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Conference of the Birds: Iranian-Americans, Ethnic Business, and Identity

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Conference of the Birds: Iranian-Americans, Ethnic Business, and Identity

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Abstract

The United States is home to the largest population of Iranians outside of Iran, an immigrant group that slowly emerged over the latter half of the 20th century, spurred by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent unrest in the mid-2000s. This case study explores the Iranian and Iranian-American-identifying population of the United States, with a geographic focus on the Twin Cities metro area in Minnesota. It delves into several key questions: are Iranian ethnic businesses distinct from those previously suggested in ethnic entrepreneurship case studies? And how do perceptions of Iranian-American identity play a role in the development of these businesses? This thesis first makes the case that ethnic Iranian businesses are unusual in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which Iranian ethnic businesses evolve reinforces and develops a potentially diasporic and transnational identity, one based upon specific cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education.

Through ethnographic interviews with Iranians and Iranian-Americans in the Twin Cities and through memoirs written by Iranians and Iranian-Americans, this thesis analyzes the structure of Iranian ethnic entrepreneurship in the Twin Cities and how it differs from structures most frequently suggested in similar case studies. Moreover, it explores how perceived transnational and diasporic Iranian identities, rooted in cultural notions of nostalgia, education, and family, motivate many of the distinctive qualities of Iranian ethnic entrepreneurship. This research is framed by ethnic entrepreneurship and transnational and diasporic identity literatures, and advances both a distinct conception of ethnic entrepreneurship and a reflection on Iranian and Iranian-American identity in the Twin Cities.

Keywords: Iranian American, identity, ethnic business, immigration, transnationalism, diaspora

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*Then [the herald] gave them all a written page and said
That when its contents had been duly read
The meaning that their journey had concealed
And of the stage they'd reached, would be revealed
The thirty birds read through the fateful page
And there discovered, stage by detailed stage,
Their lives, their actions, set out one by one
All that they had ever said or done*

—Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 1984

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the ancient Persian epic poem “Conference of the Birds”, a flock of birds decides to seek out their unknown king, embarking on a long, complex journey. Led by a hoopoe bird through seven different valleys, they ultimately arrive at a mountain peak where they await the arrival of their king, called “Simourgh”, only to realize that they are the leaders: they are the *si mourgh*, or “thirty birds” (Moaveni, 2005, p. 245). It is a poignant metaphor for self-discovery, where the seemingly fruitless journey is perhaps not about a person or a place but about a sense of identity. It is a metaphor sometimes used by members of the Iranian diaspora: seeking a homeland and an identity, yet unable to find either anywhere, they ultimately turn to their own experiences and lives for self-discovery. Stories of identity are told across Iranian communities in the United States, and the diversity of these stories is apparent in the occupations Iranian immigrants choose: from self-employment to large corporations, these choices often reflect a distinct migrant story. Moreover, such decisions reflect the building of a distinct identity rooted in cross-cultural experiences.

The following case study explores the multifaceted manifestations of the Iranian diaspora in the Twin Cities metro area, Minnesota, using Iranian ethnic businesses as an entry point into Iranian identity. It discusses several questions, namely: are Iranian ethnic businesses distinct from those previously suggested in ethnic entrepreneurship case studies? And how do perceptions of Iranian-American identity play a role in the development of these businesses? While Iranian ethnic businesses take some easily categorizable forms, their development and effects are significantly different from the traditional manifestations suggested in ethnic entrepreneurship literature. This thesis first

makes the case that ethnic Iranian businesses are unusual in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which Iranian ethnic businesses evolve reinforces and develops a potentially diasporic and transnational identity, one based upon specific cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education.

This research first introduces the nature of Iranian migration to the United States, and lays out a history and context for the Iranian diaspora. Next it lays out a number of ethnic entrepreneurship and transnational and diasporic identity literatures to establish a conceptual framework. Following this, the thesis delves into the bulk of this case study, exploring the context of the Twin Cities and the methodology of the research, and finally exploring several key themes extrapolated from texts by Iranians and Iranian-Americans and in-depth interviews with Iranians and Iranian-Americans in the Twin Cities. Ultimately, this case study seeks to advance both a distinct conception of ethnic business development, and a reflection on Iranian and Iranian-American identity, taking an unusual approach in its synthesis of identity and entrepreneurship literature and in its focus on the impact, more so than the formation, of ethnic businesses. By focusing on identity, this thesis marks the significance of non-economic motivators in ethnic entrepreneurship decision-making, suggesting the necessity of a broader conception of ethnic entrepreneurship.

History of Iranian Migration to the United States

The United States is a favored destination for Iranian migrants—the US is home to the largest population of Iranians outside of Iran. Iranian migration to the United States is typically discussed as three distinct waves. The first wave, from approximately 1950 to

1979, was spurred by an increase in foreign investment and industrialization in Iran that expanded the Iranian upper- and middle-class drastically, sending ambitious young Iranians abroad for educations supported by the Iranian government and lax travel laws in the United States and Iran (Bozorgmehr, 2007). Most of these migrants fully intended to return home to Iran after completing their education—but their plans were interrupted by the onset of the 1979 revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war. These events made many Iranians abroad unwilling or unable to return to an unstable Iran now run by a religious anti-West regime. Moreover, the 1979 revolution triggered a further outpouring of immigrants, now described as the second wave. The demographic makeup of this wave was different from the upper- and middle-class Persians of the 1950s and 1960s: many more Iranian religious minorities, like Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians who were often of a lower socioeconomic class, fled the country (Emami, 2014). Young men avoiding draft into the war with Iraq were also a key demographic, and by the 1990s, their wives and children were joining them: in 1992, the number of female Iranian immigrants to the United States surpassed the number of males for the first time (Emami, 2014).

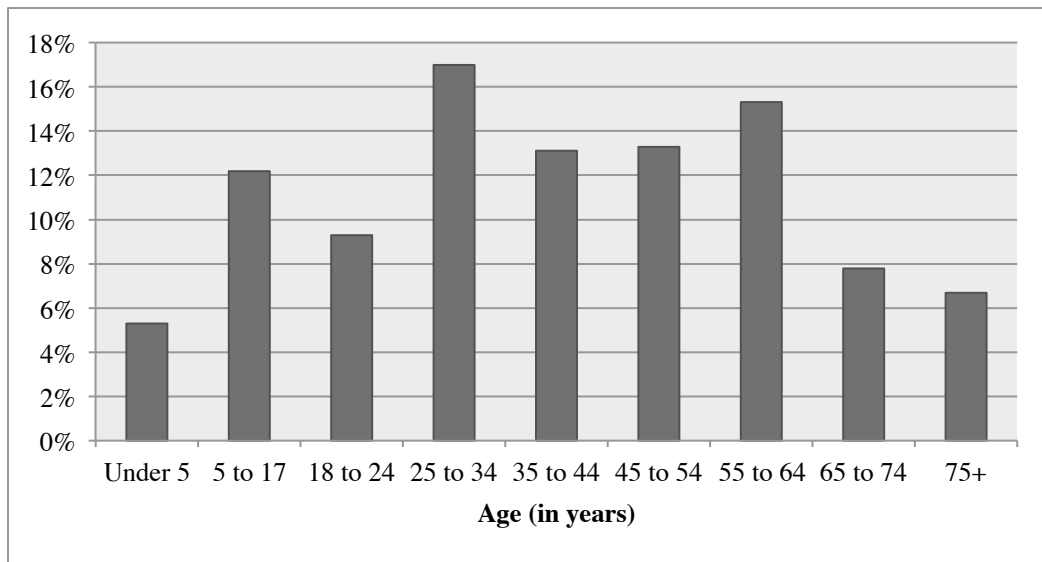
The third wave of Iranian immigration, from 2001 to the present day, was influenced significantly by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The number of Iranians coming to the United States dropped noticeably: between 2002 and 2003, the number of immigrant visas issued by the United States to Iranians dropped from 13,887 to 7,251 (Emami, 2014). Iranians already within the United States were also considerably affected. The number of Iranian cultural organizations and groups skyrocketed as efforts to improve perceptions of Iranian culture began, and advocacy organizations like the

National Iranian American Council and the Iranian American Political Action Committee were established (Bozorgmehr, 2007). An emphasis on “Persian” rather than “Iranian” culture also developed. This shift was primarily an attempt to change the association of immigrants from the highly politicized country of Iran to immigrants from the ancient culture of Persia, though the term “Persian” arguably excludes religious and ethnic minorities who might otherwise be “Iranian”. Even today, many Iranians and Iranian-Americans call themselves Persian rather than Iranian, particularly those who immigrated to the US before 9/11 and their children (Bozorgmehr, 2007). This shift hints at some of the key findings of this case study: namely, the striking divisions in identity among Iranians and Iranian-Americans who have different levels of exposure to today’s Iran.

Iranians in the United States Today

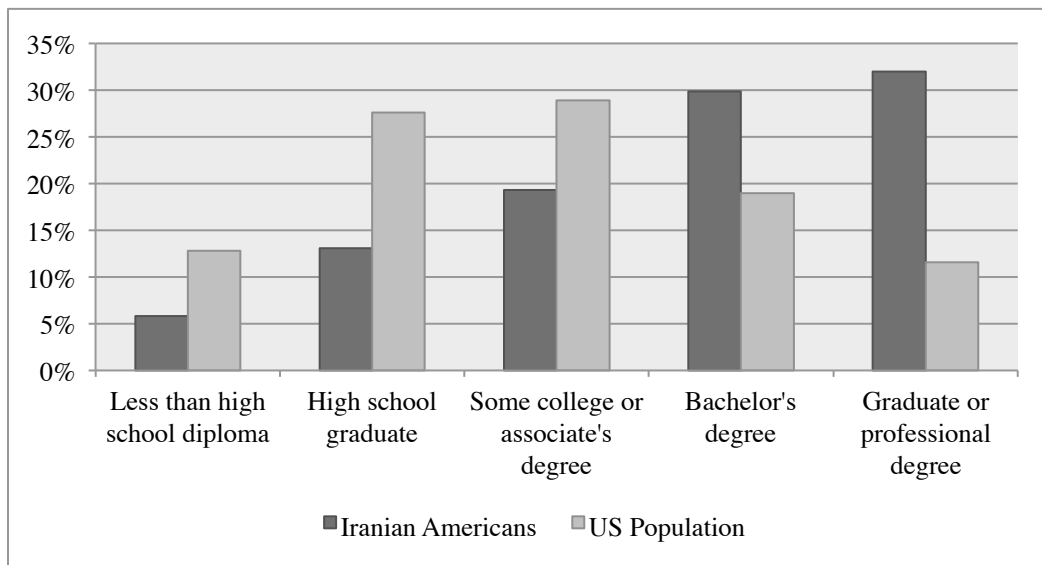
In the United States today, Iranian migrants make up a diverse group. According to the US Census Bureau (2015b), there are 486,994 Iranians in the United States. However, it should be noted that Iranians and Iranian-Americans are historically underrepresented in the American Community Survey and Census: in order to count as Iranian or Persian, Iranians or Iranian Americans must check the “Some Other Race” box and write Iranian, or Iranian-American, or Persian (Bozorgmehr, 2007), requiring residents of Iranian descent to identify actively as Iranian, Iranian-American, or Persian, and mark the survey as such. The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans estimates that there are as many as twice that number of Iranians and Iranian Americans in the United States (Emami, 2014).

Figure 1: Iranian American Age Distribution (US Census Bureau, 2015b)



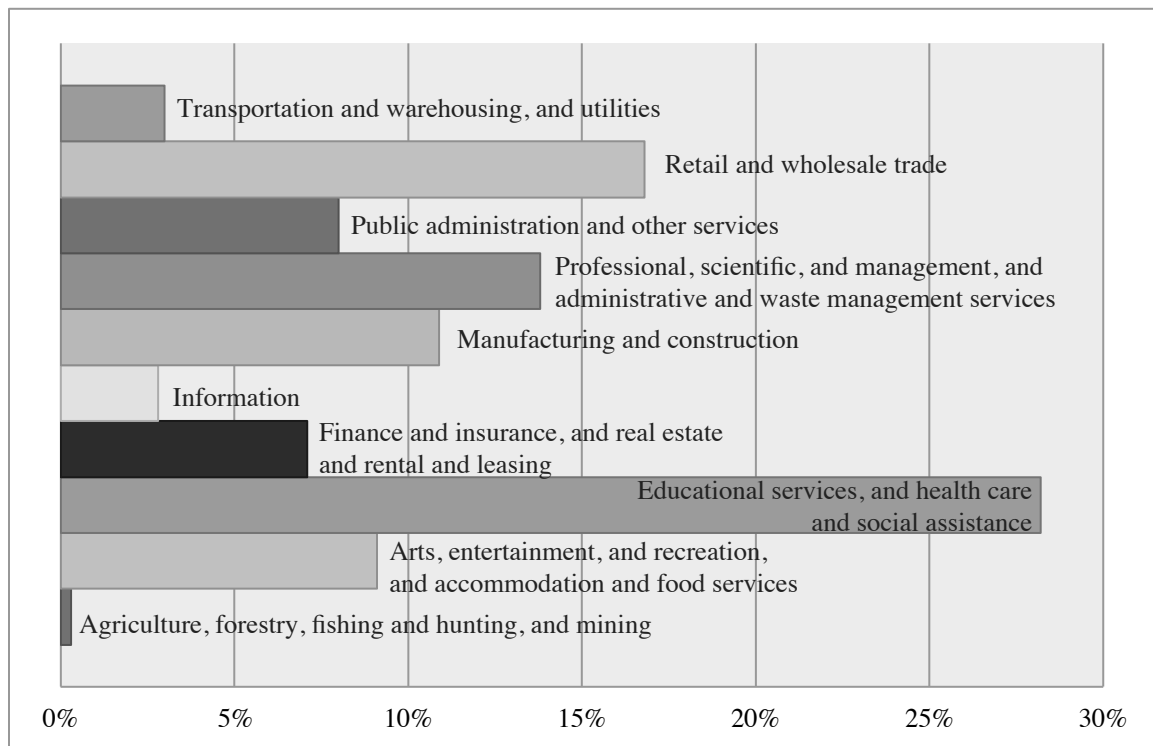
Males make up 52.1% of the Iranian population in the United States, while females are slightly in the minority at 47.9% (US Census Bureau, 2015b). The two largest age groups of Iranian Americans are 25 to 34 years at 17.0% and 55-64 years at 15.3%, representing a large student and young professional population as well as a significantly older population, tentatively representative of the population that left Iran during the 1979 revolution (Figure 1). Given the large population of students, it is unsurprising that Iranian Americans also have a strikingly high level of education attainment, with 61.9% of the population over 25 years having received at least a Bachelor’s degree (Figure 2); in contrast, 30.6% of the US population has reached the same levels of education.

