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The role of social networks in shaping the self-perception of Tehran metro peddlers

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ABSTRACT

Tehran's metro street vendors represent a marginalized occupational minority within the capital city and, from a cultural standpoint, constitute a significant case study. In recent years, economic hardship has led to a noticeable increase in the number of street vendors operating within the metro system. These individuals interact daily with a wide range of passengers across various metro stations and, due to the official prohibition of vending in such spaces—as well as the stigmatizing attitudes held by some members of the public—they experience unique social conditions compared to the broader population. One of the key factors influencing individuals' perceptions of their social status and identity is the media. Among media platforms, virtual social networks hold a distinct position due to their interactive nature and high potential for user engagement. Statistics show that these networks have increasingly become primary sources of communication, information, and entertainment for the public.This qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 street vendors in Tehran's metro system, exploring their engagement with various virtual social networks and the self-perceptions shaped through these interactions. The findings indicate that the vendors tend to develop a negative self-image through their experiences on these platforms and often do not receive a favorable representation of themselves within virtual social spaces.

INTRODUCTION

With the worsening of economic conditions in Iran and the decline in formal employment opportunities, many individuals are turning to informal and marginal occupations to earn a living. One such occupation is street vending in urban metro systems, particularly in large cities like Tehran. The metro, as one of the most crowded public spaces, provides a daily economic platform for many low-income groups.

Street vending in Tehran's metro system is not only an economic phenomenon but also a social and identity-based experience. These individuals often occupy a marginalized social position and are subjected to public attitudes marked by judgment, pity, or ridicule. Such perceptions can significantly influence the self-image of street vendors. More broadly, researchers have noted that transformative technologies can alter social perceptions and power relations in ways that simultaneously generate optimism and reinforce existing inequalities,

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highlighting the importance of thoughtful governance and inclusive strategies to support vulnerable groups (Rahmatian, 2025).

In this context, virtual social networks play a crucial role in representing this social group and shaping their self-perception. Platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, through their interactive features, content-sharing capabilities, and the visibility of others' reactions, create a space for comparison, representation, and even the construction of identity. Studies have shown that examining these platforms is especially important, as their algorithmic structures and AI-driven content can profoundly influence how individuals perceive themselves and others in digital contexts within increasingly algorithmic digital societies (Khodabin, Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi, & Movahedzadeh, 2024). This paper seeks to explore, through a qualitative approach and interviews with metro street vendors in Tehran, the role of virtual social networks in forming their self-perception.

Street vending in Tehran's metro system has expanded due to several factors, including the ease of entry, the lack of need for capital or specialized skills, and the absence of legal protections. At the same time, society's general perception of this occupation is largely negative, often associated with labels such as disorder, poverty, or nuisance. These external views can become internalized over time and influence the individual's self-conception.

In fact, following the transformation of urban–rural relationships as a result of inconsistent economic development strategies, cities gradually became filled with newcomers lacking professional skills who were not absorbed into the formal urban economy. Consequently, the informal sector and marginal occupations expanded in large cities (Mashhadizadeh Dehghani, 2011, p. 110). Another contributing factor is the increasing specialization of labor in metropolises, where jobs are assigned based on specific expertise. High job demand and the failure of individuals to succeed in prior occupations also contribute to their involvement in the informal economy and engagement in marginal work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), such jobs—operating outside government oversight and support—are characterized by features such as labor intensity, ease of access, low requirement for skills or capital, and provision of competitive goods and services. Examples include street vending, newspaper selling, and even begging (OECD, 2009, p. 15).

Cultural minorities encompass various categories, including religious, ethnic, gender-based, occupational, and others. Each type of minority in different societies requires the formulation of policies and strategies aimed at mitigating the challenges faced by these groups, addressing their needs, improving their interactions with the majority population, and reducing feelings of anxiety and marginalization associated with minority status. In related discussions, researchers have pointed out that the adoption of new technological systems to address social and economic challenges requires careful design, ethical safeguards, and coordinated frameworks to ensure that such innovations genuinely serve marginalized communities and do not inadvertently create new forms of exclusion or bias (Sakhaei et al., 2024).

