

**NEGOTIATING SPACE, EMOTION AND BELONGING:
A CRITICAL SOCIO-SPATIAL APPROACH TO IRANIAN IMMIGRANT
INTEGRATION IN TORONTO**

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Preface

This doctoral thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at the University of Ottawa. It comprises four standalone but interconnected articles that examine the housing, integration, community-building, and homemaking experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto through a critical socio-spatial lens. Collectively, these articles explore how predominantly economic-class Iranian immigrants negotiate the complexities of place, identity, and belonging in a multicultural urban context, while also contributing to broader theoretical discussions on immigrant settlement and integration.

All research involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the University of Ottawa's ethical standards. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board in October 2022 (see Appendix I: Certificate of Ethics Approval). Informed consent was obtained from all research participants prior to their involvement in the study, and their privacy, confidentiality, and dignity were carefully respected throughout the research process.

Each of the four articles included in this dissertation is co-authored with my supervisor, Dr. Luisa Veronis, under the article-based thesis format. For each article, I am the first author and Dr. Veronis is the second author. The intellectual and empirical contributions to these articles are clearly delineated as follows: I was solely responsible for the design and implementation of the research project, including the development of research questions, recruitment of participants, data collection, data analysis, and the initial drafting of all four articles. I conducted the fieldwork—including interviews, photovoice sessions, and ethnographic observations—and performed all data analysis. I conceptualized each article independently and

wrote the first full draft of each manuscript, which was subsequently revised in close collaboration with Dr. Veronis.

Dr. Veronis played an instrumental role in guiding and supporting the development of the conceptual frameworks and contributed significantly to refining the theoretical framing of each article. Her role included ongoing feedback on the manuscript drafts, conceptual discussions, and editorial support, which helped shape the final versions of each article. All revisions and co-author contributions occurred under my direction and with my active engagement, ensuring that the manuscripts reflected my core research questions, methodologies, and analytic interpretations.

The four articles are intended for publication in peer-reviewed journals, with tentative plans for submission as follows: the first article is being prepared for submission to the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, the second to the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, the third to *Social & Cultural Geography*, and the fourth to the *Journal of Housing Studies*. Each of these journals aligns with the respective article's conceptual focus and intended scholarly contribution.

Declaration

In accordance with Academic Regulation II-7 of the University of Ottawa concerning theses, I affirm that I am the primary author of this research. The four articles that form the core of this article-based thesis were co-authored with my supervisor, Dr. Luisa Veronis. In each case, I was responsible for the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and drafting of the manuscripts, while Dr. Veronis provided guidance in refining the theoretical framing, as well as feedback and editorial support during the revision process. This thesis does not contain any material that has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any institution. To the best of my knowledge, it does not include content previously published or authored by others, except where appropriately cited within the text.

In the preparation of this thesis, I used artificial intelligence tools (Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT and Perplexity) solely to support the editorial process. These tools were employed to enhance clarity, phrasing, conciseness, and the overall flow of ideas and sentences, as well as the overall flow of some sections of the manuscript. At no point were they used to generate content, conduct data analysis, formulate arguments, or interpret findings. The research design, data collection, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this thesis are entirely my own and represent original work. The use of AI did not replace critical thinking or scholarly judgment and was limited strictly to language editing and stylistic refinement.

Acknowledgements

As I stand at the culmination of my Ph.D. journey in the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at the University of Ottawa, I find myself reflecting on an extraordinary chapter of my life. Writing this acknowledgment is unexpectedly challenging, as it stirs a whirlwind of emotions—nostalgia, gratitude and pride—all intertwined with the memories. This journey has been anything but straightforward. I realize that this experience has been far more transformative than I could have ever imagined. It has been a journey marked by perseverance, resilience, and growth—both academically and personally.

Embarking on this path as an international student was daunting. Navigating a new academic system rooted in Western pedagogy while adapting to an unfamiliar culture—both socially and academically—was a challenge that demanded courage and adaptability. These years have been a crucible of self-discipline and self-learning, teaching me lessons that extend far beyond the confines of academia. It was during the darkest hours—when chaos seemed to engulf everything. But even then, I chose not to give up. I turned inward, found strength in unlikely places, and transformed weakness into willpower. There were times when I felt like several people inhabiting one body—fragile yet strong, stormy yet calm. But through every high and low, one truth remained steadfast: I was invincible in my determination to see this through. I postponed many things in my life for this dream—and I have no regrets. If someone were to ask me whether I would undertake this journey again, knowing how complicated it would be, my answer would be a resounding “yes.” This experience has shaped me in ways that I will carry forward for the rest of my life; it has deepened my capacity to think critically and reflectively—not just about my research but about life itself.

This journey introduced me to remarkable individuals whose lives and stories left an indelible mark on me. Their kindness, wisdom, and resilience inspired me in ways I could not have anticipated. They reminded me of the beauty of human connection and the power of shared experiences. To them, I owe more than words can express. While I cannot acknowledge each person by name here, I sincerely hope you recognize the significance of your support and the impact you have had on me.

So, first and foremost, I thank myself—for not giving up. For showing up, even when it was hardest. For believing, even when it felt impossible. For finding strength within weakness and transforming chaos into opportunities for growth. This might seem selfish, but it is a testament to the resilience that carried me through this journey.

I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to my brilliant supervisor, Dr. Luisa Veronis. From the very beginning of this journey—when everything felt chaotic—she believed in me and supported me wholeheartedly. Her meticulous feedback on my drafts, her constructive suggestions, and her unwavering encouragement pushed me to refine my work and grow as a scholar. Dr. Veronis was not only my academic guide but also a mentor who helped me navigate Canadian academic networks as a newcomer. She introduced me to conferences and scholarly communities that enriched my learning experience and connected me with researchers from around the world—moments that remain among the most inspiring parts of this journey. Thank you for your kindness, your patience, and your belief in my potential.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Brian Ray, my former supervisor, whose early mentorship proved invaluable in laying the groundwork for this research. His expertise and dedication to introducing me to critical literature, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks helped shape my initial understanding of this project's scope.

To my committee members: Dr. Wei Li, my external reviewer, and Drs. Marc Brosseau, Christine Gibb, and Brenda Macdougall, my internal reviewers—thank you for your invaluable guidance throughout this process. Your critical feedback challenged me to think deeper and sharpen my arguments, ultimately elevating the quality of my thesis. Your expertise has been instrumental in shaping this work into what it is today.

I extend heartfelt thanks to my colleagues at Pathways to Prosperity, a space that nurtured me as a junior scholar and offered me countless learning opportunities. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Brunner and Dr. Anne-Cécile Delaisse for their thoughtful reviews and suggestions on my thesis articles.

To my family—your love and support have been the foundation upon which I built this journey. My husband’s belief in my capabilities made all the difference during these years. Hadi was an anchor who made everything easier and more straightforward when challenges arose. My mother’s prayers were a source of immeasurable strength during this journey—I firmly believe her prayers carried me through moments when I felt weak or uncertain; my father’s encouragement reminded me of the importance of perseverance; my sister, and brothers’ support carried me through. My niece, Parnian, deserves special recognition—her calls during moments of homesickness lifted my spirits and reminded me of the warmth of home even from afar.

I am grateful to Ali Ashkezari in Iran for his steadfast friendship during critical moments when his support was invaluable. To my friends in Canada—you made life in a new world easier with your kindness and companionship during difficult times.

A special thanks goes to the participants in my research project—your stories inspired me beyond words. Without your contributions, this project would not have been possible. You welcomed me into your homes, your stories and trusted me with your truths. I feel truly fortunate

to have learned from your life stories and the valuable experiences you shared as immigrants. Among you are individuals whose support went above and beyond: Dr. Reza Moridi connected me with inspiring leaders like Mehran Mohaghegh; I would sincerely appreciate Sahar Mirshafie for her generosity during my fieldwork in Toronto—your hospitality empowered me both personally and academically. Sahar offered her home during my fieldwork in Toronto when I had no strong network there—a gesture that cannot be adequately expressed in words or repaid in kind. Living with Sahar enriched the ethnographic dimension of my research while teaching me invaluable life lessons about resilience and community-building as an immigrant woman herself.

The Iranian community in Toronto holds a special place in my heart—not only for their contributions to my research but also for their inspiring stories as immigrants who have built strong networks in Canada while preserving their cultural heritage. I want to acknowledge the vibrant Iranian community in Toronto whose achievements filled me with pride as an Iranian newcomer. Walking through Iranian ethnic spaces inspired me with hope and admiration for their remarkable progress in Canada.

Finally, as this chapter closes, I am reminded that endings are merely beginnings disguised as conclusions:

“What we call the beginning is often the end; and to make an end is to make a beginning.” – T.S. Eliot

This Ph.D. journey may be ending, but it marks the start of a new chapter—a continuation of growth, learning, and discovery that will unfold in ways yet unknown.

To everyone who has touched this journey—thank you for being part of it. You have left an indelible mark on both this work and on me as a person.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis aims to reconceptualize immigrant settlement narratives through a critical socio-spatial lens, focusing on the case of established, predominantly economic-class Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada. By interrogating residential choices, integration pathways, community-building practices, and homemaking strategies, the study challenges traditional models of immigrant settlement, foregrounding the agency of skilled Iranian immigrants in shaping spaces of belonging within a multicultural metropolis. The analysis integrates Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998) to analyze how Iranian immigrants negotiate place and identity.

The thesis comprises four interconnected articles. The first interrogates residential concentration in Toronto's affluent northern suburbs through Lefebvre's spatial triad, challenging existing models of immigrant settlement and suburbanization. Using Askins' emotional citizenry, the second article examines the complex interplay between residential and socioeconomic integration, highlighting gendered experiences and emotional belonging. The third investigates multiscale community-building practices, showing how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, in combination with emotional citizenry, foster affective attachments across private and public spheres. The fourth article frames homemaking as a spatial practice that, through Lefebvre's triad, actively reconfigures suburban homes and environments into contested sites of cultural preservation and identity negotiation.

Employing a mixed-methods approach – including census data analysis, 54 semi-structured interviews with photovoice, ethnographic observations, and 7 key informant interviews — the methodology aligns with the conceptual framework's emphasis on spatial

production and affective agency. The study makes three key contributions. First, it offers an integrated conceptual framework bridging structural spatial analysis (Lefebvre) and emotional agency (Askins), challenging deficit-oriented settlement models. Second, it repositions integration as an active, multidimensional process through which immigrants leverage (suburban) spaces to reconcile cultural heritage with social mobility aspirations. Finally, it provides a multiscale account of how immigrants mobilize social capital across spatial and institutional contexts to foster emotional belonging.

Keywords: Iranian immigrants, residential patterns, integration processes, community-building practices, homemaking strategies, skilled economic immigrants, emotional belonging

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The journey of migration is deeply intertwined with the concepts of home, integration, and belonging, particularly for immigrants navigating new cultural and spatial landscapes. For me, this connection became profoundly personal when I arrived in Canada as an international student in September 2019. Like many newcomers, I faced significant hurdles in securing housing—a fundamental aspect of stability and integration. The challenges were so overwhelming that I contemplated returning home. I vividly recall the questions that haunted me during those initial weeks: “*What happens if I can’t secure a place to live? How long am I supposed to stay in an Airbnb—and can I even consider it a real home? How long can I endure this kind of instability and discomfort?*” These uncertainties underscored the profound significance of housing, not merely as a physical structure but as a cornerstone of security, identity, and aspirations for social mobility. This struggle sparked a curiosity within me to explore the broader implications of housing and integration for immigrants and how it shapes their sense of belonging in Canadian society.

Within the first few months of my arrival, I visited Toronto—a city renowned for its multicultural vibrancy—and encountered the Iranian community concentrated in its relatively affluent northern suburban neighbourhoods. What struck me was not only their spatial concentration but also the remarkable institutional completeness of the community. Here, Iranian businesses, services, and cultural institutions thrived with high patronage, creating a rich tapestry of cultural continuity amidst the diversity of Toronto’s landscape. Observing this dynamic community inspired me to delve deeper into the relationship between housing, neighbourhoods, and immigrant integration. The Iranian community’s ability to create spaces that simultaneously

preserve cultural heritage while enabling integration into Canadian society became a focal point for my research.

Indeed, Toronto's Iranian community offers a unique lens through which to examine their lived experience. Unlike many immigrant groups who follow traditional settlement trajectories from inner-city enclaves to suburban neighbourhoods over generations (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003; Preston & Ray, 2020), Iranian immigrants have settled directly in relatively affluent suburban areas like Richmond Hill and North York. This pattern departs from historical models of immigrant settlement, tracing mobility from declining inner-city neighbourhoods to the suburbs – such as Eastern European Jews, Italians, and Portuguese among others (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003; Preston & Ray, 2020; Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007). Their spatial concentration also contrasts sharply with other visible minority groups who are more dispersed, including Blacks from Caribbean and African origins (Qadeer & Kumar, 2006; Qadeer et al., 2010), Bangladeshis (Ghosh, 2014), and Ghanaians who are concentrated in inner suburban high-rise apartments (Firang, 2019).

Accordingly, this doctoral thesis examines the multifaceted processes through which established Iranian immigrants actively negotiate their spatial, social, and emotional landscapes to foster a sense of belonging in their adopted home country. By focusing on this specific immigrant group—primarily skilled economic-class immigrants residing in relatively affluent suburban neighbourhoods—the research challenges traditional models of immigrant settlement and integration, offering novel insights into the complexities of immigrant experiences in superdiverse cities. The distinct geography of Iranian immigrants in Toronto raises important questions about how housing choices reflect aspirations for social mobility and the process of integration. In this context, integration is inherently multidimensional, as residential and

socioeconomic integration are closely interconnected, with social mobility and recognition together shaping the sense of belonging among Iranian immigrants. Furthermore, the thesis investigates how community building practices—such as fostering social capital through co-ethnic networks and cross-cultural engagements—shape emotional belonging, and how homemaking strategies rooted in transnational material culture and spatial practices reconfigure suburban landscapes into sites of cultural continuity. By integrating these multiple dimensions, the study advances a holistic understanding of immigrant integration that bridges structural, affective, and socio-spatial dynamics.

This thesis is structured as a series of four interconnected articles that collectively investigate distinct yet interrelated aspects of Iranian immigrants' lives in Toronto. The first article (Chapter 2) investigates Iranian immigrants' residential patterns, drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (1991). It reveals their neighbourhood and housing preferences, challenging existing models of immigrant settlement. This paper contributes to our understanding of how immigrants actively shape their residential environments, extending spatial theory in the context of immigrant settlement.

The second article (Chapter 3) examines the complex interplay between residential and socioeconomic integration utilizing Askins' concept of emotional citizenry. It highlights gendered experiences and the role of emotional belonging in the integration process. This paper advances our understanding of the multidimensional nature of integration, revealing how emotional attachments intersect with spatial and economic factors.

The third article (Chapter 4) examines community building practices through the lens of emotional citizenry (Askins 2016) and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998). It uncovers diverse strategies Iranian immigrants employ to foster social connections and an

emotional sense of belonging. This paper contributes to theories of social capital formation and emotional citizenry in diverse urban contexts, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in fostering belonging among immigrant communities.

The fourth article (Chapter 5) analyzes homemaking practices applying Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space to analyze immigrant experiences. It examines the significance of these practices in cultivating emotional belonging to place and negotiating cultural identity. This paper provides a novel framework for understanding how immigrants negotiate belonging through socio-spatial practices from the intimate space of the home to ethnic neighbourhoods. It demonstrates how material and symbolic practices transform physical environments into sites of emotional attachment, fostering a dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation. By situating these practices within Lefebvre's spatial triad, the study advances a novel understanding of immigrant belonging as a multiscalar process shaped by everyday socio-spatial negotiations.

Overall, this doctoral thesis challenges conventional narratives of immigrant settlement—often framed through economic struggle or assimilation (e.g., Murdie & Teixeira, 2003)—by examining how a skilled, predominantly economic-class immigrant group negotiates space, community, and belonging in a multicultural metropolis. Rather than focusing solely on survival or adaptation (i.e., particularly in the context of newcomer experiences), this research highlights the active agency of established Iranian immigrants in shaping their residential landscapes, advancing their professional trajectories, cultivating social networks, and fostering a sense of emotional belonging that connects past and present, bridging the culture of the country of origin and the new society.

Further, this thesis challenges simplistic narratives of integration by illuminating the intricate interplay between space, identity, emotion, and community in the lives of established Iranian immigrants in Toronto. By examining their experiences across multiple dimensions—residential behaviour, socioeconomic integration, community building practices, and homemaking strategies—the thesis reveals the dynamic and multidimensional processes through which Iranian immigrants create meaningful spaces of belonging that bridge their cultural heritage with their aspirations for inclusion in Canadian society. This approach provides a novel lens to understand immigrant integration as an active and creative process rather than one defined by passive adaptation to structural constraints.

This dissertation is presented in three main components: a comprehensive introduction, four interrelated chapters consisting of journal articles, and a concluding chapter. After the presentation of the research objectives, the introductory chapter provides a literature review that critically engages with existing theories on immigrant residential patterns, integration processes, community building practices, and homemaking strategies. This is followed by situating the study within the broader field of immigration studies and presents the key theories and core concepts mobilized. Next, the methodology section provides a comprehensive description of the research design and methods employed. It details the research context, recruitment strategies, and research setting while addressing reflexivity and positionality to ensure cultural sensitivity and rigour. Specifically, the section explains my mixed-methods data collection process—including quantitative spatial analysis using census data and qualitative approaches combining interviews with sociodemographic questionnaires, photovoice sessions, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations—and outlines the analytical frameworks used to

interpret the findings. Lastly, I reflect on the research limitations to contextualize the scope of the study.

Research objectives and questions

This doctoral thesis aims to investigate the multifaceted processes through which skilled Iranian immigrants in Toronto negotiate residential choices, socioeconomic integration, community-building practices, and homemaking strategies to foster belonging in their adopted homeland through a critical socio-spatial lens combining Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, Askins' (2016) notion of emotional citizenry, and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998). The specific research objectives are:

- To propose and apply a conceptual model based on Lefebvre's spatial triad for analyzing immigrant residential behaviour, using the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, to challenge traditional models of immigrant settlement by examining their spatial concentration in affluent suburbs.
- To analyze the dynamics of residential, socioeconomic, and emotional dimensions of integration among Iranian immigrants in Toronto, examining how their interplay shapes long-term belonging with attention to gendered differences in how divergent pathways in professional mobility, housing choices, and affective experiences produce distinct integration outcomes for men and women.
- To investigate how Iranian immigrants leverage multiscale social networks—spanning bonding (co-ethnic ties), bridging (cross-cultural connections), and linking (institutional associations)—to foster emotional belonging, framed through the dual lenses of social capital theory and Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry.

- To examine how Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in homemaking practices—encompassing physical, sensory, and cultural dimension—to transform suburban spaces into sites of belonging through a multiscale analysis of the social production of Toronto’s urban space.

The following primary research question guides this study:

- How do Iranian immigrants in Toronto negotiate residential choices, socioeconomic integration, community building practices, and homemaking strategies to foster a sense of belonging in their new society?

In addition, the secondary questions are:

- How do Iranian immigrants’ residential choices and suburban settlement patterns challenge dominant models of immigrant integration, and what structural and cultural factors shape their residential behaviour?
- In what ways do residential and socioeconomic mobility intersect to shape Iranian immigrants’ integration trajectories, and how do gendered experiences influence these pathways and their emotional outcomes?
- What forms of social capital do Iranian immigrants mobilize across ethnic, intercultural, and institutional domains, and how do these networks support emotional citizenship and a sense of connectedness?
- How do Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in physical, sensory, and cultural homemaking practices to transform suburban domestic and neighbourhood spaces into sites of belonging across multiple spatial scales?

In the next section, I contextualize this research within existing scholarship, synthesizing the theoretical frameworks and conceptual foundations that underpin the investigation.

Immigrant Settlement, Integration, Home, and Belonging

The experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburban landscape offer a compelling case study to examine the intersections of immigration, spatial practices, integration processes, and emotional belonging in a new society. To situate the study within broader scholarly debates on immigrant settlement, integration, and the negotiation of belonging in superdiverse contexts, this review presents relevant literature across four interconnected thematic domains: residential behaviour, socioeconomic integration, community building, and homemaking practices.

Residential Behaviour: Challenging Traditional Settlement Models

The study of residential behaviour has been a central focus in human geography, particularly in understanding how immigrant groups navigate settlement patterns within their new living environment in North American cities. Early theoretical models, such as the Chicago School's concentric zone theory (Park et al., 1925) and spatial assimilation frameworks (Massey & Denton, 1985; Alba & Nee, 2003), have shaped much of the academic discourse on immigrant geographies.

In the 1920s, the Chicago School's ecological approach likened human society to natural organisms, using analogies from plant and animal ecology to explain urban social structures. This model, introduced by Park, Burgess, and McKenzie (1925) in *The City*, conceptualized urban spaces as dynamic ecosystems where competition for resources drives spatial organization. The concentric zone model theorized that competition drives sorting mechanisms: socioeconomically stronger groups occupy better neighbourhoods, while weaker groups are relegated to less desirable areas. Park et al. (1925) also introduced the concept of invasion–succession processes, wherein newcomers settle in run-down areas, displacing existing residents

who move to higher-status neighbourhoods. These processes were believed to stabilize urban systems and reproduce the internal structure of cities (Park et al., 1925). However, critics have highlighted the deterministic and normative assumptions underlying these models, particularly their framing of race and ethnicity (Steinberg, 2007).

Building on the ecological tradition, spatial assimilation theory emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a dominant framework for understanding immigrant residential mobility. Spatial assimilation serves to describe the process by which immigrants achieve residential proximity to the majority population through socioeconomic advancement and acculturation (Massey & Mullan, 1984; Massey & Denton 1985). Immigrants often begin their settlement journey in ethnic enclaves, benefiting from co-ethnic networks that provide social support and economic opportunities. Over time, as immigrants acquire language proficiency, cultural practices of the receiving society, and financial resources, they move out of enclaves into more integrated neighbourhoods. This trajectory is seen as a crucial step toward full incorporation into mainstream society (Massey & Denton, 1985).

Despite its widespread application, spatial assimilation theory has faced significant critiques for its oversimplified assumptions about linear progression and universal applicability (Alba & Nee, 1993). Studies have shown that segregation patterns vary widely across ethnic groups due to structural barriers such as institutionalized discrimination and housing market constraints (Alba & Logan, 1993). For instance, African Americans in the U.S. experience persistent segregation even with socioeconomic advancement due to systemic racism in housing markets (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Thus the place stratification model offers an alternative perspective by emphasizing structural barriers—such as discriminatory practices and housing market segmentation—that constrain residential mobility for certain groups. According to this

model, minority groups' relative standing in society determines their ability to access desirable neighbourhoods. For stigmatized groups, high socioeconomic status may not sufficiently overcome these barriers (Alba & Logan, 1993; Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007).

In recent decades, however, the housing patterns of immigrant groups and their direct settlement in the suburbs contrast starkly with traditional immigrants' residential patterns (Haan, 2005; Mendez, 2009). While Canadian scholars aimed to avoid the term "assimilation," which was widely used to define various functional, cultural and spatial adaptation processes of immigrants in the US, other concepts, including "integration" and "spatial concentration," tend to retain an assimilationist perspective (Mendez, 2009). Mendez (2009) explains that Canadian scholars examine the new socio-spatial trends of immigrant settlement and integration in order to identify the basic patterns of the spatial assimilation model and thus address some of its inadequacies.

As such, for Hiebert and Ley (2003), the "up" and "out" model better describes the integration and socio-spatial mobility of immigrants over time and is more reflective of the main patterns of the traditional model (see also Mendez, 2009). Other studies (e.g., Hou, 2004), however, find that contemporary visible minority immigrants are more likely to settle in the same-group neighbourhood for more extended periods than immigrant groups in the past. The increased share of visible minority immigrants in a city's population and their tendency to live in the same-group neighbourhood can result in the formation of minority neighbourhoods (Fong & Wilkes, 2003; Hou, 2004). Logan et al. (2002) refer to these as "ethnic communities" in their analysis of the spatial patterns of Asian immigrants in the U.S (see also Li, 2009). Haan (2005) took a different approach to examine the applicability of "ethnic community" in the Canadian context, in particular Toronto. He finds that it is primarily income and education levels that

affect visible minority immigrants' spatial patterns and homeownership rates. Haan concludes that the spatial assimilation model is valid for those with a socioeconomic status below the city's average. Nevertheless, immigrants with high socioeconomic attainment are associated with "the new spatial assimilation model," which indicates that visible minority immigrants with high human capital live in ethnic communities and represent higher homeownership rates than those who do not live in the same-group neighbourhood (Haan, 2005).

To summarize, there seems to be no consensus on contemporary residential patterns and socioeconomic trajectories of visible minority immigrants in Canada. Mendez (2009) concludes that the findings of Canadian scholars are not coherent due to differences in research design, choice of variables and interpretation, and, more importantly, the complex sociospatial geographies of various visible minority immigrants. The increased share of visible minority immigrants in a city's population and their tendency to live in the same-group neighbourhood can result in the formation of minority neighbourhoods (Fong & Wilkes, 2003; Hou, 2004). The increasing suburbanization of ethno-racial minority immigrant populations has changed the North American suburban landscape, representing a multiethnic mix of immigrant groups and communities with upward or downward housing outcomes depending on the cases (Murdie & Skop, 2011; Teixeira & De Burgos, 2022).

Recent scholarship has called for integrating these theoretical models to better capture the complexity of residential behaviour (Kadarik, 2019; Krysan & Crowder, 2017). Indeed, these models are often treated as competing and distinct frameworks, whereas they should be understood as interacting and complementary (Krysan & Crowder, 2017). Scholars (Kadarik, 2019; Krysan & Crowder, 2017) further call for greater attention to processes of neighbourhood selection and housing search, highlighting how knowledge of neighbourhood options varies

significantly by race and ethnicity. Accordingly, understanding everyday social processes—such as residential decision-making, social networks, and daily activities—is crucial to addressing segregation and inequality in urban spaces (Kadarik, 2019).

This thesis responds to these calls by focusing on the residential behaviour of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, particularly their neighbourhood choices and housing preferences in affluent suburban areas. The aim is to provide a nuanced analytical lens by applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to the study of immigrant settlement and residential behaviour—a perspective that complements existing frameworks by capturing the dynamic and lived dimensions of settlement processes, while addressing some limitations of models that focus narrowly on specific groups or assume static, universal trajectories. By applying Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, encompassing perceived space (daily practices), conceived space (planned environments), and lived space (symbolic meanings), the study examines how Iranian immigrants' residential behaviour is shaped by their lived experiences and spatial perceptions while engaging with conceived spaces structured by urban planners and policymakers. This article (Chapter 2) aims to move beyond the confines of traditional models, which may not adequately capture the diversity of settlement experiences in superdiverse urban contexts (Vertovec, 2007). The conceptual contribution of this work lies in providing an analytical lens that is attentive to the interplay of daily practices, planned environments, and lived symbolic meanings. This approach provides a potentially rich, nuanced and flexible framework for understanding the diverse settlement experiences of immigrant groups across different urban contexts. In doing so, this chapter responds to calls in the literature for more integrative and flexible theoretical models that can account for the varied and dynamic settlement pathways shaped by both structural forces and immigrant agency in contemporary cities.

The Intersections of Residential Integration and Socioeconomic Integration

The simultaneous effect of housing and neighbourhood as an indicator of socioeconomic status and life chances reflects the perspective of “where one lives can significantly affect where one ends up in life” (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007, p.19). The services, amenities, and interactions in a neighbourhood play a fundamental role in presenting opportunities for households to climb the socioeconomic ladder (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007). Yearning for upward mobility aligns with a desire to move from one neighbourhood or community into another (Young, 1997). The social and economic significance of housing can be considered as an outcome of converting households’ socioeconomic status (education and income) into their housing condition (Alba & Logan, 1992; Alba & Nee, 1997; Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007); it can also be seen as an input in the continuation of socioeconomic mobility and integration processes (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007). This is particularly important for immigrants who strive to build a life in a new country.

Socioeconomic integration is closely tied to residential mobility, shaping overall trajectories of immigrant integration. Stable employment and upward mobility are often considered prerequisites for achieving residential integration, as they provide the financial resources necessary to access desirable housing and neighbourhoods (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). However, this relationship is far from linear. Structural inequalities in labour markets—such as the devaluation of foreign credentials for skilled immigrants or limited access to professional networks—can significantly hinder economic integration and, by extension, limit residential opportunities. Even when immigrants achieve financial stability, economic success alone does not guarantee social or emotional belonging; many continue to experience exclusion or alienation within their neighbourhoods due to systemic barriers (Alba & Logan 1993; Rosenbaum &

Friedman, 2007). As such, racial hierarchies in housing markets can constrain access to affluent neighbourhoods for certain groups. Not only do these dynamics vary across different ethno-racial groups, but they also manifest differently within minority communities based on internal diversity.

The intersection of these factors underscores the importance of viewing integration as a multifaceted process shaped by systemic inequalities and individual agency (Pennix, 2019). Residential integration is not merely about physical proximity to certain populations but also involves access to resources such as quality schools, public services, and community networks that facilitate upward mobility (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007). Socioeconomic integration encompasses labour market participation and income stability while also addressing broader issues of equity in access to housing and neighbourhood amenities.