Figure 2: Educational Attainment, Population Over 25 (US Census Bureau, 2015a; US Census Bureau, 2015b)



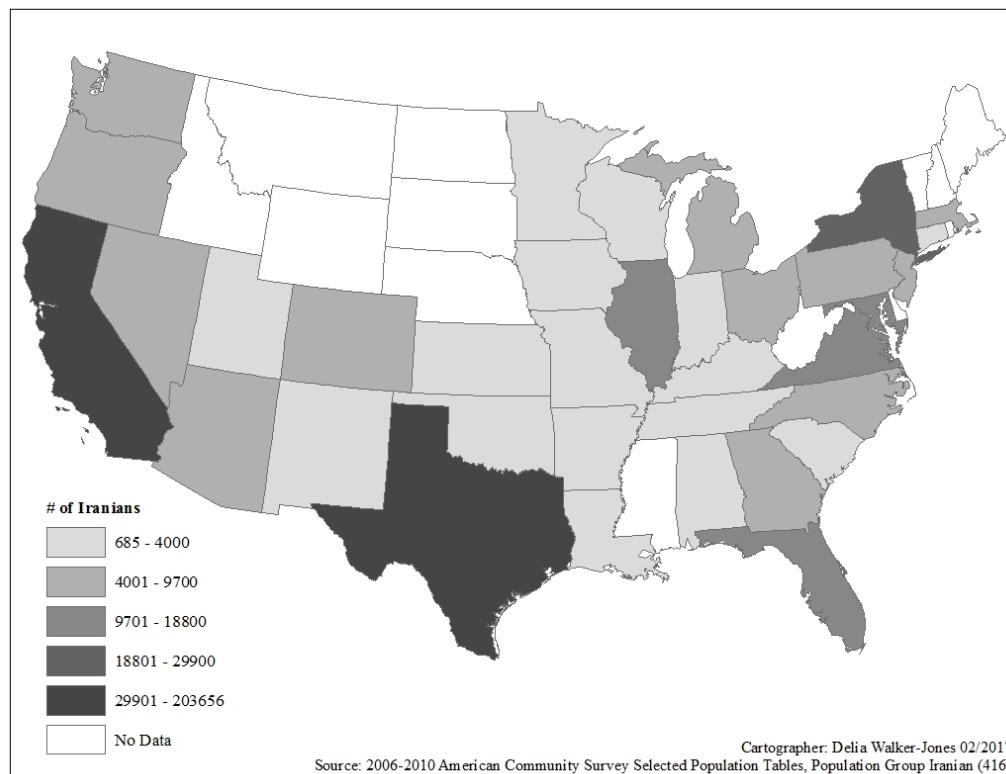
As seen in Figure 3, Iranian Americans work primarily in educational services and healthcare, professional, scientific, and technology services, and retail trade, typically sectors with high skill requirements. Very few Iranians work in the agriculture, information, or transportation sectors. Moreover, the Iranian American population has a median household of \$72,345, notably higher than the US population as a whole (US Census Bureau, 2015b), while their rate of self-employment is also greater than that of the general population: according to the US Census Bureau (2010a), about 22% of Iranians get income from self-employment, in comparison to about 13% of Americans overall. These data present a clear, if simplistic, picture of Iranian American immigrants: a highly educated and relatively wealthy migrant group, successful by many standards. The high rate of self-employment, moreover, was a crucial determinant for this case study’s ethnic entrepreneurship focus, further discussed in Chapter 2.

Figure 3: Employment Sectors for Iranian Americans (US Census Bureau, 2015b)



Today the largest populations of Iranian Americans are found in large urban areas like Los Angeles, popularly dubbed “Tehrangeles”, and New York City (Figure 4). There are also significant populations in Texas, Virginia, Maryland, and Florida, while in Minnesota, the focal location of this case study, there are an estimated 2,467 +/- 481 Iranians. The particularities of this population will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

Figure 4: Iranian American Population Distribution (US Census Bureau, 2010b)



These populations often establish geographically-based communities through festivals and cultural celebrations, Iranian businesses, social groups, and advocacy (Raji, 2010, p. 195). For instance, beginning in 2004, an annual Persian parade is held in April on Madison Avenue in New York City. In Los Angeles, the number of Iranian markets and restaurants located in Iranian districts of the city has doubled over the last ten years (Emami, 2014). These communities and events represent some of the many ways that Iranians in the United States engage with both their host and home cultures.

By contextualizing the Iranian American population in the United States as a whole, we can understand how many of its traits may influence ethnic business development, and through it, identity. Before delving into the case study, however, we must first develop an understanding of ethnic entrepreneurship and identity, rooted in previous research.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

This research engages broadly with concepts of diasporic and transnational identity and closely with theories of ethnic minority entrepreneurship and businesses. While entrepreneurship is often discussed as an offshoot of diaspora or a byproduct of transnationalism (Cohen, 1997; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Vertovec, 2001; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999; Zhou, 2004), this research seeks to ground the reader first in notions of ethnic entrepreneurship and the current conversation surrounding the motivations behind ethnic businesses before delving into broader concepts of transnational and diasporic identity. This approach fosters a natural connection between ethnic entrepreneurship and its potential to reinforce or develop a so-called transnational and diasporic identity, the nuances of which will be discussed.

Ethnic Entrepreneurship

It is important first to highlight this paper's use of the term "ethnic minority entrepreneurship". While this term may not at first glance appear to include migrants, it is in fact a term deeply rooted in the notion of both minority and immigrant populations. According to Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990), ethnic minority entrepreneurship is based upon "a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing a common national background or migration experiences" (p. 36). It is important to note that this definition does not necessarily highlight self-employment, but rather the connections and interactions among minorities or immigrants. In this case study, the population at hand is Iranians and Iranian-Americans living in the United States, a group that comprises both migrants and ethnic minorities, and these two categories are far from

mutually exclusive. Because this population falls with ease into both categories, this conceptual framework delves into the concept of ethnic minority entrepreneurship with respect to both migrant and minority status.

Ethnic entrepreneurship refers to the seeming propensity for certain groups of minorities and migrants to have exceptionally high rates of self-employment (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Waldinger, Aldrich, & Ward, 1990). At first glance, self-employment may appear a simple determinant for entrepreneurship. However, case studies often run into difficulties when estimating the prevalence of ethnic entrepreneurs in the local host country economy, due to the diversity of such marginal groups and their fluid communities (Williams, 2009). While research attempting to quantify ethnic businesses and their characteristics is often inconclusive across studies, consensus on factors that spur the development of ethnic entrepreneurship is easier to find (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 2). The current approaches to ethnic entrepreneurship can be categorized most generally into two different areas of thought: those of “cultural predisposition” and “labor market exclusion”.

Cultural predisposition pulls from a number of other key theories to suggest “ethnic minority groups are endowed with essential cultural traits that predispose them toward entrepreneurship” (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 2). This line of thinking breaks down in several ways. One such component is the notion of social capital: the resources of the marginal community may dispose migrants to entrepreneurship, such as the supply of co-ethnic employees, a ready stream of co-ethnic customers, and access to goods and services unique to the community (Light & Bhachu, 1993).

The foundation for this idea springs from the concept of a migrant network: “migrant networks consist of social ties that link sending communities to specific points of destination in receiving societies. These ties bind migrants and nonmigrants within a complex web of complementary social roles...” (Massey, 1987, p. 139) Migrant networks provide not only sources of social capital, but tangible forms of financial and practical support that are crucial in the formative stages of an ethnic business. Moreover, ethnic businesses provide a critical node in migrant networks for the social structure to develop. Volery (as cited in Marlow & McAdam, 2015) suggests, meanwhile, that the varying levels of cohesion among such networks may correlate with the strength of a group’s inclination towards entrepreneurship: “Asian Americans’ greater adherence to traditional cultural norms and networks, relative to African Americans, whose networks are more dispersed, is seen to explain their greater propensity for entrepreneurship” (p. 112). This approach suggests, therefore, that certain cultural resources and traits among minority groups may dispose different groups to different levels of entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Critics of this approach suggest that it is overly simplistic in its homogenization of minority groups and potentially racist (Marlow, 2015, p. 112). It does not account, for instance, for changes in self-employment among subsequent second-generation migrants, who often opt for high-quality positions outside of ethnic businesses (Thompson, Jones-Evans, & Kwong, 2010). It also fails include an explanation of how pre-existing structures within a host country may affect an inclination towards self-employment.

The labor market exclusion perspective, therefore, takes a far more structural approach. Fregetto (2004) suggests that market disadvantages such as relevant

employment experience and language skills disproportionately affect migrants, which then serve as a barrier to entering the host country labor market. Moreover, structural racism also prevents immigrant minorities from attaining quality employment, and self-employment becomes preferred to unemployment or underemployment (McEvoy & Hafeez, 2007). Ethnic enclaves, the structural approach most commonly associated with geography, suggests the importance of a space designated—whether formally or informally—for a specific migrant population; places like Chinatown in San Francisco or Little Italy in Chicago are popular examples (Wang, 2010). These spaces then serve as a built-in market for co-ethnic customers and employees, in a more concentrated form of a migrant network.

Currently, the most popular approach to ethnic entrepreneurship development combines the previous two methods to explore the development of ethnic businesses as a combination of cultural and structural market factors that work together to create an environment in which self-employment is the best option. An example of this is the mixed-embeddedness analysis proposed by Kloosterman & Rath (2001), who suggest:

We want to understand the socio-economic position of immigrant entrepreneurs by taking into account not only their rather concrete embeddedness in social networks of immigrants but also their more abstract embeddedness in the socio-economic and political-institutional environment of the country of settlement...We also look at the embeddedness of the immigrant entrepreneurs in social networks, but we do this by explicitly relating this to the opportunity structure in which these entrepreneurs have to find possibilities to start a business and subsequently maintain or expand that business (p. 190)

By looking at aspects of both migrant networks and the “opportunity structure” of the host country’s labor market, Kloosterman combines the two approaches to great effect.

Other scholars taking this mixed methods approach include Wang (2010), Thompson, Jones-Evans, and Kwong (2010), and Raijman and Tienda (2003), who conduct case study research. In particular, one benefit of this approach is its applicability to case study research: its flexible nature fits all sorts of migrant and minority groups, while not blurring their differences. By taking into account both the cultural and structural factors at work, this approach encompasses many components influencing ethnic business development without assuming universal explanations.

While these analytical approaches emphasize the importance of ethnic business development, it is important to touch on the nature of entrepreneurship as a concept. The businesses themselves are just as diverse as the immigrant groups that establish them. While notions of ethnic entrepreneurship may conjure up images of “petty traders, merchants, dealers, shopkeepers, or even peddlers and hucksters, who engage in such industries or businesses as restaurants, sweatshops, laundries, greengrocers, liquor stores, nail salons, newsstands, swap meets, taxicabs, and so on...” (Zhou, 2004, p. 1041) ethnic businesses among minorities are not always easily classified. In approaching the notion of ethnic entrepreneurship, and what makes it distinct from other forms of business ownership, Light and Bachu (1993) emphasize its reliance on migrant networks, saying:

...from the point of view of entrepreneurship, some networks are more productive than others...qualitative dimensions of the immigrant network sometimes affect the network's capacity to reconstruct the economic environment in destination localities, and thus affect the capacity of the network to produce the economic conditions for its own magnification and persistence. (p. 42)

The self-perpetuating nature of a migrant network lends itself analogously to a different form of entrepreneurship: social entrepreneurship. Hjorth and Steyaert (2004) define

social entrepreneurship as a “form of social creativity, taking place primarily in societal rather than in business contexts” (p. 3), drawing a parallel, perhaps, between the social nature of migrant networks as building blocks for entrepreneurship and the “social creativity” of social entrepreneurship. An ethnic business, therefore, may be categorized as such through its embeddedness in a migrant network or, alternatively, through its social characteristics, not solely through ownership and self-employment.

To summarize, therefore, the ethnic entrepreneurship literature seems to trend in several different directions: a more human-centric approach that considers the cultural traits and networks of immigrants critical in establishing ethnic businesses, a more structural approach that takes into consideration the outer market forces directing immigrants into self-employment, and the current perspective that combines the previous two to great effect. Moreover, the characteristics comprising an entrepreneur range from a reliance on migrant network to an emphasis on social creativity.

I approach this research, for the most part, from the third perspective described above; I explore factors both within and without, cultural and structural, that members of the Iranian immigrant community perceive to influence the decision to become an entrepreneur. I also explore the nature of ethnic entrepreneurship as a network-based structure, and how that structure lends itself to entrepreneurship in societal rather than in business contexts. However, the crucial divergence of my approach lies in the relationship between ethnic entrepreneurship and perceived Iranian identity. An emphasis on identity forces consideration of not only the development of Iranian ethnic businesses, but also the impacts of these businesses on members of the Iranian-American community. This is one aspect of ethnic entrepreneurship sorely lacking in existing literature, and one

that this case study attempts to address. Identity, therefore, is what drives this approach, and it is through this lens that both the development and consequences of ethnic businesses are addressed.

Iranian Migrants and Entrepreneurship

In order to further this identity-driven approach to ethnic entrepreneurship, I took into careful consideration previous studies by Iranian studies scholars, to examine their approaches to ethnic entrepreneurship among Iranian immigrants. While case studies engaging specifically with Iranian ethnic entrepreneurship are limited, a handful have been published over the last twenty years, primarily focusing on Los Angeles, Canada, and Sweden (Dallalfar, 1994; Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, & Der-Martirosian, 1993, 1994; Moallem, 1991; Mobasher, 2007; Khosravi, 1999; Min & Bozorgmehr, 2000). Most emphasize the cultural resources and predisposition towards self-employment of Iranian migrants, while several make use of a more blended approach that includes structural factors within the host country. For instance, one study notes the Swedish government practice of granting designated *starta eget-bidraget* (start-up business grants) especially for migrants who hope to start their own businesses (Khosravi, 1999).