Metropolitan cities worldwide have always been primary destinations for migration from other regions. Given the attractiveness of large cities as centers of opportunity compared to peripheral areas, small towns, and villages, various social issues inevitably arise within these urban centers. One such issue is the expansion of the informal economy and the increasing number of individuals engaging in marginal or unofficial occupations. Marginal occupations typically do not require specialized knowledge or skills and are not considered formal employment. More broadly, when rapid systemic changes reshape social and economic structures, they often create intertwined opportunities and ethical, infrastructural, and adaptation challenges that require thoughtful, inclusive strategies to avoid reinforcing marginalization and inequity (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2022). Examples include street vending, fortune-telling, begging, and similar activities.

Street vending, as one of the largest segments of the informal economy, is prevalent in metropolitan areas. Tehran, as the capital and the most populous city in Iran, faces this challenge prominently. The metro system, as one of the busiest and most widely used public transportation methods in Tehran, serves as a key location attracting street vendors who rely on it as a source of income. Every day, numerous vendors operate within this environment.

The author argues that the self-perception held

by cultural minorities—in this study, metro street vendors—is of critical importance. Individuals' mental image of the occupation they engage in can be a source of individual and social harm. Such self-perceptions may become a foundation for cultural anxiety, feelings of weakness and inferiority, as well as individual and social deviance.

Virtual social networks, which nowadays play significant roles in various domains such as daily communication between individuals and groups, news dissemination, information acquisition, and entertainment, also influence the formation of metro street vendors' self-perception. A substantial part of their self-identity and their views on their occupation derive from these virtual social networks.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

The central research question of this study is:

What kind of self-perception do Tehran's metro street vendors develop about themselves through virtual social networks?

Sub-questions:

1. Which virtual social network(s) do Tehran's metro street vendors use the most?

2. Through which channels do metro street vendors receive news and information about their peers (e.g., groups, pages, colleagues)?

3. Which virtual social networks share news related to metro street vendors?

4. How do the news reports portray metro street vendors?

DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS

Virtual Social Networks

Networks are social structures created through interactions among individuals and groups (Littlejohn, 2005: 684). A network can be described as a collection of reciprocal interactions among many people, which may occur at different times and places (Borgman, 2010: 14). A social network is a product of the evolutionary movement of the web toward a user-centered structure, where the previously static content produced by organizations has been replaced by dynamic content created by users (Meybodi et al., 2017: 49-81).

Simply put, online social networks are websites where individuals can become members, make friends, engage in discussions and exchange opinions, share images and videos they like, comment on others' interests and posts, publish content according to their preferences and views, and even create an imaginary virtual identity of themselves (Afrasiabi, 2013: 15). In parallel, researchers highlight that cultivating media literacy—the ability to critically interpret and engage with information across digital platforms—has become essential for individuals seeking to navigate these environments thoughtfully and avoid the pitfalls of misleading or biased content (Arsalani, Rahmatian, & Hosseini, 2025).

Virtual social networks, based on their functions, features, and the facilities they offer to users, are divided into different categories such as blogs, sharing platforms, forums, various websites, etc. The virtual social networks considered in this study are those that perform the function of social networking, where diverse individuals can participate and, according to their needs, attitudes, and desires, send messages, share videos, photos, music, texts, and more. At the same time, scholars have emphasized that digital systems often carry a dual potential: they can strengthen collective resilience and participation or become tools of exploitation and exclusion if ethical safeguards and transparent governance are not prioritized (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025a).

Mental Image (Self-Perception)

Mental image refers to the ideas individuals hold in their minds about objects, concepts, others, and themselves. It is one of the primary sources of self-reflection, acceptance, or rejection of oneself, which can be influenced by many factors. In digital societies, these self-perceptions are increasingly shaped by platform architectures that amplify stigmatizing narratives while offering marginalized groups few means of redress (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2020). Mental images can be shaped and affected by various events, issues, occurrences, people, thoughts, and anything that plays a role in their formation and development.

Vendoring as an Economic Concept

Vendoring refers to the act of selling goods or services directly to consumers, typically outside the bounds of formal economic institutions. It is often

associated with micro-enterprise activity within the informal sector, encompassing street vending, mobile vending, and other small-scale retail practices carried out in public or quasi-public spaces such as sidewalks, transportation hubs, markets, and mobile stalls. While the term can describe activities within formal retail chains (e.g., vendor contracts with corporations), in urban economic and development literature, vendoring more often denotes informal or semi-regulated economic practices that serve as subsistence strategies for marginalized populations (Cross & Morales, 2007).