In Canada's multicultural context—where diversity is celebrated but inequalities persist (Abu-Laban et al., 2023)—integration must be understood as a relational process shaped by power dynamics at multiple scales. For instance, while Toronto's suburban neighbourhoods offer opportunities for upward mobility among immigrant groups (Preston & Ray, 2020), they also reflect broader patterns of exclusion within Canada's urban landscape (Hulchanski, 2011). This duality underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how residential and socioeconomic integration intersect with issues of equity and inclusion.

The second article of my thesis (Chapter 3) advances a framework for analyzing immigrant integration, bridging objective indicators (e.g., residential stability, professional mobility) with subjective experiences (e.g., emotional belonging, recognition) to capture the complex realities of immigrant life in superdiverse cities like Toronto. This approach responds to critiques of siloed scholarship that isolates residential, economic, and cultural dimensions of

integration (Penninx, 2019; Kutor et al., 2023), risking oversimplification of how these domains dynamically intersect to shape trajectories. Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, it examines immigrants' ability to develop emotional belonging in the new society while navigating systemic barriers and cultural differences. This approach moves beyond simplistic narratives of assimilation or multiculturalism to capture the complex realities of immigrant experiences in superdiverse cities like Toronto. By incorporating emotional dimensions alongside spatial and economic factors, it offers a critical perspective on how immigrants navigate belonging in superdiverse urban environments.

This study responds to critiques of siloed approaches to immigrant integration research, which often examine residential, economic, and cultural dimensions separately rather than in an interconnected manner (Penninx, 2019; Kutor et al., 2023). Thus traditional frameworks risk oversimplifying the lived realities of immigrants, as these dimensions dynamically intersect and mutually shape integration trajectories. Building on calls for integrated approaches, this article advances a framework that bridges objective indicators such as homeownership and professional mobility with subjective experiences of recognition, achievement, and emotional belonging. By employing the conceptual framework of emotional citizenry (Askins, 2016), the analysis captures how Iranian immigrants negotiate affective aspirations across interconnected domains. This approach moves beyond compartmentalized analyses to illuminate how socioeconomic success fosters emotional bonds to place, while residential stability enables professional advancement, a relational process central to integration in superdiverse contexts. This framework, therefore, moves beyond the limitations of siloed models by foregrounding the interplay of material and affective dimensions, offering a holistic lens to understand integration as both a structural and agentic phenomenon.

Community Building: Paradoxes of Social Capital

Early urban sociology, particularly the Chicago School, emphasized locality as central to community formation. Scholars such as Robert Park et al. (1925) and Louis Wirth (1938) explored how spatial proximity facilitated social interaction within urban neighbourhoods (Delanty, 2003). Ferdinand Tönnies' (1957) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) provided an early framework for understanding the tension between traditional communal bonds and modern societal structures (Delanty, 2003). While Tönnies argued that modernity eroded intimate communal ties in favour of rationalized individualism, subsequent scholarship has expanded this analysis to account for the complexities of urbanization, globalization, and technological change. However, these spatially bounded models have been critiqued for their inability to account for symbolic and transnational dimensions of belonging that transcend geographic boundaries (Hannerz, 1996; Levitt, 2001). In particular, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) fundamentally reshaped understandings of nationalism by arguing that nations are not primordial entities rooted in ancient ethnic ties but modern constructs forged through shared symbols, narratives, and print capitalism. While Anderson's analysis focused on the historical emergence of nation-states and their ideological underpinnings, critiquing claims of nations' "natural" or ancient origins. His conceptualization of imagined communities has been cautiously adapted by migration scholars (e.g., Appadurai, 1996) to analyze diasporic identities, albeit with critical nuance.

Modern sociological thought further complicates these frameworks by emphasizing the fluidity and fragmentation of contemporary communities. Gerard Delanty (2003) situates community within the broader context of globalization, arguing that modern communities are less spatially bounded and increasingly defined by communication networks and shared

practices. Community today can also be seen as a response to the crisis in solidarity and belonging that has been exacerbated, and in part created, by globalization (Featherstone et al., 1995). While changing modes of communication in contemporary society produce fragmentations, they simultaneously create opportunities for forming new types of communities and social connections (Appadurai, 1996). As a result, communities today are shaped by overlapping affiliations—whether cultural, professional, or transnational—and reflect the dynamic interplay between local and global influences. For immigrant populations, this shift represents both a challenge and an opportunity: while traditional bonds may be disrupted by migration, new forms of solidarity emerge through digital platforms, ethnic associations, and hybrid identities.

Delanty's (2003) notion of recovery through community emphasizes the emergence of communities where belonging is mediated by shared practices, symbols, and networks rather than spatial proximity. Immigrants often forge these communities through bonding ties within co-ethnic networks, bridging connections with other groups, and linking relationships with institutions. Such practices reflect the interplay between nostalgia for a cohesive past and adaptive strategies required to navigate superdiverse settings (Hannerz, 1996; Levitt, 2001; Malkki, 1997). Immigrants' efforts to rebuild community are not merely acts of preservation but also acts of transformation, as they create hybrid spaces that integrate elements of their cultural heritage with the realities of their new contexts (Delanty, 2003).

Multicultural policies play a significant role in shaping these processes but are not without challenges (Delanty, 2003; Kymlicka, 2003; Banting & Kymlicka, 2006). Canada's multicultural framework enables cultural preservation but also presents challenges in fostering cohesion across ethnoracial lines (Dhamoon, 2009). This essentialism risks marginalizing intra-

community diversity and obscuring the complexities of identity formation within immigrant groups (Kokot et al., 2004). For instance, religious, ethnic, and generational differences within immigrant communities can lead to fragmentation rather than cohesion (Nasrullah, 2019). Critics highlight the divisive potential of multiculturalism when it becomes a tool for political or social fragmentation rather than integration (Dhamoon, 2009; Porter, 2000). In such cases, multicultural frameworks may inadvertently hinder the bridging capital necessary for fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration.

What I refer to as community building in this thesis is the process by which immigrants collectively forge relationships that transcend individual interests to create a shared sense of purpose and solidarity. It involves both informal practices and formal initiatives. The third article of my thesis (Chapter 4) examines how Iranian immigrants build communities in Toronto's multicultural context as part of their recovery from the loss of traditional social bonds experienced during migration. It analyzes how these immigrants cultivate bonding ties within close-knit networks alongside bridging efforts across diverse groups and linking connections to institutions such as professional associations and cultural organizations.

Employing social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998) and emotional citizenry (Askins, 2016) as conceptual frameworks, this paper aims to shed light on how Iranian immigrants cultivate emotional belonging through diverse community building practices while navigating systemic barriers such as fragmentation and exclusion. It highlights the interplay between bonding ties within close-knit networks, bridging efforts across cultural divides, and linking connections to institutions that facilitate integration into Canadian society.

The findings contribute to broader discussions on immigrant integration by emphasizing the importance of emotional dimensions in shaping social networks within superdiverse cities

like Toronto. It is important to recognize the active agency of Iranian immigrants in strategically cultivating networks and connections that support their integration and sense of belonging. Rather than passively relying on existing community structures, participants in this study demonstrated resourcefulness in building and sustaining relationships across multiple social and spatial scales – including within households, neighbourhoods, workplace, the Iranian community, ethnic associations. These strategic efforts reflect a nuanced understanding of how social capital can be mobilized not only for immediate support but also for long-term adaptation and resilience in a superdiverse urban context. Notably, participants leveraged continuity with pre-migration networks and bridged cultural practices from their heritage with receiving society norms, illustrating how transnational ties inform local integration strategies.

Homemaking: Material Culture and Sensory Belonging

How home is lived and experienced is complex and multifaceted and can take on very different and contradictory meanings (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Valentine, 2013). Individuals may have different understandings of housing and neighbourhood with respect to the intersections of their multiple identities of class, gender, ethnicity/race, religion and sexuality (hooks, 2015; Imrie, 2004; Marcus, 2006; Valentine, 2013; Wise, 2000; Young, 1997). Housing may be homely for some residents, while it may be unwelcoming for others (Mezei & Briganti, 2012). Among other characteristics, gender is crucial in the lived experiences and meaning-making of home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006); men and women may experience conflicting or variable meanings of home in different circumstances (Gieseeking & Mangold, 2014).

To conceptualize the idea of home, Boym (1994) indicates that it is “not the space itself, not the house, but the way of inhabiting it that made it home” (Boym, 1994, p.166; Wise, 2000). A place is homely or unhomely through the process of inhabitation and use (Chan, 2012). It is

the appearance of habits and the effects of spouses, children, parents, and their companionship that gives meaning to the idea of home (Wise, 2000). Identities are composed of habits shaped by the repetition of a series of actions and movements as space-time routines that arise no longer from conscious thoughts (Cresswell, 2013; Wise, 2000). Individuals, men and women, are brought into cultural practices through their identities and habits, cultivated and encultured in everyday life and practices that make up a world of meanings and cultures (Wise, 2000).

Changes in individuals' physical and social settings may cause a disruption in people's everyday habits and cultures, their place-identity and sense of belonging (Proshansky et al., 1983). The challenge for immigrants who move to a new country is to make themselves at home. They are inclined to define themselves by their affective bonds to their home, neighbourhood, and/or community, which are rooted in their identity, cultural habits and values (Marcus, 2006). The discrepancy between the old and new locations may cause individuals to feel lost in their new setting and long for their old housing and neighbourhood (Proshansky et al., 1983). Over time, immigrants become habituated to the new locale and rebuild new homes and identities.

Immigrant men and women may practice different meanings, gender roles and gender relations in the domesticity of their new homes than those they experienced in their origin home prior to migration (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). The reciprocal relationship between people and place leads them to identify a sense of self with place all while they form and transform that place (Hauge, 2007). In this sense, the things of the past that were experienced in everyday life are re-created in the intimacy and familiarity of objects and people (Bahloul, 2012). Immigrants may strive to reconfigure and rebuild their sense of culture and identity through negotiation with the new place in the face of multiple power relations and social structures they experience in their everyday lives (Nagel, 2011). In other words, immigrants' inherent need to be emotionally

attached to people and places leads them to negotiate between the dominant culture and their origin home culture and identity through their interactions and practices in everyday spaces (Nagel, 2011). Immigrants' practices of "social citizenship" (i.e., to claim social membership) and their interaction with the new society may foster a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the new place (Askins, 2016; Kazemipur, 2014).

As such, home and its culture are continuously produced and reproduced through individuals' actions, habits and behaviour entangled with power dynamics, gender, class, and culture (Rybczynski, 1986; Wise, 2000). As home and identity are inextricably linked (Wise, 2000), identity in this sense is not fixed and is always in the process of being constructed (Young, 1997). For immigrants, housing and neighbourhood may become a series of cultural trades and negotiations, accepting some practices of the dominant culture while preserving old cultural habits (Wise, 2000, p.306), thus producing new spatial and social arrangements. "As a means of acculturation" (Stea, 2000, p.46), home is likely to reflect hybrid identities by shifting spaces, identities, and cultures (Miller, 2008). In fact, people's interactions through place play a crucial role in producing, sustaining and transforming a sense of identity and belonging (Korpela, 1989). The decision to reside in a particular type of housing and neighbourhood may be an expression of alignment of values and identities with the new society and its dominant norms and values, or a form of alienation (Imrie, 2004; Marcus, 2006; Qadeer, 1997). A neighbourhood locale with foods, smells, materials, and structures can express the identity of its residents, all while generating feelings of exclusion and of being out of place for those deemed not to belong to this place (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the fourth article of my thesis (Chapter 5) examines the homemaking practices of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, exploring how they

cultivate an emotional sense of belonging in and through place/space, from the intimacy of the home to the broader neighbourhood. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, it investigates how Iranian immigrants transform their homes and neighbourhoods into spaces that bridge their Iranian heritage with their Canadian present. Through physical modifications such as open-concept renovations and cultural practices like cooking traditional dishes and celebrating *Norouz* (Persian New Year), they actively negotiate their identity and create a sense of continuity between past and present. The paper also highlights the role of transnational material culture—such as Persian rugs and imported artifacts—and sensory landscapes in shaping domestic environments that evoke nostalgia while fostering new attachments.

Moving beyond the home, the study examines the significance of neighbourhood dynamics in fostering belonging. Ethnic places with Iranian businesses and cultural markers provide familiar spaces for social interaction while reinforcing cultural identity. Over time, accumulated memories within homes and neighbourhoods deepen place attachment, illustrating how homemaking becomes a critical site for identity negotiation and emotional belonging. By focusing on established Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburbs, this paper contributes to broader discussions on how immigrants engage in the social production of space to navigate cultural hybridity and foster belonging in multicultural contexts. It underscores the agency of immigrants in shaping their environments while negotiating dominant norms and values.

Conceptual frameworks and central concepts

This section presents the conceptual frameworks and central concepts that form the foundation of this thesis, building on the preceding literature review to provide a coherent conceptual framework for analyzing Iranian immigrants' settlement and integration in Toronto.

The framework is anchored in Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space and Kye Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry and is operationalized through the key concepts of residential concentration and multidimensional integration.

Lefebvre's theory posits that space is not a passive backdrop but is socially produced through a dialectical relationship between material structures, social practices, and lived experiences (Lefebvre, 1991; Zieleniec, 2008). His spatial triad distinguishes between perceived space (spatial practices and routines), conceived space (the representations and plans of dominant actors such as urban planners), and lived space (the subjective, emotional, and symbolic meanings attached to place). This triadic framework is particularly useful for understanding how immigrants both navigate and transform urban environments, as their daily practices, aspirations, and attachments interact with broader structural forces and institutional constraints.

Within this theoretical context, the concept of residential concentration is central to the study of immigrant geographies. Residential concentration refers to the spatial clustering of immigrant groups within specific neighbourhoods or urban areas, often resulting in the formation of ethnic enclaves or communities. Traditionally, residential concentration has been interpreted through deficit-oriented frameworks, which view such clustering as a sign of social segregation, marginalization, or a barrier to integration (Andersson et al., 2010b; Massey & Denton, 1993). However, recent scholarship challenges this view by recognizing that residential concentration is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by both structural factors (such as housing market dynamics, urban policies, and systemic inequalities) and agency-driven choices (such as cultural preferences, access to co-ethnic networks, and the pursuit of institutional completeness).

It is important to distinguish residential concentration from segregation. While segregation emphasizes systemic exclusion and limited interaction between groups (Massey & Denton, 1988), often carrying negative connotations, residential concentration as used in this thesis reflects a more nuanced understanding of spatial clustering. Concentration can facilitate access to ethnic businesses, cultural institutions, and mutual support, and may foster social cohesion, community-building, and economic advancement (Li, 2009; Zhou & Yang, 2021). At the same time, it can present challenges, such as limited cross-group interaction or the reinforcement of stereotypes. By situating residential concentration within Lefebvre's triad, the thesis examines how the physical and social constraints imposed by conceived space interact with the everyday practices and emotional attachments of immigrants that constitute perceived and lived spaces.

Integration is another central concept and is understood here as a multidimensional and multiscalar process shaped by the interplay of structural forces, individual agency, and emotions. Integration operates across several interconnected domains: spatial, economic, social, cultural, political, and emotional (Ager & Strang, 2008). Spatial integration refers to the residential patterns and locational choices of immigrants, including both the degree of residential concentration or dispersion and movement into higher-status neighbourhoods, which are often interpreted as indicators of socioeconomic achievement and access to resources (Ray, 2002; Murdie & Ghosh, 2010). Economic integration involves access to stable employment, income security, and opportunities for upward mobility, shaped by factors such as education, credential recognition, and discrimination (Reitz, 2007; Hou & Picot, 2016). Social integration concerns the extent and quality of participation in social networks and the development of social capital, which foster mutual understanding, trust, and inclusion (Putnam, 2000; Portes & Rumbaut,

2001). In addition to these core dimensions, cultural integration encompasses adaptation to, negotiation with, and contribution to the cultural norms and values of the receiving society, while political integration involves participation in civic life and advocacy for rights and representation (Berry, 1997; Bloemraad, 2006).

These dimensions are shaped by individual characteristics such as education level, language proficiency, and employment status, as well as broader societal factors such as urban policies, housing market dynamics, discrimination, and systemic inequalities. The multidimensional nature of integration underscores its inherent complexity, wherein each component is intricately interconnected with the others, forming a system of mutual influence and reinforcement. Integration processes are circular rather than hierarchical, involving constant negotiation between structural constraints and individual agency (Ager & Strang, 2008). Importantly, integration is conceptualized as a non-linear trajectory (Favell, 2019) that is highly context-dependent and varies across groups based on socioeconomic status, ethnoracial background, migration pathways, and settlement contexts (Kymlicka & Banting, 2016; Pennix, 2019).

A key innovation of this thesis is the explicit inclusion of emotional integration, drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry. Emotional integration refers to the affective ties to place and community that immigrants develop through everyday practices, homemaking rituals, and social encounters. It recognizes that a sense of home and belonging is shaped not only through socioeconomic achievement or spatial mobility, but through the cultivation of meaningful emotional attachments and recognition within the receiving society. Emotional citizenry highlights the importance of empathy, mutual understanding, and the negotiation of hybrid identities in shaping immigrants' sense of belonging (Kazemipur, 2014; Askins, 2016;

Kale & Kindon, 2021). This perspective challenges reductionist models of integration by foregrounding the relational and affective dimensions that are central to immigrant experiences.

Central to this thesis is the concept of social capital, defined as resources embedded in and derived from social networks. Scholars distinguish three interrelated forms: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to dense, inward-looking ties among family, close friends, or homogeneous groups (ethnic, religious, class-based). These ties reinforce identity and cohesion, providing what Putnam (2000) calls “getting by.” For immigrants, bonding capital functions as a safety net and preserves cultural identity during settlement (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Bridging social capital encompasses more outward-looking relations that cross social divides (race, class, religion). Although weaker than bonding ties, they promote access to new information, opportunities, and social mobility—crucial for “getting ahead” (Putnam, 2000). Bridging capital enables immigrants to expand networks and foster cross-cultural understanding (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Linking social capital captures vertical connections to institutions, authorities, and service providers. These ties grant access to resources and decision-making power, making them especially valuable for marginalized groups (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Unlike bonding and bridging, linking emphasizes cross-hierarchical relations. Together, these forms operate interactively: bonding offers immediate support, bridging expands opportunities, and linking facilitates institutional engagement (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Their integration into the conceptual framework allows a nuanced understanding of how Iranian immigrants negotiate belonging and access opportunity structures within Toronto’s superdiverse context.

The conceptual framework developed here makes several contributions to the field. It bridges the gap between structural and affective dimensions of settlement and integration, highlights the interplay between agency and constraint, and offers new insights into how immigrants navigate, experience, and transform the spaces and places of contemporary cities. By integrating Lefebvre's spatial theory, Askins' emotional citizenry and social capital theory, the thesis provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing immigrant settlement, moving beyond linear or one-dimensional models to reflect the complexity and fluidity of integration in superdiverse urban contexts that is inclusive of immigrants' experiences and own perceptions of these processes. By centering immigrants' voices and self-perceptions, this approach ensures their lived realities inform the analysis, challenging top-down assumptions about integration pathways. As such, integration is theorized as a process of dynamic negotiation rather than a fixed state or endpoint. It is influenced by intersecting identities such as gender, class, ethnicity/race, and life stage, with gendered dynamics playing a particularly significant role in shaping integration outcomes. Integration also unfolds across temporal scales; early settlement experiences may differ significantly from long-term trajectories as immigrants navigate evolving societal norms and personal circumstances.

Methodology

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach employed to investigate the interconnected themes of residential experiences, integration, community building and emotional belonging among Iranian immigrants in Toronto. It begins by establishing the research context, highlighting the demographic significance of this community and its unique settlement patterns within the city. Subsequently, the mixed-methods research design is outlined, detailing the quantitative and qualitative strategies used to gather and analyze

data. I then describe the participant recruitment process, including the strategies used to engage with the Iranian community, and present the sociodemographic characteristics of the final sample. Next, I detail the data analysis techniques utilized in this study. Lastly, I discuss my positionality and reflexivity, acknowledging the potential influence of my background and experiences on the research process, and conclude by examining the study's limitations.

Research context

The case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto provides a unique opportunity to examine the complex interplay between residential, socioeconomic, and emotional aspects of integration. As of 2021, Iran was the 9th largest source country for immigrants to Canada, making up 2.2% of the total immigrant population. In total, there were 182,940 Iranians in Canada, with the majority settling in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2021). Toronto had the largest concentration of Iranian immigrants with 87,105 individuals (representing 47.6% of the group), which is more than twice the number in Vancouver (43,245) and nearly four times the number in Montreal (18,915) (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Toronto is renowned for its high level of diversity (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003), with immigrants making up 46.6% of the Toronto CMA's population in 2021. Moreover, 57% of the population identified as visible minorities, up from 51.4% in 2016. As a gateway city, Toronto's neighbourhoods exhibit distinct patterns of immigrant settlement, characterized by varying spatial concentrations and shares of ethnoracial and immigrant populations (Hulchanski, 2011; Harris, 2004; Harris, 2020; Walks, 2020; Firang, 2019). Within this multicultural landscape, Iranian immigrants predominantly settle along a north-south corridor centered on Yonge Street, extending from North York to Richmond Hill, contributing to the formation of residential clusters (see Chapters 2 and 3). These neighbourhoods located in Toronto's northern suburbs are

typically upper-/middle-class areas dominated by single-detached homes while also featuring a significant presence of Iranian businesses, institutions, and services. This spatial concentration contrasts with settlement patterns observed among other visible minority immigrant groups, such as South Asians who often reside in inner suburban high-rise apartment buildings (Ghosh, 2014) or blacks (Firang, 2019) who are more dispersed across different areas.

Research design and methods

This study employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to examine both the residential experiences and broader integration processes of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. This design intentionally combines objective indicators of integration – such as socioeconomic status, housing conditions, and spatial settlement patterns – with the subjective experiences and perspectives of immigrants themselves. Grounded in the principles of triangulation and complementarity, this approach enables a robust and nuanced understanding of immigrant integration as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing residential, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, this methodological framework aligns with Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space by incorporating multiple types of data that capture the lived, conceived, and perceived dimensions of urban space.

The quantitative component is based on a secondary analysis of Statistics Canada’s 2021 census data, focusing on key variables that capture multiple dimensions of immigrant integration within Toronto’s neighbourhoods. Specifically, indicators related to residential integration include homeownership rates, housing values, and housing types, which provide insight into patterns of settlement and housing behaviour among Iranian immigrants. Economic integration is assessed through variables such as income levels, employment status, reflecting the economic

positioning of the population. Social integration is examined through measures of ethnic composition and educational attainment, which illuminate the social and cultural characteristics of Iranian immigrant communities. To facilitate a comprehensive analysis and interpretation, a series of tables were systematically developed to organize these variables, enabling clear visualization of trends and comparisons across census tracts. Additionally, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) techniques were employed to map the census data, visualizing the spatial distribution and proportion of Iranian immigrants across Toronto's census tracts. This spatial profiling, derived from GIS mapping and comprehensive tabular analyses, provides a critical contextual baseline that supports the interpretation of qualitative findings by highlighting patterns of residential integration, neighbourhood characteristics, and the socioeconomic and cultural profiles specific to Iranian immigrants across Toronto's census tracts (see Chapters 2 and 3). Moreover, these tabular presentations facilitate the triangulation of findings with qualitative and other quantitative data sources, thereby enhancing the overall robustness and validity of the study's conclusions.

The qualitative component is extensive and multi-dimensional, including interviews with Iranian immigrant men and women, key informant interviews with Iranian real estate agents, and participant observation. First, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 54 Iranian immigrants. Semi-structured interviews were selected to center participants' voices, enabling them to narrate their experiences through self-determined priorities while ensuring coverage of key themes (e.g., residential behaviour). This approach aligns with Gaudet & Robert's (2018) emphasis on balancing researcher-guided inquiry with participant agency, fostering natural dialogue that reveals nuanced, context-specific insights into migration trajectories.

Next, the sociodemographic survey served to collect data on participants' immigration histories, socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education, occupation, income), and housing attributes. This information enriched the qualitative analysis by allowing for nuanced interpretations of participants' narratives, particularly in relation to gender and other demographic factors. During the interviews, some participants spontaneously drew mental maps to visually articulate their residential choices; these maps were incorporated into the study with their consent (see Chapter 2).

The methodology employed a two-stage interview process and an innovative aspect of this study is the integration of a photovoice component within the second interview sessions. Photovoice is a participatory visual research method that facilitates participants' ability to articulate their perspectives and priorities, thereby giving voice to individuals whose experiences might otherwise be marginalized or overlooked (Wang & Burris, 1997). This process helps to uncover both conscious and less articulated thoughts and concerns, complementing verbal narratives and providing a multidimensional understanding of participants' experiences (ibid). Photovoice data can provide rich insights into the material and symbolic dimensions of everyday life – such as homemaking practices among Iranian immigrants – and is useful to capture broadened expressions of social meanings associated with familiar environments, such as homes and neighbourhoods. However, not all participants engaged in the photovoice component, as some opted out due to personal preferences or logistical constraints., reflecting the ethical prioritization of participant autonomy in this study.

To gain additional insights into housing practices and preferences within the community, I conducted key informant interviews with seven Iranian real estate agents serving primarily co-ethnic clients in Toronto. These interviews provided valuable perspectives on how housing

markets influence Iranian immigrants' spatial practices and residential decision-making processes. In addition, three community leaders and co-founders of Iranian ethnic associations in Toronto were interviewed to examine the role of ethnic organizations and associations along with broader community building practices.

Lastly, ethnographic methods were also integral to this research, mostly by engaging in participant observation within areas with high concentrations of Iranian immigrants, visiting businesses, attending cultural events, and observing social interactions in public spaces. Living within or near neighbourhoods with high concentrations of Iranian immigrants during fieldwork allowed for direct access to participants' daily lives and provided a deeper understanding of their settlement behaviours and social practices. Notably, staying at the residence of one participant recruited through social media offered unique insights into Iranian immigrants' lived experiences that extended beyond formal data collection.

The integration of these diverse methods—quantitative spatial analysis, qualitative interviews with sociodemographic data, mental maps and photovoice, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observation—ensures a comprehensive examination of Iranian immigrants' experiences. The mixed-methods approach not only captures multiple dimensions of the phenomenon but also facilitates data triangulation to enhance validity and reliability. By combining statistical profiling with lived experiences and participatory techniques, this methodology provides a holistic understanding of how Iranian immigrants navigate their spatial and social environments in Toronto's diverse landscape.

Recruitment process and participants

The study targeted established Iranian immigrants who had resided in the country for at least five years, had immigrated to Canada as economic immigrants or through family

reunification – and thus were permanent residents or Canadian citizens – and ranging in age from 30 to 70 years. The study prioritized participants residing in suburban neighbourhoods within North York and the Cities of Richmond Hill, Thornhill (Markham and Vaughan), and Newmarket, where Iranian immigrants are spatially concentrated.

To achieve the target sample size of 40 participants, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed, enabling both targeted recruitment based on specific criteria and the expansion of the sample through referrals from existing participants and community networks. I initiated the recruitment process by leveraging my Iranian social networks to identify potential participants and generate initial interest in the study.

Simultaneously, I engaged with Iranian community leaders, public figures, politicians, local community providers, and business owners, to solicit their support in promoting the study and facilitating connections with potential participants. I also disseminated targeted advertisements on Facebook pages and other social media platforms frequented by the Iranian community in Toronto, clearly articulating the study's purpose, eligibility requirements, and contact information. Moreover, posters and announcements were disseminated in ethnic businesses and service providers (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants, community centers) located in suburban neighbourhoods with high concentrations of Iranian residents. In addition to these formal recruitment methods, I dedicated time to informal recruitment efforts within public spaces frequented by the Iranian community, including libraries, coffee shops, shopping malls, and community centers. Through these interactions, the study was introduced, and interested individuals were provided with further details.

All potential participants were screened to ensure they met the eligibility criteria, and those who expressed willingness and were deemed eligible were provided with detailed

information about the study, including its objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. The final sample consisted of 54 participants, comprising 34 women and 20 men. A significant portion of the sample had immigrated to Canada as economic immigrants (43 participants) or through family sponsorship programs (8 participants). Three participants who initially entered Canada as refugees were also included in the study based on their subsequent demonstration of economic integration and overall successful establishment in the country.

Participants came from two distinct migration waves. The first cohort, consisting of 15 participants, arrived before 2000, coinciding with the significant increase in Iranian emigrants following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This group was primarily motivated by social and political transformations and the hardships caused by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The second cohort, consisting of 39 participants, arrived between 2000 and 2017. This wave was characterized by more diverse motivations including economic opportunities, educational pursuits, and a desire for an enhanced quality of life. The emergence of new social movements, such as the Green Movement in 2009, may have influenced the second cohort to migrate (Mohammadi, 2023).

Geographically, the majority of participants (43) resided in upper and middle-class neighbourhoods in North York and Richmond Hill, areas with a significant concentration of Iranian immigrants; another 8 lived in Thornhill, and 3 in Newmarket. Most participants (42) were homeowners, primarily living in single-detached houses. The majority belonged to older age groups, with the 50-59 years category representing the largest proportion (n=21), followed by the 40-49 years category (n=14). Regarding household income, 25 participants reported earning \$100,000 or more annually, 15 households fell into lower income brackets, and 14

respondents did not disclose their income. This multipronged recruitment strategy enabled a degree of variation in participants' profiles.

