conditions, the Shiite Iranian immigrants concentrate on the observable behaviors that distinguish the people of Manila from Iranians during their identity transformation process. The descriptive results of the study reveal that much of the interviewees' reflections were based on analyzing the behaviors of Manila's inhabitants and contrasting them with Iranian norms. These behaviors which are called "distinctive behaviors" include kindness, contentment, humility, patriotism, respect for privacy, adherence to ethical principles, and gender equality. The analysis indicates that these behaviors have a significant impact on immigrants' identity transformation. They contribute to the emergence of a hybrid "Manila/Catholic identity." Whether this identity is primarily created by the metropolitan social environment of Manila or by its Catholic cultural impacts requires further investigation.

For instance, kindness such as a landlord who used to provide breakfast every morning (as described by interviewee #6) triggers strong positive emotions like gratitude and warmth. This emotional response develops a sense of belonging and appreciation towards the local community which encourages the immigrants to integrate aspects of Manila's culture, including Catholic values, into their own identity. Acts of kindness motivates reciprocity and encourages the immigrants to embody similar behaviors which reinforces their cultural assimilation and identity transformation. Humility is another distinctive behavior which shapes identity transformation. Interviewee #14 noted that Iranians often perceive themselves as more arrogant than Filipinos who show humility through everyday actions such as patiently waiting in line. Recognizing this cultural difference can prompt self-reflection and motivates immigrants to adopt humble behaviors, aligning themselves with local cultural norms and Catholic virtues. As noted by interviewee #3, the value of humility is reinforced by some religious symbols such as the Blessed Virgin Mary whose role in Manila's religious ceremonies can exemplify positive femininity and spiritual humility. This observation motivates the immigrants to integrate humility into their identities and reconsider their gender-related cultural attitudes. It further strengthens their connection to the Manila/Catholic identity. Respect for privacy is emerged as another key behavior which affects the immigrant identity. According to interviewee #16, Manila's culture respects personal choices and autonomy. It allows individuals freedom to express themselves without interference from government or religion. This respect for individuality can foster a stronger sense of self and comfort which enables the immigrants to embrace their own values and boundaries. The emphasis on personal dignity is

aligned with Catholic teachings on conscience and human dignity which facilitates cultural integration and reinforcing the Manila/Catholic identity.

The adherence to ethical principles can play a significant role as well. Interviewee #8 recounted observing Filipino students' honesty during exams. It was in contrast with their own prior experiences of cheating. This commitment to integrity impressed the interviewee and highlighted how Catholic values can influence Filipino behavior. Such ethical conduct can act as a model for immigrants which creates their evolving identity and fosters admiration for local cultural and religious values.

Gender equality has a transformative effect on the immigrants' identity formation. Interviewee #1 who is a Muslim female student, expressed admiration and envy for the prominent role of women in Manila compared to the limited opportunities for women in Iran. The Philippines' recognition as a top country for gender equality increases this value's significance. This awareness prompts reflection and motivates the immigrants to integrate gender equality into their own beliefs, blending their original Muslim identity with the progressive gender norms observed in Manila. Therefore, it forms a new hybrid identity. Similarly, interviewee #22 emphasized the need for change given the women's roles in Iran, contrasting it with the Philippines, which has had a female president despite fewer female ministers. This comparison can encourage reevaluation of personal and cultural values. Therefore, it inspires the immigrants to advocate for gender equality and incorporate these ideals into their evolving identity shaped by Manila's Catholic-influenced culture.

In summary, these distinctive behaviors such as kindness, humility, respect for privacy, adherence to ethical principles, and gender equality can play significant roles in the identity transformation of Shiite Iranian immigrants in Manila. As a result of their lived experiences and reflections, the immigrants gradually construct a Manila/Catholic identity.

### *E) Strategies*

The strategies adopted by Iranian immigrants in Manila in response to the surrounding cultural and social influences mainly fall into three categories including acceptance, resistance, and leaving the social environment. Many Iranians who are married to Filipinos tend to accept and integrate into Filipino society. They often abandon some traditional Iranian identity behaviors such as strong religious practices but without converting religions. They develop a blended identity which incorporates Filipino cultural values while still recognize their Iranian heritage. Another group who are mainly Shiite Iranians occupy an intermediate position and acknowledge changes in gender

relations, religious tolerance, and multicultural values. However, they maintain a strong sense of Iranian identity rooted in their historical and cultural background. The third strategy which is common among younger Iranians involves leaving Manila after completing their studies, considering the Philippines as a stepping stone to more developed Western countries rather than a permanent home.

Several factors have significant influences on these identity transformations. Marrying Filipinos and obtaining permanent residence can encourage deeper integration into local customs and society. It can foster blended identities. Similarly, starting careers in the Philippines and pursuing Filipino citizenship provide opportunities for cultural exchange and a stronger sense of belonging. Participation in Catholic religious ceremonies also affects identity by exposing Iranian immigrants to new spiritual practices, while hesitation or reduced involvement in Shiite rituals indicates shifting religious priorities. However, some Iranians remain disengaged from Catholicism, choosing to preserve their original religious beliefs or exploring alternative spiritual paths.