From a structural-economic perspective, vendoring arises in response to systemic constraints such as high unemployment, inadequate social safety nets, low levels of education, and barriers to entry into the formal labor market. In related analyses, scholars have emphasized that when individuals face systemic constraints such as economic volatility and limited formal employment, continuous education and capacity-building are essential strategies to help them adapt effectively and build more resilient livelihoods (Hosseini et al., 2021). In countries with high rates of urbanization and economic volatility, including many in the Global South, vendoring often serves as a “default” form of employment—an adaptive livelihood strategy among those excluded from formal wage labor (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2018). These actors typically operate without formal business licenses, tax registration, social protection, or access to financial credit systems. However, they frequently occupy economically strategic spaces and fulfill vital functions in local consumption economies by offering affordable goods and flexible services to low- and middle-income urban residents.

Vendoring is also conceptualized as an inherently spatial practice, mediated by urban governance and public space politics. Municipal authorities often adopt contradictory approaches to street vendors: on the one hand, criminalizing their presence for violating urban planning codes or contributing to perceived disorder; on the other hand, tolerating or even unofficially regulating them to maintain social peace or gain political capital (Donovan, 2008). This regulatory ambivalence creates a precarious existence for vendors, who are frequently subject to harassment, displacement, or unpredictable enforcement actions. This instability mirrors the broader phenomenon of legislative inefficiency, where laws that lack coherent formal principles and disregard on-the-ground realities paradoxically increase non-compliance while punishing marginalized populations (Aghigh et al., 2022). In a related domain, this precarity resembles the "ambiguity burdens" documented in technology adoption, where marginalized users bear disproportionate costs from ill-defined systems (Khodabin et al., 2022). Consequently, vendoring not only reveals the economic struggles of urban populations but also exemplifies contested claims over public space and the right to livelihood. A parallel can be seen in AI systems within regulated industries, where stakeholders must balance innovation with risk management; similarly, street vendors navigate an unstable equilibrium between formal prohibitions and informal toleration, exposing both to unpredictable operational disruptions (Nosraty et al., 2025).

In the specific context of Iran, and particularly within metropolitan centers such as Tehran, vendoring—especially within the metro system—has become a visible symbol of informal economic resilience. Many metro vendors are women, elderly individuals, or rural migrants who have been pushed into informal work due to economic shocks, inflation, devaluation of the rial, or exclusion from secure employment. Metro vendoring provides a uniquely mobile and low-cost platform to reach thousands of daily commuters. Yet, despite its scale and visibility, it remains largely unrecognized by formal institutions. Public discourse often stigmatizes these vendors, viewing them as symbols of poverty, desperation, or urban decay. This stigmatization has social consequences, shaping how vendors perceive themselves and how they are treated by passengers, authorities, and policymakers.

While metro vendoring may appear economically marginal, it embodies complex intersections of gender, class, spatial regulation, and survival economies. Recent studies call for more inclusive policy frameworks that recognize vendors not as obstructions to modern urbanism, but as legitimate economic actors whose labor sustains vital circulations of goods and services within the city (Roever & Skinner, 2016). Recognizing vendoring as a form of work—albeit informal—entails not only economic validation but also the extension of legal protections, social services, and the right to public space. Such recognition mirrors calls

in other marginalized sectors—from healthcare to gig work—for frameworks that validate organic innovations while addressing their root systemic causes (Toosi et al., 2025). In this regard, scholars have shown that embedding health-focused strategies into such frameworks can help reduce risks, improve satisfaction, and promote resilience among marginalized workers (Zamani, Nosraty, & Soroori Sarabi, 2025).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Various studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of street vending and its different aspects. For example:

Sadeghi-Fasai and Ajourlou (2011), in their article titled "Sociological Explanation of Women's Tendency toward Street Vending (Case Study: Women Street Vendors in the Metro)," used a qualitative method and in-depth interviews with 30 women street vendors in the metro to assess their lived experiences. They identified financial need, a female-friendly environment, job flexibility, and adequate income as factors driving women toward street vending.