Data collection

Fieldwork was conducted from October 2022 to March 2023. This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the University of Ottawa. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board in October 2022, ensuring that the study adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

The interview process was structured around two sessions designed to examine different aspects of participants' experiences. The initial plan involved a shorter first session serving as an introductory meeting to build rapport, explain the research objectives, and administer the socio-demographic survey. However, contrary to expectations, many participants engaged deeply with the interview questions during this first session, extensively discussing their experiences, everyday social practices, and spatial practices related to housing and integration processes. The richness of these initial interviews often exceeded expectations, leading to a more in-depth understanding of key themes than initially anticipated for the introductory session.

The photovoice methodology was introduced during the first interview session, where participants were provided with instructions and guidelines regarding the photovoice component. These included suggestions on the types of photographs to capture, such as materials, objects, and spaces of personal significance, and encouragement to take photos within their current environments in Toronto while also sharing photos from their homes in Iran. Participants were given flexibility to choose the number of photographs they wished to share. The second session

focused on eliciting participants' reflections on these images, facilitating deeper insights into their lived environments and everyday practices as Iranian immigrants in Toronto.

All interviews were conducted in Farsi to ensure participants could express themselves comfortably and authentically. In strict adherence to ethical guidelines and with explicit informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations chosen to enhance participant comfort, including their homes, workplaces, coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, and community centres. A subset of the second interview sessions ($n = 4$) was conducted online to accommodate participants' scheduling constraints.

To acknowledge participants' time and contribution, interviewees were often offered gift cards as a token of appreciation. For interviews conducted in cafes or restaurants, the study covered the costs of any food or beverages consumed during the session. Cultural sensitivities were carefully observed throughout the research process; for instance, a few men participants respectfully declined coverage of expenses, and this preference was fully honoured. As a gesture of gratitude, participants who welcomed the researcher into their homes were offered a box of chocolates.

During home and workplace visits, participants often extended traditional Persian hospitality by offering tea, coffee, and sweets, reflecting transnational cultural practices common among Iranians in the diaspora. Conducting interviews within participants' homes provided a unique and intimate setting that served both as the object and the site of research. This environment facilitated richer, more tangible discussions about their everyday practices, social relationships, and emotional connections to place. Participants frequently showed me around their homes, explaining the significance of objects, décor, and household elements, which

offered valuable insights into their transnational identities, neighbouring practices, and experiences of belonging. The home setting was particularly conducive to exploring themes related to domestic life, such as gardening, cooking, and social interactions, allowing participants to articulate their lived realities in ways that might not have emerged in external settings.

Among the participants, three held prominent roles as co-founders and heads of Iranian-Canadian community organizations. During interviews with these individuals, a deliberate analytical focus was placed on understanding community building processes, including institutional advocacy, cultural preservation initiatives, and diaspora networking strategies. Their leadership positions provided unique insights into how formal and informal networks – ranging from local cultural associations to transnational collaborations – shape settlement patterns and foster belonging.

In addition to interviews with Iranian immigrant participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Iranian real estate agents serving as key informants. These interviews aimed to gather expert insights on Iranian immigrants' residential behaviours, homeownership attainment, socioeconomic status, and the cultural roles influencing their sociospatial practices. The sample included five men and two women agents. Except for one in-person interview, all sessions were conducted online due to logistical considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to two hours for an average of one hour and a half, allowing for in-depth discussion and variability in responses. These key informant interviews provided a valuable complementary perspective on the housing market dynamics and settlement patterns specific to the Iranian immigrant community in Toronto.

Ethnographic observations constituted a critical component of the fieldwork and were conducted concurrently with interviews between October 2022 and March 2023. Immersed in

naturalistic settings frequented by Iranian immigrants – such as cafes, restaurants, libraries, community centres, ethnic grocery stores, and shopping malls – I systematically observed social interactions, spatial practices, and cultural expressions relevant to the study. These observations were guided by a set of thematic prompts aligned with the research objectives, focusing on everyday practices, social networks, and the use of urban space. Detailed field notes were maintained in a research journal to document contextual information, non-verbal cues, and informal conversations when opportunities arose. This ethnographic approach enabled a richer understanding of the lived realities of Iranian immigrants beyond interview narratives, capturing embodied practices and social dynamics within both public and semi-private spaces. When appropriate, brief informal interactions and follow-up questions supplemented observations, providing additional qualitative depth.

Data analysis

I employed a robust, mixed-methods approach to analyze the complex interplay of factors influencing Iranian immigrants' experiences in Toronto. The data analysis strategy involved a multi-step, iterative process, designed to ensure rigour and capture the nuanced realities of residential behaviour, integration, social mobility, community building, homemaking and emotional belonging. Central to this approach was the principle of triangulation (Creswell, 2013), which involved drawing upon my various data sources to validate and enrich the interpretation of the findings.

The quantitative analysis began with a comprehensive examination of Statistics Canada's 2021 census data, which was conducted prior to fieldwork and while awaiting ethics approval. This early analysis enabled the identification of key settlement patterns and informed subsequent qualitative inquiry. Utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS), I mapped the spatial

distribution and concentration of Iranian immigrants across Toronto's census tracts, providing a visual overview of their settlement geography (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Beyond spatial mapping, the analysis incorporated a detailed investigation of a range of variables relevant to integration, including homeownership rates, housing values, housing types, income levels, employment status, educational attainment, and ethnic composition. To contextualize these findings, I systematically prepared tables and comparative charts that contrasted the demographic and socioeconomic profiles of Iranian immigrants with those of the broader Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) population. Further, I conducted comparative analyses between key suburban areas of Iranian concentration, such as North York, Richmond Hill, Thornhill, and Newmarket, to highlight intra-group variation and neighbourhood-level differences. These tabular and comparative analyses provided a robust empirical foundation for the study, enabling the identification of both macro-level trends and local specificities. This quantitative groundwork not only guided the design and focus of the qualitative research, but also facilitated triangulation by allowing for systematic comparison between objective indicators and the subjective experiences gathered through interviews and ethnographic observation.

The next stage involved analysis of the sociodemographic surveys from the interview participants, organizing and summarizing the quantitative data. The data was systematically presented in tables and graphs, providing a comprehensive overview of the participant sample and its key characteristics. This information provided an important foundation for the qualitative analysis of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which formed the core of my analysis.

Given the culturally sensitive nature of the research and the need to preserve the rich, varied nuances in the participants' accounts, I transcribed the interviews in Farsi and then translated them into English. Following this, I opted to undertake manual coding to familiarize

myself with and to gain deeper understanding of the interview data. This approach was crucial for identifying a variety of themes and patterns with subtle nuances that might have been missed by automated methods.

The coding process was implemented in two phases: deductive and inductive. In the first phase, a deductive approach was adopted, using pre-defined codes derived from the research questions and interview guide. This initial coding involved a systematic organization of the data around key areas of inquiry, such as residential choices, integration experiences, social mobility aspirations, and community building practices. Subsequently, the analysis transitioned to an inductive coding approach, involving both vertical analysis (examining themes within individual interviews) and horizontal analysis (comparing patterns across interviews) to identify new themes and patterns emerging from the data. This combined approach was essential for identifying unexpected insights and capturing the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

At this stage, field notes and recorded ethnographic observations were strategically integrated throughout the data analysis process. These data sources provided valuable contextual insights into the social and cultural milieu of Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburban context that helped to refine interpretations, contextualize interview data, and identify potential biases in the data. Importantly, the triangulation of interview data with ethnographic observations and field notes facilitated the identification of potential biases, such as social desirability bias or selective recall, by highlighting discrepancies or consistencies between participants' narratives and observed behaviours or environmental cues.

The final analytical stage involved a theoretical interpretation of findings through triangulation of qualitative, quantitative, and ethnographic data. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space and his spatial triad, the analysis examined how

Iranian immigrants' residential behaviours in Toronto reflect the interplay of *lived* (everyday practices), *perceived* (emotional attachments), and *conceived* (structural/institutional) spatial dimensions. This framework was applied to both census data, such as housing types, income levels, and geographic distribution, and qualitative narratives from interviews and photovoice, enabling a synthesis of objective spatial patterns with subjective lived experiences.

Next, Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry was utilized to examine the interplay between Iranian immigrants' different dimensions of their integration processes, their emotional sense of belonging, and gendered experiences. In conjunction, I integrated social capital theory to analyze the development of various intra/inter-cultural social networks and friendships along with the effects of community building on sense of belonging. This combined theoretical lens provided insights into how social connections contribute to emotional belonging and integration. Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space and spatial triad were further applied to analyze Iranian immigrants' homemaking practice. This theoretical framework enabled an examination of how spatial practices serve to negotiate and/or contribute to emotional belonging, offering a multidimensional understanding of the relationship between physical space and emotional attachment.

By combining these multiple stages of analysis and integrating diverse data sources, the study provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. This thorough analytical approach ensured that the findings are rigorously grounded in a set of rich empirical data while also being theoretically informed.

Positionality and reflexivity

Reflecting on positionality and engaging in reflexivity during research is important for several reasons. Researchers inherently bring their own perspectives, beliefs, and experiences

into the research process and acknowledging this is valuable for understanding and taking into account potential biases and subjective influences (Creswell, 2013; Foote & Bartell, 2011, Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Essentially, maintaining awareness of one's positionality and engaging in reflexivity helps foster a more rigorous, transparent, and ethical research process, thereby enhancing the overall reliability and validity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

To situate myself as the principal researcher in this study, I am both an insider and an outsider relative to the Iranian immigrant community in Toronto. I am an insider insofar as I am Iranian and fluent in Farsi, having been born and raised in Tehran, Iran. Living through significant transformative periods in Iran has provided me with valuable insights into the history, cultural codes, norms and values of my home country, underscoring my role as a cultural informant. As a first-generation adult immigrant, I share some commonalities in my life experiences with Iranian participants in this research. This insider position gives me certain advantages in conducting this study.

Yet I am also an outsider due to several factors that differentiate me from many of the participants in this study. My position as a female researcher may influence interactions with male participants, potentially affecting the nature and depth of information shared. Additionally, being in my early 30s, I am younger than the majority of participants, who are predominantly in their 40s and 50s. This generational gap may impact our shared experiences and perspectives on various socio-cultural issues.

Furthermore, participants born and raised before or during the early years following the Islamic Revolution may have experienced significantly different social, political, and economic circumstances compared to my own upbringing in Iran. While I have gained knowledge about these historical periods through various sources such as literature, media, and social networks,

there remains a distinct difference between lived experience and acquired information. This disparity in direct versus indirect experiences could influence our respective worldviews and interpretations of certain phenomena, potentially affecting the nuances of our interactions and the depth of our mutual understanding during the research process.

Additionally, a student researcher holding a temporary study permit, my perspective is shaped by my status as an outsider, given that participants' permanent residency (or acquired Canadian citizenship) was typically a prerequisite for studying their long-term integration process. Even more, my immigration pathway as an international student differs from that of many participants who arrived as skilled workers. My relatively recent arrival in Canada positions me as a newcomer compared to many of the long-term residents in my sample. Despite these potential limitations, this dual positioning as insider-outsider has been advantageous, enabling me to empathize with participants' experiences while leveraging my analytical skills to integrate qualitative insights with broader data sources. Moreover, my short period of stay in Canada could potentially enhance the data collection process as participants may feel more comfortable discussing topics they consider important without assuming I have prior knowledge or experiences as an established immigrant.

Building trust was paramount given the political climate and potential fears about discussing sensitive topics within Iranian community. Participants often hesitated to engage unless they knew me through their networks or could verify my status as a university student. My affiliation with an academic institution helped alleviate concerns and facilitated trust-building. My active involvement in the research community and pre-existing social networks in Toronto and Ottawa played a significant role in facilitating participant recruitment and building

rapport. These networks included friends and acquaintances known to me prior to the study, as well as connections established through community leaders and gatekeepers.

Importantly, a pivotal opportunity arose when a participant who co-founded an Iranian cultural community organization in Toronto offered me temporary accommodation. This participant played a dual role as both a research participant and a community gatekeeper. Their leadership position within the Iranian community and extensive social networks provided critical insights into the structural and relational dynamics of Iranian immigrant integration in Toronto. This collaboration occurred early in the fieldwork phase (November 2022), following an initial interview. The relationship with this participant extended beyond the formal research period, evolving into a sustained friendship grounded in mutual respect and shared cultural identity. During my residency with this participant, daily conversations focused on broader community dynamics, including the role of ethnic associations, cultural preservation efforts, and shared settlement experiences among Iranian immigrants in Toronto. To maintain strict confidentiality and anonymity, these discussions avoided reference to individual participants or specific data points. Instead, they centered on general observations of sociocultural practices and institutional networks, allowing me to contextualize findings within the community's collective experiences. Post-fieldwork, we maintained contact through occasional meetings and digital communication.

In addition, I conducted key informant interviews with community leaders and Iranian real estate agents early in the research process, prior to or concurrent with participant interviews. This preliminary engagement served as a strategic entry point, providing valuable insights into the community's social dynamics and housing practices. Given the high level of trust that many Iranian immigrants place in these respected community members, their endorsement reassured participants about the integrity and purpose of the research.

Participants also employed various strategies to assess their willingness to participate and gauge their level of trust, including inquiring about my background, post-graduation plans, and relationship with the Iranian government. These interactions allowed them to evaluate my positionality and adjust their expectations accordingly. I found that participants with university education, particularly those familiar with qualitative research methods, tended to place greater trust in me as a researcher.

As a researcher from Iran, a country with a complex ideological and religious landscape, I approached this study with a nuanced understanding of the potential sensitivities surrounding religious and political topics. Discussions about religion were not prominent in the interviews unless participants proactively raised the subject. My secular demeanor likely played a crucial role in establishing trust with participants from secular backgrounds, positioning me as a partial insider. Nonetheless, I was also able to establish rapport with the few participants who visibly practiced their religious beliefs.

Once initial trust was established, many welcomed me into their homes with traditional Iranian hospitality. This hospitality created a complex dynamic in the researcher-participant relationship. While accepting such generosity required careful navigation of power dynamics, it also served as an empowering action for participants, allowing them to shape aspects of our interactions. Close engagement was achieved through genuine expressions of interest in participants' lives, and a consistent emphasis on respect, confidentiality, and reciprocity throughout the research process. This approach fostered an environment in which participants felt comfortable and valued, encouraging them to share their authentic perspectives and experiences. In several instances, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee evolved into genuine friendships, particularly as trust deepened through ongoing communication and

shared experiences beyond the formal interview setting. This was especially evident among women participants, who, as a result of this trust and rapport, felt more at ease sharing personal and sensitive aspects of their migration journeys, family life, and emotional experiences.

Throughout the analysis, I was acutely aware of my dual positionality as both an insider – sharing cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds with participants – and an outsider, as a researcher maintaining academic distance. To achieve reflexivity, validate the data and enhance the credibility of participants' narratives, I adopted a self-supervision approach that involved regularly bracketing my emotions, preconceptions, and prior experiences, and critically examining how these factors might influence the interpretation of data (Berger, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). I engaged in a systematic process of reflexivity to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. I maintained reflexive journals and analytic memos to systematically document moments of potential bias, shifts in perspective, and key methodological decisions. This ongoing self-interrogation allowed me to leverage my cultural familiarity to build rapport and contextual understanding, while also upholding analytical rigour and objectivity. By embedding these reflexive practices throughout the analysis process, I was able to enhance the validity of the findings and ensure that participants' narratives were represented authentically and ethically.

Research limitations

To maintain transparency and rigour, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential limitations of this study, enabling readers to understand its scope and boundaries (Creswell, 2013). The research sample encompasses Iranian immigrants who arrived in Canada at various periods before and after the year 2000. While the research was well-received within the Iranian

community in Toronto, resulting in a sample exceeding the initial target, some individuals' lack of trust in the researcher prevented their participation.

In this context, the recent sociopolitical climate affecting Iranians, both domestically and within the diaspora, cannot be disregarded as a potential deterrent to participation. Specifically, the unrest and revolutionary movement that emerged following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, identified by the slogan of "Women, Life, Freedom," may have contributed to some Iranian immigrants' hesitance and mistrust. While many participants indeliberately discussed the political situation in Iran, some others never engaged in such discussions. Reassurances regarding the study's non-political nature and the right to withdraw from the study were necessary to build trust.

Furthermore, the implementation of specific recruitment criteria, focusing on established Iranian immigrants who have been permanent residents (or citizens of Canada) for five or more years, inherently excludes other Iranian immigrant groups with differing circumstances. It is notable that the majority of participants who chose to contribute to this study were professionals, academics, and educated individuals, potentially skewing the findings towards these groups. This may have introduced a potential bias toward those with a more nuanced understanding of the research process.

Additionally, the sample consisted of individuals with backgrounds outside of the social sciences, who often exhibited a preference for positivist and quantitative research approaches. This required additional effort within interviews to contextualize the qualitative nature of the research and emphasize the value of their lived experiences. Participants also raised questions about the potential impact of the research on themselves, the Iranian immigrant community, and

relevant immigration policies, necessitating discussions to clarify the study's goals and potential benefits.

Finally, the researcher's insider position within the Iranian community introduced a potential for bias, as participants were likely to read the research upon completion. This required careful consideration during data analysis and writing to balance the researcher's roles as both a researcher and a member of the community, particularly when addressing potentially controversial topics such as gender relationships. A cautious approach to data articulation was adopted to minimize any potential negative reactions or distrust toward future researchers.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis is organized as a series of four interconnected articles, each addressing a distinct but related dimension of Iranian immigrants' experiences with integration in the multicultural context of Toronto. While each article is self-contained with its own aims, research questions, theoretical frameworks, methods, and findings, they collectively address the overarching theme of immigrant integration in superdiverse cities.

Chapter 2 (Paper I), *Homescapes: Examining Iranian Immigrants' Residential Behaviour in Suburban Toronto through Lefebvre's spatial Triad*, investigates how spatial choices and everyday practices shape the residential geographies of Iranian immigrants, challenging conventional models of settlement. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, this article employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative spatial analysis of census data with qualitative interviews. It reveals that residential clustering in affluent neighbourhoods like Richmond Hill reflects strategic agency rather than passive assimilation, redefining spatial hierarchies in Toronto's suburbs. In so doing, this paper adopts Lefebvre's

spatial triad as a useful analytical framework for studying immigrant settlement geographies, with the intention of addressing some of the limitations of existing models.

Chapter 3 (Paper II), *Navigating the Multiple Dimensions of Integration: Gendered Experiences, Emotional Belonging, and Social Mobility among Iranian Immigrants in Toronto*, explores the interplay between residential and socioeconomic integration, with particular attention to gendered pathways and the development of emotional belonging. Using a mixed-methods approach, it synthesizes integration theories with Askins' emotional citizenry framework to argue that integration's multidimensional aspects—economic, residential, and emotional—are interconnected and interdependent, with social mobility and professional achievements fostering a sense of belonging.

Chapter 4 (Paper III), *Community-Building Practices among Iranian Immigrants: Social Capital Formation and Emotional Belonging in Toronto*, critiques transactional models of social capital by analyzing how Iranian immigrants navigate community fragmentation through multi-scalar networks that blend bonding, bridging, and linking capital. Combining social capital theory with Askins' notion of emotional citizenry, the study examines how intra-community divisions challenge cohesion, while revealing how immigrants strategically cultivate networks across local, transnational, and institutional scales to foster emotional solidarity and cultural continuity.

Chapter 5 (Paper IV), *Homemaking Practices and Cultural Continuity: A Spatial Analysis of Iranian Immigrants' Lived Experiences in Toronto*, examines how Iranian immigrants transform suburban homes and neighbourhoods into sites of transcultural belonging through homemaking practices, material culture, sensory rituals, and spatial negotiations. Combining semi-structured interviews, photovoice sessions, and ethnographic

observations, the study applies Lefebvre's spatial triad to analyze multiscalar spatial production – from domestic dwellings to ethnic businesses and neighbourhoods, and public institutions – are reconfigured through lived experiences (lived space), structural constraints (conceived space), and everyday practices (perceived space), illustrating a dynamic, multiscalar process of cultural negotiation and emplacement.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions of the thesis, highlighting how the experiences of Iranian immigrants contribute to broader debates on immigrant integration, home, and belonging within migration and urban studies. It reflects on the significance of adopting a multidimensional and relational approach to integration, particularly in superdiverse contexts. The chapter also identifies avenues for future research, including comparative and longitudinal studies, which could further explore the evolving and complex nature of immigrant experiences. In doing so, the conclusion underscores the broader relevance of this research for advancing scholarly understanding and informing ongoing discussions around migration and diversity.

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Chapter 2: Paper I: Homescapes: Examining Iranian Immigrants' Residential Behaviour in Suburban Toronto through Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

هر کجا هستم، باشم
آسمان مال من است
پنجره، فکر، هوا، عشق، زمین مال من است

*Wherever I may be, the sky is mine—
The window, the wind, the thought, the love, the land—
All are mine.*

— Sohrab Sepehri

Abstract

This paper contributes to understanding immigrant residential pathways by applying Lefebvre's theory of the production of space as an analytical lens, offering a flexible framework for examining diverse settlement experiences. We demonstrate the utility of this framework through an analysis of Iranian immigrants' residential behaviour in suburban Toronto. Drawing on mixed methods, including spatial analysis of census data, in-depth interviews with 54 Iranian immigrants and 7 real estate agents, and ethnographic observations, we examine the factors shaping neighbourhood and housing choices. Our sociospatial analysis reveals how Iranian immigrants' residential patterns are influenced by the interplay between lived experiences, spatial perceptions, and engagement with conceived space in Toronto's multicultural landscape. We find that Iranians concentrate in relatively affluent suburban areas they refer to as "Iranian neighbourhoods," which provide desired safety, social class, and ethno-racial composition. Notably, Iranian immigrants, despite being an ethno-racial minority group, exhibit a unique ability to access and concentrate in privileged neighbourhoods in Toronto, contrasting with the experiences of other ethno-racial minority groups. Iranian immigrants' housing choices are also influenced by their pre-migration residential behaviour, cultural identity and economic considerations.

This case study illustrates how our theoretical approach can capture the multi-layered nature of immigrant settlement, moving beyond simplistic notions of diversity to reveal nuanced ethno-racial geographies. Our findings raise questions about ethnic hierarchy and offer a promising direction for theorizing diverse immigrant residential pathways in contemporary gateway cities.

Keyword: Residential behaviour; Lefebvre's spatial triad; privileged neighbourhood; ethnic hierarchy; suburban Toronto; Iranian immigrants.

Introduction

The growing diversity of contemporary immigrant flows to major gateway cities like Toronto, Canada, presents significant challenges for theorizing residential pathways and settlement patterns. Today's immigrants, arriving through a variety of admission categories, represent a wide spectrum of national, ethno-racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, creating what Vertovec (2007) terms 'superdiverse' cities. This complex reality renders traditional models of immigrant residential behaviour, developed in earlier eras of more homogeneous immigration flows, increasingly inadequate (Alba & Nee, 1997; Mendez, 2009; Nagel, 2009; Zhou & Yang, 2021).

The tendency of a growing share of non-European and non-White immigrants to bypass city centres and directly settle in suburbs (Ahadi, 2021; Harris, 2020) challenges conventional spatial assimilation narratives. As Wright, Ellis, and Parks (2005) demonstrate in their critique of spatial assimilation research, these models often fail to capture the complex interplay between structure, agency, and identity that shapes contemporary immigrant geographies. What is needed is a theoretical framework that can account for the active role immigrants play in producing urban space while navigating structural constraints.

Building on this theoretical foundation, it becomes essential to examine how these dynamics manifest in specific suburban contexts. In-depth research is needed to analyze the diverse characteristics of new ethnic suburban communities, rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. While much of existing research focuses on the housing experiences of disadvantaged ethno-racial minority immigrants (e.g., Firang, 2019; Ghosh, 2014), less is known about ethno-racial minority immigrants in more affluent areas. Moreover, besides extensive analysis of the Chinese as an established visible minority in Toronto with a long immigration history (e.g., Lo & Wang, 1997), the literature has predominantly concentrated on the settlement experiences of newcomers (5 years or less since arrival), with limited attention given to more established immigrants. In contrast this study examines the case of established Iranians, a visible minority immigrant group with a much shorter migration trajectory and less settled presence in Canada relative to other minority groups.

In addition, Iranian immigrants' experiences diverge from both postwar European immigrants (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003; Preston & Ray, 2020; Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007) and contemporary ethno-racial minorities from the Caribbean and Africa (Qadeer & Kumar, 2006; Qadeer et al., 2010). Unlike some ethno-racial immigrant groups settling in inner suburban high-rise buildings (Firang, 2018; Ghosh, 2014), Iranian immigrants concentrate in contiguous middle- and upper-class suburban neighbourhoods where single-family homes dominate. Over time, in these areas, distinct "Iranian neighbourhoods" have emerged through the interplay of cultural preferences, socioeconomic resources, and structural conditions.

To capture this complexity, we draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) theory of the production of space to develop an analytical lens attentive to the interplay of daily practices, planned environments, and lived symbolic meanings. Lefebvre's framework of perceived,

conceived, and lived space highlights the social construction of space through human activity and experience (Merrifield, 2006; Pierce & Martin, 2015; Zieleniec, 2008). Applying this lens, we ask: (1) What factors shape Iranian immigrants' neighbourhood and housing choices in Toronto? (2) How can Lefebvre's spatial triad help conceptualize their settlement patterns in privileged suburban areas?

We first critically review the existing literature on immigrant settlement, then outline our conceptual framework. After describing our methodology, we present our findings on Iranian immigrants' neighbourhood choices and housing preferences in Toronto, examining how lived experiences, spatial perceptions, and engagements with conceived space influence their residential geographies. We conclude by reflecting on how our analytical approach can advance theories of immigrant settlement in increasingly diverse metropolitan contexts.

The geographies of immigrant settlement and housing behaviour

Since the early 20th century, various models have been proposed to explain immigrant settlement patterns and housing experiences in cities across the United States and Canada. We critically review these key theoretical frameworks, tracing their evolution from early models to recent conceptualizations. We highlight the strengths and limitations of each approach to situate our study within the broader landscape of immigrant geographies research in North American urban contexts.

The study of immigrant residential behaviour finds its roots in the early 20th century Chicago School which laid the groundwork for this field with their pioneering theory of the "concentric zone model." The model proposed that socioeconomic competition shapes the spatial organization of urban populations into distinct zones (Park et al., 1925). Developed in the 1920s,

this framework has been critiqued for oversimplifying the residential experiences of diverse immigrant populations (Alba & Nee, 1997).

Building on this foundation, Massey and colleagues (1985) introduced the “spatial assimilation model,” which posits that over time immigrants assimilate socially and spatially by relocating from ethnic enclaves in the inner-city to suburban neighbourhoods. This movement has often been interpreted as an indicator of upward socioeconomic mobility (Ray et al., 1997). But critics argue that this model fails to account for the multifaceted experiences of ethno-racial groups, particularly how structural barriers such as racial discrimination shape their residential outcomes (Alba & Nee, 1997; Mendez, 2009; Murdie & Skop, 2011; Nagel, 2009; Zhou & Yang, 2021).

Next, Alba and Logan (1993) proposed the “place stratification theory,” offering a critical perspective on residential patterns in US cities. Developed from observations of Black and non-white Hispanic experiences, this model suggests that structural barriers significantly influence the residential outcomes of different ethno-racial groups. According to this theory, locational attainment is not solely determined by socioeconomic factors such as income and education; rather, racial stratification, manifested through housing market discrimination, creates a hierarchical ordering of places. This hierarchy effectively constrains ethno-racial minorities’ access to the most desirable locations in the spatial landscape, regardless of their socioeconomic achievements (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007).

In recent decades, the settlement of immigrants from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds in ethnic neighbourhoods has led to the development of ethnic community models (Fong & Wilkes, 2003; Hou, 2004). Research suggests that socioeconomic factors, such as income and education levels, play a critical role in shaping spatial patterns and homeownership rates among

contemporary groups (Skop & Li, 2005). Studies have further demonstrated that ethno-racial minority immigrants with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to reside within ethnic communities and exhibit higher rates of homeownership compared to their counterparts living outside same-group neighbourhoods, representing a phenomenon known as the “new spatial assimilation model” (Haan, 2005).

The concept of “ethnoburbs,” developed by Wei Li (2009), has significantly influenced scholarly understandings of contemporary immigrant integration experiences. Ethnoburbs are defined as suburban ethnic clusters characterized by residential and business districts in large metropolitan areas. These areas are multiethnic communities with one dominant ethnic minority group, often highly educated and affluent immigrants (Li, 2009; Zhou & Yang, 2021). The ethnoburb model captures not only novel housing patterns but also the economic position and function of these communities (Li, 2009). Ethnoburbs reframe perceptions of ethnic enclaves from impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods to economically prosperous and culturally vibrant suburbs (Wen, Lauderdale, Kandula, 2009; Zhou & Yang, 2021). While initially observed among Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles, the ethnoburb phenomenon has been documented in various North American cities, demonstrating its broader applicability as a contemporary settlement pattern (Li, 2009; Wang & Jason, 2013; Wen, Lauderdale, Kandula, 2009).