Decisions to stay or leave Manila play a significant role in identity formation. Those hesitant to stay often encounter cultural and social challenges which reinforces attachment to their Iranian roots if they leave. In contrast, staying in Manila can reflect a willingness to adapt and integrate, contributing to evolving identities. Additional strategies include returning to Iran, which often strengthens ties to Iranian culture and religion, and migration to other countries, which can further transform identity through exposure to new cultures. Maintaining strong adherence to the Iranian religious ceremonies acts as an anchor for cultural continuity and personal identity amid these transformations. Overall, these varied strategies display the complex, dynamic processes shaping immigrant identity among Iranians living in Manila.

### *F) Consequence*

The final consequence of the identity transformation process among Shiite Iranians living in Manila is described as “Receptivity to Acculturation,” which can be seen in four forms: Adaptation, Assimilation, Integration, and Acculturation. It is challenging to precisely categorize individuals into these forms due to the complexity of identity. However, the interview data indicates some trends. Iranians with longer residency in Manila tend to be in the acculturation stage. They blend Filipino cultural elements with their original Iranian identity while maintaining a distinct cultural heritage. However, this group is relatively small. The majority of Iranians fall into the other three categories including Adaptation, Assimilation, and Integration. Adaptation means to adjust to Filipino culture while retaining Iranian roots, assimilation refers to a deeper alignment with Filipino cultural norms

at the potential expense of original cultural aspects, and integration reflects a balanced engagement with both Iranian and Filipino cultures, resulting in a blended identity. These processes can contribute to a state described as “relative instability of identity,” where Shiite Iranians experience ongoing shifts in cultural belonging influenced by social and contextual factors from both Iran and the Philippines. This instability is created by causal conditions, contextual and interventional factors, as well as the distinctive behaviors and strategic reactions of individuals. Although this model provides a framework for understanding these dynamics, further research is needed to fully assess the extent and implications of this identity instability among Shiite Iranians in Manila.

### *Proposed Concept of Identity Transformation*

The study found that identity transformation among Iranian Shiite immigrants in Manila is affected by a complex interplay of religious, cultural, political, and social factors from their homeland and the host country. Positive aspects of Filipino life such as the calm spirit, happiness, and warmth of the people, motivate Iranians to interact and integrate and foster identity change. Similarities in religious behaviors, such as shared values between Islam and Christianity, can further promote openness and interfaith dialogue. Cultural traits such as kindness, humility, gender equality, and respect for privacy also contribute to gradual identity shifts. Many participants selected the Philippines for educational and economic reasons, partly driven by political and economic difficulties in Iran, including the Islamic Revolution, wars, and sanctions, which have weakened national identity and morale. Despite Iran’s more rigid, traditional, and gendered culture, Manila’s acceptance of cultural diversity, multilingual environment, and gender progressiveness appear more attractive to immigrants. Religious identity undergoes transformation as well. Iranians consider religion in Manila more as a cultural habit than a political ideology which in contrast with their experiences in Iran where religion and politics are intertwined. The immigrants tend to avoid ranking their religious identity in Manila for social and cultural reasons. Overall, various causal, contextual, and interventional conditions lead Iranian immigrants to observe and react to “distinctive behaviors” in Manila’s society such as kindness, humility, and patriotism which create what can be termed a “Manila/Catholic identity.” The participants generally respond to these impacts by accepting, resisting, or leaving the social environment. For example, those married to Filipinos often abandon many traditional Iranian identity behaviors including religious practices. They embrace changes related to gender relations, multicultural education, and religious tolerance. Despite these shifts, many still identify strongly with their Iranian heritage and history which

shows a complex, and evolving identity transformation process created by both Iranian roots and Filipino influences.

The final consequence in the identity transformation process is called “Influence-ability,” which can be displayed in four forms: Adaptation, Assimilation, Integration, and Acculturation. It is difficult to precisely categorize Shiite Iranians into these stages. However, the interview data suggest that those with a longer residence in Manila tend to be in the Acculturation phase. They blend Filipino cultural elements with their Iranian identity. However, since this group is relatively small, most Iranian immigrants fall into Adaptation, Assimilation, or Integration stages. This contributes to a phenomenon described as the “Relative instability of identity.” The conceptual model of the study proposes that the transformation of Shiite Iranian identity in Manila begins with different causal, contextual, and interventional factors from both Iran and the Philippines. This is followed by distinctive behaviors observed in Manila’s society and the Iranians’ reactive strategies. They both foster this relative instability in identity. The precise nature and impact of this instability on Shiite Iranians’ identities needs further investigation.