These studies provided valuable insight into the particularities of Iranian businesses as they function within ethnic entrepreneurship discourse. Among studies within the United States there is a consensus that Iranians are more likely to be self-employed than other comparable groups: according to Light et al. (1993), nearly 60% of Iranians in Los Angeles are self-employed, though admittedly many of the available statistics were gathered nearly twenty years ago. Moreover, Iranian ethnic businesses are

by no means typical in their development: in particular, Mobasher (2007) emphasizes that most Iranian communities do not often follow an enclave settling pattern, meaning that they are not necessarily privy to the same benefits and resources associated with such a geographic designation. Khosravi (1999), meanwhile, emphasizes Iranian perceptions of self-employment, suggesting that Iranian cultural stereotypes about dishonest Iranian entrepreneurs stymie middle- and upper-class Iranian migrants from entering into business themselves, despite its potential benefits. Thus, Iranians in Sweden work to make their businesses more palatable to their cultural values, including changing businesses like restaurants into ventures perceived as more professional, such as computer stores, and adding cultural values to their businesses, like offering language classes or community film screenings. It is clear from these studies that Iranian migrant communities occupy a distinct space in ethnic entrepreneurship research: they do not fit into many of the preexisting hypotheses for why and how ethnic entrepreneurs enter the labor market.

Transnationalism and Diaspora

This thesis argues that some of the notable features of Iranian ethnic entrepreneurship can be explained by synthesizing ideas of diasporic and transnational identity. In order to understand this approach, we next proceed with a necessary foundational understanding of trends in transnationalism and diaspora literature. Diaspora is an exceptionally old term, historically related to the forced migration of Jews in antiquity, while transnationalism was initially conceptualized as a social science term used in academic research, referring to the phenomenon of extensive connections among migrants across national borders and the created spaces that ensue. Both concepts

describe phenomena of migration and arguably “cannot be separated in any meaningful way” (Faist, 2010, p. 12). Thus, in order to understand a diasporic identity and a transnational identity, it is necessary to explore them alongside one another. Though it would be foolish to suggest that the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism are mutually exclusive in a fundamental way, at their most simplistic understanding they are nonetheless inherently different: “diaspora approaches focus on aspects of collective identity, while transnational approaches take their cue from cross-border mobility” (Faist, 2010, p. 21). By exploring the concepts side-by-side, however, we may gain a rich understanding of their relationship.

A transnational identity is one that is defined by dual or multiple identifications with many national, cultural, or ethnic groups (Vertovec, 2001). The concept of transnationalism broadly—and by extension, transnational identity—has undergone many phases of understanding. In the 1990s, after dramatic increases around the globe of migration across national borders, scholars sought to add a new perspective to the assimilation process of migrants, and suggested transnationalism: migrants and their children, rather than fully assimilating or rejecting their new host culture, continue to be active in social, economic, and political structures in their homeland, facilitating the growth of networks that extend far beyond the borders of a host or home country (Portes, 2001; Vertovec, 2001; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999; Faist, 2010). Over the course of the 1990s, researchers began to see transnationalism everywhere, and “new research findings were celebratory, predicting that by living transnationally, migrants could overcome the poverty and powerlessness to which capitalism relegated them” (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 131).

Critiques of the apparent universality of transnationalism surfaced immediately, arguing that the definition of transnationalism was too vague, and that the nation-state system was too important in today's world to disappear so quickly from relevance (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 131). More recent approaches have sought to rectify these gaps, and, similar to the mixed-embeddedness approach previously ascribed to ethnic entrepreneurship, the current understanding lies somewhere between the initial conception and later critiques, rooted in the notion of transnational space: "transnational migration...[takes] place within fluid social spaces that are constantly reworked through migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society" (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 131). These spaces are occupied by both migrants and nonmigrants, because the ideas, practices, and identities that flow among these cross-border social spaces impact the lives of both groups (Levitt, 2001). When applied to ethnic entrepreneurship, transnationalism appears to broaden the potential scope of businesses. Zhou (2004) suggests that by engaging bicultural or bilingual skills and by utilizing resources across national borders in order to develop an ethnic business, migrants may cut across structural barriers and engage more broadly with their host communities as well as their homeland communities, fostering mobility for the second generation.

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain transnational flows and spaces. Vertovec (as cited in Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 132) divides transnational migration into three types of transformation: perceived, conceptual, and institutional. Portes (as cited in Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007, p. 132) distinguishes between those who are formally and regularly engaged in transnational political, economic, or sociocultural activities. It is important to note that this thesis does not follow this particular distinction: it does not

engage with transnational businesses or transnational entrepreneurship, because these terms refer to businesses that have been established across borders, with support for individuals in the home country and the host country. None of the Iranian businesses I explored demonstrated these traits, and thus it was appropriate to direct the case study to other conceptions of transnationalism. Instead, this work engages with scholars Faist (2000) and Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004) in their notion of transnational identity as “a kind of gauge, which, while anchored, pivots between a new land and a transnational incorporation” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1011). Here, a transnational identity is one that is inherently rooted in movement, a “specific mobility know-how” (Faist, 2010, p. 43) that oscillates constantly in relation to the society of the host and home countries. This research approaches Iranian cultural conceptions of education and family through this lens: a movement-based identity inherently rooted in the multiple cultures that have created it.

Next, we explore diaspora. Diaspora is defined by Robin Cohen (1997, p. 26) as a collective group of migrants, dispersed from their homeland in a potentially forceful manner, that sustains a collective imagination and collective memory that underlies much of a dispersed groups’ identities. Diaspora has been conceptualized in a number of ways, but, as Faist (2010) suggests, breaks down into three points: the way the group left, the notion of a return to homeland, and the integration or lack thereof into a host country. In contrast to transnationalism, a diasporic identity is rooted not in movement, but in a collective memory. Though by virtue of the current definition of diaspora all diasporas may be transnational migrant groups, not all transnational communities are inherently diasporas.

The three aspects of diaspora cited above are all subject to a number of different understandings that have changed over time. The first aspect—how the group left their host country—was initially associated with a forced dispersal, as in the case of Jews in antiquity and, more recently, Palestinians. However, the criteria for method of homeland departure has now been broadened to include many types of dispersal, from Chinese trade diaspora to the Turkish labor diaspora in Germany (Cohen, 1997). While a diasporic dispersal may or may not be forced, the nature of leaving must be such that it establishes within the group a collective narrative or memory of that dispersal.

The second aspect, that of how the group conceptualizes its homeland, has also been subject to shifts over the years. Though the initial concept implied a possible return to the homeland (Safran, 1991), the current literature takes a broader approach and describes numerous ways in which a homeland can be conceived in a nostalgic collective memory. Faist (2010) suggests that the notion of return may be replaced by a more transnational perspective through the vast number of social and political ties between a homeland and its diaspora: think, perhaps, of the state-sponsored birthright journeys that Israel grants young Jews around the world, without the guarantee of permanent “return” to the homeland of Israel. This suggests that the emphasis on return has “been replaced by circular exchange and transnational mobility” (Faist, 2010, p. 13). This perception highlights some of the overlap between diaspora and transnationalism, hinting at their inextricable relationship.

Finally, the third aspect of a diaspora refers to how members of a diaspora integrate into a host community. Older notions of diaspora imply that there is a lack of integration into a host country, given the groups’ cultural, social, and political

relationship to their homeland, real or imagined, for assimilation would imply a loss of collective identity (Faist, 2010, p. 13). Therefore, diaspora must be culturally distinctive from their host country. However, perspectives today have shifted to an emphasis on cultural innovation rather than cultural distinctiveness (Faist, 2010, p. 13), again suggesting the implications of a transnational approach, one amalgamating cultural aspects of both homeland and host country.

These recent approaches suggest the nuanced nature of diaspora when it is explored through a transnational lens. On the whole, this study engages with identity according to King and Christou's suggestion (as cited in Faist, 2010, p. 26): "identity as relational, processual, and situational". I do not assume homogenously either a transnational or diasporic identity among the Iranian immigrant population: rather, I explore nostalgia as an aspect of collective memory, and education and family as aspects of cross-border transnational mobility. I hope that by combining aspects of both transnational thinking and concepts of diaspora, I can create a synthesis of Iranian identity that is reflective (though, certainly, not all-encompassing) of its many nuances.

Iranian Migrant Identity

As with ethnic entrepreneurship, it is important to understand the previous approaches of Iranian Studies scholars with respect to identity. Explorations of Iranian identity have centered particularly on media and the impact of cultural trauma, and explicitly refer to different types of identity from diasporic identity to ethnic identity and to exile identity (Kelly, 2011; Graham & Khosravi, 1997; Naficy, 1991, 1993; Mobasher, 2006). Naficy, a leading scholar in his work on Iranian Americans, highlights in

particular how Persian language media in Los Angeles has influenced Iranian-American perceptions of an “exile culture”, one that is rooted in nostalgia (1991). He describes a process of cultural “fetishization of the homeland”, where Persian language media in LA serves as a method of cultural reproduction and establishes a fetishized image of Iran through its depictions of Iranian country life, culture, and romance (Naficy, 1993). This thesis engages with his approach to great affect in Chapter 4’s discussion of nostalgia, though from a different perspective.

Kelly, meanwhile, explores the Iranian diaspora in Sweden and highlights Iranian-focused cultural organizations as a method of engaging with homeland politics, society, and culture. She suggests that the Iranian identity in Sweden is a diasporic one characterized by its high level of engagement with Iranian politics, citing protests in the summer of 2009 after the contentious election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The younger generation of Iranians in Sweden, she says, is “not as restricted as their parents by homeland definitions of who belongs and who does not belong to certain subgroups based on class, ethnicity, or political affiliation” (Kelly, 2011, p. 451). This reflects a more flexible, transnational perspective on Iranian diaspora identity.

Mobasher, meanwhile, highlights the cultural trauma of the 1979-81 hostage crisis and 1979 revolution that he argues caused the “identity crisis” of Iranian Americans. “The...unique transformation of the Iranian ethnic identity, and the emergence of Persian, Persian American, and Iranian American identity among Iranians in the United States have been a response to a double cultural trauma affecting both the home society and the host society” (Mobasher, 2006, p. 100). The “ethnic identity” that Mobasher emphasizes is one that Kelly skims over in her suggestion that such differences are

subsumed by second-generation migrants: the differences among Persian and minority ethnicities, and how, though “Iranian” as an identity may be broader, “Persian” becomes a preferable identity in a host society where “Iranian” has clear negative associations. This contextualization represents a part of a processual identity, one that changes over time according to both host and home country relations. While the distinctions that Mobasher notes may be argued as transnational conceptions, I would argue that the growth of “Persian” as an identity represents the development of a diasporic conception of identity, not rooted in movement, where the instability of a present home country is homogenized by a new imagined homeland: Persia.

These explorations of Iranian identity come to no clear consensus on the diasporic or transnational qualities implied by many practices of Iranian immigrants—the question of identity is thorny, subjective, and situational. These studies highlighted here demonstrate some of the different approaches to Iranian identity, and I hope that by exploring previous perspectives on Iranian identity I may incorporate their findings into a new contextualized relationship between Iranian ethnic businesses and Iranian-American identity.

Chapter 3: Case Study Overview and Methodology

Before delving into the body of this research and its ramifications, it is important to understand some of the underlying demographics of Iranians in Minnesota and the broader context of migrants in the Twin Cities metro area. To this end, I introduce a handful of other case studies on ethnic entrepreneurship in the Twin Cities and give a brief statistical overview of the Iranian population in the Twin Cities metro area as can be determined by available data sources. These sources provide a context for the case study, and quantitatively ground this thesis' primary research. Next, I explain the methods used to gather a substantial body of original research: semi-structured interviews and memoirs. By providing an overview for these methods and explicating their benefits and shortcomings, I hope to acknowledge many of the potential limitations of the conclusions drawn in this thesis and to encourage a broader perspective through further research.

Migration in the Twin Cities

The Twin Cities metro area is a popular location for studying migrants and migration patterns. As a mid-sized city with many resources, the Minneapolis and Saint Paul area is often a destination for new immigrants and refugees to the country, and has strong support networks for these populations. As early as 1976, Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia established a strong foothold in Minnesota, the community in the Twin Cities second in size only to Fresno, California (Kaplan, 1997, p. 220). In the 1990s, meanwhile, populations of Somalis and other East Africans began trickling in, further establishing Minneapolis and Saint Paul as a common mid-sized location for refugees and other immigrants (Yusuf, 2013). With large populations of Southeast Asian and African

immigrants, there is no shortage of case studies about migrant groups and the ways in which their communities develop (Kaplan, 1997; Guthe, 2006). There have been several case studies conducted in the last twenty years about ethnic entrepreneurship in the Twin Cities, typically about different groups of Asian migrants. Kaplan (1997) discusses the ethnic enclave nature of the Indochinese community in the Twin Cities, while emphasizing its limitations in developing a full-fledged ethnic economy. Guthe (2006) highlights the atypical nature of Asian ethnic businesses in the Twin Cities, and suggests using transnationalism to reconceptualize Asian ethnic entrepreneurship. This thesis certainly confirms some of these previous findings, in its focus on the distinct nature of Iranian ethnic businesses, but uses different methods from previous research.

Iranians in the Twin Cities

There are small pockets of Iranians in the Midwest, mostly in Chicago and the Twin Cities. Following the United States-wide trend of settling in large urban areas, the Iranians in Minnesota have settled primarily in the Twin Cities metro area. It is important to note that these populations in the Midwest settle broadly across their respective urban areas and do not appear to follow an ethnic enclave pattern, limiting the opportunity for ethnic business incubation referenced in Chapter 2. The Twin Cities are not a hotspot for Iranian immigrants: according to the US Census Bureau (2015b), the population of Iranian-identifying people in Minnesota as a whole is 2,467 +/-481, while the population of the Twin Cities metro area is 2,187 +/-471. However, as previously discussed, there is a strong possibility that this number is greater. Others estimate that there are around 3,000 Iranians and Iranian-Americans living in Minnesota as a whole

(Regan, 2009). When asked, my interview subjects gave estimates ranging from 200 to 5,000. There are a few notable traits of Iranian Americans in the Twin Cities that are found in US Census Bureau data (2015b): the median age of Iranians in the Twin Cities is 29.6, +/-5.6 years, indicating a young population. The median household income is \$80,109, higher than the median income of Iranian Americans in the United States as a whole. 49.9% of Iranian Americans in the Twin Cities are US citizens born in the United States, indicating a strong presence of second-generation Iranian-Americans. These numbers, though small, begin to create a multifaceted profile of Iranian Americans in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metro area.

The Iranian student population at the University of Minnesota is also important to explore. According to the University of Minnesota (2015), there are 89 Iranian students presently enrolled, one of the top ten contributing countries to the international student population. Virtually all of these students are enrolled in graduate programs; Iran ranks fifth as a contributor of international students to the University's graduate programs. The number of students has increased since 2013, when the first Annual Statistical Report was made available—at that time there were 76 Iranian students. However, because many of these numbers are small, it is difficult to emerge with a clear picture of how much Iranian students contribute to the overall Iranian population.