In the Canadian context, researchers have sought to adapt and refine U.S.-based models while addressing their shortcomings to better reflect the socio-spatial trends of immigrant settlement in Canadian cities. Despite efforts to avoid the term “assimilation,” concepts such as integration and spatial concentration often retain assimilationist undertones (Brunner et al., 2024; Mendez, 2009). Consequently, Hiebert and Ley’s (2003) “up and out” model may more

accurately capture the main patterns of the traditional spatial assimilation model in Canadian cities (see also Mendez, 2009).

The changing suburban landscape, particularly the prevalence of high-rise apartment buildings in certain suburbs in metropolitan areas like Toronto, challenges the traditional notion that suburbanization signifies upward socioeconomic mobility for immigrants. Recent studies show that each visible minority immigrant group – e.g., Bangladeshis (Ghosh, 2014) and Ghanaians (Firang, 2019) – exhibits distinct residential pathways. However, the tendency for most studies to focus on the unique patterns and characteristics of each group (Murdie & Skop, 2011) underscores the ongoing challenge of developing a comprehensive framework.

This critical review of key theoretical frameworks in immigrant geography research reveals a progression from early generalizations to more nuanced approaches that capture the complexities of contemporary immigrant experiences. While each model offers valuable insights, they also face limitations in fully encompassing the diversity of immigrant settlement patterns and housing pathways in increasingly superdiverse metropolitan areas. By proposing to apply Lefebvre's spatial triad to the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburbs, our study aims to contribute a more holistic understanding of how immigrants' lived experiences, spatial perceptions, and engagement with conceived space shape their residential geographies in diverse urban landscapes. This conceptual approach offers a useful way to advance understanding of immigrant settlement that reflects the diverse nature of contemporary immigrant experiences across different groups and contexts.

Lefebvre's social production of space (spatial triad)

In his theory, Henri Lefebvre (1991) conceptualized space as the product of social relations and practices in everyday life, involving dynamic interactions between material form,

social function, and hierarchical structures (Zieleniec, 2008). To articulate these dynamic interactions, Lefebvre identified three interconnected spatial dimensions: perceived space (spatial practices), conceived space (representations of space), and lived space (spaces of representation).

Perceived space refers to the material space of daily routines, circulations, transfers, and interactions (Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottman, 2022; Watkins, 2005). Spatial practices involve the production and reproduction of social relations, shaping people's everyday lives and ensuring societal cohesion and continuity (Zieleniec, 2008). Next, conceived space encompasses the mental abstractions of space as designed and ordered by those in power, such as planners and policymakers, who dictate the functions and activities of given spaces (Zieleniec, 2008). It represents the dominant space in society, serving the needs and interests of social elites. Lastly, lived space is directly experienced and meaningful to inhabitants. It is filled with symbolism, imagination, and potential forms and uses, shaped by embodied experiences, social interactions, and practices (Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottman, 2022; Watkins, 2005).

In Lefebvre's spatial triad, perceived, conceived, and lived spaces are mutually interconnected through complex dialectical relationships between the abstract representations of space, lived spatial experiences, and the dominant power structures that shape and control space (Lefebvre, 1991; Pierce & Martin, 2015; Watkins, 2005; Zieleniec, 2008). When newcomers first arrive, they encounter a conceived space shaped by the power dynamics of the receiving society, which challenges them to adapt to new lived spaces and perceived spatial practices (Delaisse et al., 2021). This adaptation often requires deviating from the socio-spatial practices in their country of origin as they navigate unfamiliar urban environments and social norms. As immigrants settle, they participate in the production of space by transforming lived space through spatial practices that align with their cultural identities and values (Delaisse et al., 2021). This

process can lead to a renegotiation of the established spatial order, as immigrants (similarly to other social groups) have the potential to ‘undermine’ or ‘subvert’ dominant structures (Zieleniec, 2008, p.87). Space is thus produced not only as a ‘product’ under the influence of those in power and the dominant groups’ perceived spatial practices but also through new social relations and understandings involving immigrants’ interactions with other groups and actors (Merrifield, 2006; Zieleniec, 2008).

We propose using Lefebvre’s spatial triad as a framework to conceptualize immigrants’ residential behaviour in superdiverse cities. We aim to demonstrate that neighbourhood and housing choices result from the complex interplay between the representation of space and spatial experiences from immigrants’ countries of origin, their new spatial practices and evolving understandings of space post-migration, and their interaction with and adaptation to the receiving society’s conceived space and power dynamics. Using the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, we show how their interaction with and negotiation of place shapes their neighbourhood choices and housing preferences in relatively affluent suburban areas, and how in turn they actively participate in the process of constructing and transforming these spaces. This theoretical foundation guides our research methodology and informs our data analysis.

Context and Methodology

The residential patterns of Iranian immigrants in Toronto offer a compelling case study for examining residential dynamics in a superdiverse context. As of 2021, the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) was home to 87,105 first-generation Iranians, accounting for 47.6% of this population in Canada. Toronto’s demographic composition – where 46.6% of the population are immigrants and 57% identify as ethno-racial minorities (Statistics Canada, 2021) – positions it an ideal research site. The city’s remarkable diversity (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003)

reflected in its distinctive neighbourhood characteristics (Hulchanski, 2019) and ethnic spatial concentrations (Harris, 2020; Walks, 2020; Firang, 2019), further underscores its suitability for this study.

Iranian immigrants in Toronto are predominantly concentrated along a north-south corridor centered on Yonge Street, extending from the northern suburbs of North York and Thornhill to Richmond Hill (Figure 1). More recent settlement patterns indicate an expansion into farther northern suburbs such as Aurora and Newmarket, also along Yonge Street. This corridor features middle- and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods characterized by single-detached homes with high concentrations of Iranian residents. It is further distinguished by a notable presence of Iranian businesses, institutions, and services. This spatial concentration serves as the starting point for our investigation into the formation of ‘Iranian neighbourhoods’ in Toronto’s suburban landscape. Our study examines how the residential preferences and settlement practices of various cohorts of Iranian immigrants have shaped the development of these neighbourhoods over time.

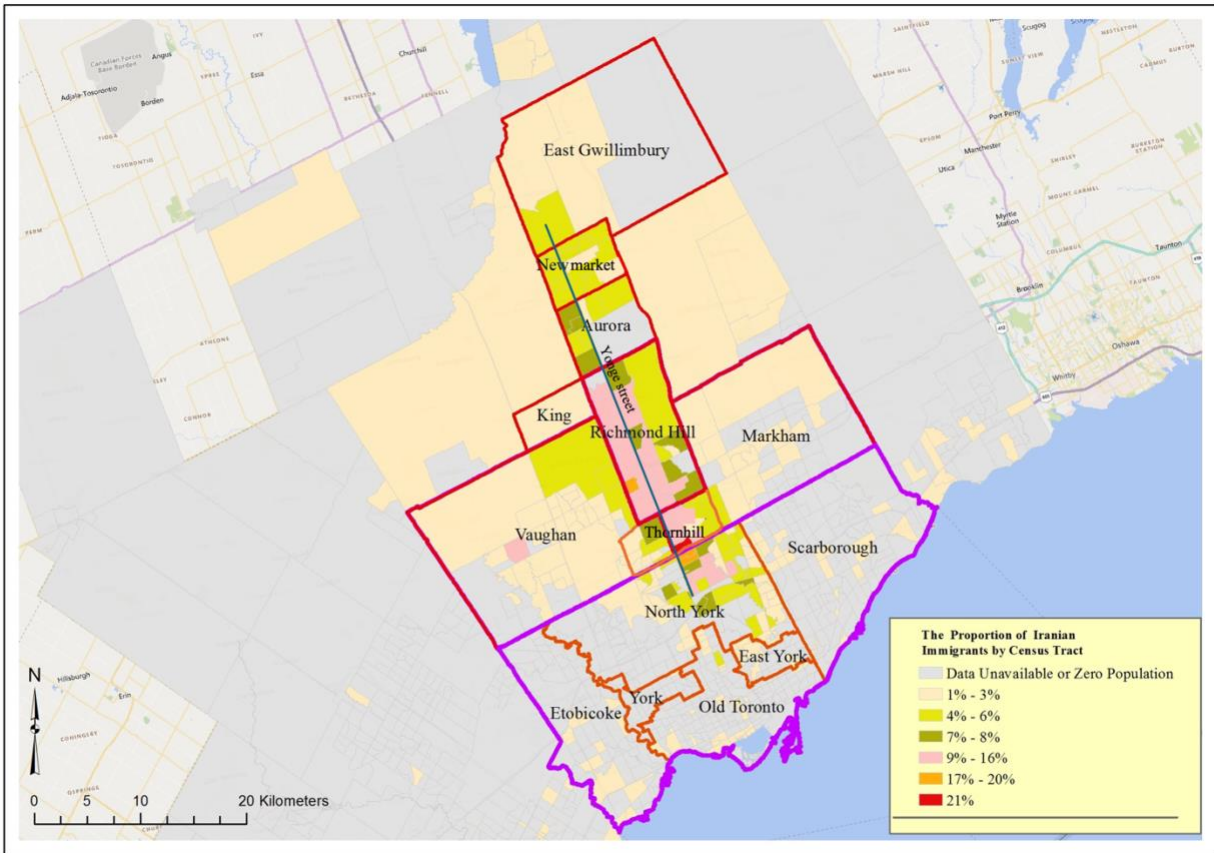


Figure 1: Iranian immigrants as a proportion of census tract population, Toronto CMA, 2021.

Source: Canada Census 2021 (calculations by authors)

Informed by our conceptual framework based on Lefebvre’s spatial triad, we adopted a mixed-methods approach to capture Iranian immigrants’ diverse perspectives regarding their residential experiences. Our analysis began with Statistics Canada’s 2021 census data, focusing on key variables such as population size, income levels, housing characteristics, and educational attainment of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. Employing GIS techniques, we mapped this data to create a visual representation of the distribution and proportion of Iranian immigrants across Toronto’s census tracts (Figure 1). This spatial profile serves as a baseline for our study, offering important context for our qualitative findings.

Second, from October 2022 to March 2023, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 54 Iranian immigrants, along with a sociodemographic survey, to investigate their lived experiences and spatial practices. During these interviews, some participants spontaneously created “mental maps” to visually illustrate their residential choices, which we included with their permission. Thirdly, we interviewed seven Iranian real estate agents serving the community, whose intermediary roles significantly influence the spatial practices and experiences of Iranian immigrants. Lastly, we carried out ethnographic observations in areas with high concentrations of Iranian immigrants, visiting businesses, attending cultural events, and observing social interactions in public spaces to gain deeper contextual insights.

Our selection criteria targeted established Iranian immigrants who entered Canada as economic immigrants and through family reunification. Eligible participants had lived in Canada for at least five years, were between the ages 30 and 70, and resided in North York and Richmond Hill. To recruit participants, we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies, using social networks, targeted social media advertisements, and direct outreach to community leaders and business owners. Additionally, informal recruitment efforts included observations of the Iranian community in public spaces.

Ethics approval was obtained from our institution and our research activities adhered to established ethical standards. Participants provided informed consent, and interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in two separate sessions. To ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, interviews were conducted in Farsi across a variety of settings (e.g., participants’ homes, libraries, community centers, coffee shops). Their duration ranged from 45 minutes to three hours and 30 minutes, with an average length of one hour and 30 minutes.

The final study sample consisted of 54 Iranian immigrants including 34 women and 20 men who met our selection criteria (see Table 1). Participants are categorized into two groups based on their year of arrival in Canada: 15 immigrated during the 1980s and 1990s – a period marked by significant political and social upheaval in Iran, such as the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War – while 39 arrived between 2000 and 2017 representing a cohort with more diverse migration motivations. The majority of participants (43) entered as economic immigrants under the Skilled Worker category, while 8 immigrated through family reunification (predominantly women, with only one man). Additionally, the sample included 3 participants who originally arrived as refugees, selected for their long-term residence in Canada and subsequent economic success.

A significant portion of our participants (37 out of 54) are parents with children, ranging from 1 to 3 per family, with an average of 1.4 children. This suggests a notable presence of family units within the sample, with children's ages varying from toddlers to young adults. This family-oriented demographic may influence immigrants' residential choices, particularly regarding the need for schools and amenities. In terms of residential distribution, our participants were concentrated in specific areas of Toronto: 23 participants resided in North York, 20 in Richmond Hill, with 8 in Thornhill (just South of Richmond Hill), and 3 further north in Newmarket (see Figure 1). Our sampling strategy enabled us to capture a degree of diversity and a range of residential and integration experiences within the established Iranian immigrant community in Toronto.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Iranian participants in Toronto

Category	Pre-2000	2000-2017	Total
Immigration category			
Economic immigrants	10	32	43
Family reunification	3	6	8
Refugees	2	1	3
Family status			
Parents with Children	6	31	37
Single parent	6	3	9
Couples without children	2	1	3
Single/divorced/widowed (no children)	1	4	5
Place of residence			
North York	5	18	23
Richmod Hill	9	11	20
Thornhill	0	8	8
Newmarket	1	2	3

Source: Calculations by the principal author

Data analysis followed an iterative process, triangulating between our different data sources. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed thematically (Creswell, 2013), integrating field notes and observations for context. We then conducted a theoretical analysis applying Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad to identify and analyze the lived, perceived, and conceived dimensions of Iranian immigrants' residential behaviour. Our multi-step, layered, and iterative approach, integrating various data sources and methods, aligns with Lefebvre's theory

of space production and ensures a rigorous understanding of Iranian immigrants' residential experiences in Toronto's suburban context.

Iranian Immigrants' Residential Behaviour

We now present our findings on Iranian immigrants' residential patterns in Toronto's suburban neighbourhoods focusing on two key aspects. First, we examine the factors influencing neighbourhood selection, including safety perceptions, social class considerations, and ethno-racial dynamics. Second, we analyze housing preferences and how these relate to pre-immigration residential experiences. Our aim is to elucidate the complex interplay of sociocultural, structural and individual factors shaping Iranian immigrants' residential decision-making processes in their new environment.

1. Neighbourhood Choices

Our results reveal several general and specific priorities that influence Iranian immigrants' neighbourhood selection in Toronto's suburbs. We found that the interplay of safety concerns, social class considerations, and ethno-racial dynamics played a crucial role in guiding the residential choices of early Iranian immigrant cohorts in Toronto. These pioneers sought out areas that they perceived as safe, socially prestigious, and culturally comfortable. As more Iranian immigrants arrived, drawn by similar preferences, they also settled in these areas and a critical mass began to form. This concentration of Iranian immigrants with shared values and practices in certain neighbourhoods created a self-reinforcing cycle, attracting more co-ethnics and gradually transforming these areas into 'Iranian neighbourhoods'.

1.1. General priorities: Navigating Safety, Class, and Race/Ethnicity

Through our data analysis, we identified three general criteria that shape participants' neighbourhood choices: perceptions of safety, social class considerations, and race and ethnicity dynamics. Safety emerged as the most significant criterion in Iranian immigrants' residential selection process. Participants reported experiencing discomfort and a sense of alienation when venturing outside their chosen environments, highlighting the critical role of perceived safety in their residential decision-making, especially in areas they perceive as less safe. One participant stated:

We just moved two blocks away from the Iranian neighbourhoods to rent a cheaper apartment in the first year of our arrival. The building was in good condition, but the culture was different. A police car was always in front of our building. I experienced sexual harassment in the building's elevator; children used the F-word when my son was playing in the park. We just sent a notice and moved out immediately after a few months. (Woman#12, 40s, North York, post-2000)

This account demonstrates that even short distances – in this case two blocks – can result in significant changes in perceived safety and cultural comfort. The participant's decision to move out quickly, despite the economic advantages of the cheaper apartment, underscores the primacy of safety and cultural familiarity in residential choices. These findings also illustrate that some participants draw sharp boundaries around what they consider to be a “safe” neighbourhood, with areas outside these perceived boundaries viewed as significantly less desirable or even threatening.

Echoing this experience, another participant explained: “I have to pay more than \$3,000 each month for our rent. It takes all my money, so I can't save anything. But I

don't want to live anywhere else. This is where my kids are happy and feel safe” (Woman#18, 40s, North York, post-2000). Participants’ narratives highlight the discomfort they face when settling into areas outside established Iranian communities, suggesting that for Iranian immigrants, feeling a sense of safety within a neighbourhood often takes precedence over economic considerations, such as lower rent, in their housing decisions.

Next, social class also emerged as a prominent factor in residential decision-making, ranking second in importance. Iranian participants emphasized the intrinsic relationship between social class and their perceptions of neighbourhood safety, effectively intertwining these two concerns. From the perspective of many participants, a neighbourhood characterized by higher social class, well-educated residents, and robust socioeconomic status inherently contributes to a heightened sense of safety. This connection between social class and safety was a recurring theme in participant narratives, suggesting these factors are closely linked in Iranian immigrants’ residential choices. One participant shared:

In our housing search, I considered the social class of the people living in the neighbourhood. While I live in North York, not all areas meet our standards. I believe that neighbourhoods with higher social class residents are generally safer and more livable. (Woman#3, 50s, North York, pre-2000)

Iranian immigrants in Toronto are predominantly concentrated in affluent suburban neighbourhoods, with the highest concentrations found in Richmond Hill and Willowdale in North York. These areas exhibit socioeconomic indicators that are notably higher than average (see Table 2). Both neighbourhoods have significantly higher housing values than the Toronto CMA average. Richmond Hill reports the highest average household income among the three,

exceeding the Toronto CMA benchmark. Educational attainment is also elevated with a substantially greater proportion of residents aged 25-64 holding a bachelor's degree or higher – likely reflecting the presence of many skilled Iranian immigrants (see Tables 3 and 4). The discrepancy between Willowdale's high housing values and its comparatively lower average income may be attributed to a greater prevalence of apartments and rental units relative to Richmond Hill (Statistics Canada, 2021d) (see Table 7 in the section on housing preferences).

Table 2. Socioeconomic Indicators for Richmond Hill, Willowdale, and Toronto CMA, 2021

Indicator	Richmond Hill	Willowdale	Toronto CMA
Average Household Income (2020)	\$134,000	\$106,300	\$129,000
Homeownership Rate	78.2%	58.0%	65.1%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher (age 25-64)	56%	66%	46.5%
Average Dwelling Value	\$1,344,000	\$1,187,000	\$1,112,000

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021d.

Thirdly, we found that race and ethnicity play a significant role in shaping residential preferences. Some participants showed a preference for ethnically and racially diverse (multiethnic) neighbourhoods, over more homogeneous communities, even those composed of their own co-ethnics. One participant said: “The race/ethnicity of my neighbours is irrelevant as long as they belong to a good social class and are kind-hearted people” (Woman#12, 40s, North York, post-2000).

Meanwhile, a small subset of participants showed a preference for residing near specific ethno-racial groups, particularly middle- and upper-middle-class Whites. This preference is illustrated by one participant's reflection: “I can't ignore that the racial makeup of a

neighbourhood matters to me. While I appreciate diversity, I've found myself more comfortable in White neighbourhoods" (Woman#21, 50s, Richmond Hill, pre-2000). One real estate agent confirmed:

Iranians often don't feel comfortable in neighbourhoods dominated by some other ethnic groups. From my experience, Iranians tend to prefer White-based neighbourhoods, like neighbourhoods dominated by Italians. While our culture is different, we generally show more interest in integrating into these neighbourhoods and cultures rather than others. In my opinion, we Iranians tend to conflate cultural differences with racial or ethnic distinctions. We often feel less safe and comfortable living near certain groups due to perceived cultural differences.

(Agent#7)

A few participants shared negative experiences and perceptions about certain ethno-racial groups, citing behaviour and cultural practices that made them reluctant to live in specific neighbourhoods. More importantly, "territorial stigmatization" (Garbin and Millington, 2011) influences the residential choices of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. Participants referenced media portrayals when discussing their perceptions of certain neighbourhoods and ethno-racial groups as unsafe or undesirable, deterring them from considering these areas as potential places to live. One participant stated, "One of my friends lives in [this suburb]. But I prefer not to go there, even for shopping. The culture is different. I don't feel safe in those areas. You may have heard about the area in the news!" (Man#31, 60s, Richmond Hill, pre-2000). Another participant shared:

When I first arrived in Canada [in 2008], I joined my husband in his residence [in downtown Toronto]. Honestly, it felt so different from what I imagined Canada to

be... I couldn't feel safe there. I told my husband that I couldn't continue living there, so we moved. I wanted our child to grow up in an environment that aligned with our culture. I noticed my daughter's clothing choices were being influenced by the local children, which concerned me. (Woman#26, 40s, Richmond Hill, post-2000)

Participants' experiences illustrate the complex interplay between cultural expectations, safety perceptions, and residential choices among Iranian immigrants. They seek neighbourhoods that better align with their cultural and safety preferences.

Moreover, Iranian immigrants in this study often associate certain ethno-racial groups with certain socioeconomic and cultural statuses. Specifically, they tend to perceive White residents in certain areas as having higher socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, participants also distinguished between different socioeconomic strata within White communities, showing a preference for areas inhabited by more affluent White residents.

Census data reveal that areas with high concentrations of Iranian immigrants tend to display a significant concentration of specific combinations of ethno-racial groups, rather than widespread diversity (Statistics Canada, 2021; Table 3 and 4). In the City of Richmond Hill, residents identifying as Chinese (30.2%), Iranian/Persian¹ (13.8%), and Italian (9.9%), together represent over half (50.3%) of the total population (Table 3). The remaining ethno-racial groups each have populations below 5% (Statistics Canada, 2021b). Similarly, in Willowdale (North York), the Chinese (25.8%), Iranian/Persian (12%), and Korean (10.6%) communities collectively account for 48.4% of the total population (Table 4; Statistics Canada, 2021c).

¹ The term "Iranian" refers to nationality or citizenship, while "Persian" typically refers to a specific ethnic group within Iran. Some individuals may identify as both Iranian and Persian, while others may prefer one term over the other.

In the more recently settled suburbs of Aurora and Newmarket, distinct patterns emerge among dominant ethnic and immigrant groups. In Aurora, Chinese immigrants account for 23%, Iranians for 13.8%, and individuals from the United Kingdom for 6.3%. In Newmarket, Chinese immigrants represent 14.7%, Iranians 14.3%, and those from the United Kingdom 6.5%. These areas also exhibit broader ethnic diversity, with significant populations identifying as English, Irish, Scottish, and Italian (Table 5 and 6; Statistics Canada, 2021c).

Our field observations in residential and commercial areas with the highest concentration of Iranians, specifically Richmond Hill and North York, corroborated the census data. We visited these areas multiple times across weekdays and weekends, observing a strong presence of ethnic businesses (e.g., restaurants, grocery stores, service providers) with signage and products tailored to Chinese, Iranian, Italian, and Korean communities. This visible commercial landscape reflects the demographic patterns reported in the census data.

Table 3: Dominant ethnic or cultural origin in Richmond Hill, 2021

Dominant Ethnic or Cultural origin	Total population (n)	Total population (%)
Total ethnic or cultural origin	200,930	100
Chinese	57,305	28.5
Iranian/Persian	27,735	13.8
Italian	16,125	8

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021c

Table 4: Dominant ethnic or cultural origin in Willowdale, 2021

Dominant Ethnic or Cultural origin	Total population (n)	Total population (%)
Total ethnic or cultural origin	117,125	100%
Chinese	26,835	23%
Iranian/Persian	14,065	12%
Korean	11,055	9.4%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021c

Table 5: Dominant immigrant population in Aurora

Dominant immigrant population	Total population (n)	Total population (%)
Total ethnic or cultural origin	22,565	100
China	5,200	23
Iran	3,120	13.8
United Kingdom	1,420	6.3

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021c

Table 6: Dominant immigrant population in Newmarket

Dominant immigrant population	Total population (n)	Total population (%)
Total ethnic or cultural origin	28,945	100
China	4,255	14.7
Iran	4,135	14.3
United Kingdom	1,895	6.5

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021c

Iranian immigrants' tendency to concentrate in areas with predominantly "lighter-skinned" populations may be linked to their complex racial self-identification. Mohammadi (2023) notes that many Iranian immigrants initially perceive themselves as racially similar to White Canadians, despite encountering contradictory messages in daily interactions. This perception is rooted in cultural and historical constructs like "the Aryan myth" (Maghbouleh, 2017; Tajrobehkar, 2023). Struggling to fit within established racial categories such as Black, Asian, or Brown, they often align their identity with groups of perceived "Proto-Indo-European" origins. This racial self-identification creates a distinct social position that influences residential choices, as settling in predominantly "Whiter" neighbourhoods may serve to reinforce this self-perception while navigating the complexities of racialization in the Canadian context.

Interconnection of safety, class and race/ethnicity: socio-spatial boundaries

Beyond highlighting the significance of safety, social class and ethnicity/race in shaping Iranian immigrants' neighbourhood preferences in Toronto, our findings also reveal that these factors are closely interconnected. Safety concerns are filtered through the lens of social class and ethno-racial composition, demonstrating that these criteria do not operate in isolation. This interplay contributes to our understanding of the creation of "micro-territories" (Garbin & Millington, 2012, p.2080) through sociospatial perceptions and representations, providing insights into the social production of "Iranian neighbourhoods" within Toronto's suburban landscape. These neighbourhoods emerge as complex social constructs shaped by dynamic socio-material structures, cultural norms, and lived experiences, reflecting processes discussed in recent scholarship that emphasizes the multifaceted nature of neighbourhood formation (Finlay et al., 2023; Drozdowski & Webster, 2021). One real estate agent remarked:

Iranians tend to settle in specific areas within Richmond Hill or Willowdale. There are particular sections that are especially popular among Iranians. In these areas people are highly educated, so you're moving to a place where most residents have a university degree, incomes are high, there are many good families. (Agent#3).

When asked about their neighbourhood selection process, two participants actively delineated the perimeters for their housing search by sketching sociospatial boundaries within areas that satisfy the intertwined factors of safety, social class, and ethno-racial composition (Figures 2 & 3). These mental maps not only demarcate spatial limits, but also serve as representations of perceived socioeconomic boundaries. One participant classified neighbourhoods into categories such as 'good', 'very good', and 'luxurious' (Figure 2), suggesting that perceptions of neighbourhood desirability and safety are associated with social class, education levels, and socioeconomic status. The other participant's sketch (Figure 3) outlines the boundaries of their preferred residential area, illustrating a clear spatial demarcation of where they consider suitable for habitation.



Figure 2. Participant sketch with classification of neighbourhood desirability (Woman#3, 50s, North York, post-2000)

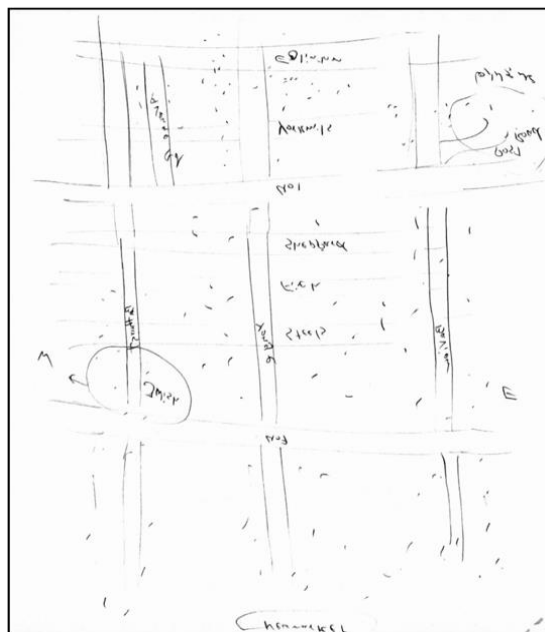


Figure 3. Participant sketch outlining preferred residential area boundaries (Man#7, 50s, Richmond Hill, post-2000)

The process of establishing distinct neighbourhood boundaries in Toronto is not unique to Iranian immigrants. Studies (Firang, 2019; Hackworth, 2023) show that members of various ethno-racial groups often exhibit a reluctance to cross these boundaries for residential or commercial purposes. This hesitance may stem from perceptions of other areas as unfamiliar or unwelcoming (Firang, 2019). Consequently, certain ethno-racial minority groups experience exclusion and discrimination, which can intensify their inclination to confine activities within specific neighbourhoods, areas, and even cities (Firang, 2019; Ghosh, 2014; Hackworth, 2023; Mensah & Williams, 2013).

The emergence and ongoing presence of Iranian neighbourhoods in Toronto's affluent suburban areas challenge existing theoretical frameworks. Unlike some visible minority groups who have involuntarily settled in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Murdie & Ghosh, 2010), Iranian participants perceive their spatial concentration in privileged suburban areas as advantageous. Iranian immigrants' initial self-identification as racially similar to White Canadians and their association with the Aryan myth (Mohammadi, 2023) have significantly influenced their settlement patterns. The experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto raise critical questions about the dynamics of residential mobility and hierarchy within the city's ethno-racial diversity (Ahmadi, 2018; Hackworth, 2023). This case study prompts an examination of whether, after accounting for socioeconomic advancement, an "ethnic hierarchy" influences access to well-established neighbourhoods.

2.1. Specific priorities in neighbourhood choices

Iranian participants also discussed a number of specific priorities in their neighbourhood selection, including proximity to prestigious educational institutions, quality social networks, access to highways and public transportation, the significance of the Yonge Street corridor and

ethnic businesses. We examine the influence of these factors on participants' residential choices by considering their family characteristics, socioeconomic status, marital and family dynamics, and their occupation.