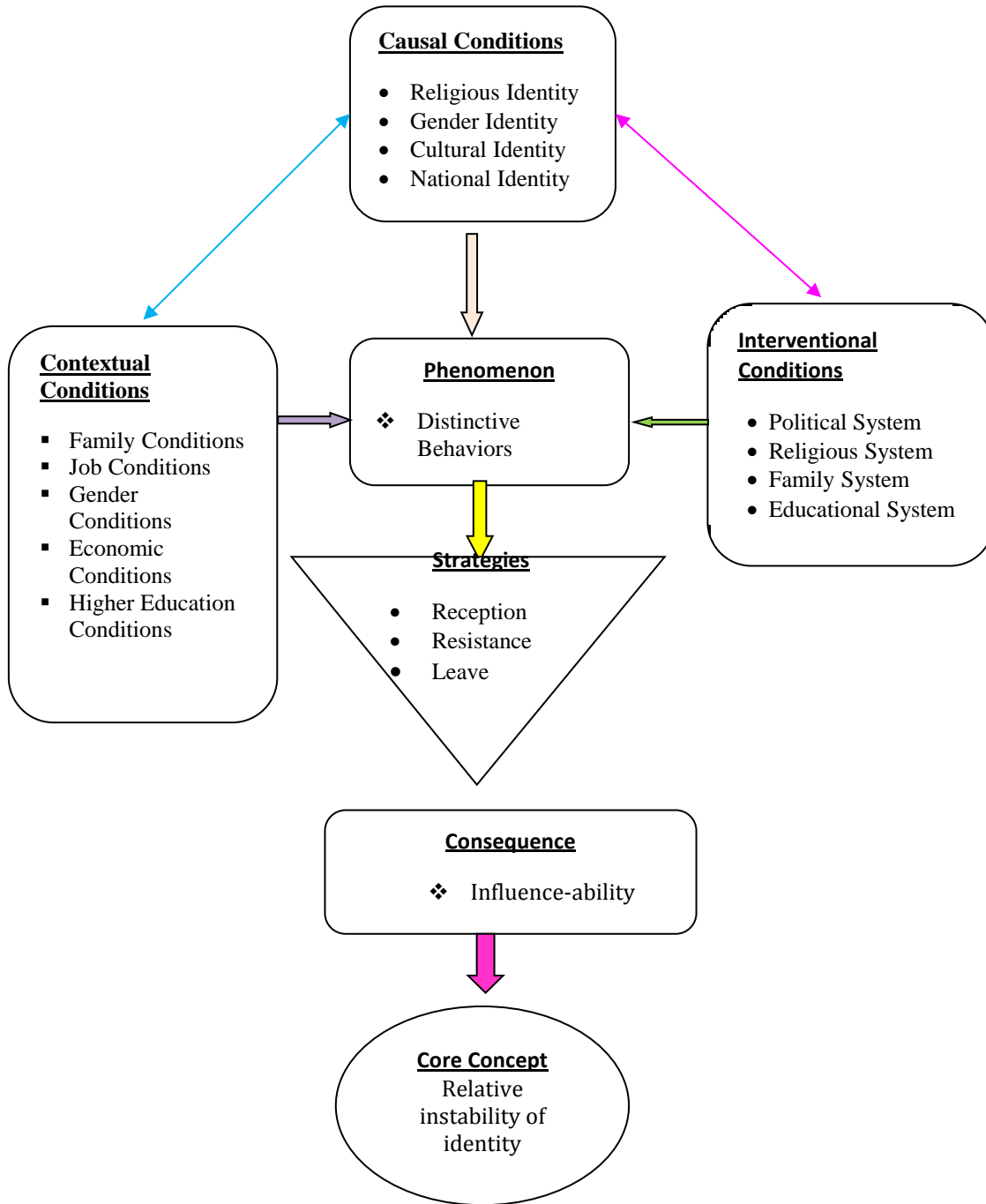


Figure 2. Conceptual model of identity transformation process among Shiite Iranians of Manila

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the complex identity transformation of Iranian Shiites living in Manila. It aimed to reveal how social and religious contexts can create their sense of self across generations. The findings highlighted a multifaceted Iranian identity that transcends religion, encompassing cultural, historical, and social dimensions. It was found that the first generation maintained a simpler, more exclusive emphasis on “Iranianness”. The second generation demonstrated greater religious knowledge and openness toward cultural and religious diversity in the host society. Despite living in a predominantly Catholic environment, the participants showed pride in their Iranian heritage without prioritizing religion as their sole identity marker. The study also emphasized on the challenges faced by Iranian women negotiating gender roles, particularly in relation to hijab observance, within a vastly different cultural setting.

The study confirmed the relevance of multiple identity theories including social identity, gender identity, identity negotiation, identity security-vulnerability, and cross-cultural adaptation in understanding immigrant identity processes. It emphasized the dynamic balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to a new environment. The religion was only one part of a broader identity framework. By focusing on Manila, this study contributed valuable insights into immigrant identity transformation outside Western contexts and highlighted the need for further research on intergenerational dynamics, gender-religion intersections, and the variations within Shiite Iranian communities. Future research should also consider comparative studies across religions and ethnicities, as well as multidimensional analyses of identity that integrate social, cultural, and linguistic factors. In sum, this study can increase the understanding of how Iranian Shiites negotiate their identities in diaspora. This highlights the ongoing interplay between continuity and change and provides a foundation for future exploration of identity formation in multicultural societies.

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