Yet the insular nature of the Iranian community in the Twin Cities makes it all the more fascinating, and there are nonetheless a number of cultural Iranian clubs and organizations in the Twin Cities, from PSOM (Persian Students of Minnesota) to PEYVAND (Iranian Association of Minnesota) and ICH (Iranian Culture House). One particular Persian restaurant and market, Caspian Bistro, is often referenced by Iranians

as a center for Persians in the Twin Cities. Its location is convenient and easily accessible, right near the University of Minnesota Minneapolis campus.

The Iranian population in the Twin Cities is politically active, at least in one faction: during the contentious 2009 elections in Iran in which incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won handily despite questions of fraudulent votes, protests were held outside the Hennepin County Government Center in support of the protests in Tehran. They were organized by a handful of Iranian biology and physics professors at the University of Minnesota (Regan 2009). The organizers of these protests discouraged the participants against showing support for any one candidate in Iran during the protests, because of possible contentious politics among the Iranians in the Twin Cities. This choice on the part of the organizers is an interesting indication of the nature of Iranian identity in the small Twin Cities community—because it is so small, political differences that might be more striking in Iran are muted.

Apart from the population of students and professors at the University of Minnesota, there is also a strong contingent of older families, some who have been in the area for a long time along with their children, as I discovered in my initial explorations of the population. The proprietors of the Persian market Caspian Bistro, for instance, a pair of older brothers, are well-established figures in the community and have been in the Twin Cities since the 1970s. My interview subjects cited the Twin Cities suburbs of Eden Prairie, Edina, and Brooklyn Park as the most popular locations for older Iranian families to settle. These suburbs have median incomes of \$97,640, \$88,298, and \$62,974 respectively (US Census Bureau, 2015c). The high median incomes of Eden Prairie and Edina in particular reflect the high economic status of Iranians in the Twin Cities overall,

mirroring the broader trend of wealthy Iranian migrants across the United States as referenced in Chapter 1.

Though the number of Iranian-run businesses in the Twin Cities is not large enough to be counted in US Census Bureau data collection, their diversity is striking. According to my interview subjects, there are a handful of significant Iranian-run businesses in the Twin Cities area, including (but not limited to) the Persian market and restaurant Caspian Bistro, a Mediterranean restaurant, a lighting company, and several car dealerships. The Iranian community in the Twin Cities is an approachable population for a case study, and the diverse Iranian-run businesses in the community serve as excellent examples of ethnic businesses.

Methodology

This case study engaged primarily with qualitative methods, a strategy appropriate for an in-depth analysis of a group without many substantial quantitative sources, as demonstrated by the sparse US Census Bureau data described above. The number of Iranian Americans in the Twin Cities is small enough that data is not often scaled in a way appropriate for this analysis or has significantly large margins of error. The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, or PAAIA, is one of the few organizations oriented towards collecting data on Iranian Americans, and, as they explain on their website, they do not collect data scaled by individual states or urban areas, but through generalized phone surveys, and their surveys are focused primarily on policy and political attitudes of Iranian Americans (Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, 2016).

The Minnesota State Demographic Center collects extensive data on entrepreneurs and business owners in the Twin Cities, some synthesized from federal government sources like the Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs or the Survey of Business Owners and some collected independently. The federal sources often have many of the same drawbacks as the US Census Bureau data in that they do not provide a distinct category for Iranian racial categorization, while the independent datasets adopt similar racial categorization, making it difficult to distinguish Iranian business owners from other ethnic minority entrepreneurs. Thus, in order to gain a full picture of the Iranian community and its ethnic businesses within the Twin Cities, it was necessary to employ qualitative methods.

This thesis utilized a mixed-methods approach, using primarily textual analysis and semi-structured interviews to capture a detailed picture of Iranian ethnic business and identity. Through semi-structured interviews, I developed a picture of Iranian businesses in the Twin Cities and their development and effects and created a substantial body of qualitative data for analysis, with a focus on the stories of Iranians and Iranian Americans and their nuanced relationships with Iranian ethnic businesses and Iranian identity. However, because the number of Iranian-run businesses in the Twin Cities is small, I elected to do additional research beyond the limits of Minneapolis-Saint Paul. Therefore, through textual analysis of memoirs I compiled a body of reflections on Iranian business networks and Iranian identity in the United States.

The primary method of data collection for this thesis was semi-structured interviews, conducted with self-identifying Iranians and Iranian Americans around the Twin Cities. Over the course of six months, I conducted 19 interviews. These interviews

were then transcribed and analyzed through coding methods, using detailed analytic codes to extrapolate themes for the intersection of ethnic business and Iranian identity. References to family, education, and nostalgia arose most frequently around references to Iranian-run businesses, and thus I derived my analysis of Iranian identity through references to these themes throughout the interviews.

My initial subjects were recruited through interactions with Iranian cultural organizations and businesses in the Twin Cities. I attended numerous Iranian cultural events, including an annual Nowruz (Persian New Year) dinner and monthly film screenings, and distributed flyers to interested participants, also leaving copies at the Persian market Caspian Bistro. I recruited further subjects using the snowball technique, asking the participants if they had friends or connections that might be interested, and contacting them through phone, email, and Facebook (Hay, 2005). Interviews were advertised as lasting 30 to 45 minutes, and typically lasted approximately 35 minutes, with one as short as 18 minutes and some as long as 60.

Few samples are perfectly representative of their population, and undoubtedly there were voices missed in interviews, but this case study managed to identify a diverse set of perspectives. There was an equal mix of gender among interview participants, with nine female-identifying participants and ten male-identifying participants. Age varied from 20 to 78, with a mode of 34 years. Many of the interview participants were students and young professionals in the Twin Cities, attending the University of Minnesota as graduate students or working in high-skill jobs. Several were male business owners, running a diverse collection of businesses. A number were professional artists, established in the Twin Cities arts community. Most were born in Iran, and had been in

the Twin Cities for at least five years, with several who had been in the Twin Cities for twenty to thirty years. A number were second- or third-generation Iranians who were born in the United States, with parents who arrived in the Twin Cities in the 1970s and 1980s.

The primary specification for selecting subjects was their self-identification as Persian, Iranian or Iranian-American, a categorization that drew from recent Iranian migrants to second- or even third-generation Iranian-Americans and long-term first-generation Iranian migrants. Initially, I focused on recruiting participants who defined themselves as “regular customers” of Iranian businesses, but found that subjects were often hesitant to describe their patronage at such businesses as regular, and were less interested in describing businesses and more interested in describing their own experiences. Thus, I opted to modify this specification in order to draw more participants, and instead included “experiences with Iranian business” in my recruitment process as a topic of the interview rather than a requirement. In order to compensate for this modification, I chose to gather much of my explicit information about Iranian businesses in the Twin Cities through landscape analysis and participant observation. I limited my business-explicit interview questions, and instead explored in depth implicit perceptions of ethnic businesses.

The limitations of this method of research are varied. My sample was made up primarily of people under 50, while the mode length of time in the United States was five years. It seems likely there is a lack of perspective from older Iranians who have been in the Twin Cities for a long time. This may be attributed to my recruitment methods: by using the snowballing technique, I often found the friends and peers of young

professionals and students, rather than older demographics. This technique additionally may suggest an oversampling of the student population. It also seems likely that the number of second-generation Iranian participants was disproportionately small to the number of second-generation Iranians in the Twin Cities presented in the US Census Bureau data (2015c). This is perhaps due to my criteria of self-identification as Iranian or Iranian-American: some second-generation Iranian-Americans may feel removed enough from Iran that self-identifying as Iranian is cursory. Additionally, the US Census Bureau data reflect participants under 18, whom I was not able to interview. While there are limitations to my methods, I hope that rigorous analysis and reflection on those limitations sustains the bulk of this case study. The additional exploration of memoirs also contributes to a better understanding of the Iranian American population as a whole.

For my second method of data collection, I read a total of four novel-length memoirs and three anthologies of short pieces written by Iranian Americans about their experiences in the United States. These works were chosen with several criteria in mind: they were written by authors who identified as Iranian or Iranian American, they were autobiographical reflections on the lives of their authors, and they explored to a large degree life as an Iranian in the United States. Several popular Iranian diasporic works were not included under these criteria, notably Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, because they do not take place in the United States or primarily focus on experiences in the United States, respectively.

Two of the self-contained memoirs explored were *The Rose Hotel: A Memoir of Secrets, Loss, and Love From Iran to America*, by Rahimeh Andalibian, and Galareh Asayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and American*, both written by women born

in Iran who came to the United States as young children. The other two, Firoozeh Dumas' memoir *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*, her article *Supermarket Zerangi*, and Azadeh Moaveni's memoir *Lipstick Jihad* were written by second-generation Iranian-Americans, born to parents who came to the United States in the 1970s. I also explored three collections of short pieces, which included interviews, essays, and poetry. Zoreh T. Sullivan's edited collection *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* gathered interviews from many different Iranian immigrants, most of whom were a part of the first wave of Iranian migration, during the 1950s and 60s, while the collections *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* and *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans*, both edited by Persis Karim, focus on the Iranian immigrants of the 1970s and 80s.

The purpose of this textual analysis was to extrapolate an image of Iranian American experiences with identity and businesses in the United States. To analyze these texts, I selected passages where Iranian-run businesses were referenced, then explored the context of these passages and their intersections with perceived identity. By delving into sources from a variety of times and places, it was possible to create a synthesis of Iranian identity in the United States and its relationship to Iranian ethnic businesses. Based on the themes of the interviews, I focused again on family, education, and nostalgia in developing my analysis.

One of the primary limitations of this method of research is its prepared nature and, in the case of my sources, its lack of male perspective. Because these memoirs are edited and compiled with perhaps unclear intention on the part of the authors, there is a danger of interpreting a particularly coded message, an imperfect method for the

purposes of this analysis. Moreover, all the complete memoirs of my sample were written by women, while the collections of short stories contained only brief perspectives from men. Part of this selection was unintentional: the vast majority of the body of Iranian diasporic literature is written by women, and the handful of memoirs written by men were not appropriate to my criteria. Persis Karim's introduction to *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* states (2006):

On more than one occasion, I have been asked why so few Iranian men in America have been published. Perhaps...they have been too busy becoming engineers and doctors to write poetry and memoirs. But it is more likely that the dramatic increase in the number of women writing and publishing outside of Iran is an outgrowth of Iranian women's specific experience; they have felt compelled to respond to the view of Iranian women purveyed by both the Islamic Republic and the Western media. (p. xx)

Her reflection suggests some of the potential hidden voices in the Iranian American population, and indeed, all of the Iranian business owners in the Twin Cities with whom I interacted were male. Though this case study does not address this gender gap directly, I hope that by selecting memoirs written primarily by women I may shed light on some of the gender dynamics at play in ethnic Iranian entrepreneurship. While some of my female interview subjects were engaged in unconventional entrepreneurial activity, the memoirs provided some access to the perspectives of spouses and relatives of male Iranian business owners, voices I was otherwise unable to access in my interviews.

Though it may seem unorthodox to include memoirs from a broader population in a case study, I would argue that in fact a broader context is often important in case study research, as it provides implications for populations beyond the local one explored. I also

hope to mitigate some of the limitations of the interview process by including these additional perspectives from Iranian Americans around the United States. By utilizing all these resources to their greatest extent, I establish a solid body of research for analyzing the three key themes: nostalgia, education, and family. Over the next three chapters, I delve into these themes.

Each chapter will first establish the importance of each concept among the Iranian Americans comprising my research body before delving into their respective relationships to ethnic entrepreneurship and identity. I open with nostalgia. I argue for two distinct manifestations of nostalgia among Iranian Americans: first, in the formation of ethnic markets as one specific brand of ethnic entrepreneurship, and second, in the development of arts-based networks and businesses for visual and musical artists, catering to both Iranian and American audiences. These two forms of ethnic entrepreneurship demonstrate the complexity of a diasporic and transnational identity at work. Next I move to education, and I argue for two particular interactions between ethnic business and education practices: first, an older generation of Iranians electing to become entrepreneurs late in age; second, the current influx of Iranian graduate students, divided by their approaches both to education and to businesses. These two interactions highlight the unique conception of education among Iranian Americans and how significantly it influences a potential transnational identity, one based in socioeconomic status and an identity narrative. Finally, I discuss family, first exploring how a family-based identity among entrepreneurs spurs the development of community-centric ethnic businesses and next arguing that these ethnic businesses have the potential to reinforce family-based identities among their customers, demonstrating some aspects of the

complex relationship between family and entrepreneurship. Ultimately, these three chapters seek to prove that ethnic Iranian businesses are unusual in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which these ethnic business develop have the effect of reinforcing and developing a diasporic transnational Iranian identity, one based upon notable cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education.

Chapter 4: Nostalgia

Defining Iranian-American Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, 2001, p. xiii), and is a key aspect of a shared diaspora identity. Hamid Naficy, a Media Studies scholar and leading specialist of Iranian American studies, uses this concept of nostalgia to argue that Iranian media forms—from poetry to music videos—and other kinds of cultural products represent a kind of nostalgia through a “fetishization of the homeland” (Naficy, 1991). He explores how Iranian nostalgia manifests itself through Persian poetry, music videos, and cultural products, like handicrafts, souvenirs, and foods. Naficy argues that there is a “fetishization”, or commodification of Iranian products that is in response to the fear of losing a homeland forever. In his own words (1991): “...it is against the threat of such a loss [of homeland] that the nostalgic past must be turned into a series of nostalgic objects, into fetish-souvenirs that can be displayed and consumed repeatedly” (p. 289). Because of nostalgia about the place they or their families have left behind, he suggests that Iranians consume and commodify cultural products that represent that homeland, which may or may not exist in the form they perceive. I argue that the development of some kinds of ethnic businesses may be a part of this process of commodification that Naficy describes. However, in my research there alternatively appears to be a pushback on this sort commodification that certain ethnic businesses may engender: Iranians who negatively perceive the nature of such nostalgia-based businesses tend, it seems, to recreate their own type of ethnic entrepreneurship that explores nostalgia very differently.

Across the interviews and in the memoirs, there were many examples of nostalgia and how that nostalgia influenced the formation of ethnic businesses. It appeared that nostalgia influenced Iranian American entrepreneurs in two distinct ways: first, in the formation of ethnic markets, catering to both Iranian and American customers, and second, in the development of arts-based networks and businesses for visual and musical artists, again catering to both Iranian and American audiences. While these two types of entrepreneurship may appear quite different, they both represent the development of a nostalgia-based identity, one that plays closely into the notion of a diasporic identity and transnational identity, respectively. This chapter first establishes two apparent types of nostalgia: Naficy's product-based nostalgia and a more place-based nostalgia, correlated to different stages in the development of a diasporic identity. It then delves into ethnic markets and the many experiences of their Iranian American customers, explaining how these customers perceive ethnic markets using cultural products as a development of place-based nostalgia or a more pragmatic nostalgia. Finally it explores reactions against this sort of nostalgia, and how, among those who react most strongly, there is an alternative nostalgia promoting the creation of a new kind of ethnic business.