1.2.1. Prestigious Schools

Iranian participants emphasized the importance of proximity to prestigious educational institutions in their housing decisions, particularly for families with school-aged children. Ensuring their children attend top schools is seen as a pragmatic strategy to enhance future opportunities and facilitate integration into a new society. Notably, this priority for high-ranking schools, as indicated by participants, was evident even during their initial years of arrival. Indeed, the pursuit of their children's educational and professional achievements was a key factor for their immigration to Canada. One participant shared:

The first priority for every parent is finding a good school for their kids; 50 to 60% of Iranian parents choose McKee school [in North York] in our neighbourhood for their kids and then find their place of residence in proximity to the school, as what we did. (Woman#12, 40s, North York, post-2000)

Participants with families emphasized the importance of maintaining educational and social stability when considering changing residence within Toronto. They expressed concerns about the potential upheaval associated with moving to a different neighbourhood and school, which could negatively impact children's educational trajectories and social lives – especially for families with high school-aged children. One participant said:

I find it highly unlikely that we would move out of this neighbourhood because of the schools. There's no way I want to move my son right now. He's in his first year of high school, and I want him to stay here until he finishes high school.

However, I might consider moving to a bigger house in this same neighbourhood if I can afford one and renovate it the way I want. (Woman#5, 40s, North York, post-2000)

The desire for high-quality education not only influences initial settlement decisions but also influences long-term residential mobility within the city. Iranian parents prioritize their children's academic success and social integration, often sacrificing other preferences to maintain proximity to preferred schools. The concentration of Iranian families around prestigious schools has contributed to the creation of Iranian neighbourhoods and fostered a sense of community.

2.2.1. Quality social networks

For our Iranian participants, residential proximity to family, friends, and close-knit social networks emerged as a significant factor in their decision-making process. Immigrating to a new country often brings a sense of isolation and disconnection from familiar social networks, especially for those without immediate family members and friends. Participants tend to display a strong desire to reside near their social networks, highlighting the importance of spatial proximity in maintaining regular connections and facilitating frequent social interactions (see Chapter 4). Spatial proximity enables regular connections, facilitating frequent social interactions and reducing the risk of social isolation. One participant explained the value placed on these proximal social connections:

I really feel better living here because of the location [in proximity to my relatives and friends]. Knowing that if I can't pick up my son, my friend can step in and bring him home gives me peace of mind. In the mornings, I can also call another

friend if I need help. I have four or five people I can rely on here. (Woman#39, 40s, Richmond Hill, post-2000)

Iranian immigrant families value spatial proximity to supportive social networks for their role in children's social and educational development. Our analysis indicates that Iranian parents prioritize quality relationships, especially with other caring, family-oriented Iranian friends. They often seek peers for their children from families with similar cultural norms and values. These interactions are seen as essential, as peers can significantly influence each other's behavioural norms and academic aspirations. As one participant articulated: "If you do not find good friends for your kids, your kids will find friends that you do not like. Proximity makes us and our friends more comfortable frequently meeting and scheduling play dates for kids" (Woman#8, 30s, Thornhill, post-2000).

Iranian immigrants' desire for proximity to family, friends, and co-ethnics significantly reinforces their spatial concentration and contributes to the development of distinct Iranian neighbourhoods. As more Iranian families settle near their social networks, a clustering effect gradually transforms these areas into recognizable Iranian neighbourhoods.

4.2.1. Access to highways and public transportation

Many participants prioritized residing in areas with convenient access to highways and public transportation to minimize commuting times, especially in neighbourhoods with their preferred characteristics. To achieve this, some showed flexibility by adjusting their job search, accepting longer commutes, or changing employment locations. This tendency underscores the importance participants place on living in their preferred neighbourhoods. One participant shared:

The logic was to move to [another suburb] near my clinic, but we conferred with my husband and decided to search for a place close to the highway [within Iranian neighbourhoods] that I could easily access and shorten the commuting time. We visited the neighbourhoods and schools near my work environment but we don't want our kids to be in that area. (Woman#8, 30s, Thornhill, post-2000)

The Iranian neighbourhoods along Yonge Street align with participants' residential preferences due to their proximity to major highways and public transportation systems. Although established immigrants rely less on public transit, some participants strategically use it to avoid traffic congestion on Toronto's highways, especially when they work downtown. Nevertheless, a subset of participants who established ethnic businesses within the Iranian neighbourhoods prioritized living close to their workplaces. Proximity to their business locations significantly influenced their residential decisions, underscoring the importance of logistical convenience for supporting their entrepreneurial activities.

3.2.1. Yonge Street Corridor and Iranian businesses

Yonge Street, a prominent north-south thoroughfare in Toronto, serves as a significant spatial anchor for the Iranian community. For many participants, proximity to Yonge Street emerged as a crucial factor in their residential choices. The observed north-south clustering of Iranian immigrants indicates a strong preference for neighbourhoods aligned with this direction (Figure 1). In contrast, the reluctance to move east-west suggests potential barriers, either perceived or actual, that discourage settlement in those parts of suburban Toronto.

The presence of Iranian businesses, services, and institutions along the Yonge Street corridor acts as a powerful magnet, further cementing the existence of Iranian neighbourhoods. As one participant noted, "I must live near Yonge [St.]; I don't like to reside in

neighbourhoods far away from Yonge St. Here, I can access everything I want” (Man#17, 50s, North York, post-2000).

As established immigrants, our participants relied less on Iranian businesses and grocery stores, having gradually adapted to Canadian shopping centres; they turned to Iranian stores mainly for specific, authentic products. Nevertheless, some participants noted the increasing availability of Persian products in local mainstream stores, such as barberry and Iranian bread, reflecting the responsiveness of the Canadian marketplace to the diverse needs of ethnic communities. Meanwhile, our ethnographic observations revealed that Iranian ethnic establishments, particularly coffee shops, restaurants, and grocery stores, continue to experience high patronage.

Participants said they value the easy access to these establishments and the nostalgic connection they provide. These businesses also act as cultural anchors, creating a familiar environment for more recent cohorts of Iranian immigrants. The Farsi signs, authentic products, and the presence of co-ethnics speaking their mother tongue foster a sense of familiarity and help mitigate feelings of alienation (see Chapter 5). One participant aptly captured this sentiment: “It may seem ridiculous, but whenever I want to taste Barbary [Persian bread], it is five minutes away from me. Noon [Persian bread] is not only food but also my culture; it’s my connection to my homeland, to nostalgia” (Woman#5, 40s, North York, post-2000).

Furthermore, proximity to ethnic places facilitates exposure to Iranian culture and lifestyle, especially for families seeking to connect their children with their cultural heritage. Iranian communities and businesses serve as spaces for cultural reproduction, enabling the transmission of language, traditions, and values to younger generations. As one participant noted, “My son was born in Dubai. We travelled to Iran only a few times after moving to Canada.

Living within Iranian community supports me to inform my child of his Iranian identity”
(Woman#12, 40s, North York, post-2000).

Taking everything into consideration, the residential choices of Iranian immigrants in Toronto’s suburbs reflect a complex interplay of factors that have contributed to the creation and perpetuation of Iranian neighbourhoods. These choices are influenced by a combination of safety perceptions, social class considerations, and ethno-racial dynamics, as well as specific priorities such as proximity to prestigious schools, quality social networks, access to transportation infrastructure, and the presence of Iranian businesses and services. Having explored the complex factors influencing Iranian immigrants’ neighbourhood choices and their role in shaping Iranian neighbourhoods, we now turn our attention to their specific housing preferences. While neighbourhood preferences shape the broader spatial patterns of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, housing choices at the individual level are also influenced by a distinct set of cultural practices and financial considerations.

2. Housing preferences

Iranian immigrants exhibit a strong inclination toward neighbourhoods characterized by single-detached housing—a defining feature of Toronto’s northern suburbs. This trend is particularly evident in Richmond Hill, where single-detached houses account for 56.7% of the housing stock (Statistics Canada, 2021a). Similar patterns are observed in Aurora (60.3%), Newmarket (59.8%), and Thornhill (51.0%), all of which display a clear predominance of low-density residential development. By contrast, Willowdale reflects a markedly different housing profile, with apartments making up 67.2% of dwellings and single-detached homes constituting only 24.6%—well below the Toronto CMA average of 39.0%. While this distribution highlights

the prevalence of high-rise living in Willowdale, it is important to note that participants in this study who resided in Willowdale were primarily settled in single-detached houses.

This preference for single-detached housing among Iranian immigrants is shaped by two main factors: prior housing experiences in Iran, perceived differences between Iranian and Canadian residential forms, and financial motivations such as investment potential and long-term economic security.

Table 7: Dwelling Types in Iranian-Concentrated Suburbs and Toronto CMA (2021)

Area	Single-detached houses (%)	Semi- detached houses (%)	Row Houses (%)	Apartments less or more than 5 storeys (%)
Willowdale	24.6	1.7	3.4	67.2
Richmond Hill	56.7	3.8	15.1	21.1
Thornhill	51.0	3.4	11.6	30.2
Aurora	60.3	6.9	16.8	12.7
Newmarket	59.8	7.4	16.8	12.7
Toronto CMA	39.0	7.3	9.3	44.2

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021a

Social and cultural practices

Iranian immigrants' preference for houses over apartments stems from their lived experiences in Iran. While most study participants came from cities with many apartment buildings, some – especially those who immigrated before or in the early 2000s – had lived in houses in Iran. Even those who had lived in apartments (mainly more recent cohorts who

immigrated in the mid-2000s) reported markedly different experiences compared to Toronto apartments. Participants emphasized the difference in the number of units per floor, with Iranian apartment buildings typically having only one to two units per floor. One participant shared:

We lived in a 2000 square feet apartment in Iran. There was only one unit on each floor. But apartments in Canada are like jails; 100 units on one floor. In Iran, you have a maximum of two neighbours on one floor. (Woman#3, 50s, North York, pre-2000)

The architectural setup experienced in Iran prioritizes privacy, hospitality, and family-oriented living, which are deeply ingrained in Iranian culture (Mohammadi & van den Scott, 2023). The Canadian apartment model, with its higher density of units, often contrasts with these cultural preferences. Additionally, apartments in Iran are primarily associated with condominiums, distinct from the rental apartments common in Canada highlighting a fundamental difference in the housing landscapes of the two countries.

Participants also noted that apartments in which they lived in Iran often resembled houses, with multiple bedrooms and ample space for family and social gatherings. They prefer homes with spacious land areas and open-concept designs, reflecting Iranian cultural values placed on living environments that facilitate family interactions and social connections. As one Iranian real estate agent explained:

When searching for housing, Iranians are concerned about whether the house has enough space for guests. They typically look for homes with spacious foyers to properly welcome visitors. When showing a place to my Iranian clients, they prefer fewer walls and divisions and more open-concept spaces. To address

privacy concerns, they consider if the place has enough rooms to comfortably house both family members and visiting relatives from Iran. (Agent#6)

The desire for spacious single-detached homes and homeownership in affluent neighbourhoods is also connected to the deeply ingrained notion of *aberoo*, which means “conformity to social prestige” and “face saving” (Abdi, 2023, p.73). Achieving homeownership of a single-detached house in advantaged neighbourhoods serves as a visible symbol of success and social advancement, affirming one’s identity as a successful Canadian while upholding cultural values. Although participants were often hesitant to directly address *aberoo* due to its sensitive nature, their narratives illustrate how it influences housing choices to preserve social status within the Iranian-Canadian community and broader Canadian society. One participant noted, “Our home [in Richmond Hill] served as a symbol of our social status within our circle of friends and relatives. showcasing our ability to afford such a large house [in that area]” (Woman#32, 50s, Richmond Hill, pre-2000). One real estate agent discussed the issue of *aberoo* more explicitly:

Iranians often disregard whether they can afford a house, believing they can generate the necessary funds. When they state their budget and are shown properties within that range, they frequently find them unsatisfactory. I’ve learned to show properties I know they’ll like, regardless of their budget or affordability. What matters to them is whether the house upholds their *aberoo* and reflects their social status. Women, in particular, seek large, luxurious homes in prestigious areas. Many families are willing to stretch their financial limits to secure such properties, prioritizing status and appearance. (Agent#7)

While the desire for spacious single-detached homes in prestigious neighbourhoods serves as a visible marker of success and social status, it sometimes pushes families to stretch their financial limits. The dynamics of cultural ideals and economic pragmatism leads us to examine the financial considerations that shape Iranian immigrants' housing decisions in Toronto's competitive real estate landscape.

Financial considerations

The preference for houses over condominiums among participants is also driven by financial considerations. A compelling reason to invest in a house is the inherent value of the land on which it is built, which appreciates over time. Unlike condominiums with shared land ownership, houses typically come with exclusive ownership of land, making them a more attractive option for long-term investment gains. One real estate agent remarked:

...land is important for Iranians. They are more interested in buying houses than condos; they consider walk-out basements and the money from their rent. They look for places in proximity to high-ranked schools with not only the aim of better educational attainment for their kids but also for better equity of these popular areas. (Agent#3)

Indeed, one participant confirmed:

Buying our house equipped us not only with a sense of comfort and convenience but a sense of financial security. We refinanced our home two times over ten years. We paid off our loans, bought cars and ran a business. (Woman#32, 50s, Newmarket, pre-2000)

Furthermore, participants favour houses over condominiums due to the greater autonomy and potential for property enhancement, which can significantly increase the property's market

value. Some reported renovating their residences or incorporating elements from their origin country, reflecting cultural adaptation in their new environment (see Chapter 5). The versatility of walk-out basements, which can serve various functions (e.g., additional living spaces, home offices, rental units), also contributes to a level of financial flexibility that condominiums lack.

One participant explained:

One advantage of owning a house is the freedom to make changes as you see fit.

Initially, I was hesitant to purchase our home, but it was the only affordable option in our desired area. The Iranian real estate agent convinced me by envisioning the potential after renovation. We proceeded with the renovations and also finished the basement. At first, I rented out the basement for additional income, but now I've converted it into my home office. (Woman#5, 40s, North York, post-2000)

Another drawback of condominium ownership for Iranian participants is the high monthly maintenance fees, which can be a financial burden and reduce the affordability and appeal of condo living. In contrast, homeowners manage their property's maintenance, allowing for more direct control over costs. One participant shared her experience with this decision-making process:

As I am getting old, I thought I should move to a condo because maintaining a house seemed beyond my energy. I discussed this with my family, and we decided I should stay in my house. We realized that condo maintenance fees are high, and I could use that money to pay someone to help me with house maintenance instead.

(Woman#52, 50s, Richmond Hill, pre-2000)

Participants generally thought that while condominiums may offer certain conveniences, houses provide a more flexible and potentially lucrative investment opportunity. The flexibility

to alter and personalize the living space, coupled with the financial benefits of land appreciation and potential rental income, were seen as a more strategic choice for Iranian immigrants.

3. Applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to Iranian immigrants' residential behaviour

We now employ Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space as an analytical framework to interpret Iranian immigrants' residential choices in Toronto. This conceptual approach allows us to understand how our participants' residential behaviour emerges from the dynamic interplay between Lefebvre's three spatial dimensions: conceived, perceived, and lived space.

First, Iranian participants' general priorities in neighbourhood selection – safety, social class, and ethno-racial composition – strongly align with Lefebvre's concept of lived space, as shown in Figure 3. The affluent suburban neighbourhoods they choose embody qualities they aspire to and value: security, prestige, and cultural comfort. These spaces are imbued with symbolic meanings that resonate with their aspirations and cultural values, creating environments where they experience emotional comfort and a sense of belonging. For our participants, these neighbourhoods function as more than mere residential locations; they serve as meaningful spaces that affirm their identity, mitigate feelings of alienation in a new country, and provide tangible symbols of success through features like upscale housing, well-maintained public spaces, and proximity to prestigious institutions.

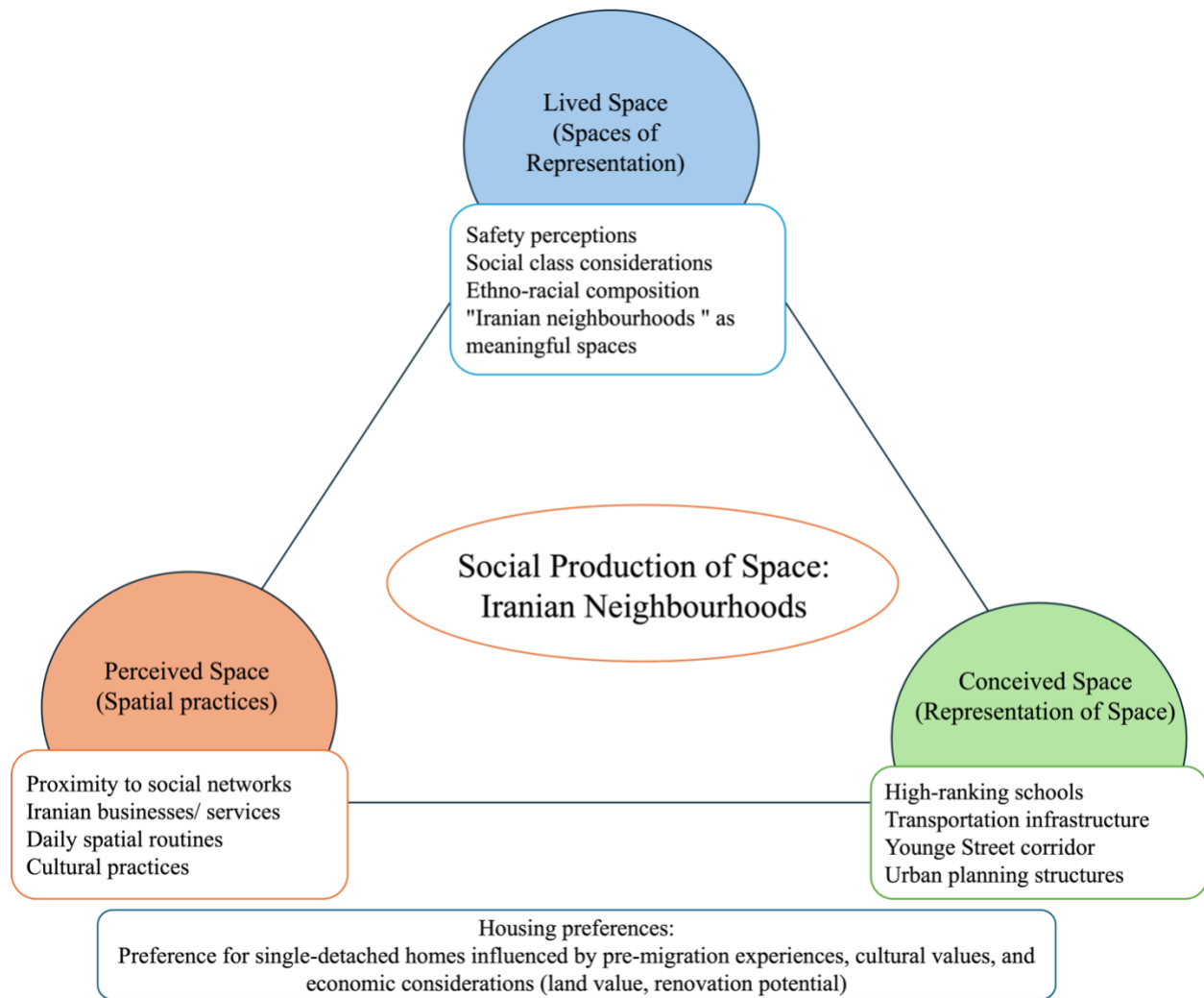


Figure 3. Iranian immigrants' residential behaviour and social production of Iranian neighbourhoods in Toronto based on Lefebvre's spatial triad

Next, Iranian participants' specific neighbourhood priorities – proximity to high-ranking schools, access to major transportation infrastructure, and orientation toward the Yonge Street corridor – demonstrate their engagement with Lefebvre's conceived space. These elements represent Toronto's deliberately planned urban landscape, designed and implemented by urban planners, policymakers, and developers who hold the power to shape the city's spatial organization. Iranian immigrants strategically navigate this conceived space, selecting areas

where institutional advantages (highly ranked schools), infrastructure investments (efficient transportation networks), and planned development corridors align with their aspirations. Their residential choices thus reflect both adaptation and strategic utilization of these dominant spatial structures, illustrating how conceived space shapes but does not wholly determine their settlement patterns.

Thirdly, Iranian immigrants' preferences for proximity to social networks and ethnic businesses align with Lefebvre's perceived space. These preferences emerge from their embodied routes and cultural practices transported from Iran and adapted to the Canadian context. The rhythms of daily life – visiting friends, shopping in Iranian stores and maintaining close connections with co-ethnic networks – generate spatial patterns that reinforce community bonds and cultural continuity. These spatial practices create recognizable patterns of movement and interaction that gradually transform certain Toronto neighbourhoods into distinctly “Iranian spaces” through repetitive, collective activity. As Figure 3 illustrates, these practices serve as a bridge between abstract conceived space and symbolically meaningful lived space, allowing Iranian immigrants to produce neighbourhoods that accommodate their practical needs while reflecting their cultural identities.

The pronounced preference for single-family homes over condominiums further is intertwined with Iranian immigrants' everyday practices and cultural values rooted in their country of origin. This housing choice reflects a combination of economic considerations, cultural values, and spatial practices shaped by their previous living environments.

Significantly, while Iranian immigrants did not explicitly intend to establish ethnic neighbourhoods or enclaves, their collective residential choices and practices have gradually produced distinct “Iranian neighbourhoods” in Toronto's northern suburbs. This phenomenon

illustrates Lefebvre's central insight that space is socially produced through the dynamic interactions between perceived, conceived, and lived dimensions. Iranian immigrants' vision of desirable spaces (e.g., safe, affluent, culturally comfortable), their daily spatial practices, and their emotional attachments to places that feel like home have interacted with Toronto's urban structure to create recognizable spatial patterns. These patterns emerged not through coordinated planning but through countless individual decisions that collectively transformed sections of the urban landscape.

This case demonstrates how everyday spatial decisions by ordinary residents can progressively reshape urban geographies, even without deliberate placemaking strategies. By applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to Iranian immigrants' settlement patterns, we gain insight into the complex interplay between abstract conceptions of ideal living environments, practical routines of daily life, and deeply meaningful lived experiences – all negotiated within Toronto's existing urban framework. This theoretical approach provides a more nuanced understanding of immigrant residential geographies than traditional models, revealing them as dynamic productions emerging from the intersection of structural conditions, cultural identities, and individual agency rather than predetermined outcomes of assimilation or segregation processes.

Discussion and conclusion

Our aim was to contribute to understanding of immigrant residential behaviour by applying and extending Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to the case of established Iranian immigrants in Toronto, offering a rich, nuanced and flexible framework for examining diverse settlement experiences. We propose this approach as a more comprehensive alternative to traditional models that primarily focus on socioeconomic factors or cultural preferences. By examining the complex interplay of factors influencing Iranian immigrants' neighbourhood

choices and housing preferences, we demonstrate how this theoretical framework can reveal nuances in immigrant settlement patterns that conventional approaches might overlook.

The application of Lefebvre's spatial triad shows that Iranian immigrants' residential patterns emerge from the dynamic interactions between their perceived space (embodied routines and cultural practices), lived space (symbolic meanings and aspirational values), and their strategic engagement with the conceived space of Toronto's urban planning and housing markets. This conceptual lens illuminates how immigrants actively participate in the creation and transformation of urban spaces within their new living environments, challenging the notion of immigrants as passive recipients of existing spatial arrangements.

Our findings demonstrate that Iranian immigrants have concentrated in relatively affluent suburban areas of Toronto, particularly in neighbourhoods dominated by single-detached housing. This pattern distinguishes them from many other minority groups with similarly recent immigration histories in Canada, who often face barriers in accessing advantaged neighbourhoods and tend to settle in inner suburban high-rise apartments (Firang, 2019; Ghosh, 2014). The distinctive residential geographies of Iranian immigrants raise important questions about the complex interplay of cultural values, racial self-identification, socioeconomic resources, and structural factors in shaping immigrant housing patterns.

Moreover, our study challenges simplistic narratives of diversity in Toronto's immigrant suburban settlements. While Toronto is celebrated for its diversity, encapsulated in its motto "Diversity Our Strength," our findings underscore the need to critically examine the intersections of diversity with issues of equity, justice, inclusion, and exclusion (Zhuang, 2024). The unique ability of Iranian immigrants to access and concentrate in privileged neighbourhoods prompts a

reconsideration of how various forms of social and cultural capital enable certain ethno-racial minorities to navigate urban spaces more advantageously than others (see Chapter 3).

Although our limited sample size and focus on skilled economic immigrants constrain the generalizability of our findings, our study contributes to advancing understanding of immigrant residential behaviour in superdiverse urban contexts. By illuminating how lived experiences, daily practices, and engagement with dominant spatial structures collectively shape residential decision-making, we apply Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. In doing so, we offer a flexible conceptual lens for examining diverse settlement experiences and add to ongoing discussions on how to analyze immigrant settlement patterns.

Future research ought to apply Lefebvre's spatial triad to other ethno-racial minority immigrant groups with relatively recent immigration histories in Canada and other contexts to test the broader applicability of this framework. Further research is also needed to investigate whether a higher socioeconomic level enhances the likelihood of movement to these affluent neighbourhoods and whether such mobility varies among different immigrant and ethno-racial minority groups across various settlement contexts. Comparative studies examining how different groups navigate and negotiate their residential choices within the same urban environment could also provide valuable insights into the diverse ways immigrants participate in the social production of space – from the intimate scale of the home to the broader geographies of neighbourhoods, districts and metropolitan regions.

In conclusion, this study advances understanding of immigrant residential behaviour by applying Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space as a conceptual lens, offering a flexible framework for examining diverse settlement experiences. By providing a

multidimensional understanding of how immigrants interact with, transform, and give meaning to urban spaces, this conceptual framework advances theories of immigrant settlement beyond simplistic models of assimilation or segregation. While not directly oriented towards policy, our approach can nevertheless inform urban planners, policymakers, and other experts seeking to develop more nuanced and effective strategies for creating equitable and inclusive cities.

Recognizing the complex interplay between conceived, perceived, and lived spaces is crucial for fostering environments that better accommodate the diverse needs, cultural practices, and aspirations of immigrant communities in an era of increasing global mobility and superdiversity.

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Chapter 3: Paper II: Conceptualizing immigrant integration as a multidimensional process: interdependencies of residential, professional and emotional belonging

گفتا کجا خوش است؟ بگفتم آنجا که دل خوش است

*Asked, where it is delightful?
I replied: where the heart is content.*

—Baba Taher (translated by the author)

Abstract

Immigrant integration remains a contested concept in academic and policy spheres. This study examines integration as a multidimensional process by analyzing the experiences of established Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada. Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, we investigate the interconnections between residential patterns, socioeconomic achievement, and emotional belonging. Through a mixed-methods approach combining census data analysis with interviews of 54 Iranian men and women, we reveal how integration emerges through the dynamic interplay between objective indicators and subjective experiences of integration. Our findings demonstrate that Iranian immigrants' concentration in affluent suburban neighbourhoods represents successful residential integration, often reinforcing and reinforced by professional achievements. However, developing an emotional sense of belonging requires more than material accomplishments – it emerges through experiences of recognition and upward mobility. Notably, we identify distinctly gendered integration experiences, with Iranian women often becoming primary drivers of family integration despite initially arriving as dependents. This case study contributes to integration scholarship by revealing how residential choices, professional success, and emotional attachment are systematically interconnected, with gender significantly influencing these relationships. Our approach offers analytical tools applicable beyond the Iranian case study for understanding integration's complex, lived experience.

Keywords: Immigrant integration; professional achievement; emotional citizenry; social mobility; gendered integration; Iranian immigrants.

Introduction

The notion of immigrant integration remains a highly debated topic in academic and policy circles, especially in multicultural societies such as Canada. This ongoing debate reflects the complex interplay between societal expectations and the diverse experiences of those settling in a new country. In recent decades, the arrival of increasing numbers of newcomers in Canada, most of who are visible minorities with varied experiences, highlights the need for more nuanced research to comprehend their specific integration pathways (Murdie & Skop, 2011).

The integration process is complex and multifaceted, involving interrelated and interdependent economic, housing, sociocultural, and political dimensions. Further research is required to fully understand the interconnections and interdependencies between these various dimensions, especially when considering the experiences of immigrants from diverse ethno-racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Immigrants often make strategic investments across different domains to achieve integration, such as focusing on residential integration to improve socioeconomic outcomes. These strategies highlight the agency of immigrants in navigating their integration pathways and the importance of examining the complex relationships between different aspects of integration.

Our aim in this article is to investigate the complex process of integration by examining the interconnections between the residential and socioeconomic dimensions of Iranian immigrants' integration experiences in Toronto, Canada. For Iranian immigrants, immigration is often a social mobility project involving both residential integration in upscale neighbourhoods and socioeconomic integration. Our research uncovers how their

residential patterns and social mobility experiences mutually influence each other, creating complex integration pathways. Moreover, we are attentive to the gendered dynamics and emotional dimensions of integration, particularly sense of belonging, and how they intersect with socioeconomic trajectories. Utilizing Askins' (2016) notion of emotional citizenry, we delve into the multifaceted nature of integration by underlining Iranian immigrants' emotional sense of belonging throughout their journeys.