Talebpour (2015), in his article "Sociological Explanation of the Tendency toward Street Vending: A Qualitative Study (Case Study of Male Street Vendors in Tehran's Markets and Metro)," conducted observations and in-depth interviews with 60 male street vendors (30 in markets and 30 in the metro). He analyzed their lived experiences based on four major themes: interaction fields, typology of street vendors, attractions of street vending, and those responsible for street vending.

Refatjah and Rabiei (2016), in their study "Examining the Experience of Simultaneously Fulfilling Occupational and Family Roles among Female Heads of Households with Emphasis on Women Street Vendors in the Metro," employed qualitative techniques including observation and semi-structured interviews with women street vendors in the metro. Their findings showed that the various roles of economic provider, mother, and homemaker present both opportunities and constraints, but multiple roles did not have a detrimental effect on this particular sample.

Pasandeh, Savadian, and Karimian (2021), in their article "Identity Types of Women Street Vendors in Tehran's Metro," using a qualitative phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews with 23 women vendors, categorized their social identity into three classes: conservative vendors (household heads or helpers), disillusioned vendors (single, divorced, former employees, and educated women), and satisfied vendors (long-term sellers and household heads or helpers).

Mohammadian-Mosamam, Ahmadi, and Razavian conducted a study titled "An Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Women's Street Vending in Tehran's Metro." Using documentary research and a survey with semi-structured interviews involving two groups—75 passengers and 82 female street vendors on Metro Line 1—they found that passengers generally had a relatively high satisfaction with the activities of female street vendors and the goods they sold. Most women vendors were young, educated, often migrants, married, and heads of households. Lack of sufficient capital and formal employment were the main reasons for their involvement in this activity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the above, this study examines the formation of the mental construct (or mental image) of Tehran's metro street vendors based on virtual social networks. The discussion related to mental constructs and, subsequently, self-concept (or self-image) is considered useful here.

A general idea, a structure, a framework, a program, or anything that evokes any of these meanings is considered a cognitive construct (Roberts & Robar, 2001). In fact, our behaviors and reactions during everyday social interactions or interactions within specific social frameworks are based on knowledge, awareness, and experiences we have previously acquired. A mental construct is a set of past experiences categorized within related knowledge groups and used to guide our behavior in familiar situations (Nishida, 1999). Consistent with this perspective, research on cultural participation has shown that cognitive engagement and the development of interpretive frameworks are deeply influenced by individuals' educational experiences and the broader social environments in which they participate (Mohammadi, Piriyaei, & Sabbar, 2025).

When we or a member of a similar culture encounter certain situations for a prolonged time or when we discuss specific information with them,

mental constructs are formed and stored in our minds (Ameli & Hejazi, 2018). Mental constructs, due to simplifying behavioral patterns and systematizing them, possess strong generalizability; however, while they ease the process, they may also lead to erroneous conclusions (Giddens, 1999, p. 261). These constructs become particularly consequential when shaped by external systems—as seen when professionals and marginalized workers alike must reconcile their identities with technologically-mediated narratives (Tomraee et al., 2024).

In fact, mental constructs convey an illusion of reality to individuals, which can completely change their mindset, actions, and reactions toward the subject of the construct. Similarly, studies of emerging technologies have highlighted how their transformative potential is often accompanied by ethical uncertainties, gaps in understanding, and the need for clear frameworks and education to prevent misperceptions and unintended consequences (Tomraee, Hosseini, & Toosi, 2022).

Self-Concept

Mental constructs are divided into different types, including personal constructs and self-constructs. Taylor and Crocker (1981) referred to mental constructs encompassing personal constructs, which include knowledge about individuals' personality traits, and self-constructs, which include knowledge and awareness about oneself.

Self-constructs refer to the mental images individuals hold about themselves (how they see themselves and how others see them) (Ameli & Hejazi, 2018; Shahghasemi, 2017). In fact, self-concept is an individual's effort to build a mental schema to organize perceptions, feelings, and attitudes that the person has about themselves (Wolfe, 1993).