Importance of Nostalgia Among Iranians: Product- and Place-Based

References to a wistful nostalgia occurred throughout the memoirs and interviews with Iranian-Americans in the Twin Cities, with references to clothes, foods, and culturally specific Iranian goods. In Tara Fatemi's poem "My Fifties-Theme Birthday Party" (1999, p. 51), the narrator, a second-generation migrant, references her interest in traditional Iranian clothing, after shunning the notion as a child: "ten years later/.../I pull

an Iranian housedress from the pile/my mother laughs as I/gush over the rich colors and intricate beads/*it's tacky, you don't want it*/I rub the fabric and see a seamstress in Iran/sewing each bead with care, with precision". Here we see both the commodified nostalgia that Naficy suggests as well as an underlying contrast between the perceptions of first- and second-generation migrants. While the mother doesn't view this object as valuable, for the narrator it represents a piece of a familiar but distant culture, and conjures up images of a homeland that is reflected in the handiwork of the dress, just as Naficy suggests; the narrator is unwilling to rid herself of an object that represents what she perceives to be lost. The mother, meanwhile, who moved to the United States at an earlier time, is less drawn to this cultural product, calling it tacky. This suggests there is a process to nostalgia, and hints at the formation of diasporic identity: those closer to the experiences of the homeland may be less likely to attach meaning to certain cultural products, because they are more familiar with the nature of such products. Those more removed from cultural objects, however, may make strong associations between the homeland and certain objects, perhaps as a reflection on the collective memory represented by these objects; this suggests the reproduction of a cultural diasporic association.

The interviews completed for this research, meanwhile, offer examples of more recent Iranian immigrants reflecting on their nostalgia. One young man, a five-year US resident, said, "When I think of this [movie], 'Fireworks', it's about the last Wednesday before the New Year begins, and people are celebrating with some fireworks...It's one of the most nostalgic moments for me. This movie very well pictures those moments for me" (10/14/16B). This reference to film, though in a different form, recalls Naficy's

thesis on media as the creation of exile culture, “meant to investigate how exiles process, through the popular culture and television programs they produce and consume, their own experiences of separation, liminality, and incorporation...” (Naficy, 1993, p. xvi)

Here, the cultural image that ‘Fireworks’ produces connects the interviewee to his remembered homeland. He feels nostalgic about the images of the place he referred to as “home” throughout the interview. However, I would argue that film, perhaps, represents a different sort of cultural product from the housedress referenced in Fatemi’s poem. The interview subject emphasized that “Fireworks” is directed by a famous and critically acclaimed Iranian director, and that the film is ascribed cultural value in Iran as well as the United States. By having this duality of value in both places, my participant seems to conceptualize this film and others similar to it as representations of middle-class life in Iran, rather than a cultural product in of itself. This nostalgia seems to be focused on the place, rather than a reproducible product of the homeland.

Other Iranians who had come to the United States in the previous five to ten years similarly cited place-based phenomena rather than products as their fondest memories of Iran. One said, “Some things you miss the most are the smells...A paved road and it’s dusty and you’re watering it or watering plants and you get some of it on the road and it gets the smell...or the smell of fresh-cut grass. Like the smell of the food...even the pollution.” (9/13/16). These strong tactile and olfactory experiences tie these newer migrants to their homeland. This hints at the development of a slightly different nostalgia among recent immigrants: one that is place-based rather than connected to products.

Ethnic Markets and Nostalgia

The notion of product-based nostalgia appears to be particularly at play in the ethnic markets run by Iranian-Americans, catering to both American and Iranian customers. An ethnic market here is defined as an ethnic business specializing in cultural products, primarily food in this analysis. Second-generation Iranians tended to express positive or ambivalent feelings towards Caspian Bistro, the Persian ethnic market referenced in Chapter 3, stating that they went to the restaurant fairly regularly for meals but went to the market somewhat less often, and typically with their older Iranian parents (7/22/16, 10/13/16, 9/23/16). They cited their attraction to the place as a combination of family, atmosphere, food, and convenience factors, each highlighting the longevity of the business—it has been around since the 1970s, according to one participant (9/23/16)—and remarking, “my parents know the owners” (10/13/16). The impact of these ethnic markets seems to be the reinforcement of a product-based nostalgic diasporic identity.

Of my participants, the only one who spoke with seemingly open enthusiasm about the food of the restaurant was a second-generation Iranian-American-identifying student, who said, “...Their food is really good I think personally. And...having that when I’m in my apartment with my roommates...you know, I’m not going to make Persian food every day, so just kind of having the reminder of home I guess, in a food way” (7/22/16). Another second-generation student, who self-identified more as American than as Iranian-American, also spoke positively, though less enthusiastically, about the food in the restaurant: “I think my parents make better food, but their [Caspian Bistro’s] food’s pretty good too. So...if I ever want kebabs I just head down there, it’s right there” (10/13/16). These two opinions reflect, it seems, both a product-based

nostalgia on the part of the customers and the importance of ethnic markets as a place for promotion of that nostalgia.

The first respondent is relating her experiences of home, growing up in the Twin Cities in what she describes as a Persian household, and she relates her consumption of food at an ethnic business to experiences from her Persian household. It is up for question, it seems, whether the participant connects her home life in the United States to a lifestyle in Iran. However, later in the interview, she makes the connection between a Persian lifestyle and this Iranian-focused business explicit, saying: “The setting [of Caspian Bistro] is a Persian vibe, there’s portraits on the rugs. That’s such a typical Persian thing, there’s a bunch at my house too. The food gives a Persian feel to it...the market area, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the way the pistachios and meat and stuff is placed is kind of like in Iran, I think that’s what they typically look like” (7/22/16). Here, the participant makes a series of connections: first connecting the rugs, cultural products displayed at Caspian Bistro, to her own house, and then suggesting her house is representative of typical Persian characteristics. Then she connects the display of cultural products like pistachios to displays in Iran, suggesting that Caspian Bistro is representative of an Iranian space. This relates to several ideas. First, this participant’s observations reinforce the notion that Iranian ethnic businesses specializing in culturally specific products and services often make use of nostalgic products to create a seemingly Iranian space, something suggested by Khosravi (1991) and Naficy (1991, 1993). Second, her words may imply the development of a nostalgia-based identity: rooted in her appreciation for the products and goods of this Iranian ethnic market, this participant recreates her home life, though not necessarily an Iranian life, through her consumption

of Iranian products. She has developed a specific conception of Persian culture based upon her family's lifestyle in the United States, and even expresses uncertainty when comparing Caspian Bistro directly to Iran, saying, "I think that's what they typically look like" (7/22/16). She is reflecting both the product-based nostalgia and place-based nostalgia of a processual diasporic identity: rugs, foods and other cultural products represent a product-based nostalgia, and within the context of an ethnic market, they suggest the creation of an Iranian space, and this participant certainly perceives Caspian Bistro as such. She is using the collective notion of a Persian space to reaffirm her own identity as an Iranian.

The second respondent in this example, meanwhile, who says, "I think my parents make better food, but their [Caspian Bistro's] food's pretty good too. So...if I ever want kebabs I just head down there, it's right there" (10/13/16), highlights the convenience of the ethnic business, while not dwelling on its connection to a Persian culture or Iranian heritage. This suggests an alternative manifestation of a nostalgia-based diasporic identity. For this participant, though her home life may be a more suitable representation of Iranian food culture, the convenience of Caspian Bistro's food serves as an appropriate substitute. She does not actively seek out the business for nostalgic reasons, but finds its location appropriate. This may represent a more pragmatic manifestation of a product-based nostalgia. Rather than connecting her home life in the US to a broader image of life in Iran, she views her experience as Caspian Bistro as a convenient substitute for the goods that she misses most. For her, things like kebabs are a part of her identity regardless of their relationship to an imagined homeland. Another interviewee, a recently naturalized American citizen who has been in the US for about a decade, expressed a

similar sort of pragmatic nostalgia, saying, “Caspian [Bistro] I always go for the rice, and tea...those are the two staples...oh bread too. Sometimes...they have quince which I love” (10/15/16). Again, this participant does not relate the goods from this ethnic market directly to a lifestyle in Iran, but rather sees them as essential aspects of her lifestyle here in the United States. Both of these participants represent, perhaps, an alternative way in which an ethnic market may impacts its co-ethnic customers, particularly those who identify more strongly as Iranian-American, by reinforcing a diasporic identity rooted in the pragmatic consumption of nostalgic goods.

Alternative Nostalgia: Professional Arts Entrepreneurship

While a handful of interview participants were strongly to moderately enthusiastic about the food and atmosphere of Caspian Bistro, a majority of participants were not explicitly laudatory of the business. One said, “Their food isn’t that great. They try to do Iranian food but it’s not that good” (9/13/16), while another said, “I like some of the things over there, but not everything there...I think it’s not completely authentic” (3/27/16). A few participants mentioned how expensive the market was, saying that they often opt to go to Holy Land, a market run by Lebanese owners, to purchase similar products (9/13/16, 9/22/16). These mixed reviews came most frequently from Iran-born immigrants who had moved to the United States in the last ten years. Based upon these interviews, it appears that ethnic markets, while perhaps an important player in developing a diasporic identity for some Iranians in the United States, are not uniform in their impact. It seems, however, that perhaps more recently arrived immigrants, ones with a more distinct conception of Iran today, may be disposed to access their nostalgia for an

Iranian homeland in alternative ways to ethnic markets. One demographic of participants, primarily Iranian arts professionals around the Twin Cities, highlighted one possible way that Iranians engage with nostalgia and establish a more transnational identity, while also establishing one another in a distinct style of ethnic entrepreneurship.

There are several examples throughout the interviews of participants articulating first their desire to better understand Iran, and subsequently, expressions of entrepreneurial collaboration in order to further that understanding. One woman, a musician in the Twin Cities who has divided much of her life between Iran and the United States, emphasized her use of Persian literature and musical traditions in her own work, saying:

...Right now I'm dedicating a lot more time to making my own music and my own sound and finding people around the Twin Cities...who...are willing to try out the things that I want to try. I'm very interested in lyrics, and I think Persian music for me is very strong because it's very much intertwined with Persian literature. I focus on that quite a bit. But I also constantly love to learn new things, so I'm learned a new Iranian instrument...called *kamancheh*, spiked fiddle...it's kind of like a violin but it stands on the ground and turns...And it's been great because... you see new things that you never really would have if you didn't play that particular instrument. (9/22/16)

This participant expresses an alternative way to engage with Persian culture, in a way that is not perhaps nostalgia, but rather using instruments and literature as a lens with which to see her own work and identity. She articulates how playing a Persian instrument she is unfamiliar with grants her the ability to "see new things". Most importantly, the ways in which she involves aspects of Persian culture like literature help her to create her own

sound, an apparent development of a transnational identity: by using aspects of Persian culture and collaborators in the Twin Cities, she is establishing a sound for herself rooted primarily in her own individualized experiences in the United States and Iran, amalgamating aspects found in each place.

Another participant, an Iranian studying art who has been in the US for two years, expressed a sentiment similar to this woman, describing what he calls a “cultural horizon”:

[The] ...cultural horizon...defines who we are...and since I have moved to America, the idea of immigration has been added...in terms of how immigrating to another country can shift your perspective about...your identity and what happens when you...try to reorient yourself into a new language, a new culture...it's totally a new horizon in terms of epistemological understanding of who you are...how you are received in the host culture, and in the circle of your countrymen...it just totally changes. In Iran [my art] was mostly about the society...[what] the Iranian people are experiencing on a daily basis in terms of their relationship with the government, their resistance against what government wants...I need[ed] to move away somewhere that I [could] freely express myself. So that was the reason actually we decided to do that move. And we still...even now we revise that, it's a decision that is continuous in our life. (10/16/16)

Similar to the previous respondent, this participant is expressing nearly explicitly his development of a transnational identity: how his understanding of himself has shifted since coming to the United States and the changes that this has wrought upon his artwork. His attempts to understand these changes reflect some of the many ways in which Iranians attempt to understand their new existence in a foreign country. The “cultural

horizon” he refers to expresses the ways in which he has accessed new aspects of an American culture that was previously unknown to him. He also describes his decision to move as a continuous process, a phrase that ties deeply into the notion of transnationalism as rooted in movement: an identity that is constantly in flux. I would argue that this expression and the previous participant’s words may express a sort of alternative nostalgia. Unlike the second-generation participants, these two respondents utilize aspects of Persian culture in their work in order to further an understanding of themselves. Their reflections on Persian musical instruments and the resistance of Iranians against the Iranian government imply that these individuals use Persian products and places in order to further their understanding of their identity, rather than as a reinforcement of conceptions of a homeland.

Among these respondents, namely professionals in the humanities recently arrived from Iran or with significant experience living in Iran, there were frequent examples of how this desire to understand a transnational identity transitioned into a network-based type of entrepreneurship. One woman, now working to be the co-owner of a gallery in Minneapolis, expressed eloquently the challenges of establishing a business, saying:

I just applied for a job and then I started working here [at the gallery], so [I was] just a basic employee. But now I get to the point that it’s a little overwhelming and terrifying at the same time, but now we have the option where we can find another space, so [name of the gallery] can survive, and it will be [business partner name] and I who would come back. And it’s just the funding and how to manage it is just something that we are trying to figure out, but probably not as a commercial gallery anymore...as a nonprofit or artist-run gallery. Otherwise I think commercial[ly] we failed. (10/15/16)

Though the participant did not view her employment with the gallery as successful, she is trying to continue the business under a different designation. By establishing herself with a partner and considering options for a new manifestation of the business, this participant appears to be engaging in an unusual sort of ethnic entrepreneurship. She wants the gallery to survive as part of a non-profit or artist-run gallery, highlighting its importance not as a commercial venue but as an artistic identity: she wants to keep the name of the gallery to “survive”, indicating her investment in the enterprise as a cohesive entity. Commercial success, often considered to be a key aspect in keeping ethnic entrepreneurs in business, is not as relevant to her; rather, the identity and notion of the gallery itself is, though she finds the prospect “overwhelming”. Her desire to continue with the artistic venture, so that the name and distinct identity of the business will be maintained despite commercial failure suggests that the establishment of a new alternatively nostalgic identity contributes to the development of these notable manifestations of ethnic businesses.