By examining these multifaceted aspects of integration simultaneously, we contribute to theoretical understandings of immigrant integration and provide a more nuanced, comprehensive view. Our study combines residential integration perspectives with the notion of emotional citizenry to examine both objective indicators and subjective emotional dimensions. We argue that the emotional dimension, particularly sense of belonging, is crucial for understanding immigrants' lived experiences as they navigate their new social landscape. This approach moves beyond traditional, compartmentalized approaches to integration research.

We employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the case of established, first-generation Iranian immigrant men and women predominantly residing in upper-/middle-class suburban neighbourhoods in Toronto. This group offers a valuable case study for examining integration processes of skilled immigrants, many of whom arrived with substantial human and/or financial capital. The significant presence of Iranian immigrants in Toronto (87,105), comprising 47.6% of Canada's Iranian population (Statistics Canada, 2021a), enables a focused analysis of integration trajectories within a specific setting. As a visible minority group with a significant demographic presence in Toronto, their

experiences illustrate the complex interplay between residential integration, socioeconomic trajectories and emotional dimensions within a multicultural metropolisgar1.

We first review the relevant literature and describe our methodological approach. In the results section, we discuss the interconnections between residential, socioeconomic, and emotional integration, with a focus on gendered dynamics. We conclude by underscoring the importance of considering both tangible achievements (e.g., homeownership) and intangible aspects (e.g., emotional attachments to place) to fully understand the multifaceted nature of immigrant integration in diverse societies.

Immigrant integration

Immigrant integration is a deeply contested concept in both academic literature and policy spheres. At the heart of these debates lie fundamental tensions between: unidirectional versus multidirectional processes, normative versus descriptive approaches, and objective versus subjective measures of integration. This multifaceted nature reflects what Kutor et al. (2023) aptly term a ‘wicked concept’ – inherently complex, context-dependent, and resistant to universal definition. Our study addresses these tensions by examining the interconnected dimensions of integration – residential, socioeconomic, and emotional – through the lived experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. We argue that a comprehensive understanding of integration must integrate both tangible aspects (housing, employment) and intangible elements (sense of belonging, emotional attachment), along with their dynamic interplay across different contexts and immigrant groups.

The evolution of integration frameworks: From unidirectional to multidimensional models

The concept of integration in immigration studies traces its origins in classical sociological theory. Emile Durkheim (1984) and Herbert Spencer (1898) laid the foundation for understanding how societies maintain social cohesion and order. Durkheim emphasized the importance of social integration to achieve solidarity in increasingly complex societies (Kalter, 2022; Spencer & Charsley, 2021). While initially operating at the macro-level of society rather than specifically in relation to individuals or immigrants (Kalter, 2022), these concepts were increasingly applied to immigration contexts as migration to North America and Europe intensified in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Early models in North America conceptualized integration primarily as a unidirectional process of ‘assimilation’, whereby immigrants were expected to shed their original cultural identities and fully adopt the receiving society’s culture (Macleod, 2021). This assimilationist paradigm was prominently developed by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (Park et al., 1925) of the Chicago School of Sociology, who posited that immigrants would gradually adopt the cultural norms and values of the receiving society, leading to a homogeneous national identity (Kalter, 2022). Milton Gordon’s (1964) *Assimilation in American Life* attempted to depict assimilation as a reciprocal process of adaptation, yet his conceptualization remained anchored in a perspective that viewed dominant culture and society as static (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023).

By the mid-20th century, these unidirectional models faced mounting criticism for their oversimplification of integration processes. Scholars like Gans (1979) and Portes & Zhou (1993) highlighted their inadequacy in explaining the complex dynamics of immigrant adaptation, particularly immigrants’ capacity to selectively adopt elements of

the dominant culture while retaining significant aspects of their original identities. These critiques catalyzed a paradigm shift toward bidirectional models that conceptualized integration as a truly reciprocal process involving mutual adaptation between immigrants and the receiving society (Alba & Nee, 2003). This theoretical evolution recognized that receiving societies are not static entities but evolve in response to immigration.

Multiculturalism emerged as an alternative conceptual and policy approach in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in immigrant-receiving countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Kymlicka, 2014). As Kymlicka (2003) articulates, multiculturalism functions simultaneously as a descriptive term for diverse societies, a policy model for managing diversity, and a conceptual framework for understanding diverse societies. As an ideology, multiculturalism shapes societal norms and values, influencing how different groups interact and relate to one another.

The Canadian context provides a particularly relevant example, where multiculturalism has manifested in policies promoting religious tolerance, recognition of diverse cultural practices, and celebration of ethnic distinctiveness (Kymlicka, 2003). This approach explicitly values the maintenance of distinct cultural identities within a diverse society (Kymlicka & Banting, 2006). Yet despite its widespread adoption, multiculturalism has faced its own criticisms, including concerns about potential social fragmentation and the formation of parallel societies (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Porter, 2000; Dhamoon, 2009; Kymlicka, 2011).

Reconceptualizing integration: Beyond binary thinking

More recently, a renewed wave of critiques has targeted fundamental assumptions underlying integration concepts and practices. Schinkel (2018) and Wieviorka (2014) argue

that integration often carries normative biases, portraying immigrants as ‘others’ who must adapt to an ostensibly homogeneous receiving society. This critique challenges underlying assumptions that societies are bounded, culturally uniform entities to which immigrants must conform (Kutor et al., 2023). As Schinkel (2018) demonstrates, such framings can lead to immigrant-blaming narratives and reinforce power imbalances by assessing certain groups based on their level of integration while exempting others from similar scrutiny.

Rather than abandoning the concept entirely, recent scholarship has worked to reframe and reconceptualize the notion of integration to address these critiques (Favell, 2019; Klarenbeek, 2019, Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Penninx, 2019). Particularly promising is Kutor et al.’s (2023) proposal to understand immigrant integration as a ‘wicked concept’, acknowledging its inherent complexity, contested nature, and the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition. This perspective captures integration’s multidimensional, multidirectional nature spanning various domains (e.g., economic, social, cultural, political), while also considering the influence and role of macro-level factors such as societal structures, policies, and majority attitudes.

This view of integration highlights its inherent complexity, with interconnected components forming a system of mutual influence. Traditional approaches to measuring integration have employed various indicators across domains: economic integration (employment rates, income levels, occupational mobility), social integration (social networks, connections with locals), cultural integration (adaptation to norms and values), civic integration (political participation, representation), and spatial integration (residential patterns, housing quality) (Ray, 2002). Social mobility – the movement of individuals or groups within a social hierarchy (Kaufmann et al., 2004) – is also a key indicator of

successful integration, reflecting immigrants' access to opportunities and resources in their new society (Preston & Ray, 2020).

The subjective dimensions: Emotional citizenry and belonging

Traditional approaches to measuring integration often fail to account for the subjective experiences and emotions of immigrants navigating the integration process. By focusing solely on 'objective indicators', the views, experiences, and voices of immigrants are largely overlooked. This top-down approach neglects the agency of immigrants, the work they invest in their integration, and their emotional experiences throughout the process.

While most studies focus on measuring integration through indicators such as educational achievement and professional and social class status (e.g., Portes et al., 2005), they frequently miss immigrants' own perceptions and affective dimensions of integration, such as sense of belonging and identity (Aquino, Chanamoto, & Christou, 2022; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). A growing body of research has emerged to address this long-standing neglect and underscores the critical role of emotions in comprehending the social and spatial dynamics of integration (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Bondi, Davidson, and Smith, 2005).

The field of emotional geographies illuminates how emotions shape immigrants' experiences and interactions with places and social dynamics (Aquino, Chanamoto, & Christou, 2022). This approach provides valuable insights into how immigrants navigate new environments, develop emotional attachments to places and communities, and maintain relationships with their homeland and transnational communities. To fully understand the complexity of integration, it is crucial to consider immigrants' perspectives and lived experiences alongside objective measures.

Our conceptual framework draws particularly on Askins' (2016) notion of emotional citizenry to capture the subjective and emotional aspects of the integration experience. Askins emphasizes the significance of emotions in the process of becoming a citizen and attaining a sense of belonging, encompassing individuals' diverse experiences of citizenship and their emotional connections to their new home. This concept proves especially valuable for understanding the emotional dynamics associated with contemporary immigration trends and settlement processes, underscoring how "emotional encounters can evidence desires to remake society at the local level, moving beyond normalized productions and practices of citizenship" (p.515).

While our focus is on integration rather than citizenship *per se*, emotional citizenry offers a critical framework for investigating the affective dimensions of belonging and participation, which are crucial aspects of the integration process. This framework views integration as a deeply emotional and relational process extending beyond legal or administrative definitions. By emphasizing everyday interactions, feelings, and interpersonal encounters, this approach reveals how immigrants negotiate their sense of belonging through complex affective experiences (Askins, 2016; Kale & Kindon, 2021). Emotional connections are not peripheral but central to understanding how individuals become part of a new social landscape and integrate into society (Kale & Kindon, 2021).

The concept of emotional citizenry aligns with the multidimensional nature of integration, encompassing social, cultural, and political participation aspects. It highlights the intricate relationships between emotions, residential patterns, and socioeconomic participation, and how these factors contribute to developing an emotional sense of belonging to the receiving society. Additionally, the temporal dimension of emotional

citizenry views belonging as an unfolding process, aligning with the understanding of integration as a dynamic and long-term process.

By incorporating emotional citizenry into our analysis, we recognize that integration involves not only objective indicators but also deeply emotional and relational processes. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how structural elements and individual experiences interact in shaping immigrants' sense of belonging throughout the integration process. As such, it aligns with the conceptualization of integration as a 'wicked concept' that acknowledges the complex, multifaceted nature of integration processes and the importance of considering both structural and individual experiences.

Our study on Iranian immigrants in Toronto focuses specifically on the interconnections between residential and socioeconomic integration while attending to the emotional aspects that permeate and connect these dimensions. By examining how residential patterns, socioeconomic integration, and emotional sense of belonging mutually influence one another and are shaped by gender dynamics, we contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of immigrant integration in contemporary multicultural societies.

Research methodology

The case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto offers a unique opportunity to examine the complex interrelationships between residential, socioeconomic, and emotional dimensions of integration. As of 2021, Iran was the 9th largest source country for immigrants to Canada, constituting 2.2% of the total immigrant population (Statistics Canada, 2021). The first-generation Iranian population in Canada reached 182,940 in 2021, with significant concentrations in Toronto (87,105), Vancouver (43,245), and Montreal (18,915).

Iranian immigrants tend to cluster in relatively affluent suburban areas along the Yonge Street corridor in Toronto's northern suburbs (Figure 1), a settlement pattern distinct from other recently settled visible minority groups (e.g., Firang, 2019; Ghosh, 2014). These characteristics make them ideal for investigating the interplay between residential patterns, socioeconomic status, and integration processes.

We employed a mixed methodological design, combining census data analysis, qualitative interviews, and ethnographic methods. First, we created a comprehensive sociodemographic profile of Iranian immigrants in Toronto through secondary analysis of Canada's 2021 census data, the most recent available and temporally coinciding with our field research. We focused on key indicators of residential integration (homeownership rates, housing values), neighbourhood characteristics (ethnic composition, income levels), and socioeconomic profiles (educational attainment, income distribution), specific to Iranian immigrants in Toronto.

After obtaining ethics approval, we conducted qualitative data collection from October 2022 to March 2023. This included semi-structured interviews with 54 established Iranian immigrant men and women residing in Toronto's northern suburbs. To complement these, we interviewed seven key informants – Iranian real estate agents serving their ethnic community – to gain insights into the housing practices and preferences of Iranian immigrants. Additionally, we used ethnographic methods, including participant observation within the Iranian community, to better understand the social and cultural context of their integration experiences.

For recruitment, we employed purposive and snowball sampling strategies, leveraging Iranian community networks (e.g., social media, ethnic businesses) and informal recruitment in public spaces frequented by the Iranian community. Interviews were conducted in person at various locations according to participants' preferences (e.g., cafés, libraries), audio-recorded

with consent, and transcribed verbatim. To ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, interviews were conducted in Farsi and later translated to English. Questions focused on housing, integration, and social mobility experiences, while a short demographic survey collected information on gender, age, time of arrival, marital status, and occupation among other things.

Participants were relatively established, having been in Canada for more than 5 years at the time of the interview: 15 arrived before 2000, 18 between 2000 and 2010, and 21 between 2011 and 2017 (see Table 1). The sample comprised 43 economic immigrants, 8 family-sponsored immigrants, and 3 refugees (although not part of the initial sampling criteria, they were included due to their established status in Canada). Most (43) resided in upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods in North York and Richmond Hill, areas with a large concentration of Iranian immigrants. Most participants (42) were homeowners, predominantly living in single-detached houses. In terms of household income, 25 participants reported earning \$100,000 or more annually.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Iranian Immigrant Participants

Characteristics	Category	Number/ Total:54
Immigration status	Economic immigrant	43
	Family reunification	8
	Refugee	3
Period of arrival	Before 2000	15
	2000-2010	18
	2011-2017	21
Age	30s	6
	40s	14
	50s	21
	60s	13
Gender	Woman	34
	Man	20
Family status	Married	40
	Single	5
	Separated/divorced/widowed	9
Education level	Diploma	4
	Bachelor's degree	24
	Master's degree	16
	Ph.D./doctoral	10
Homeownership	Homeowner	42
	Renter	12
Dwelling type	Single-detached house	32
	Semi-detached house	3
	Townhouse	2
	Apartment (condo)	10
	Apartment (rental)	7
Location of residence	North York	23
	Richmond Hill	20

	Thornhill	8
	Newmarket	3
Annual household income	\$30,000- \$49,000	3
	\$50,000- \$69,000	5
	\$70,000- \$99,0000	7
	\$100,000 or more	25
	Not disclosed	14

We analyzed qualitative data through a multi-stage process. First, we organized participants' sociodemographic survey responses and presented them in tables to provide an overview of the sample characteristics. Next, we used an inductive thematic approach to analyze interview data, guided by our research themes of housing, integration, and social mobility. The analysis involved open coding to identify initial concepts and categories, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between categories (Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Straus, 1976). Throughout this iterative process, we compared data within and across interviews to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in participants' experiences. Emerging themes that extended beyond our initial focus were noted. We used field observations to refine our analysis and interpretation. Lastly, we conducted a theoretical analysis using Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry to examine the role of emotions in Iranian immigrants' integration experiences, focusing on the intersections of emotions with residential and socioeconomic dimensions. This analysis highlighted significant gender differences in emotional experiences of integration.

Results

We now delve into the multifaceted integration experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. First, we discuss their residential integration, focusing on the factors that influence their settlement in specific neighbourhoods and suburbs. Next, we analyze the dynamics of their

residential patterns and socioeconomic integration, highlighting the strategic actions they have taken to enhance their professional integration into Canadian society, as well as the challenges some participants faced who experienced slower social mobility. Thirdly, we investigate their integration experiences from a gender perspective, emphasizing women's resilience and empowerment. Finally, we draw on the concept of emotional citizenry to analyze how the social mobility experiences of Iranian immigrants shape their emotional sense of belonging within Canadian society.

Residential integration

Analysis of the 2021 census data and our interviews reveals three key patterns in Iranian immigrants' residential integration: strategic homeownership in affluent suburbs, leveraging of pre-migration resources, and culturally driven housing priorities. Iranian immigrants in Toronto concentrate in upper-/middle-class suburban neighbourhoods (Figure 1), particularly Richmond Hill and Willowdale (North York), where they constitute over 10% of the population in several census tracts (Statistics Canada, 2021). Those who identify as Iranian/Persian² represent 13.8% and 12% of the total population in these areas respectively, reflecting their significant demographic presence.

² The term "Iranian" refers to nationality or citizenship, while "Persian" typically refers to a specific ethnic group within Iran. Some individuals may identify as both Iranian and Persian, while others may prefer one term over the other.

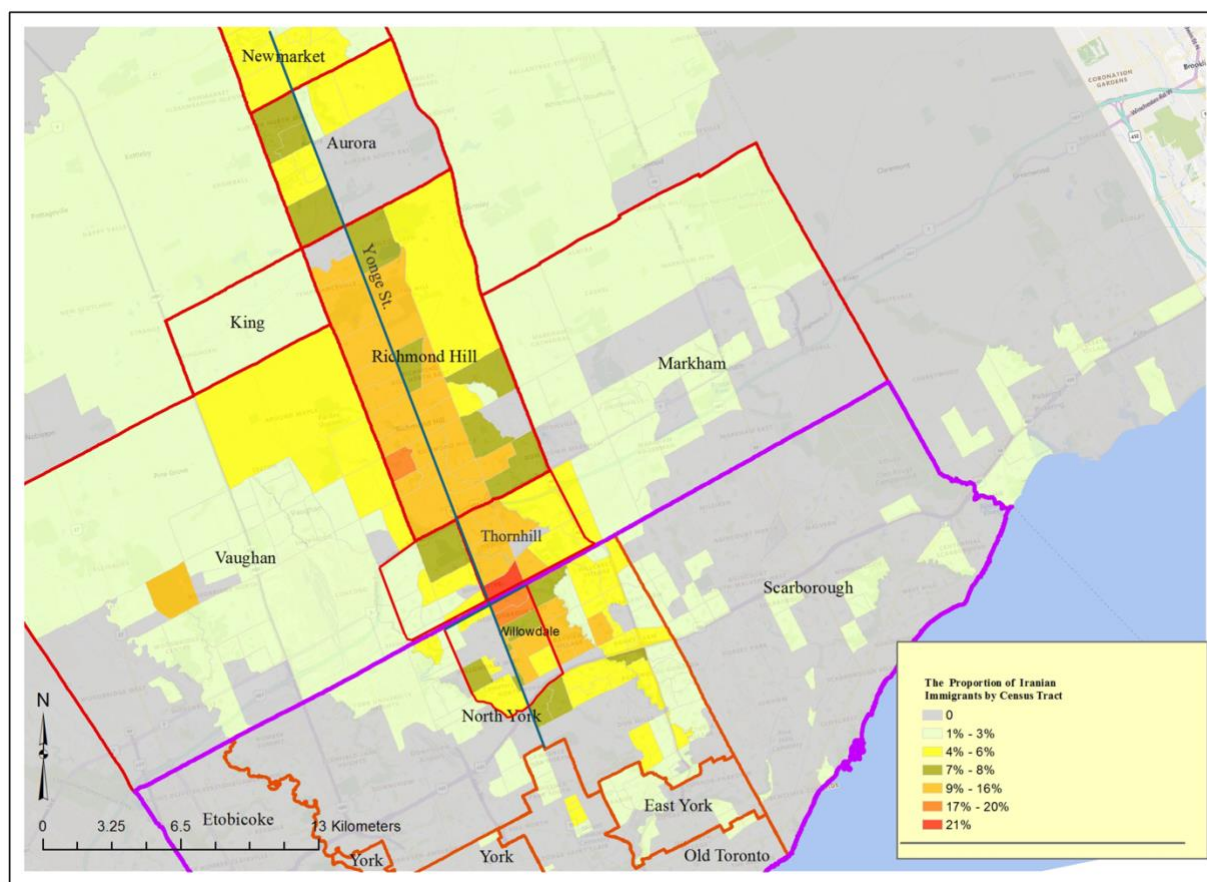


Figure 1: Iranian immigrants as a proportion of census tract population, Toronto CMA, 2021.

Source: Statistics Canada Census 2021 (2021; calculations by authors)

This settlement pattern, particularly the predominance in areas characterized by single-detached housing, suggests successful residential integration. Richmond Hill's housing stock is 57% single-detached houses (Table 2), significantly higher than Willowdale's 25% and the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) average of 39% (Statistics Canada, 2021b). This aligns with our participants' housing choices, with 32 of 42 homeowners residing in single-detached houses primarily in these suburban neighbourhoods (Table 1).

Table 2. Residential and Socioeconomic Indicators for Richmond Hill, Willowdale, and Toronto CMA, 2021

Indicators	Richmond Hill	Willowdale	Toronto CMA
Single-detached houses	57%	25%	39%
Total houses	76%	30%	56%
Apartments	24%	70%	44%
Average dwelling value	\$1,344,000	\$1,187,000	\$1,112,000
Homeownership rate	78.2%	58.0%	65.1%
Average household income (2020)	\$134,000	\$106,300	\$129,000

Source: Statistics Canada (2021b)

Socioeconomic indicators from Census data (Table 2) reveal important patterns underlying these settlement choices. Richmond Hill has notably higher average dwelling values (\$1,344,000) and household incomes (\$134,000) compared to the Toronto CMA averages. Willowdale presents a more nuanced picture: its average dwelling values (\$1,187,000) exceed the CMA average, while its household income (\$106,300) falls below it, indicating a more economically diverse area. The significantly lower homeownership rate (58.0%) and the predominance of apartments (70%) in Willowdale, compared to Richmond Hill and the Toronto CMA, point to a substantial renter population residing in apartment buildings. But as illustrated in Figure 2 and supported by our ethnographic observations, Iranians as established immigrants primarily concentrate in the more affluent areas in Willowdale dominated by single-detached housing. The high homeownership rate in Richmond Hill (78.2% compared to 66.5% for the

CMA) further confirms the priority Iranian immigrants place on property ownership as both financial investment and a symbol of successful integration.

Our analysis of the housing trajectories of Iranian immigrants reveals that many participants achieved this residential positioning by leveraging substantial pre-migration economic resources. Unlike Canada's mortgage-centered housing market, Iranian property purchases typically require full payment, as lending institutions rarely provide home financing. Consequently, immigrants who owned property in Iran often used capital from selling these assets to fund down payments necessary in Toronto's housing market. Iranian real estate agents, who participated as key informants in this study, validated the significant role of pre-immigration economic resources in facilitating homeownership among Iranian immigrants in Toronto: "I can say that nearly 95% of my clients fund their down payment by selling properties in Iran" (Agent#2). This financial strategy enables them to bypass the mortgage financing barriers that many newcomers commonly face. One couple explained:

We initially came to Canada to obtain our permanent residency. We first did not intend to live here permanently, but it's all about kids, you know! We needed a place of our own. Just one year after our arrival, we transferred some of our savings from Iran to make the down payment on a house in Thornhill. (Spouse, both acknowledging, 50s, Thornhill, 7 years in Canada)

The high rate of homeownership among our participants (42 of 54; Table 1) reflects cultural priorities beyond financial considerations. This inclination stems from the deep-rooted significance of property ownership in Iranian culture and identity formation. Iranian immigrants thus often allocate a significant portion of their income and savings towards acquiring housing. As one real estate agent noted:

Compared to other ethnic groups, Iranian clients are determined to make sacrifices in order to pay higher percentages of their income towards their mortgage by reducing other expenses, such as travel and shopping, to fulfil their expectations of a ‘dream home’ in the suburbs of Toronto. (Agent #1)

Our findings suggest that these housing choices serve multiple functions beyond shelter: they act as visible indicators of social status, maintain privacy consistent with cultural norms, provide spaces for hosting family gatherings, while also establishing material and emotional anchors in Canadian society. One participant succinctly captures these sentiments:

Our home was a sanctuary for my son and me, a place where we could find comfort and refuge. It was where we could host parties and spend time with family and friends. It also reflected our social status, showcasing that we owned a house in Richmond Hill. After a few years, refinancing our home also helped us meet some of our financial needs. (Woman, 50s, Newmarket, 29 years in Canada)

Participants consistently prioritized neighbourhood quality and status over financial considerations, distinguishing their approach from other immigrants. One long-term resident described:

In the 1990s, I worked as a taxi driver in Toronto. There were days when we didn’t make enough money, and I felt very concerned. My colleagues would ask why I was worried and suggest moving to a cheaper neighbourhood where rent was only \$100 a month. But my mentality was different. I wanted my wife and kids to live in a safe neighbourhood. Despite the financial strain, I prioritized my family’s security and wellbeing. In the end, we made the right decision. The economic

growth in our neighbourhood was higher, we gained better equity, and our kids were raised in a good environment. My family felt a sense of comfort and peace in our living area. (Man, 60s, Richmond Hill, 34 years in Canada)

This perspective reflects how residential choices are viewed as long-term investments in both financial and family wellbeing.

Meanwhile, 12 participants had not achieved homeownership, illustrating alternative integration trajectories shaped by timing, resources, and strategic priorities. Most arrived after the mid-2010s with insufficient capital to enter Toronto's housing market. Their situations reflect three distinct patterns: some strategically prioritized alternative investments (e.g., businesses, more affordable properties elsewhere, or children's activities); others encountered challenges transferring funds from Iran; and some faced difficulties improving their socioeconomic status in Toronto. These participants employed alternative strategies for eventual homeownership, including disciplined saving, prudent financial management, and additional income-generating activities (e.g., second jobs). One mother explained:

Paying over \$14,000 annually for my son's sports activities has made it impossible for me to become a homeowner. No institution provided support for his sports expenses, so I decided to prioritize his success over our dream of owning a home. I believe we will be able to afford a house within the next few years, though it will likely be in areas further out, like Newmarket, rather than North York. In the meantime, I am diligently saving. (Woman, 40s, North York, 13 years in Canada)

Rather than indicating integration failure, these cases demonstrate strategic resource allocation toward different integration priorities.

For non-homeowners, the path to homeownership remains a central goal, with many considering more affordable areas north along the Yonge Street corridor, such as Aurora and Newmarket (see Figure 1). These suburbs offer lower entry points to the housing market while maintaining proximity to established Iranian communities and in alignment with their lifestyle preferences.

To conclude this section, most participants have achieved successful residential integration through homeownership in relatively affluent suburban areas, leveraging pre-migration resources and prioritizing property investment in alignment with cultural values. Even those without homeowner status demonstrate agency through strategic financial planning and alternative investment approaches. These findings reveal residential integration as multifaceted, encompassing not only economic calculations but also social and cultural considerations that contribute to immigrants' growing sense of rootedness in their new society.

The nexus between residential integration and socioeconomic integration

Our analysis demonstrates a complex, bidirectional relationship between the residential and socioeconomic dimensions of integration among Iranian immigrants in Toronto. While pre-migration economic resources enabled initial homeownership for many participants, long-term residential success required subsequent professional achievement in Canada. This interconnection reveals that integration is a dynamic process where success in one domain reinforces progress in others.

Post-immigration professional achievements proved critical for sustaining and enhancing residential status. Participants who strategically pursued Canadian credentials, professional examinations, and career advancement secured their housing positions more

effectively than those who relied solely on pre-migration resources. One successful participant described this process:

I was hired as a professional engineer just one month after immigrating. My resume was exceptional, and when I presented it to the company, they immediately offered me a position. I worked hard and bought a house in a well-credited neighbourhood in North York. (Woman, 50s, North York, 23 years in Canada)

The participant's trajectory illustrates how professional integration directly facilitates residential achievement.

This relationship between residential and socioeconomic integration functions bidirectionally. Residence in desirable neighbourhoods provides access to valuable social networks, quality institutions, and professional connections that can enhance socioeconomic integration. Simultaneously, professional success enables residential mobility toward more prestigious areas. One participant captured this dynamic:

I was discouraged by Iranians who insisted that passing the dental exam was extremely difficult (...). After moving to Toronto, I gained valuable social networks of fellow Iranians in our neighbourhood library that enabled me to study effectively. I passed the dental exam and became a licensed dentist. My business worked and I very soon enhanced our family's economic status. We first bought an apartment; we had a few movements until we attained our ideal home with a large back yard and swimming pool. (Woman, 30s, Thornhill, 15 years in Canada)

Educational considerations further illustrate this interconnection. For Iranian immigrants, proximity to quality educational institutions serves dual strategic purposes. First, it represents an investment in their children's academic trajectories and future

socioeconomic integration in Canadian society. Secondly, given the competitive real estate market dynamics in desirable school catchment areas, these properties typically experience higher appreciation rates making them financially advantageous investments. As one Iranian real estate agent explained:

There are two prestigious schools in Richmond Hill that attract both Iranian and Chinese residents, two communities who compete to live nearby. The appeal is not only due to the high-quality education for their children but also because these areas appreciate in property value over time. (Agent#1)

These findings demonstrate how residential choices simultaneously address current family needs, future aspirations for children, and long-term financial security – all elements contributing to successful integration across multiple dimensions.

Nevertheless, not all participants were successful in translating their professional qualifications into post-migration career advancement. A subset – primarily men who immigrated in their forties – encountered substantial barriers to socioeconomic integration that consequently limited their residential options. These challenges stemmed from a number of interconnected factors, including: advanced age at immigration, family responsibilities, limited financial resources for retraining, and insufficient social capital. Particularly significant were the challenges navigating unfamiliar credentialing processes without adequate information networks to share vital knowledge about recognition of foreign credentials, professional certification requirements, and educational bridging programs (Wang & Lo, 2005). The opportunity costs of education while supporting families created particularly difficult choices for these individuals, especially when

accurate information about outcomes was unavailable. One participant's experience exemplifies these challenges:

I was dismissed from my position as a university professor in Iran due to my political activities in 2009, leaving me with no choice but to migrate to Canada as a skilled worker. For the first two years, I searched for a job that matched my qualifications but was unsuccessful. Given my age [mid-40s] and lack of savings, further education was impossible for me. I became engaged in casual jobs to make a living. After 10 years, I'm struggling to improve my socioeconomic status. Only recently, after years in shared rooms, I managed to rent an apartment. (Man, 50s, North York, 10 years in Canada)

These cases illustrate how barriers to professional integration directly constrain residential options and in turn upward social mobility.