A positive self-concept indicates that the individual accepts themselves as a person with strengths and weaknesses, which raises their self-confidence in social relationships. Conversely, a negative self-concept reflects feelings of worthlessness, incompetence, and inability (Bong & Stalwick, 2003). In this regard, scholars have emphasized that technological systems themselves can play an ambivalent role in shaping self-concept, acting as tools for empowerment and connection or as mechanisms that reproduce exclusion and reinforce structural inequalities when ethical safeguards are absent (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025b). A significant part of these constructs is formed through direct and indirect interactions with others, family, friends, colleagues, etc. In fact, many social mental constructs develop in the course of social interactions (Iravani & Bagherian, 2004, pp. 63-64).

METHODOLOGY

The present study is applied in terms of purpose because it seeks to find answers and evaluate them in relation to the research problem, identifying deficiencies, challenges, and consequently solving them in this field. In terms of research method, this study is qualitative. Qualitative research is a broad term encompassing a set of interpretive techniques that aim to describe, decode, translate, and understand meanings rather than merely quantify phenomena that occur more or less in social settings (van Manen, 1983, p. 9).

Qualitative research is defined as a systematic approach to understanding human beings and their interactions with themselves and their surroundings, representing a holistic method (Polity, 1992). Given that the issue in this study is the formation of the mental image of Tehran metro street vendors through virtual social networks, naturally it involves various definitions, concepts, and descriptions with which the study participants have had different experiences. Therefore, the qualitative method is suitable for addressing this issue and facilitates conducting interviews with the target participants. Likewise, studies on media literacy emphasize that perceptions and behaviors are shaped by a complex interplay of individual experiences, educational interventions, and collective engagement, highlighting the value of integrated approaches to understanding and addressing social challenges (Hosseini, Nosraty, & Tomraee, 2025).

In qualitative research approaches, one of the most conventional methods is interviewing (Ameli, 2013, p. 273). An interview is a method designed to extract a clear picture of the participants' perspectives on the research topic (Mac et al., 2005, p. 29).

Using qualitative research and interviews allows us to become familiar with individuals' mindsets based on what they know, how they think, and their

everyday experiences as much as possible. Considering the responses received, this helps us approach the answer to the research problem.

For conducting this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out over two weeks with 13 Tehran metro street vendors at the field site (the metro). The interview process with the vendors was as follows: initially, the researcher engaged in conversations about the research topic and questions with the vendors working in the metro. After their willingness to participate was expressed, the interviews were conducted.

Following this, the interviews were carefully reviewed and analyzed using common coding methods, including axial and open coding. The main purpose of coding is to break down and understand the text, link the obtained components, develop categories, and organize them based on a chronological order (Flick, 2008, p. 330). In related discussions, scholars have emphasized that systems of classification and interpretation are most effective when they combine foundational principles with adaptive approaches that respond to evolving social contexts and complexities (Siahpour, Bahmanpouri, & Salehi, 2024).

Population and Sampling

The present study investigates virtual social networks and the formation of the mental image that Tehran metro street vendors have of themselves. The population in this research consists of metro street vendors in Tehran who are active at metro stations or inside metro wagons. The sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling.

Based on this sampling method, the researcher contacts individuals who have adequate and relevant knowledge or information regarding the subject under investigation or its aspects (Mohammadpour & Rezaei, 1999, pp. 18-19).

Therefore, individuals selected for the interviews were those confirmed to be street vendors with prior experience of vending in Tehran metro. The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation. In this regard, when the responses given to the interview questions become sufficiently similar and no new data emerges, the number of interviews is considered adequate.

FINDINGS

Gender and Age of Street Vendors

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 Tehran metro street vendors (1 woman and 12 men) aged between 20 and 35 years. The reason for having only one woman among the participants was the lack of cooperation from female vendors due to various reasons, including conservatism and unwillingness to participate.

Education Level of Street Vendors

Regarding education, 5 of the street vendors had left their studies before obtaining a high school diploma, 3 had a diploma, 3 were undergraduate students, and 2 held a bachelor's degree.

Social Networks Used by Street Vendors

Since the subject of this study is virtual social networks and the formation of the mental image of Tehran metro street vendors about themselves, one of the criteria considered for the Tehran metro vendors was their membership and use of virtual social networks. Among these networks, Instagram was the only application used by all 13 interviewees. This indicates that Instagram holds great importance among Tehran metro street vendors and can serve as a critical communication tool for connection, information dissemination, and policymaking related to metro street vendors in Tehran.