A second example of this sort of network-based business spurred by identity comes from the musician earlier quoted. She describes her relationship with one of her collaborators as a musical one, but then elaborates how she has invested in their relationship and employed him to help with her own projects:

The whole thing with [fellow Iranian musician] started with—there are these two other wonderful [Iranian] artists...they had a show down at [name of gallery], in downtown Minneapolis, and they were looking for musicians, and they had [fellow Iranian musician] and I both in that show, so we ended up having to play together. And it was great, you know, the spark was there from the get-go and it felt great to play with him, and then I had a few shows in NY and DC, so I flew

him out to come and play...and then ever since whenever opportunities have come up I've had him. (9/22/16)

In this selection, the participant highlights a number of things. First, the strength of the network that establishes this collaborative relationship is apparent. The gallery referred to here has a show with two Iranian artists, who then recruit two Iranian musicians to play with them. This woman then establishes a collaborative relationship with the other musician, based upon their spark together. She interacts with him beyond a social relationship, investing in flying him out to shows and playing with him at other opportunities. I would argue that this represents a kind of ethnic entrepreneurship in its reliance on migrant network relationships and economic investment. Moreover, it is a creative relationship that furthers the development of a transnational identity, suggesting that the process of understanding aspects of a new transnational identity plays a role in the development of these unusual forms of ethnic entrepreneurship.

It is important to note, however, that these participants did not perceive themselves as entrepreneurs, but rather as artists. This interpretation of their activity as entrepreneurial may not be appropriate in some contexts. However, I would argue that the ways in which many of these participants utilized their migrant network in order to gain autonomy in their professions represents a type of entrepreneurship, and an important aspect of ethnic business. These small "businesses", so deeply embedded in the network of Iranian-Americans in the Twin Cities, represent both a notable way in which an Iranian-run ethnic business may develop and the influence on identity on the creation of these particular businesses. These unusual businesses are similarly represented in the following chapter on education.

These examples demonstrate the many nuanced ways in which nostalgia, manifested in ethnic businesses, often supplements a diasporic and transnational identity. By playing into the notion of cultural products, ethnic businesses reinforce an image of Iran that may or may not be in conjunction with the reality of Iranian life. This is one notable aspect of Iranian-American-run ethnic businesses, particularly markets that sell specifically Persian-related goods. Moreover, an alternative nostalgia, one that supplements a more transnational identity, appears to be at play when establishing Iranian-American artists entrepreneurially in the creative world. These different notions of nostalgia and entrepreneurship all contributed in complex ways to a heterogeneous, in-motion diasporic and transnational Iranian-American identity, just as education, which shall be discussed subsequently, represents one further method that Iranian Americans adopt in order to develop a seemingly transnational identity.

Chapter 4: Education

Just as nostalgia takes on a distinct flavor when analyzed from an Iranian American perspective, so too does education. It is a conclusion that seems apparent based on the demographics of the Iranian population in America: education is highly valued among Iranians, and the high education levels among Iranian immigrants correlate to a significantly higher median household income than most other migrant groups in the US.

The memoirs and interviews in this research certainly contribute to this understanding of education in Iranian culture. It appears that there are two different ways that education interacts with ethnic businesses. First, there is the apparent pattern of members of an older generation of Iranians electing to become entrepreneurs late in age, well after their education in the United States has permitted them a steady white-collar high-paying career. Additionally, there is the current influx of Iranian graduate students, divided by their approaches both to education and to businesses in their perceptions of their own socioeconomic status and their personal education. These two interactions represent two ways in which Iranian Americans appear to use education to develop a seemingly transnational identity: as a method of establishing a high socioeconomic status and as a method of furthering personal knowledge. This chapter first demonstrates how education serves as a method for establishing high socioeconomic status and for furthering personal knowledge. Next it delves into two interactions between education and ethnic businesses, looking at how each interaction correlates to one of these uses of education, ultimately establishing a seemingly transnational identity.

Perceptions of Education Among Iranians

First, it is important to establish that for many Iranians, education—and the socioeconomic status that accompanies it—is a key part of their identity, and, alternatively, education is a way in which Iranian immigrants are able to understand their identity. These approaches to education break down in two different ways: first, as a method to improve one’s socioeconomic status by attaining a high-prestige job like doctor or engineer, and second, as a method for understanding one’s own transnational identity. In *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America*, Gelareh Asayesh describes her parents’ experiences trying to regain their education: “It was in 1970 that both my parents received letters of admission to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Baba in the School of Public Health, Homajoon in the School of Library Science. For my parents, it was the realization of a dream” (Asayesh, 2000, p. 62). This in of itself is exemplary of how important education is for Asayesh’s parents: it is the “realization of a dream”. Next, she describes how her father struggles to regain the prestige and social status that he held in Iran:

Baba...had social stature...he was a doctor—the most prestigious profession in Iran...That road brought him to an American living room decorated in peach and orange, where he stayed up late at night studying for an endless series of medical certification exams, conscious that his competitors were young men and women fresh out of medical school...All those exams, which he failed seven times before finally winning the right to practice medicine in America. All those blows to his identity he endured without complaint... (p. 117)

Within this passage we can see numerous aspects of the impact that education has on the narrator’s father, the primary one being his social stature as a doctor, the “most

prestigious profession in Iran”. In an attempt to regain his identity, rooted in the prestigious position he had in Iran, Asayesh’s father is forced to reorient himself to a low-status identity, the beginning in the process of developing a transnational space. Asayesh describes him in an American living room, considering his own position as an older man pursuing education. This represents one way in which Iranians may perceive education, and the socioeconomic status and prestige that comes with it, as rooted in identity, in a way that is forced to change when confronted with new institutional structures.

A second way that education is perceived to be crucial to an Iranian identity is described in *Lipstick Jihad*: “Within two years I was totally immersed in the Middle East...fascinated to discover that the Iranian Revolution had historical roots and wasn’t a conflagration designed primarily to upset my family’s social caste. In the process of all this academic probing, Iran was demystified—it became a subject I could learn about on my own, a civilization that I could approach from whatever direction I chose” (Moaveni, 2005, p. 28). Here, rather than playing a role in socioeconomic status, education is how Moaveni is able to approach her dual Iranian-American status. Here, in an example of an alternative conception of transnational identity, she is able to shift her gauge from her adopted home country—the United States—and reconceive what she perceives as her true home country, Iran. Moaveni ultimately adapts a truly transnational perspective and moves to Iran for a time, where she finds herself yet again recalibrating her gauge. But within this particular passage, we see how Moaveni adapts her education to establish her identity, changing her perception of her own family’s movement-based identity. Here Moaveni is highlighting the crucial value of education for her—she is able to assert autonomy over what she learns and to engage in “academic probing”. Both Asayesh’s

father and Moaveni are using their education to assert a changing identity, and though their perspectives are different—one rooted in social status and the other in creating an identity narrative—they are both representative of how crucial many Iranians perceive education to be.

Entrepreneurship After Education

Some of the key trends in the memoirs and interviews included the decision to become an entrepreneur after extensive education and high-paying positions, how independent students felt in choosing their education, and the division between humanities students and engineering students. These trends represent some of the ways in which education interacts with ethnic entrepreneurship, and reinforce a potential conception of transnational Iranian identity, one that reflects both the notion of socioeconomic status and an identity narrative as described above.

Though the decision by older men to engage in ethnic entrepreneurship was not a dominant trend (due, perhaps, to the potential under-sampling of this demographic), in the interviews there were a handful of cases of older Iranians engaging in entrepreneurship after long careers in other fields. An interview with one business owner proves a striking example. He came to the United States as a student in the 1970s, which, he states, was an easy time for Iranian students to come to the United States. He worked for a number of local Minnesota companies as an engineer before moving to another Midwestern city to work as an engineer for a railroad company (12/11/16). Yet despite this long career as an engineer working for American companies, which he described in positive terms, three years ago he elected to open a technology installment businesses. He

emphasized that many of his current employees and business partners are family members or other Iranians who are all engineers or business majors, stating that highly educated students are “building blocks” of Iranian society. The participant highlighted that he believed strongly in the mission of his business, saying that the environmental benefit of his installation company spoke for itself, and that they used little marketing when their business began. He also emphasized that while initially the business’ customers were fellow Iranians, they were able to move on to “bigger better things” as the business grew: they expanded to American customers.

For this participant, entrepreneurship was an alternative to the status his education granted him, and it provided an opportunity for him to develop a distinct vision and cause not rooted in Persian culture. Electing to open a business after a long engineering career seems an unorthodox choice, given the literature’s current line of reasoning in the choices that lead to ethnic entrepreneurship, as described in Chapter 2. However, by hiring fellow Iranians but expanding his customer base to Americans and large businesses, this respondent draws from the “building blocks” of educated Iranians to establish himself as a purveyor of environmentally-friendly technology in the United States. He is using Iranian values of education to establish a broad message in the United States, though his message is not inherently Iranian. This suggests the development of a transnational identity. Because he is using Iranian values of education to create his business, he is able to temporarily assume what he considers a lower-status position, as demonstrated by his “bigger better” phrase, and ultimately let his message of environmentalism speak for itself in an American context.

This participant demonstrates a few ways in which education and entrepreneurship interact: the participant appears to posit education and entrepreneurship again one another, suggesting his entrepreneurial endeavors as an alternative to his high-status education. He speaks of his career as an engineer positively, emphasizing his achievements and suggesting that he feels fulfilled by such a position; but for him, entrepreneurship is a separate goal from the socioeconomic status and fulfillment that his career as an engineer has afforded him. Moreover, the relationship between education and entrepreneurship appears to allow Iranian businessmen, older men, in this case, to establish a transnational identity based upon values from both Iranian and American cultures.

The STEM/Humanities Divide and Perceptions of Autonomy

Next, it is important to discuss one perceived gap among different students getting degrees at the University of Minnesota. Nearly every student I interviewed mentioned the differences between Iranian students in STEM fields—primarily engineering—and Iranian students in humanities or social science fields. These alternative approaches to education appear in some ways to correlate with alternative approaches to professional development and entrepreneurship. While many recently arrived Iranian students in STEM-related fields expressed a certain amount of acquiescence in their choice to attend University of Minnesota, other recently arrived students in humanities fields appeared to express a certain level of autonomy in their decision to go to University of Minnesota.

Engineering students, by far the largest demographic of Iranian students at the University of Minnesota, typically in graduate or post-graduate programs, often

expressed their decision to come to the University of Minnesota as driven by the application process and financial opportunities. This is likely driven by the challenging visa and application process: one participant, who has been in Minnesota for many years and seen many students come and go, noted that the student population has a “hard time” because of the visa process (12/11/16). Many engineering students stated their process of coming to the United States very simply, saying, “Like many other grad students, I applied for a PhD to come here to college. And fortunately I got the admission and came here” (10/14/16B), and “...just a regular frequent story of how Iranian students are here. So I got my Bachelor in engineering in Iran and then right away after I got my degree I applied for my PhD program in lots of states and here I got fully funded from the U of M, so I chose to come here for the PhD program” (9/29/16). This participant even mentions how common she perceives her narrative to be.

When asked how Minnesota became the location of choice, one respondent said, “Actually the results of the applications. It was sort of the best way I could come” (10/14/16B), suggesting the almost arbitrary nature of the Twin Cities for Iranian students. And the trend extends further back to other locations in the Midwest, to the stories that second-generation Iranian-Americans tell about their parents, saying, “...My father and my mother, when they got married...before the Islamic Republic revolution...my father was looking for grants and funding to get into graduate school. Back then, they had distinguished students awards, and my father got a scholarship to come to the United States and go to Iowa State University and got his PhD in civil engineering there” (9/22/16). However, this story is slightly different in that this participant emphasizes the meritorious aspects of her father’s decision to come to the

United States as a “distinguished student”, perhaps highlighting the changing attitudes of Iranian students today in comparison to the first waves of Iranian immigrants.

It seems today that many Iranian students in the engineering field perceive the places in which their applications are accepted and for which funding is granted as somewhat based on a luck of the draw, rather than a self-motivated decision for them. This suggests the nature of the Twin Cities as a seemingly haphazard location for Iranian students, excluding those drawn here by family (this demographic will be discussed in the following chapter). These quotations suggest notions of both a transnational and a diasporic identity. First, there are positive phrases attached with the ability to come to the United States: “fortunately”, “fully funded”, and “distinguished student”. These phrases suggest a positive perception of education, and also reinforce the perception of high status and prestige that those who become engineers or doctors hold in Iranian society, as top students with funding. Yet their perception of their own context within the United States—and the Twin Cities specifically—appears less clear, indicated by the seemingly arbitrary nature of selecting the Twin Cities. It seems that these participants are adjusting their perceptions based on both their home and host country cultures, adapting their transnational gauge: they are confident of their status as future engineers, but less so of their presence in the Twin Cities. Similarly to the father described in Asayesh’s *Saffron Sky*, they are adapting their perceptions of themselves in the United States, directly engaging in developing a transnational identity as they recalibrate their perception of their socioeconomic status. Additionally, there is one participant’s suggestion that her narrative is a common one, suggesting a collective narrative, aligning with the notion of a diasporic identity. The alternative implications that the Twin Cities have for the

development of a transnational identity are fascinating to parse out, and may be better understood by looking at the transition from engineering students to engineering professionals.

This seemingly happenstance way of choosing school in Minnesota, in contrast to many Iranians who came here through family connections as will be subsequently described in Chapter 6, appeared to correspond to the methods of engineering professionals for finding a job in the engineering industry. When asked about how they found their current position, the engineering professionals that I interviewed expressed their decision in ways similar to students, and none seemed to express inclinations towards entrepreneurship. One participant said, in the context of beginning a new job in LA before coming to Minnesota, “I have a friend who told me they had a company, they needed a civil engineer...one week after I moved, I started my job. So I had to have a plan” (6/14/16). His use of phrases like “they needed” suggests a pull on the respondent perhaps unrelated to his personal plans, while his emphasis on his short transition time and need to have a plan seem to indicate a decision based more on the job than on personal preferences, though because his position was in LA, it is impossible to apply its implications to the seeming arbitrary nature of the Twin Cities. However, in response to a question about finding his position, another engineer described a more autonomous decision process, saying, “Through the U...I found an internship through the U at...[name redacted]. And then once I had that I applied online, with [name redacted]” (9/13/16). This attitude reflects, perhaps, the conflicting development of a transnational identity at work: this second participant, who seems comfortable navigating his environment at the University of Minnesota, is also secure in his knowledge that as an

engineer, his career progression will come naturally, asserting both the status that an engineering education brings and the confidence of navigating a foreign infrastructure.