To sum up, through the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, the relationship between residential and socioeconomic integration emerges as multidirectional and mutually reinforcing. Our participants demonstrated considerable agency in navigating structural constraints through strategic settlement patterns in affluent neighbourhoods and professional development. Those who successfully engaged one domain typically experienced enhanced integration in the other, creating positive feedback loops of advancement. Conversely, barriers in professional integration directly limited residential options and mobility for others. Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, these interconnected integration domains collectively shaped participants' sense of achievement and belonging in Canadian society. These findings emphasize the conceptual importance of examining integration as a multidimensional process rather than

as separate, disconnected aspects. Such an approach reveals how various dimensions of integration are systematically interrelated, with developments in one sphere influencing trajectories in others – insights that would remain hidden when studying these dimensions in isolation.

Gendered experiences of immigrant integration

Our analysis reveals significant gendered patterns in integration trajectories, with women participants generally demonstrating more successful professional integration than their male counterparts. In turn, this success directly influenced their families' residential achievements and socioeconomic position, and thus their overall integration in Canadian society. These findings draw attention to the gender dynamics within immigrant families, where women's professional success significantly contributes to both socioeconomic and residential integration. While our sample includes more women than men (34 versus 20; Table 1), the consistent pattern of women professional resilience warrants attention as a substantive finding (rather than merely a sampling artifact).

Women participants typically achieved levels of integration and upward mobility that matched or surpassed their male counterparts, even when they arrived through family sponsorship initially categorized as dependents. Meanwhile, some men experienced downward mobility through job loss, underemployment, or diminished professional status. One woman's experience illuminates these gender dynamics:

I was the one who felt a sense of responsibility to my family; my husband made no effort to find a job since we arrived in Canada. My sons asked me to move to a house. I didn't want to disappoint them. I challenged myself, working in two

different places to afford to live in a house. I dedicated myself to my children.

(Woman, 40s, North York, 10 years in Canada)

Although many families initially immigrated through male sponsorship, women's post-migration roles evolved far beyond dependent status. These women proactively pursued educational credentials, professional development, and career advancement, becoming primary drivers of their families' socioeconomic integration. In their roles as wives and mothers, women consistently advocated for residential improvements and neighbourhood upgrades that aligned with aspirations for upward mobility. As one male participant acknowledged, "You know how women are like; they are ambitious. My wife wanted to move to a place with more convenience" (Man, 60s, Richmond Hill, 16 years in Canada). This gendered orientation toward neighbourhood quality and housing standards reflects how women often served as integration catalysts, translating professional achievements into residential advancement for their families.

Our findings also show that immigration led to significant transformations in women's self-reliance. Cut off from traditional family support networks upon which they had relied in Iran, these women developed newfound independence and decision-making authority. One participant recalled:

Within the first few months of arrival in 1999, one colleague recommended that I purchase a pre-construction condo in North York. As a young woman alone, I couldn't envision making such a big purchase independently. Later, I learned I must take on all the responsibilities that my family used to handle back in Iran. It was challenging, but I learned to become self-reliant. (Woman, 50s, Richmond Hill, 25 years in Canada)

This transformation was particularly pronounced for single mothers and divorced or widowed women. Despite the emotional impacts of loneliness, these women summoned the fortitude to embrace the challenges of integration and social mobility. Their integration narratives highlighted determination to overcome both structural barriers and cultural expectations of their community:

We divorced shortly after arrival. Now, I live with my daughter. As a single mom, I worked hard to support us. I bought a house in an affluent neighbourhood in North York. I never wanted to be treated as if being a single parent means I can't live a quality life. (Woman, 50s, North York, 23 years in Canada)

Women who immigrated without or ahead of their husbands navigated particularly complex challenges, managing childcare responsibilities while simultaneously pursuing educational credentials and professional development in Canada. In the context of transnational families, financial support from husbands and fathers who stayed behind in Iran significantly empowered their wives and children, facilitating a more seamless and effective integration process. While recognizing the critical role of women and their ability to integrate socioeconomically into Canadian society, it is essential to acknowledge that some men who joined their families in Canada in their 40s or 50s made significant sacrifices for the prosperity of their wives and children. Despite not achieving socioeconomic advancement themselves, these men provided crucial financial support that was vital for their families' socioeconomic integration and success. One participant shared her experience:

I uprooted my career in Iran and moved to Canada. Balancing studies and caring for my kids alone during the first years of arrival was challenging, but I

persevered. I worked hard to become a licensed pharmacist in Canada. However, it couldn't [have] happened without my husband's support back home. (Woman, 50s, Richmond Hill, 10 years in Canada)

Women also played significant roles in family reunification processes. Driven by cultural values prioritizing family unity, many Iranian immigrant women actively facilitated their husbands' eventual relocation to Canada, even when this meant professional compromises. These women managed complex negotiations between economic pragmatism and emotional priorities, aiding their husbands in achieving social mobility and cultivating an emotional connection to their new place of residence. The reunification of fathers and husbands, in turn, played an essential role in developing a sense of stability within Canadian society. One participant articulated this process:

I didn't want my family to live separated from one another. I wanted us all to be in the same place. My husband was a physician in Iran, but after some time, I realized we needed to be together. I managed to secure a college admission for him and registered him. Now, he's working in a hospital. Although it's not his ideal job, the fact that we are all together in Canada brings us some sense of stability. We transitioned from living in an apartment to a house, which further enhanced our sense of belonging to Canada. (Woman, 50s, Thornhill, 15 years in Canada)

This account illustrates how family reunification often contributed to residential advancement from apartments to houses, creating spaces that embodied the family's growing rootedness in Canadian society.

To conclude this section, gender emerges as a crucial lens for understanding integration processes among Iranian immigrants. Women demonstrated remarkable

agency in navigating structural constraints, often becoming the primary drivers of family integration through their professional resilience and strategic decision-making. Their efforts shaped their families' trajectories, including residential advancement and children's prospects. The gendered distribution of integration labour – with women frequently managing both professional advancement and family wellbeing – reflects broader transformations in gender roles spurred by migration. These gendered dynamics provide essential context for understanding the emotional dimensions of integration, which we examine in the next section.

Integration and affective experience of belonging

Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, we find that feelings of belonging develop through the interrelated experiences of residential integration, professional achievement, and social recognition in Canadian society. While homeownership in upscale neighbourhoods and residential integration are important milestones, developing a profound sense of belonging goes beyond these material achievements. In fact, homeownership and residing in advantaged neighbourhoods alone do not guarantee emotional attachment and sense of belonging to their homes, neighbourhoods, and Canada at large. Rather, it is the emotional journey associated with the challenges and successes of the broader integration trajectory, including overcoming professional barriers and achieving educational and career goals in Canadian society that shapes Iranian immigrants' sense of belonging and emotional citizenry. Particularly significant is the experience of upward social mobility, which encompasses both objective socioeconomic gains and the subjective emotional satisfaction of progressing within Canadian social hierarchies. One participant articulated this complex emotional landscape:

We now have a business that works, a house in Richmond Hill; but I cannot find my position as a doctor; here, in Canada, I'm my wife's assistant. I'm here only for my family. My wife says she immigrated to Canada not only for our children but also her own aspirations; but I'm here only for my children's prosperity. (Man, 50s, Richmond Hill, 10 years in Canada)

This testimony reveals how material achievements may exist alongside emotional ambivalence when professional identity remains compromised. It is the interplay between residential attainments, economic integration, and professional accomplishments that nurtures Iranian immigrants' emotional connection and rootedness in their adopted country.

The emotional impact of integration barriers becomes particularly evident among participants who struggled with socioeconomic advancement. Their experiences reveal how professional identity and social recognition fundamentally shape emotional attachment to place. These individuals – often facing barriers to credential recognition, age discrimination, and limited social networks – experienced not just material deprivation but profound emotional displacement. Their sense of non-belonging manifested through exclusion from both co-ethnic networks and broader Canadian society, creating a dual marginalization that intensified feelings of isolation. This emotional dimension of integration failures is powerfully captured by one participant:

I live in a rental apartment. I couldn't improve my socioeconomic status in Canada. As a former university professor, I am working as a security guard. In Iran, I was somebody, but in Canada, I am nobody. I feel less attached to Canada. Home is my hometown in Iran. (Man, 50s, North York, 10 years in Canada)

This testimony illustrates what Askins (2016) identifies as emotional citizenry– where professional deskilling through migration directly erodes the affective bonds that constitute belonging (to the new society). For this participant, the inability to maintain professional status correlates directly with emotional attachment to place, with ‘home’ remaining psychologically located in Iran despite years of residence in Canada.

Moreover, our findings reveal significant gendered patterns in the development of emotional belonging. Women participants demonstrated particularly strong capacities for cultivating emotional connections to their new society through professional achievement and identity transformation. Their pursuit of Canadian credentials represented not merely practical advancement but emotional investment in creating new identities within Canadian society. This emotional integration was often facilitated by supportive family arrangements that deviated from traditional Iranian patriarchal structures (Moghissi, 1999), embodying feminist familial partnerships (Mohammadi, 2023). One woman shared this emotional dimension of professional integration:

Toronto was like a springboard for my progress. I passed the professional exam. My husband fully supported me by taking care of the kids, cooking, and doing household chores. I gave it my all to pass this exam. You cannot imagine how happy I was when I heard I passed it; I just burst into tears. I felt on top of the world. I can say Toronto is my home. (tearing up while describing) (Woman, 30s, Thornhill, 15 years in Canada)

Her emotional response – tears, pride, elation – powerfully illustrates how professional achievement fosters emotional attachment to place, transforming Toronto from a location to “my home.”

Iranian women's sense of belonging was further enhanced by opportunities for gender equality in Canada that were absent in Iran. Their emotional citizenry was enriched by the newfound ability to leverage their potential, feel included and accepted across spheres, and actively contribute to their communities, which were often undervalued in their home country. As one participant explained, comparing professional opportunities:

In the laboratory, (...) all the equipment was small and delicate, making it seem like a completely feminine job. Despite this, women were banned from entering the Telecommunication Studies Research Department in Tehran. My friend, a top university student with a high GPA, was not allowed to work there. It's so unfortunate! This same woman now holds two doctorates and is one of the scientists working for Apple company from Canada. (Woman, 50s, North York, 23 years in Canada)

Such experiences demonstrate how recognition and validation within Canadian society directly nurture emotional citizenship for Iranian women in Canada, creating a stark contrast with the "structural and cultural barriers" they faced in Iran (Mousanejad, 2023, p.162).

In closing this section, our analysis reveals that emotional dimensions of integration extend well beyond material achievements, constituting a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of immigrant experience. Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, we demonstrate how sense of belonging emerges through the interplay of residential choices, professional achievements, and experiences of social recognition. Particularly significant is the subjective experience of upward mobility, which fosters emotional attachment to place by affirming immigrants' social value and

future prospects. These emotional processes are distinctly gendered, with women often developing stronger connections to Canadian society through newfound opportunities for professional advancement and gender equality. This analysis highlights the importance of considering emotional dimensions alongside objective indicators to fully comprehend the complex, multifaceted nature of immigrant integration, revealing how material achievements gain meaning primarily through their emotional significance in immigrants' lived experiences.

Discussion & Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to shed light on the complex, multifaceted process of integration by examining the experiences of Iranian immigrant men and women in Toronto, focusing on the interconnections between residential patterns, professional integration, and emotional belonging. Our analysis reveals that successful integration emerges through the dynamic interplay between these dimensions rather than through isolated achievements in separate domains.

Iranian immigrants' settlement in affluent suburban areas characterized by single-detached housing indicates substantial residential integration, often facilitated by leveraging pre-migration socioeconomic resources from Iran and profoundly shaped by cultural preferences. Nevertheless, our findings show that maintaining this residential status requires ongoing professional achievement in Canada, highlighting the bidirectional relationship between housing choices and career advancement. This interconnection manifests concretely in participants' strategic selection of neighbourhoods with quality educational institutions that simultaneously enhance children's prospects and serve as sound financial investments.

A significant contribution of our study lies in identifying distinctly gendered integration trajectories. Iranian women demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, frequently achieving socioeconomic success that matched or surpassed male counterparts despite often arriving initially as dependents. Women's proactive pursuit of education and professional credentials, coupled with their determination to establish what they envision as 'proper homes' for their families, positioned them as primary drivers of integration. This pattern challenges traditional gender roles and reveals how migration can lead to significant transformations in family dynamics. Particularly notable was how women facilitated integration not only for themselves but for entire family units, managing residential advancements that reflected and reinforced their professional achievements.

Drawing on Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, our analysis illuminates the critical yet often overlooked emotional dimensions of integration. Rather than emerging automatically from material achievements, sense of belonging develops through the subjective experience of overcoming barriers, achieving recognition, and experiencing upward social mobility. Participants actively negotiated belonging by strategically leveraging resources across domains, with emotional attachment to place strengthening particularly when they achieved professional recognition and social advancement. This emotional dimension was especially pronounced for women, who often found unprecedented opportunities for professional development and gender equality in Canadian society compared to restrictions they faced in Iran.

By examining subjective emotional experiences alongside objective measures of integration, our study provides a holistic understanding of integration as a complex,

ongoing, and multidimensional process. Conceptualizing integration as a “wicked concept” (Kutor et al., 2023) enables us to capture the nuances and contradictions in immigrants’ experiences within specific space-time contexts, avoiding reductive approaches and normative perspectives. This framework reveals how feelings of achievement, success, and upward mobility foster belonging regardless of the specific pathways pursued, while also highlighting how integration failures in one domain can undermine achievements in others.

While our findings offer valuable insights, we acknowledge limitations regarding generalizability. Most participants represent a specific subset of immigrants who arrived in Canada with substantial human and/or financial capital. Nevertheless, our conceptual approach offers broader theoretical contributions to integration studies regardless of immigrant group characteristics. First, our framework reveals how integration domains function as an interconnected system rather than isolated processes. Second, by combining objective indicators with emotional dimensions, we provide a template for capturing integration’s complexity without privileging material achievements. Third, our gender analysis reveals how integration processes reshape family dynamics, highlighting the need to examine integration beyond household-level outcomes. These conceptual insights are applicable across diverse immigrant populations and contexts, offering analytical tools for understanding integration as both structurally situated and emotionally experienced.

In conclusion, our study contributes to a richer understanding of immigrant integration by revealing the dynamic interconnections between residential patterns, professional achievement, and emotional belonging, as well as how these processes are fundamentally shaped by gender. This approach underscores the importance of considering

both tangible achievements and their emotional significance in immigrants' lived experiences. Perhaps more crucially, our analysis demonstrates the paramount importance of subjective experiences of achievement, recognition, and fairness in cultivating genuine belonging among immigrants. This insight offers compelling directions for future research and policy initiatives aimed at fostering immigrant inclusion and well-being in contexts where many newcomers struggle to realize their aspirations. By attending to both structural opportunities and emotional dimensions of integration, receiving societies may better support immigrants in building meaningful lives and contributions in their new homes.

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Chapter 4: Paper III: Negotiating belonging: Iranian Immigrants' Community Building practices in Toronto

بنی آدم اعضای یکدیگرند / که در آفرینش ز یک گوهرند
چو عضوی به درد آورد روزگار / دگر عضوها را نماند قرار

*We are all limbs of a single body,
Born from one radiant gem of creation.
When one aches, the rest cannot remain at peace—
For in our shared origin, our hearts beat as one.*

—Saadi Shirazi, Golestan

Abstract

In increasingly diverse urban contexts, understanding immigrants' community building practices is crucial for fostering social cohesion. This study examines how Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada, negotiate belonging across multiple socio-spatial scales through the lens of social capital theory and Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry. Employing qualitative mixed methods – sociodemographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observations – we analyze the experiences of 54 established Iranian immigrants, predominantly professionals residing in upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods of Toronto's northern suburbs. Our findings reveal three interconnected scales of community engagement: (1) neighbourhood interactions that transcend ethnic boundaries through shared class position; (2) close-knit social networks formed through pre-migration connections providing essential emotional support and cultural continuity; and (3) engagement with ethnic associations facilitating professional advancement and cultural preservation. We argue that Iranian immigrants strategically cultivate different forms of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking—across these scales, demonstrating agency in constructing meaningful belonging despite intra-community fragmentation along ethnic, religious, generational, and political lines. This approach challenges linear models of immigrant integration, illustrating how emotional citizenry operates simultaneously across different spatial and social contexts. Our study contributes to understanding the complex emotional geographies of belonging that emerged in superdiverse urban settings.

Keywords: community building; emotional belonging; Iranian immigrants; integration.

Introduction

In an era of increasing global mobility and diversity, understanding the complex processes of immigrant community building has become crucial for fostering social cohesion in multicultural societies. While traditional approaches have often focused on the economic, political, and social aspects of immigration, a growing body of research examines its emotional dimensions (Aquino, Chanamoto, & Christou, 2022; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). These studies highlight how emotional factors shape immigrants' experiences of integration and sense of belonging, yet more research is needed to further uncover the complexities of emotional belonging in the context of increased diversity, particularly in gateway metropolitan areas.

Our aim in this paper is to advance understanding of the emotional dimensions of community building by examining the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada, a gateway city renowned for its diversity (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). By investigating the interplay between emotions and immigrants' community building practices, we offer a nuanced empirical and conceptual analysis that contributes to the literature on immigrant integration. Specifically, we focus on Iranian immigrants' community building practices both within their co-ethnic group and with other ethno-racial communities, applying social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998) to examine how they form diverse connections through bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Utilizing Askins' (2016) framework of emotional citizenry, we further investigate how these connections contribute to developing a sense of belonging among established Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburban landscape.

We address two primary research questions: (1) How do established Iranian immigrants in Toronto build and sustain community networks within their co-ethnic group and with other ethno-racial communities? (2) In what ways do these community building practices contribute to

their emotional citizenry and sense of belonging? Our study examines immigrants who arrived under the economic class and have resided in Canada for at least five years, offering insights into long-term processes of community building beyond the immediate challenges of settlement.

This research advances understanding of immigrant integration in three ways. First, by focusing on established immigrants with professional background, we move beyond studies of recent arrival to examine long-term processes of community building. Second, our application of emotional citizenry offers new perspectives on how everyday interactions shape immigrants' sense of belonging across multiple spatial and social scales. Third, by studying Iranian immigrants – a relatively understudied group in the Canadian context – we contribute to understanding the diverse experiences of integration among ethno-cultural communities in superdiverse cities.

We first review the literature on immigrant community building, followed by a presentation of our conceptual frameworks of emotional citizenry and social capital. We then describe our qualitative mixed-methods approach. Our findings demonstrate the diverse community building practices Iranian immigrants employ, ranging from intimate social networks to broader societal engagements. Through this analysis, we provide insights into the nuanced nature of immigrant integration and the diverse roles that social connections play in fostering a sense of belonging in multicultural urban settings.

Immigrant community building

Understanding how immigrants interact socially and engage in community building practices is essential for fostering social cohesion and integration (Alfieri et al., 2019). These interactions not only shape immigrants' integration process into the receiving society but also influence their experiences of emotional belonging. In this section, we discuss classical theories and conceptual

approaches to community, followed by a review of contemporary theories and their applications in relation to immigrant populations.

The social fabric of a locality is fundamentally shaped by how community is conceptualized and the nuances of community engagement. Jacobs (2001) defines community as a “place-based community, meaning the existence of groups with territorial interests or associations or communities based on formal local government boundaries” (p.2383). Anderson’s (2006) concept of “imagined communities” offers a more nuanced understanding of how groups construct and maintain a sense of belonging despite never meeting most of their fellow members.

Building on these ideas, Delanty (2003) argues that modern communities are increasingly constructed and fluid rather than fixed; they are not just local entities but can span across borders through transnational networks (Basch, 1993). This is particularly relevant for immigrant groups who maintain ties to countries of origin while establishing new connections in the receiving society. For immigrants, the nostalgia for community may be heightened as they navigate adaptation to a new society, manifesting as “restorative nostalgia” that reconstructs idealized pasts (Boym, 2001). This nostalgia operates within communities actively constructed through communicative practices rather than fixed structures, where belonging is continually negotiated through dynamic processes of meaning-making (Ahmed & Veronis, 2019).

Immigrants employ diverse strategies to build social connections and communities in the receiving society (Veronis, 2010). Engagement with both co-ethnic and inter-ethnic groups is crucial for integration (Zhang et al., 2023). While co-ethnic networks provide immediate support, bridging networks with the broader society are essential for long-term integration and social mobility (Ager & Strang, 2008). Skilled immigrants leverage their professional status and human

capital to shape their integration strategies (Portes, 1995; Zhou, 1997). Professional networks complement traditional ethnic and familial ties, facilitating access to resources and opportunities in the receiving country (Lin, 2001; Light & Karageorgis, 1994).

Moreover, immigrants' civic engagement and volunteerism within their neighbourhoods and the broader society significantly impact their integration processes (Alfieri et al., 2019) while fostering emotional belonging (Soto Saavedra et al., 2023). Ethnic neighbourhoods can serve as important sites for cultural preservation (Logan et al., 2002), and in some cases immigrants employ “strategic spatial essentialism” to construct geographies of belonging in space/place (Veronis 2007). Community-based organizations play pivotal roles as intermediaries bridging gaps between immigrants and broader communities (Veronis, 2013; Delaisse et al., 2022), providing essential services, advocating for immigrant rights, and cultivating a sense of community (de Graauw, 2016).

Despite these valuable insights, much of the existing literature treats immigrant community building in relatively siloed ways – examining either co-ethnic ties or bridging relationships, professional or neighbourhood connections – without fully exploring how these multiple forms of engagement interact simultaneously across different spatial and social scales. Additionally, while recent scholarship has begun to recognize the emotional dimensions of migration, few studies have explicitly examined how various community building practices contribute to emotional citizenry and belonging, particularly among established immigrant populations.

Emotional citizenry and social capital

To analyze how Iranian immigrants' engagement in diverse community building activities fosters emotional connections and belonging in the multicultural context of Toronto, we combine Askins' (2016) notion of emotional citizenry with social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998).

Askins' (2016) emotional citizenry focuses on the everyday experiences and interactions that shape citizenship practices and emotional belonging. This concept posits that citizenship extends beyond formal rights to encompass lived experiences unfolding through social connections and emotional attachments formed in different contexts. This aligns with the growing recognition of emotions' importance in shaping immigrant experiences (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015) and offers a nuanced approach to examining social interactions within and between increasingly diverse immigrant communities in contexts of super-diversity (Askins, 2016; Kale & Kindon, 2021).

Emotional citizenry involves four key aspects: the influence of everyday experiences and interactions on citizenship practices; the role of emotions in civic engagement and political participation; the dynamic nature of citizenship as a process of becoming rather than a static state; and the spatial and relational dimensions of citizenship (Askins, 2016). This framework is instrumental in understanding how immigrants develop and nurture an emotional sense of belonging in their new society. These aspects resonate with the three dimensions of social capital – bonding, bridging, and linking (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998) – providing valuable insights for understanding integration dynamics and community development (Zetter et al., 2006).

Bonding social capital refers to relationships within immediate networks, typically including family and close friends from similar backgrounds. These connections are vital for

immigrants, providing essential support and resources for navigating daily life in a new environment. Bridging social capital encompasses relationships outside immediate networks, connecting immigrants to the broader community (Ager & Strang, 2008; Thomas et al., 2016). Such connections provide access to a wider range of resources and opportunities, including enhanced economic prospects and employment options (Hutchinson & Vidal, 2004; Zhang, Anderson, & Zhan, 2011). Linking social capital involves relationships between immigrants and institutions or individuals in positions of power (Thomas et al., 2016). These connections are crucial for accessing services and participating in decision-making processes that affect immigrant communities.

Integrating these frameworks offers several advantages for understanding immigrant community building. First, it enables us to examine how different forms of social capital operate simultaneously across multiple scales – from intimate interpersonal relationships to neighbourhood interactions to institutional engagements. Second, by focusing on emotional citizenry, we can analyze how these varied social connections contribute to immigrants' subjective experiences of belonging, rather than just their objective integration outcomes. Third, this approach enables us to explore how established immigrants with professional backgrounds navigate complex community dynamics beyond the initial settlement period.

By focusing on the emotional dimensions of immigrants' experiences, our combined framework provides a deeper understanding of community building practices and development of belonging. Through the case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, we analyze how diverse forms of community connections foster meaningful emotional attachments across different spatial levels, offering insights into the complex dynamics of the integration process in increasingly diverse urban contexts.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative mixed-methods approach. We began by analyzing Statistics Canada's 2021 census data to construct a demographic profile of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, followed by our primary data collection, which involved semi-structured interviews with demographic surveys, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations. Our fieldwork lasted from October 2022 to March 2023.

Our selection criteria focused on Iranian immigrants who: (1) entered primarily as economic immigrants or through family reunification; (2) had been established in Canada for at least five years; (3) were of working age (30-65 years); and (4) resided in Toronto's northern suburbs of North York and Richmond Hill – areas with high concentrations of Iranian immigrants (see chapter 2). We employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques through social networks, targeted social media advertising, and community outreach.

Our sample comprised 54 Iranian immigrants meeting these criteria, with a few exceptions (3 arrived as refugees). We categorized participants into two cohorts based on arrival period (Table 1): 15 participants who immigrated during the 1980s-1990s (a period of significant political upheaval in Iran – i.e., the Islamic Revolution, Iran-Iraq war), and 39 who arrived between 2000-2017 (with potentially more diverse migration motivations – economic, quality of life, political; Mohammadi, 2023).

Most participants (n=43) were economic immigrants, while eight arrived through family reunification; three were refugees and were exceptionally included in the study due to their status as successfully established immigrants. The majority (n=43) lived in upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods in North York and Richmond Hill, with others (n=11) residing in nearby areas of Thornhill and Newmarket (Table 1).

Table 1: Sociodemographic profile of Iranian immigrant participants

Characteristics	Study participants
Sample size	54
Period of immigration	
Before 2000	15
2000-2017	39
Immigration category	
Economic immigrants	43
Family reunification	8
Refugee	3
Age distribution	
30-39	6
40-49	14
50-59	21
60-69	13
Gender	
Female	34
Male	20
Place of residence	
North York	23
Thornhill	8
Richmond Hill	20
Newmarket	3
Homeownership	
Homeowner	42
Renter	12
Dwelling type	

Single-detached house	32
Semi-detached house	3
Townhouse	2
Apartment (condo)	10
Apartment (rental)	7

All interviews adhered to ethical standards with informed consent from participants. Interviews were conducted in two separate sessions per participant, allowing for comprehensive exploration of their experiences, with the second session focusing on specific aspects of community building. Sessions were audio-recorded and took place at locations chosen for participants' comfort (homes, libraries, community centers, and coffee shops). Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Farsi, then translated into English. Session duration averaged 90 minutes, ranging from 45 minutes to 3.5 hours.

In addition, we conducted key informant interviews with three community leaders and co-founders of Iranian ethnic associations in Toronto to gain insights into community-wide dynamics. Our fieldwork also incorporated ethnographic observations and active participation within the Iranian community, providing contextual understanding of Iranian immigrants' experiences in suburban Toronto.

We employed a multi-step analytical approach, triangulating our various data sources (Creswell, 2013). Survey responses were systematically organized and presented in tabular and graphical formats. Verbatim interview transcriptions underwent thematic coding and analysis using an iterative method to identify key patterns. We applied our combined theoretical framework of emotional citizenry and social capital theory to analyze the diverse community building practices of Iranian immigrants in Toronto. This multi-step, iterative approach enabled

us to develop a detailed interpretation of the various forms of community building among Iranian immigrants and their intersections with emotional belonging.

Iranian immigrants' community building practices in Toronto

Our findings reveal that Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in a multilayered web of community building practices. To capture this complexity, we organize our results into three main themes based on the geographical scope of interactions: (1) everyday neighbourhood interactions with co-ethnics and non-Iranians; (2) close-knit networks and community building practices mostly with co-ethnics, but also non-Iranians; and (3) interactions with ethnic associations, including cultural and professional communities. Within each section, we employ social capital theory to analyze the different types of relationships – bonding, bridging, and linking – while drawing upon emotional citizenry to examine how these diverse interactions contribute to developing emotional belonging and sense of community.

Neighbourhood community interactions

Everyday neighbourhood interactions play a crucial role in shaping immigrants' emotional sense of belonging to their place of residence (Logan et al 2002; Veronis et al. 2025). Most Iranian immigrants in our study reside in upper-/middle-class suburban neighbourhoods characterized by single-family homes, with a high rate of homeownership (Table 1). These areas have significant Iranian populations and offer opportunities for both co-ethnic interactions and engagement with affluent neighbours from diverse backgrounds. Residents, especially homeowners in these neighbourhoods often engage in neighbourly interactions to maintain an orderly and secure environment that aligns with their lifestyles and preserves property values.

Participants engaged with both Iranian and non-Iranian neighbours through various forms of reciprocity and community engagement, from casual encounters to more substantial

relationships. Nevertheless, a notable pattern emerged regarding participants' social connections: many reported a preference for establishing relationships with non-Iranian neighbours, particularly those of "White" ethnic backgrounds, citing concerns about potential privacy infringement from co-ethnic neighbours. This preference for bridging relationships with "White" neighbours represents an interesting dynamic in community formation.