After Instagram, WhatsApp, mainly considered a social messenger, was used by 8 participants. The reasons for using WhatsApp include its ease of use and simple accessibility.

Table 1. General information related to vendors

Using social networks	Level of education	age	Name	row
Instagram and WhatsApp	diploma	20	Meysam	.1
Instagram and WhatsApp	Bachelor's student	21	Reza	.2
Instagram, WhatsApp and imo	Below high school diploma	30	Rahman	.3
Instagram	Bachelor's degree	27	Mustafa	.4
Instagram,Telegram and Facebook	Diploma	26	Davod	.5
Instagram and WhatsApp	Below high school diploma	24	ahmad	.6
Instagram, WhatsApp and Telegram	Bachelor's student	23	Ali	.7
Instagram and WhatsApp	Below high school diploma	35	Shirzad	.8
Instagram	Bachelor's student	23	Vahid	.9
Instagram and WhatsApp	Below high school diploma	33	Mohamad	.10
Instagram and WhatsApp	Below high school diploma	28	Mehdi	.11
Instagram and WhatsApp	Below high school diploma	25	Parisa	.12
Instagram	Bachelor's degree	25	Yunes	.13

1. Membership of Tehran Metro Street Vendors in Groups, Channels, and Pages Related to Their Profession

Street vendors, recognized as a social and cultural minority in society, have limited membership in virtual social networks, particularly in groups, pages, or channels related to their profession. Among the interviewees, only two were members of WhatsApp groups with their colleagues, and one person had joined a group with coworkers. The other ten interviewees were not members of any channel, group, or page associated with their profession.

2. How Tehran Metro Street Vendors Obtain News and Information from Colleagues

According to the research findings, Tehran metro street vendors mostly obtain their news and information from colleagues through face-to-face interactions in metro stations. Among the interviewees, one person used Instagram, and another used WhatsApp to acquire news and information about their colleagues. Eleven others mentioned that in-person meetings and conversations in train cars and stations provided an opportunity for information exchange.

For example, Mehdi, 28 years old, said: "We are like ants bumping into each other. You know how ants communicate when they touch? We do the same; we inform each other. For example, someone says, 'Business is better 100 meters ahead, or two stations before or after,' and everyone goes there."

3. Virtual Social Networks That Street Vendors Believe Share Most of Their News and Issues

Nine street vendors believed that Instagram shares more news related to street vendors than other social networks. Among these, one person mentioned Telegram, and two others cited television news alongside Instagram as main sources of news sharing about street vendors. Another person referred to Telegram, and two more mentioned television news as sources for sharing news. This indicates the significant role Instagram plays in disseminating information about Tehran metro street vendors.

4. How Tehran Metro Street Vendors Are Portrayed in Virtual Social Networks

Overall, the portrayal of Tehran metro street vendors in various virtual social networks, as well as in television news (according to four street vendors), has been negative.

• **Street Vendors as a Nuisance:** One of the negative stereotypes is viewing street vendors as nuisances. For instance, Ali, 23, said: "They think we are unemployed or surplus people. That's how I interpret others' mindset. People who have no real job or just found an extra job." Another interviewee, Shirzad, 35, said: "They say street vendors block the way and are always a nuisance."

• **Street Vendors as Beggars or the Poor:** Another unpleasant perception expressed by interviewees is the pitying or sometimes humiliating view held by metro passengers. Reza, 20, said: "In virtual spaces, they mostly show us as poor and unfortunate people." Parisa, 25, added: "They say many of them are unfortunate and helpless, forced to sell on the streets." Mostafa, 27, who sells mobile accessories, said: "Many people feel sorry for us doing this work; some tease or annoy us, but many feel pity. They say, isn't it a shame that these young people are unemployed?"

5. Suggestions by Metro Street Vendors to Improve Social Media Content About Themselves

Given the wave of negative news and portrayals about metro street vendors, they have made various suggestions to improve and correct the negative image in social media content.

• Mohammad, 33, suggested changing the pitying perspective: "I am young, healthy, and working. But what I see, for example, they write 'Street vendors are sinners, buy from them.' It's not like that. I'm a businessman myself and not guilty. If there's any advertisement, it shouldn't be pitying or make us look like beggars."