Neither of the participants mentioned conventional methods of entrepreneurship—such as opening a business—or less conventional methods of entrepreneurship, such as the networked-based approach referenced in Chapter 4. The potential for this network-based entrepreneurship, meanwhile, appears to be limited. Both of these participants commented on the high number of Iranian coworkers in their workplaces. The first respondent described his relationship with one older Iranian colleague, saying, “once in a while I go to his home and there are a lot of friends coming over” (6/14/16), suggesting a personal relationship outside of work. The other respondent, however, said, “Job-wise, there are Iranians in my workplace, but I don’t work with them...I have a lot of [Iranian] friends. I’ve never worked with Iranians...” (9/13/16). While both have professional connections to other Iranians, only one participant describes any sort of relationship with them, and even then says he goes over only, “once in a while”. This suggests perhaps a less well-linked network of Iranian engineering professionals, which may relate to the lack of ethnic entrepreneurship among this demographic of Iranians in the Twin Cities. It is possible that a lower perception of autonomy and lesser degree of professional interconnectivity results in a lower rate of ethnic entrepreneurship. Alternatively, however, perhaps the apparent assertion of status through education as an engineer, closely tied to a transnational identity, serves as an equivalent to self-employment, mirroring the case of older Iranian entrepreneurs.

Students in the humanities and social sciences, meanwhile, a demographic that appears on the whole to perceive themselves as more autonomous in their decision to get

the education that they want, are also, as discussed in Chapter 4, seemingly more likely to engage in entrepreneurship, even if they don't view it as entrepreneurship. While there are far fewer Iranian students in these fields at the University of Minnesota, among those interviewed were many expressions of educational autonomy:

It was very difficult for someone who did not have a background in philosophy in North America [to get a Master's], so I did my Master's degree—two Masters' degrees—in philosophy in England. And there I felt that the structure I had no framing...I was supposed to do research right away. So I looked up places where the PhD had a lot of training involved, more coursework, and the PhD program here was course work for three years. So that was one of the main reasons I decided to come to US...and also the philosophy department here has a pretty strong philosophy of math and logic program, so all together it was good. So it was a few factors, family and work. (10/14/16A)

Here, the participant's decision to come to the United States is highlighted as such: a decision based upon the program, rather than a case of the application process or funding driving her. The structure of the program and her actions in looking up one that suited her all suggest a certain level of autonomy in choosing her education. However, it must be considered this participant also had the draw of family in coming to Minnesota, which contributed to her decision as well—the impact of family will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6. Ultimately, however, it is important to note that this participant framed her move to the United States as a decision and not as “the best way I could come” (10/14/16B). The implications of this framing indicate the development of a transnational identity based on education, much as described in Moaveni's description of

her own education: by taking charge of her own intellectual development, this participant is able to use education to redefine herself in the context of a new country.

A second participant, a naturalized US citizen, emphasized a similar intellectual process in choosing her own Master's program, saying, "...since I got my BFA it was very successful, I got a grant and started working rigorously and made lots of works, got lots of shows...but I got to the point that I had the need to know more, so I applied [to the MFA program], that's the only way to get that" (10/15/16). Again, here the decision is made by the participant in order to further her own intellectual development and suggests the use of education as a means with which to better understand a transnational identity. While her status as a naturalized US citizen certainly impacts the autonomy of her decision, and should not be ignored when compared to Iranian citizens who come as students in other disciplines, nevertheless her perception of her decision-making process as one to further intellectual development indicates strongly a transnational approach to identity.

A third participant expressed something similar, though his words are given nuance by the statements of other interview subjects. He says, "My wife goes to school here as a graduate student....we went to graduate school, we got accepted in the same program, sculpture, and then after two years [my wife] decided to change school and go to a different kind of school with a different kind of emphasis on art, and that was the end of my second year, so ...she would come here and start over in the MFA program..." (10/16/16) This statement, though it expresses independence on the part of the participant's wife in that she chose to go to a new program, also contrasts a different participant's offhand comment, which, in referring to the same person, described this

woman's move to Minnesota as a result of receiving a fellowship from the University of Minnesota (9/22/16). This may suggest that the autonomy implied by this first participant may be perceived rather than actual, and is complemented by a similar statement from an engineering student, who said, "...Most of the people who I know here are engineers, because I guess that there's a better job market for engineers here. But it's very competitive for students of other majors to get here" (10/14/16B). Again, this statement seems to suggest that these expressions of autonomy on the part of humanities students may be more expressions than actualities, or based on preexisting relationships and statuses. Regardless, the perception is what is most important, and seems to correlate to the same unusual style of entrepreneurship discussed in Chapter 4. All the participants cited above were involved, in some way, with the artistic event one participant described previously: "...there are these two other wonderful [Iranian] artists...they had a show down at [name of gallery], in downtown Minneapolis, and they were looking for musicians, and they had [fellow Iranian musician] and I both in that show" (9/22/16). This quotation bears repeating, for it demonstrates the strength of this network and the investment—economic and otherwise—involved in such an entrepreneurial endeavor.

Based on these findings, it appears that education represents a clear strategy among Iranian American in developing a potentially transnational identity. Whether through the socioeconomic status that comes through education or through the potential for an identity narrative that education offers, education proves to be a significant factor in influencing transnational thinking. This is demonstrated through the different ways that Iranians perceive education interacting with ethnic businesses. Where entrepreneurship represents an alternative to educational status, or perhaps where perceived autonomy in

educational choices correlates to a tendency for network-based entrepreneurship, different approaches to self-employment connect strongly to education and the transnational identities tied to it. Moreover, both this chapter and the preceding chapter point to the alternative entrepreneurship of network-based professional artists. All these factors support the notion that ethnic Iranian businesses are unusual in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which Iranian ethnic business develop have the effect of reinforcing and developing a diasporic transnational Iranian identity, one based upon specific cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education.

Chapter 5: Family

Families and Migrant Networks

As discussed in Chapter 2, one recurrent argument for the development of ethnic networks is the idea that migrant networks play a definitive role in the development of ethnic businesses, by way of its structural support. Frequently, these migrant networks are sustained and created through kinship bonds. Ram argues (as cited in Masurel, Nijkamp, Tastan, & Vindigni, 2002):

...Social networks comprising the community and the family play a major role in the operation of ethnic enterprises...The family is externally a means of overcoming racial obstacles in the market, but internally it is a flexible source of labor and a means of managerial discipline. (p. 243)

Because families are part of the basis of a migrant network, they are crucial in providing a social structure upon which migrant entrepreneurs can develop their businesses and employ co-ethnics—including family members, reaffirming and furthering the migrant network. Thus family structures support minority entrepreneurs, and minority-owned businesses then serve to reinforce and develop that family structure in a variety of economic and social ways. This structural societal support and subsequent reinforcement is often cited in discussions of ethnic entrepreneurship as the key role of the family (Ram, 1994; Light & Bhachu, 1993; Masurel et al., 2002).

This case study certainly supports the notion of the role of family in providing a social and economic structure upon which to develop a business. However, where this research departs from the current conversation about the role of family in establishing ethnic businesses is the evidence that family plays a more nuanced role than simply a social network from which to pragmatically launch minority entrepreneurs, and that

ethnic businesses not only support and develop the migrant network familial structure, but they also serve to reinforce a family-based potentially transnational identity. These two facets of the relationship between family, ethnic entrepreneurship, and identity contribute further to the premise of this thesis: the notable nature of ethnic Iranian businesses, and the nuanced ways in which these ethnic business develop establish and reinforce a diasporic transnational Iranian identity, one based upon distinct cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education. This chapter first briefly lays out the role of family as structural support, then delves into its alternative role in supporting a family-based identity. I then discuss this family-based identity as a method for developing community-centric ethnic businesses, and finally, the role of ethnic businesses in supporting the subsequent development of family-based identity, representing the complex, circular relationship between ethnic entrepreneurship and family.

Family-Based Identity as Foundation for Ethnic Entrepreneurship

Family was a frequent theme throughout many interviews and memoirs, both in the context of a social support structure and in the context of a more nuanced role as a basis for identity. Many of the Iranian-run businesses in the Twin Cities are run by families, or were started due to different family members. Caspian Bistro, for instance, is run by several brothers, and employs additional members of the family. One interview participant, the owner of a car dealership, had been given his business by a brother-in-law, who had moved on to a different job (4/12/16). Another interview participant, the owner of a local business, said that he makes an effort to hire family members, and currently employs a nephew and several other relatives (12/11/16). In the memoirs

throughout there are many mentions of businesses that are supported and sustained by family members: “Baba, with Hadi [his son] working alongside him, had initially been successful in his new business selling carpets and Persian rugs. “ (Andalibian, 2015, p. 199). This evidence, in its breadth across both the memoirs and my interview subjects, appears to support the notion of family as structural support for entrepreneurial activity. One man’s business came directly from a member of his family, while Andalibian’s father, working with his son, had achieved commercial success in working together. Much of this case study supports the notion suggested by Ram (as cited in Masurel et al., 2002): that family, often as a part of a migrant network, plays a strong role in establishing minority entrepreneurs. In turn, however, there are several more nuanced roles to consider: first, how family may provide support for entrepreneurs in other ways, perhaps developing a more community-centric model of ethnic entrepreneurship, and second, how these entrepreneurial endeavors then affect their co-ethnic customers. Both these alternative roles may be tied back to a family-based identity, which in turn, appears to be one possible factor of a transnational identity.

Outside of this more conventional context described above, family appeared as a factor in reinforcing individual identity, meaning that, within the context of their families, Iranian migrants were able to assert an identity in the role of caretaker, sibling, or contributing child. This assertion of Iranian identity within the context of a family adds nuance to the idea of family support for ethnic entrepreneurs in several ways. By developing a family-based identity, something that was evident in many interviews, Iranian American entrepreneurs and professionals appear to establish a nuanced form of ethnic business, one focused on family-based community and collaboration.

This family-based identity, meanwhile, seems correlated to a transnational one: as Iranian immigrants adjust to the United States, they must redefine their perception of themselves within their family, adjusting their transnational gauge to a new cultural context while maintaining a family identity. It is important to establish this first: for many Iranians and Iranian Americans, developing an identity within the context of their family may be a key step in establishing a transnational identity. In one memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas (2004) says, “In my large extended family, each member has a reputation” (p. 42). This quotation reflects the significance of family as part of identity: each person has their own context within their large extended Iranian family. This contextual identity was discussed in several common situations mentioned throughout the interviews: in the decision to move to Minnesota, and in professional decisions—for example, choosing a major or career. Reflecting on these family-based identities, participants then mentioned the ways in which their perception of their role has changed, suggesting a transnational adjustment.

Nearly every interview participant, excepting students, whether recently arrived or arrived during the 1979 revolution, cited a relative in the Twin Cities who initially brought them to Minnesota, often an uncle, saying: “My uncle, my father’s younger brother was living here, so we wanted to be with family, and naturally we chose Minnesota” (9/22/16), and, “First, my cousin’s parents came out here, just because my cousin’s dad came out here, and then he married my cousin’s mom and brought her too. And so my mom and dad decided to come out here too” (10/13/16). There were also many stories of families arriving piece by piece, and getting green cards for each subsequent family member, often over long periods of time: “Fifteen years after my

grandma applied, our number came up. We did our interviews in the UAE...then we waited seven months...then we moved here” (9/13/16). One young woman told the story of how her oldest sister, who had been born in the United States while her Iranian parents were studying in the Midwest, came to Minnesota at a young age, joining an uncle and starting, as a young person, the process of bringing over her entire family (9/22/16). These stories all suggest the importance of a developing family-based Iranian identity: by choosing to come to the United States, particularly in congruence with an extended family member, they are choosing to establish a complex dual identity as American and Iranian in conjunction with their family. The process by which so many Iranian-Americans arrived to Minnesota suggests an assignment of identity within the family: those who go first have some level of significance in the family, whether as a matriarch, in the case of the grandmother, or as a natural-born citizen, in the second case described. These stories all establish how important it is, as Iranian-Americans and as migrants, to develop an identity within the context of one’s family, perhaps before addressing the grander question of Iranian and American transnational identity.

When asked what had drawn their relatives to Minnesota and the Twin Cities, most interview respondents expressed uncertainty, though in a different context from that expressed regarding education as discussed in Chapter 5. “Honestly, I have no idea [why my parents moved to Minnesota], I think it’s just because my cousin’s dad, he came out here because he knew some people, and then everybody just came out here” (10/13/16). This uncertainty hints at the manifestation of Iranian businesses as particularly community-oriented: for many of the Iranians electing to move to Minnesota, it was not the place so much as their family. The influence of family for so many Iranian migrants

reinforces what one young woman said: “I think that the whole Persian culture kind of consists of being together all the time, whereas in America you’re...independent” (7/22/16). Here, this participant highlights what she sees as a more communal perspective from Persian culture, in contrast to American culture. Her perspective is important when considering the potentially communal nature of Iranian ethnic businesses: the communal family-based nature of Persian culture may more conducive to a community-oriented business—and such a manifestation of communal traits in an American context represents a transnational perspective.

The memoirs explored in this thesis reinforce some of the more baldly emotional aspects of developing a family-based identity, something that may be difficult to elicit in the context of an interview.

Subsequently, I became the eyes and ears of my parents. Even though I was only five or six years old, it was I who would go up to store clerks to ask where the frozen lima beans were kept; I who would be the interpreter in the emergency room when my baby brother’s appendix burst; I who would order everyone’s meals at McDonald’s (PAZ, 2006, p. 66)

This excerpt indicates one way in which migrant experiences force Iranians to develop an identity in the context of their families. The young woman here, by becoming her parents’ translator, has become the “eyes and ears” of her parents, an enormous role to fill at a young age. She plays this role in both mundane contexts, like the grocery store, and in more serious contexts, like the hospital. This passage is an explicit establishment of family-based identity, and is particularly connected to her migrant experiences, suggesting a transnational identity is also at play.

One memoir makes the connection between family-based identity and community-oriented business explicit in the relationship between the father and the daughter, who narrates her story. This young woman and her father, a newly successful Iranian business owner in Orange County, have an extremely contentious relationship. Yet after the daughter opens her own business, which is relatively successful until the 2008 financial crisis results in closure, she finds that, “Baba and I had grown very close...Now we had a mutual language: business. I was learning to speak it well. By 2007, my centers were respected and successful in every way. I knew Baba was proud of me” (Andalibian, 2015, p. 262). Here, the narrator is describing a way in which she is able to establish her identity in her family and become closer to her father. She describes how her father, after running a different store for a while, goes on to invest in founding a religious center, one focused on fostering community, similar to her own business: “I was not the only one in the family to open a center dedicated to serving the community...Over the years, with unwavering perseverance...[my father] had managed to gather enough funds to build a community religious center...” (p. 263) This ties together both the idea of community-focused business, one potentially notable aspect of Iranian ethnic business, and family-based identity.

The experiences of one family in the Twin Cities serve as an excellent example to make the connection between family-based identity and community-oriented business explicit. The father of the family, who runs a car dealership, initially worked for his brother-in-law at a different dealership:

I clean the cars, I do everything, step by step...[my brother-in-law] told me, do you want to get another car lot? And I thought, maybe I will be free from here. Yes! I know that it's very hard for me to do it by myself...because I don't know

the people, I don't have good language to talk to the people, and I don't know how to do it. But I wanted to be free...I told him, Yes, I do. (4/22/16)

Here, this business owner's struggle to establish a family identity outside of his brother-in-law is clear. He wants to be "free" from the experience of working for his relative, and have the autonomy to develop his own business, despite the challenges.

How this effort to develop a family-based identity connects to a community-centric business is clear in a separate interview with one of the previous respondent's relatives. This respondent described his experiences with his family after moving to the United States: "...I think [the move] made us closer...my [relatives, the previous respondent] didn't really have friends. So we tried to stay as close to them as possible to make them forget about the bad stuff. I think it brought us closer together. We had more dinner and movie nights. We travelled more after we came here, a bit more international travelling..." (9/13/16) Additionally, this young man helps out at his relative's business: "Yeah...yeah, I help him, I don't get paid. I help him repair the cars, move the cars sometimes. He works a lot. It's a hard job" (9/13/16). This statement contradicts what a more structural approach to migrant networks might suggest. By running his own business, the car dealership owner is not necessarily providing structural support for his family by way of paying his relative. Instead, both father and son are engaged in their own process of developing a family-based identity, and the business that results is far more connected to the idea of a community-centric business than one that merely provides structural migrant support.

It is important to note, though, that a family-based identity may not play the same role for all entrepreneurs. For instance, while family did tangentially play a role in the case of the arts-based economic activity described in Chapters 4 and 5, it was not a

crucial aspect in motivating this form of unusual entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, understanding a family-based identity is certainly important in establishing an Iranian migrant conception of ethnic business. Iranian businesses in the Twin Cities, including the arts-based professional networks referenced previously, and more conventional manifestations like the car dealership described above, were often described in subtle ways as community- and collaboration-centric, and this spirit of community is strongly related to a family-based identity, one established in a transnational context. This case study, therefore, suggests an alternate role of family in the establishment of ethnic businesses: as a reinforcement of a family-based potentially transnational identity, rather than solely structural support.

Ethnic Businesses as Reinforcement of Family-Based Identity

While the first part of this chapter attempts to explain how family influences the development of Iranian businesses, the next step is exploring how those businesses then impact a family-based identity. One further way in which family, identity, and ethnic businesses intersect is way in which ethnic markets, in particular, have the potential to reinforce family-based identity. This reinforcement takes place in several forms, and ultimately highlights the potential for community-oriented Iranian ethnic businesses to enable and reinforce a family-based transnational identity.

Just as Iranian-American business owners and professionals develop their own sense of family-based identity, their customers are able to reinforce their own identity in their family through being customers at ethnic businesses, particularly markets. This establishment of identity is clearly seen here:

The bakery in the market opens at 7 am. We try to avoid the line during the day, because it is very long and very slow and the smell of fresh bread we can't wait to eat makes time go by even more slowly. In order to control the chaos, the owners put up signs, like the one limiting each person to two fresh sangak [bread]. This means that if you want, say, eight sangak for your dinner party, you can either go four times or send three relatives, perhaps cousin Mahmood, Aunt Fakri and Uncle Nematollah, to buy two sangak each. Let's just say I know that this is done...A few Saturdays ago, we got to the market a bit late...Warm sangak in hand, I heard the unmistakable voice of my father and his brother, Nematollah, talking loudly in Shushtari. When they saw us, the sangak in my arms like a newborn, my father said, 'I wish I had known you were in the bread line.' And so I did what any good daughter would do; I volunteered to go back. (Dumas, 2010)

In this passage, Dumas not only touches on the nature of extended Persian families, but also expresses an assertion of her own identity as a good daughter in a family context through her experiences in an ethnic market. Her explanation of sending "cousin Mahmood, Aunt Fakri, and Uncle Nematollah" is a clever portrait of an extended Iranian family--one that sends any number of relatives to get the things they need. And Dumas' identity within her own family is clearly articulated here: she is a "good daughter", willing to go back to help her father get his morning bread. It is in this ethnic market that she is able to assert that identity, by purchasing Iranian products and being a contributing member of her family.

One interview participant suggested that ethnic markets enable him to reinforce his family-based identity even without the presence of his family. This subject, here alone in Minneapolis while his family remains in Iran, mentioned that one of his favorite parts

of shopping at Caspian Bistro was being able to practice *ta'arof* with the owners, the Persian system of courtesy where formal details about family and accomplishments are exchanged (3/27/16). For him, these interactions in the context of a community-based Iranian ethnic market were important in reinforcing his own role in his family. By discussing his family and accomplishments formally, with the owners of the market, this participant does not contribute directly to his family, but rather to his own sense of belonging and identity within his family. Moreover, the distance between him and his family and his acknowledgment of that suggests a transnational identity: taking aspects of his home life in Iran and putting them into the context of an Iranian business in Minnesota, using both to reinforce his perception of a family role.

By exploring how a family-based identity among entrepreneurs spurs the development of community-centric ethnic businesses, I hope to demonstrate that family provides not only structural support for ethnic entrepreneurs, but also influences the development of more community-centric businesses. Next, by arguing that these ethnic businesses have the potential to reinforce family-based identities among their customers, I show how Iranian customers may potentially reinforce their own family-based transnational identities as patrons of such ethnic businesses. These are only a few of the complex ways that family influences entrepreneurship and identity. However, these conclusions add credence to the possibility of a broader definition of ethnic entrepreneurship: one based on identity.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This case study worked to demonstrate many of the notable developments and effects of Iranian-American-run ethnic businesses. It discussed several relevant questions, namely: are Iranian ethnic businesses distinct in their development and effects from those previously suggested in ethnic entrepreneurship literature? And what perceptions of Iranian and Iranian-American identity play a role in the development and impact of these businesses? While Iranian ethnic businesses take some easily categorizable forms, including ethnic markets, their development and impact are different from the traditional manifestations suggested in the literature. This case study argues that ethnic Iranian businesses are unusual in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which Iranian ethnic business develop have the effect of reinforcing and developing a diasporic transnational Iranian identity, one based upon specific cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education. This case study arguably makes several distinct contributions to ethnic entrepreneurship literature, suggesting for future studies a broader conception of what constitutes entrepreneurship, an emphasis on non-economic motivators in entrepreneurial decision-making, and a potential focus on the impact of ethnic businesses on their co-ethnic customers.

In opening my analysis, I argue for two particular manifestations of nostalgia among Iranian Americans. First, the formation of ethnic markets as one specific brand of ethnic entrepreneurship represents one way in which primarily second-generation Iranian Americans may develop aspects of a diasporic identity rooted in consumption of cultural goods. Second, the development of arts-based networks and businesses for visual and musical artists represents an unusual form of ethnic entrepreneurship developed in the

search for a transnational identity. These two forms of ethnic entrepreneurship demonstrate the complexity of a diasporic and transnational Iranian American identity at work. My analysis of customers as opposed to business owners addresses a potential gap in the ethnic entrepreneurship literature: here, I consider the impact of ethnic entrepreneurship on its customers, not just its development. While consensus on factors leading to the development of ethnic businesses is somewhat clear in previous works, there appears to be little progress or consensus on how these businesses may affect their co-ethnic customers. This analysis suggests a potential analytical perspective in addressing this gap: an exploration of identity.

The second manifestation of nostalgia discussed here, meanwhile, in the form of identity-based entrepreneurship, indicates that the current conception of ethnic entrepreneurship should perhaps be expanded to include unusual forms such as this: a strongly collaborative entrepreneurial effort, rooted in networks and self-employment in and of itself developed in conjunction with a distinct Iranian identity, rather than a traditionally owned and operated business. Chapter 2, furthermore, describes how ethnic entrepreneurship is frequently considered a result of the support of a strong migrant network, or a response to an external exclusionary market. By exploring nostalgia, however, we can see that ethnic entrepreneurship—particularly in the unusual form described here—may be a response to the development of a diasporic identity rather than an economic decision, emphasizing the need for a broader look at ethnic business development, and, in particular, the non-economic motivations behind entrepreneurial decision-making. By refining these notions of nostalgia and ethnic entrepreneurship, based on aspects of Iranian American identity, we gain a richer picture of nostalgia and

ethnic entrepreneurship that may be applied to other immigrant groups, through the lens of identity.

Next I move to education, arguing for two distinct relationships between ethnic business and education practices: first, an older generation of Iranians electing to become entrepreneurs late in age; second, the current influx of Iranian graduate students, divided by their approaches both to education and to businesses. These two interactions highlight the specific conceptions of education among Iranian Americans and how distinctly it influences a potential transnational identity. For the older Iranians turned entrepreneurs, the decision to become an entrepreneur seems rooted not necessarily in hope for higher socioeconomic status, but in utilizing skills gained from education to support a business with a strong message. This pattern further demonstrates the need for exploration of non-economic motivators in entrepreneurs.

Moreover, students in STEM and humanities fields perceive different levels of autonomy in their educational decisions, levels of autonomy that appear correlated to both the professional relationships among Iranian Americans and the decisions to enter into entrepreneurship. The nature of this identity-based entrepreneurship, first introduced in Chapter 4 and subsequently reinforced in Chapter 5, again emphasizes the need for refinement in ethnic entrepreneurship literature, suggesting the necessity of a more flexible conception of ethnic business. Finally, education is referenced in ethnic entrepreneurship literature primarily as an alternative, rather than a complement or progression, to entrepreneurial activity. This thesis demonstrates some of the ways in which entrepreneurship and education may, in fact, work together and interact,

highlighting, once again, the potential for non-economic motivators in entrepreneurial activity.

In Chapter 6, I discuss family, first exploring how a family-based identity among entrepreneurs spurs the development of community-centric ethnic businesses and next arguing that these ethnic businesses have the potential to reinforce family-based identities among their customers, demonstrating some aspects of the complex relationship between family and entrepreneurship. This research finds that family, tied so closely to identity, provides not only structural support for ethnic entrepreneurs but also influences the development of a more community-focused business approach. Just as with nostalgia and education, the Iranian notion of family provides an alternative motivation for ethnic entrepreneurship, one wherein the family's role is not limited to structural support: rather, a family-based identity proves a non-economic motivation in developing an ethnic business, particularly a community-centric one.

Moreover, Iranian customers appear to reinforce their own family-based transnational identities as patrons of such ethnic businesses. By looking at the role that ethnic businesses play in the lives of their customers as they reinforce a family-based identity, we are forced to consider the impact of ethnic entrepreneurship on its customers, not just its development, addressing one major gap in the ethnic entrepreneurship literature as discussed in Chapter 2. These conclusions add credence to the possibility of a broader definition of ethnic entrepreneurship, one based on identity: by incorporating identity into the ethnic entrepreneurship approach, we see the possibility of alternative forms of ethnic businesses, community-based and otherwise.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that ethnic Iranian businesses are notable in their development, and moreover, the multiplicity of ways in which these ethnic business develop have the effect of reinforcing and developing a potentially diasporic transnational Iranian identity, one based upon specific cultural conceptions of family, nostalgia, and education. This case study advances both a distinct conception of ethnic business development and a reflection on Iranian and Iranian-American identity, taking a new approach in its synthesis of identity and entrepreneurship literature and in its focus on the impact of ethnic businesses. This case study suggests several future research approaches, in a broader conception of what constitutes entrepreneurship, an emphasis on non-economic motivators in entrepreneurial decision-making, and a potential focus on the impact of ethnic businesses on their co-ethnic consumers. By taking an identity-based approach, scholars may adapt a line of thought on identity and ethnic entrepreneurship that, by virtue of its broader parameters, may be more widely applicable to other groups of immigrants, while enabling focus, nuance, and analytical rigor within each population.

What Does an Iranian-American Identity Look Like?

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this case study does not seek to resolve the question of Iranian-American identity. As previous research on Iranian American identity demonstrates, such a perception is constantly in flux and changes significantly with every new generation, while recent political interactions between Iran and the United States may influence Iranians in the United States in new, unforeseen ways. Recent waves of Iranian students, meanwhile, and their continuous interactions with different generations of Iranian immigrants influence the identities of a population that is

already constantly in flux. What this thesis ultimately demonstrates, I hope, is the many nuanced ways in which Iranian-Americans perceive their experiences in the United States, and how this multiplicity of stories represents how immigrants reflect on their own experiences to develop a broader identity. Just as the *si mourgh* discover on their journey to find their leader, identity comes from within one's own narrative, and the value of this identity should not be underestimated, because immigrant populations have much to contribute to the institutions and culture of the United States.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Do you identify as
Iranian or Iranian-American?

Are you a Persian business owner or customer? Do you have stories of the Iranian community in the Twin Cities?

You are invited to participate in a study about the Iranian population of the Twin Cities!

Ask your friends and family members—I'm looking for a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

You would be asked to sit down for a 30-45 minute interview in English about your experiences at Iranian businesses and with the Iranian community of the Twin Cities.

Contact [REDACTED] for more information or to schedule a session. I'm a geography major at Macalester College and completing my senior thesis on the development of transnational identities. I'm excited to hear your stories!!

Interviews will be held on Saturdays and Sundays or weekdays after 5 pm.

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions**For all participants** (modify as appropriate)

1. What's the story of how you or your family came to the United States? To the Twin Cities?
2. What does your family look like? What does everyone do?
3. What does the Iranian American community in the Twin Cities look like? What kinds of Iranians do you know here?
4. How often do you spend time with other Iranians? In what context?
5. Do you think the Iranian community here has changed a lot over the years? In what ways?
6. Do you know many (second-generation) (first-generation) Iranian Americans? What are some of the differences that you see?
7. Are you familiar with many Persian businesses in the Twin Cities?
8. Do you regularly shop at Caspian Bistro, Holy Land, anything like that? How did you first hear about the business?
9. When do you usually go there? What sort of things do you usually buy there?
10. How do you feel about the atmosphere of Caspian Bistro/Caravan Serai?
11. Do you consider yourself Iranian? Iranian-American? Persian? Why?
12. How many Persians are in Twin Cities? Where do they live?
13. What is your age?

For business owners (modify as applicable)

1. How long has your business been around? How did it get started?
2. What have been the big ups and downs of the business over the years?
3. What's the makeup of most of your clientele/customers? What about your employees?
4. Where are most of your products from?