• Mostafa, 27, suggested better introduction of street vendors to society and said: "There should be a page that introduces street vendors and their products to the public."

• Ali, 23, referring to the education level of street vendors and the entrance of educated people into this field, suggested: "Now, most street vendors are educated. Most sellers you see have a bachelor's or master's degree. This should be represented so that people don't think we are illiterate."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering that large cities serve as hubs for the establishment of companies, organizations, and various institutions, as well as providing diverse economic, cultural, social, and political facilities, it is natural that there is a strong desire among people to live and work in these cities. This attraction to living and working in metropolises such as Tehran, which offer more and better facilities compared to smaller cities, creates a fertile ground for the formation of an informal economy.

The reasons behind the emergence of the informal economy and informal jobs in large cities like Tehran include the high demand from job seekers, the specialization of certain jobs, and the failure of individuals in their previous occupations. These factors push people toward various activities such as flower selling, street vending, and so on.

Street vending, which is one of the examples of informal jobs and the informal economy, occurs in different locations such as sidewalks, markets, streets, metro stations, and more. Street vending in the metro, which today is one of the most common types of street vending in Tehran, is an issue that cannot be easily ignored. Although there is no precise and reliable data on the number of street vendors in Tehran's metro, a relatively short observation tour inside the metro reveals a significant number of street vendors.

From the perspective that metro street vendors remain a minority in terms of occupation as well as cultural and social status, they face various risks and harms such as economic insecurity, health insecurity, conflicts and confrontations with metro officers, and so on. These challenges exemplify a fundamental paradox of governance systems - where attempts to manage risks in public spaces often transfer vulnerability to marginalized groups, mirroring patterns seen in technological systems designed to mitigate organizational risks (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that they constitute an important social group, and how they perceive themselves as street vendors is also of great significance, because their self-perception can pave the way for various individual and social harms. In similar contexts, researchers have noted that technological innovations can serve as meaningful tools to reduce structural barriers and promote well-being among disadvantaged populations, provided that their implementation is accompanied by careful attention to ethical standards, equitable access, and sustained community engagement (Toosi et al., 2025).

According to the findings of this research, the news, information, and issues about metro street vendors disseminated through social media and sometimes television news have a negative perspective. Scholars have observed that the rapid integration of advanced digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, is increasingly transforming how individuals and groups are represented and perceived in virtual environments, with important ethical and social implications for marginalized communities (Toosi et al., 2024). This negativity has contributed to the dissatisfaction of street vendors with themselves and consequently to a negative self-image. Other research has highlighted that integrating advanced technologies like artificial intelligence into professional and educational contexts requires not only technical preparedness but also careful consideration of public perceptions, ethical concerns, and institutional capacities to support equitable adoption (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2021). Metro street vendors have expressed dissatisfaction with these negative portrayals and have suggested improvements in virtual social media content related to themselves, such as organizing their activities, correcting humiliating views, and highlighting positive aspects like their education. In this regard, fostering educational opportunities and continuous learning has more broadly been recognized as an effective strategy to enhance individuals' adaptability, well-being, and sense of purpose, while also strengthening collective resilience against the pressures of rapid social and economic change (Zamani, Hosseini, & Rahmatian, 2024).

Although the present study cannot be generalized to all metro street vendors in Tehran, based on this small sample, it can be concluded that the negative representation and reflection of news and issues related to street vendors damages their self-perception and creates dissatisfaction with themselves and, by extension, with society. Over time, this can lead to individual psychological problems such as reduced self-confidence and frustration, as well as social problems like turning to theft, addiction, and so forth. In this regard, research on workplace and social environments has shown that perceptions of psychological support can play a critical role in mitigating such harms, fostering

resilience, and improving overall well-being even in challenging contexts (Toosi, 2025) These cascading harms exemplify what some scholars term "infrastructural abandonment"—where systemic actors (whether municipal governments or transnational tech firms) outsource the costs of governance instability onto vulnerable populations, creating self-reinforcing cycles of marginalization (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi, & Sharajsharifi, 2025). Like states struggling to maintain sovereignty over AI systems, street vendors lack agency over the very infrastructures that dictate their survival.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of Interest declared by the author(s).

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