Several participants described proactive strategies they employed to cultivate relationships within their local residential community. For example, one participant organized a garage sale, creating an opportunity for socializing: "This event allowed me to become acquainted with nearby residents and establish cordial relationships with several of my neighbours" (Woman, 25 years in Canada).

Acts of sharing and reciprocity took many forms. Some participants shared homegrown produce with neighbours during the summer, fostering community connections and introducing Iranian agricultural traditions. One participant elaborated:

This garden is a significant means of community building for me; it's not just about growing and consuming the produce myself. I plant a variety of aromatic Iranian and Northern herbs [...] and share them with my neighbours. When I have a surplus of produces, I even offer them to friends [...]. I post pictures on my Facebook page, people come over, and we become friends. (Woman, 29 years in Canada)

Culinary exchanges were common, with traditional Iranian dishes offered to neighbours, fostering cultural dialogue and appreciation. Some participants also exchanged gifts during significant cultural events or holidays. One Iranian immigrant recounted, "Building a sense of community with neighbours takes time. I have made

efforts to connect with those living next door by sharing my contact information and offering gifts and traditional pastries when it is Nowruz [the Iranian New Year] or Christmas” (Woman, 13 years in Canada).

These practices exemplify a bidirectional cultural integration process, where Iranian immigrants both maintain their cultural identity and embrace local customs, while simultaneously introducing their traditions to neighbours. This exchange fosters mutual learning and understanding, enhancing integration, tolerance, openness, and sensitivity to diverse cultures. Such interactions not only improve intercultural understanding at the individual level but also strengthen multiculturalism within these diverse neighbourhoods, reinforcing the community’s social fabric. The shared socioeconomic status of residents in these upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods facilitates cultural exchanges, allowing connections to form across ethnic differences.

Iranian immigrant participants also demonstrated community engagement through practical assistance to neighbours, such as snow removal and lawn maintenance. These actions served as tangible expressions of community solidarity and mutual support. The reciprocal nature of these relationships was evident in neighbours’ responsiveness when participants required assistance, as one participant’s experience illustrates:

I considered selling my house and moving to a condominium due to my health condition [...]. However, my next-door neighbours intervened, saying, ‘We’ll handle the snow shoveling and lawn mowing. We’ll take care of you. Why do you want to leave?’ (Woman, 29 years in Canada)

This mutual aid system suggests the development of strong social bonds that transcend cultural differences. What begins as bridging social capital – relationships

between people of different cultural backgrounds – evolves into bonding social capital. This transition is facilitated by shared socioeconomic status and homeownership, creating a foundation for deeper relationships that transcend ethnic and cultural differences.

Some participants noted that long-term residents displayed heightened attentiveness to neighbourhood safety and security, actively welcoming newcomers and learning about the social backgrounds and identities. This welcoming behaviour fosters a supportive community environment where residents are familiar with one another, enhancing trust, safety, and security, as one participant described:

When we moved to the neighbourhood, we were pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome from our neighbours. They greeted us with sweets and a bottle of wine, introduced themselves, and even wrote down our names [...]. This welcoming culture left a lasting impression [...] about neighbourly relationships. (Woman, 7 years in Canada)

This welcoming environment was particularly significant for single women and single mothers among our participants. Knowing their neighbours enhanced their sense of security and provided a supportive network to help navigate challenges such as managing household responsibilities while ensuring their children's safety; their neighbours' reliability and care was reassuring. One participant shared:

As a single woman, I feel very safe in here. My neighbours have been residents of the neighbourhood for thirty years and have established a social media group [...], which facilitates access to assistance and information about the area. These neighbours are trustworthy and reliable, fostering a community where we are well-

acquainted [...]. We maintain a vigilant watch over the neighbourhood. (Woman, 20 years in Canada)

While most participants said their neighbourly interactions were limited to casual greetings and brief conversations, some engaged in more intimate social activities, such as hosting gatherings where they shared their cultural practices:

When hosting, I embraced my Persian style of hospitality. [...] Our neighbours often comment, saying things like 'It's too much!' But I respond, 'This is our style, our culture'. Later, they invited us over as well, and they turned out to be very warm and welcoming hosts. (Spouse, 7 years in Canada).

This reciprocal social engagement enhanced intercultural understanding between participants and their local community, contributing to their sense of emotional belonging within the neighbourhood. While spatial proximity to co-ethnics provides opportunities for cultural continuity, many participants strategically prioritize bridging relationships with non-Iranian neighbours. This pattern suggests that the social dynamics of integration extend beyond simple ethnic clustering, as immigrants negotiate multiple dimensions of identity in their community building practices.

The transformation of bridging social capital into deeper bonding relationships with culturally different neighbours demonstrates how emotional attachment to place can transcend ethnic boundaries through shared class position and daily interactions. These dynamics highlight the spatial dimension of emotional citizenry, where neighbourhood interactions provide a foundation for belonging that complements other forms of community engagement.

Building community through close-knit social networks

Iranian immigrants in this study exhibit a strong appreciation for relationships with friends and family and demonstrate sophisticated strategies for developing close-knit networks. These network building practices reflect both continuity with pre-migration social patterns and adaptation to new social contexts in Canada. In this section, we first examine the formation of close-knit social networks, we then delve into the complexities of relationship building within the broader Iranian community, and thirdly, we investigate the dynamics of building professional networks in the workplace.

Close-knit social networks

As established immigrants in Toronto, many participants had developed a range of close-knit social relationships through three primary approaches: leveraging pre-existing and transnational social capital, maintaining transnational connections, and utilizing spatial concentration.

A subset of participants leveraged pre-existing social capital – family members, friends, and relatives already established in Canada – which provided significant advantages in forming initial connections. Many successfully rekindled friendships with former acquaintances from Iran, effectively transplanting these social networks into their Canadian context. Participants predominantly cultivated social connections through pre-existing friendships from Iran and relied heavily on personal referrals. As one married couple noted: “Our social circle in Canada is from different threads: friends we already knew from Iran, acquaintances introduced by family back home, and connections made through mutual friends. These relationships create a network that bridges our past and present” (Spouse, 7 years in Canada).

For some, the spatial concentration of Iranian immigrants in North York and Richmond Hill facilitated the development of social bonds with co-ethnics, though this was less commonly reported than other networking strategies. These close-knit relationships were especially valued by those without immediate family or pre-migration acquaintances in Canada: “For immigrants like us, the absence of familiar faces often transforms quality friendships into an essential lifeline, becoming a vital component of our post-immigration existence” (Man, 15 years in Canada).

The lack of pre-migration connections presented significant challenges for some participants, particularly single individuals, in developing new social relationships. One participant explained: “At Iranian gatherings, I find it difficult to socialize and make new friends. The attendees tend to stick to their social circles and are reluctant to forge new connections” (Man, 10 years in Canada). Our findings indicate that Iranian immigrants strongly prefer developing relationships within familiar, vetted social circles, often relying on prior connections from Iran, which poses challenges for those lacking pre-existing social capital.

Notably, family units, particularly those with children, demonstrated enhanced capacity for relationship building compared to single individuals. Single mothers faced the most significant challenges due to perceived misalignment with family norms and prejudiced attitudes within the Iranian community. Thus, single, divorced, and widowed women tend to feel excluded from other Iranian immigrants, as one participant shared:

After my divorce, people who were once our friends started disappearing.

Separation also has a big impact on friendships. In gatherings that are family-oriented, you rarely get invited or feel welcome. New friends, especially Iranians,

hesitate [...]. They often distance themselves because of the stereotypes. (Woman, 10 years in Canada)

This sense of exclusion can profoundly impact emotional belonging, as these Iranian women may struggle to find acceptance and support within their ethnic community.

Next, our analysis revealed significant gender differences in social network maintenance. Women participants were more proactive in cultivating and sustaining friendships, while Iranian immigrant men were more inclined to follow their spouses' decisions regarding social and familial matters. One widower reflected on his late wife's pivotal role in their social life:

My wife was the main in fostering and maintaining our social connections. [...] our home was filled with joy, cherished memories, and frequent large gatherings. But after she passed away, everything changed. We don't have those big gatherings anymore. (Man, 29 years in Canada)

Overall, these patterns of network formation reveal important dimensions of emotional citizenry among Iranian immigrants. The strong reliance on pre-existing ties and carefully vetted relationships demonstrates how emotional belonging is often rooted in continuity rather than new connections. The challenges single individuals face – especially divorced women – highlight how emotional belonging is mediated by family status and gender norms, transported from the country of origin. These social dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between bonding social capital and emotional citizenry, where strong in-group ties provide crucial emotional support. The gendered nature of social network maintenance further reveals how emotional labour in fostering belonging often falls

disproportionately on women, who serve as primary architects of family connections and cultural continuity.

Tensions in relationship building within the Iranian community

While the spatial concentration of Iranian immigrants in Toronto's suburban neighbourhoods provides opportunities for co-ethnic networks, we found significant fragmentation within the Iranian community that leads many participants to be selective and cautious when forming co-ethnic friendships. This fragmentation stems from three primary factors:

First, Iranians represent a remarkably diverse community (Nasrullah, 2019), encompassing a tapestry of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds – Azeris, Gilakis, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, and Lors among others – alongside diverse religious affiliations, including Muslims, Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and secular Iranians. This diversity prompts some participants to take a selective approach to community building. One participant explained:

I was very selective when forming friendships within the Iranian community.

Iranians come from diverse cultural backgrounds, making it impossible to develop friendships with everyone. That's why I have a limited social network with whom I organize meetings and parties regularly. (Woman, 42 years in Canada)

Second, our ethnographic observations revealed significant generational divisions, particularly between older and more recent immigrant cohorts (Mohammadi, 2023). These divisions stem from the different socioeconomic and political contexts they experienced in Iran over time which have profoundly shaped their worldviews and sociocultural and political orientations (Panahi, 2014). These intergenerational gaps and intra-community

differences create barriers to cross-cohort friendships. Moreover, differences in immigration timelines signify varying levels of sociocultural integration, which have contributed to rifts within the community. Those who settled in Canada before or during the early 2000s often perceive themselves as having attained a higher level of acculturation compared to more recent arrivals. The term *newcomer* emerged in their narratives as a symbolic boundary marker, emphasizing limited familiarity with Canadian societal norms and institutional frameworks.

Third, political and religious differences have exacerbated community fragmentation. The politicization of religion following Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution (Gholami, 2017) has conflated religious identity with political stance for many Iranians, both domestically and abroad. Among our participants, we observed significant divergences between those with religious and secular orientations. For secular participants, negative attitudes towards the religious may stem from a form of secularism characterized by "non-Islamiosity" (Gholami, 2017, p.6) – a form of secular Iranian identity that seeks to dissociate "the Islamic" from "the Iranian" (ibid.). Conversely, some participants, who willingly expressed their religious identity during the interviews, reported negative treatment from co-ethnics. This was particularly true for a small number of women who openly practiced their Muslimness by wearing a headscarf, which led to their relative isolation from the community and a reluctance to frequent Iranian ethnic establishments. One participant shared:

Whenever I visited Iranian grocery stores, I encountered insults from Iranians. As a result, I have decided to avoid these stores entirely. Now, if I need any Iranian

products, I ask my husband to do the shopping for me. (Woman, 21 years in Canada).

These tensions reveal how emotional belonging within immigrant communities can be fractured along multiple fault lines. The case of Iranian immigrants in Toronto demonstrates how bonding social capital operates not at the level of the entire ethnic community, but rather within smaller sub-communities defined by intersecting identities of generation, political orientation, religious practice, and migration cohort. This fragmentation challenges assumptions about immigrant communities as unified entities and illustrates how emotional citizenry is negotiated through selective relationships that affirm particular aspects of identity while rejecting others. For many participants, the ability to selectively engage with specific segments of the Iranian community represents an exercise of agency in constructing meaningful belonging on their own terms, even as it may constrain the development of broader community solidarity.

Building professional relationships

When it comes to professional and workplace relationships, several participants, particularly those actively engaged in Canadian workplaces, have established friendships with non-Iranian colleagues. These participants have successfully navigated cross-cultural dynamics in their professional spheres, forming meaningful connections beyond shared cultural origins. One participant said:

My social circle has expanded to include individuals from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds. The bonds I've formed with these colleagues are just as strong and meaningful as those I share with my Iranian peers. (Woman, 13 years in Canada)

Nevertheless, for many participants language and cultural barriers limited the formation of non-Iranian friendships, despite their proficiency in English, echoing findings from Mohammadi (2023) on Iranians in other Canadian regions. This challenge was compounded by the comfort they found in socializing with their co-ethnics. One participant stated, “I have some non-Iranian friends from work, but when I’m feeling down and need someone to talk to, I prefer meeting with my close Iranian friends. They provide the comfort and understanding I need during such times” (Woman, 20 years in Canada).

Most participants maintain clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives, limiting social interactions with both Iranian and non-Iranian colleagues to public spaces. As one participant noted:

I keep my professional relationships, whether with Iranian or non-Iranian colleagues, separate from my personal and family life. Even after years of working together, my colleagues are unaware of where I live. Our interactions are typically limited to public spaces like cafes. (Woman, 11 years in Canada)

This practice reflects a deliberate strategy to maintain privacy and cultural boundaries, with participants reserving their home space primarily for close friends and family members. Nevertheless, we observed variation in these boundaries across professional contexts, with some participants—particularly those in network-dependent fields like real estate—more likely to include colleagues in personal gatherings and cultural celebrations like Nowruz (Persian New Year).

Single Iranian women face particular challenges in workplace socialization, especially in environments with Iranian colleagues. Despite working in settings that are

not overtly “ethnic,” the presence of Iranian colleagues can reinforce traditional Iranian family norms and stereotypes about unmarried women. One female participant expressed frustration with these persistent cultural expectations, even among educated and professional individuals:

I had a long-term colleague—someone I studied with at university—and I expected to be invited to his son’s wedding, but he didn’t invite me because I’m single now. I could sense his concern, like his wife might ask why he would invite a single female colleague. (Woman, 25 years in Canada)

While bridging social capital through workplace connections offers pathways to broader social integration, many participants strategically limit these connections to preserve cultural comfort zones and emotional security. This selective approach to professional relationships illustrates how immigrants actively negotiate different types of networks in their everyday practices of belonging. The challenges that single women face highlight how gender intersects with professional identity to create complex emotional geographies of inclusion and exclusion that span both Canadian workplaces and Iranian community norms and spaces. These nuanced negotiations of professional relationships demonstrate that emotional belonging is not simply about developing connections but about strategically managing relationships across cultural boundaries.

Ethnic associations: building cultural and professional communities

Since the early waves of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian immigrants in Toronto have established a diverse array of cultural and professional organizations. The landscape of Iranian community organizations in Toronto encompasses numerous associations ranging from broad community groups to specialized ethnic, cultural, and professional networks. Many of

these organizations were established by early cohorts of Iranian immigrants and serve multiple functions: preserving Iranian cultural heritage, facilitating integration, and providing various forms of support to both newcomers and established immigrants. While we examine two specific organizations based on our participants' involvement, they represent just a small sample of the vibrant Iranian associational ecosystem in Toronto.

Cultural associations

The diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of Iranian immigrants in Toronto have given rise to a variety of cultural associations reflecting their rich heritage. Two participants in our study co-founded the Association of Gilan Supporters in Toronto, dedicated to promoting the regional culture, language, and traditions of Gilan, a northwestern Iranian province. This organization serves as a cultural bridge between Gilaki immigrants and the broader Toronto community, fostering belonging among Gilakis while welcoming others interested in Gilan's heritage.

The co-founders play a crucial role in uniting members through strategic activities: organizing celebrations of traditional Iranian events (e.g., Nowruz, Shabe Yalda, Chaharshanbe Suri), hosting prominent Iranian artists and speakers, and arranging social gatherings featuring Gilaki cuisine and culture – providing opportunities for strengthening bonds among members while encouraging social interaction and cultural exchange. One co-founder explained how the association developed:

Before moving to Richmond Hill, I had established the foundation for the Gilan Community. Following the move, the association's activities expanded through interactions with Iranian and Gilakis clients. When my clients at the bank came in and I sensed a familiar name, I would inquire about their background. This

approach led to the inclusion of many new members and fostered connections within the association. Indeed, both my professional work and community engagement facilitated the growth of the association. (Woman, 29 years in Canada)

Beyond community building, the co-founders engage in broader cultural activities. One authored a multilingual (Farsi, English, and French) cookbook compiling Gilaki recipes, preserving culinary heritage while making it accessible to diverse audiences. The other is a musician and has participated in numerous social and cultural events across Canada, showcasing Iranian and Gilaki music at events, using his artistic talents to promote cross-cultural understanding.

These cultural sharing initiatives represent both bonding social capital through the preservation and celebration of Gilaki culture and traditions, and bridging social capital, by connecting the Gilaki community with the wider Canadian society. As community leaders, the co-founders significantly shape the community's identity and foster emotional belonging. Their leadership contributes to emotional citizenry by creating spaces for cultural expression, social interaction, and community engagement, enhancing members' sense of belonging within Canadian society.

Professional organizations

Iranian immigrants have also established professional associations that contribute to socioeconomic integration in Canada. One participant chairs Mohandes, the Canadian Society of Iranian Engineers and Architects, which facilitates labour market integration. The organization provides comprehensive support through seminars, workshops (job search, resume development), exam preparation resources, and volunteer opportunities. The chair reflected on its enduring impact:

The Mohandes association, established 35 years ago, primarily serves Iranian engineers residing in Canada. I joined the association immediately upon arrival in the country. The fact that this organization has endured for 35 years in a foreign land is a testament to its strong central core and continued relevance to the community it serves. (Man, 29 years in Canada)

Mohandes has expanded beyond professional development to include cultural and social activities, organizing cultural celebrations and summer picnics. These interactions foster smaller social circles and cultural gatherings, such as poetry reading and literary sessions that deepen appreciation of Iranian culture:

In addition to my regular commitments, I engage in various cultural activities, reading poems, speaking about mysticism... For 4-5 years, I hosted Hafez reading sessions at my home. During these gatherings, we would select a ghazal from different sources and spend up to five hours analyzing and discussing it in depth. (Man, 29 years in Canada)

These associations exemplify the support infrastructure Iranian immigrants have built, facilitating professional development, cultural preservation, and social integration. Their longevity stems from strong interpersonal connections among core members, and many have expanded their reach through digital platforms, enabling broader community engagement beyond physical boundaries. As such, they materialize “imagined communities” within the Iranian diaspora and foster the development of smaller social circles.

The formation of these cultural and professional communities demonstrates how linking social capital operates within immigrant populations, connecting individuals to

institutional resources and broader networks. These organizations serve as vital bridges between individual immigrants and the wider society, fostering emotional attachment and belonging through structured engagement with both Iranian heritage and Canadian society.

Intersections of community dynamics and emotional belonging

Building upon our examination of social network formation and community building practices among Iranian immigrants in Toronto, we now analyze how these varied forms of social connection contribute to emotional citizenry and belonging. We apply our combined conceptual framework of social capital and emotional citizenry (Askins, 2016) to interpret how these multilayered connections – everyday neighbourhood interactions, close-knit social networks, broader community dynamics, and institutional engagements – shape Iranian immigrants’ emotional attachments and sense of belonging across different spatial and social scales.

Our analysis reveals that Iranian immigrants’ residence in Toronto’s northern suburbs facilitates emotional citizenry through multiple mechanisms. Their concentration in upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods enables interactions with diverse residents – both Iranian and non-Iranian – who share similar socioeconomic status. This socioeconomic parity creates a foundation for meaningful social connections that transcend ethnic differences while providing opportunities for co-ethnic engagement, fostering forms of both bonding and bridging social capital. As homeowners in these affluent areas, participants experience a sense of accomplishment and successful socioeconomic integration, further enhancing their emotional attachment to place. Supportive networks among established residents also play a crucial role in navigating immigration challenges and fostering an emotional sense of belonging. Additionally, engagement in both Iranian and Canadian cultural practices enhance their visibility and

perceived value within neighbourhood communities, strengthening their emotional connection to the place.

Notably, Iranian immigrants in this study reported no discernible experiences of discrimination in their residential settings. As a visible minority group, their positive integration into advantaged suburban neighbourhoods suggests receptiveness from the broader community. Participants consistently described feeling valued and respected, particularly by their middle-class neighbours. These positive interactions contribute significantly to their emotional citizenry, fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging that transcends cultural differences. As one participant emphasized: “On several occasions, I considered selling my house. However, I ultimately decided against it because of my exceptional neighbourhood sense of community. I love this area” (Woman, 25 years in Canada). This strong neighbourhood attachment represents an important dimension of emotional belonging that complements other forms of community engagement.

While valuing their neighbourhood communities, participants’ deepest emotional connections centre on small, tightly knit social networks with fellow Iranians who share similar backgrounds. These bonding relationships provide essential cultural understanding and emotional support rooted in shared values and experiences characteristic of life in Iran. One participant stated, “What matters most to me are my close friends, my loved ones, my children, and my husband. My bond with this city is rooted in these genuine relationships” (Woman, 13 years in Canada).

The spatial concentration of Iranian immigrants in Toronto’s northern suburbs facilitates these intimate networks by enabling regular interactions, shared celebrations of cultural events, and mutual support during challenging times of need. Pre-migration connections that bridge past

and present experiences provide continuity, strengthening emotional belonging by connecting Iranian and Canadian identities. These networks function as primary sources of social capital, offering both practical assistance and emotional security through cultural familiarity, representing for many participants their most authentic expressions of community belonging within the context of diaspora.

Our analysis also revealed important gendered dynamics in these bonding networks, with women often taking primary responsibility for maintaining social connections and cultural continuity. Meanwhile, those without pre-migration connections – particularly single individuals – face greater challenges in developing these intimate social circles, highlighting how family status intersects with social capital formation to shape emotional belonging. The selective nature of these relationships demonstrates how immigrants exercise agency in constructing emotional belonging in their own terms, even as structural factors influence access to these vital emotional resources.

Paradoxically, most participants report diminished belonging to the broader Iranian community in Toronto despite active participation in cultural events and gatherings. This disconnect stems from intra-community divisions along ethnic, religious, generational, and political lines. These fragmentation patterns reveal how emotional belonging operates selectively rather than encompassing the entire co-ethnic community. As one participant observed, “When the Farsi language is involved, unreasonable expectations and poor treatment often emerge” (Man, 16 years in Canada).

While there is no cohesive larger Iranian community, the concept of an “imagined community” remains powerful. The Iranian community exists as a constellation of subcommunities defined by shared regional origins, religious practices, political orientations, and

immigration cohorts. Iranian immigrants strategically engage with these subcommunities, constructing belonging through selective participation in particular segments of the larger diaspora. This selective engagement represents an exercise of agency in navigating complex identity landscapes, as immigrants create meaningful connections while avoiding aspects of co-ethnic interaction they find challenging or unwelcoming. As such, fragmentation may hinder the development of a collective sense of emotional citizenship at the broader community level, even as it enables more authentic belonging within smaller social circles.

In contrast, ethnic associations foster profound emotional belonging, particularly among those in leadership positions. The organization of social gatherings and cultural events cultivates a sense of home and emotional belonging for Iranian participants by supporting social bonding. These organizations help members integrate both Iranian and Canadian aspects of their identities, transcending cultural boundaries while preserving heritage. Their role in advancing the professional achievements of Iranian immigrants significantly contributes to socioeconomic integration and the development of emotional citizenry within Canadian society.

The committee chair of Mohandes articulated this relationship between service and belonging: “I’ve realized that focusing my energy on the Iranian community’s youth [newer cohorts] might be more effective than other pursuits. By dedicating my time to serve and assist these ‘children’, I feel a stronger sense of purpose. This work not only satisfies me but also fosters a feeling of belonging” (Man, 29 years in Canada). These associations represent a form of linking social capital, connecting individuals to institutional resources while making the Iranian community better understood, appreciated, and recognized by the broader Canadian society.

These patterns illuminate how Iranian immigrants in Toronto actively negotiate emotional belonging through multiple, sometimes contradictory pathways. Rather than following

a linear trajectory from ethnic enclosure to broader integration, they strategically cultivate varied forms of social capital – bonding, bridging, and linking – across different contexts and relationships. The emotional dimensions of these connections reveal that belonging is not merely about social and economic integration but encompasses complex attachments to places, people, and institutions that span both Canadian and Iranian cultural realms.

This multifaceted approach to community building and emotional citizenry allows Iranian immigrants to preserve cultural continuity while successfully integrating into Canadian society. The selective nature of these engagements demonstrates agency in navigating complex identity landscapes and constructing meaningful belonging on their own terms, challenging simplistic models of immigrant integration that fail to capture these nuanced emotional geographies playing out at various levels simultaneously.

Discussion and conclusion

Our paper examines the complex dynamics of community building practices among Iranian immigrants in Toronto, employing the conceptual framework of emotional citizenry (Askins, 2009) and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998). This study reveals a multifaceted landscape of social connections and emotional belonging spanning from intimate networks to broader community engagements.

The concentration of Iranian immigrants in Toronto's northern suburbs creates important contexts for emotional belonging. In upper-/middle-class neighbourhoods, socioeconomic similarity facilitates meaningful interactions with residents, fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging that transcends ethnic differences. The apparent absence of discrimination in these settings and the presence of supportive networks enhances participants' emotional citizenry and attachment to place. These neighbourhoods simultaneously serve as ethnic places where Iranian

traditions are expressed, fostering cultural continuity and materializing a shared Iranian Canadian identity.

The study also underscores the importance of close-knit social networks in fostering a strong emotional sense of belonging. These networks, often consisting of pre-existing connections from Iran or referrals, provide a crucial source of social capital and emotional support. They enable immigrants to maintain cultural ties while navigating the complexities of integration into Canadian society. However, the absence of pre-existing networks poses challenges for those lacking social capital, particularly single individuals and single mothers, who may face exclusion from these social circles.

Ethnic associations play a pivotal role in supporting the integration process and preserving cultural heritage. These associations facilitate cultural exchanges, professional networking, and community engagement, contributing to the socioeconomic integration of Iranian immigrants. The formation of cultural and professional communities fosters a sense of emotional citizenship and belonging, particularly among those actively involved in leadership roles.

We also identified several challenges that hinder broader community connections among Iranian immigrants. The diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds within the Iranian community leads participants to adopt a selective approach to relationship building. Additionally, intergenerational divides and political orientations contribute to fragmentation and distrust within the community. These tensions reveal that immigrant community dynamics extend beyond spatial proximity to encompass multifaceted identities. Nevertheless, our findings emphasize the potential for enhancing social cohesion within the Iranian community through social, cultural, and political events as evidenced by significant Iranian participation.

Our findings diverge from Mohammadi's (2023) research on recent Iranian immigrants in cities within Canada's Atlantic provinces, where participants reported discriminatory experiences in their relationship building and daily lives. Nevertheless, our findings corroborate Mohammadi's observations regarding Iranian immigrants in Ontario cities, including Toronto, where participants reported almost no signs of discrimination. This regional variation in experiences suggests that a city's level of ethno-cultural diversity may influence the receptiveness of both immigrant and non-immigrant residents towards diverse ethno-racial groups. More diverse urban environments appear to foster greater inclusivity, potentially mitigating discriminatory attitudes and facilitating integration.

This study demonstrates the importance of supporting both cultural preservation and integration efforts to enhance immigrants' emotional belonging. They have important implications for understanding the social integration processes of immigrant communities. While this research offers valuable insights into the community building dynamics of Iranians as a visible minority immigrant group within Toronto's ethno-racial diversity, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings to the broader Iranian diaspora or to other immigrant ethnic groups, as our focus was specifically on established Iranian immigrants with professional backgrounds.

Future research should include comparative analyses with other immigrant groups to understand how different ethnic communities navigate their unique socio-spatial environments. Such research could inform more nuanced integration policies that recognize the complex emotional geographies of belonging in increasingly diverse urban contexts.

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Chapter 5: Paper IV: Nurturing Belonging: The Social Production of Space in Iranian Immigrants' Home and Neighbourhood

هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش / باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

*Whoever strays from their true source and soul /
Will one day chase the dream of being whole.*

—Rumi

Abstract

This study examines how Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in multiscalar spatial production across domestic, neighbourhood, and institutional scales to cultivate emotional belonging, applying Henri Lefebvre's framework of perceived, conceived, and lived space. We adopted a qualitative mixed-methods approach encompassing ethnography, sociodemographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and photovoice sessions with 54 Iranian immigrant women and men residing in relatively affluent northern suburbs of Toronto. Our findings reveal that they actively participate in the social production of space in multiple ways serving as tactile links to cherished landscapes of the past. These practices are deeply intertwined with memory-making, as accumulated experiences—hosting intergenerational gatherings, preserving family heirlooms, and nurturing gardens—create temporal-spatial ties that deepen emotional bonds to both homeland and adopted landscapes. At the neighbourhood scale, ethnic businesses with Farsi signage and seasonal festivals temporarily reconfigure public spaces into Iranian cultural zones, functioning as repositories of collective memory. The existence of Iranian ethnic establishments in the surrounding neighbourhood, combined with the allure of Toronto's clustered ethno-racial diversity—strengthens the emotional bonds Iranians experience. The study extends Lefebvre's triad by foregrounding gendered agency and relational spatial production, where domestic practices sustain ethnic commerce while regulatory adaptations enable heritage transmission. By embedding cultural memory into multisensory environments, this study illustrates how homemaking operates as a dialectical process that bridges conceived structures with lived experiences of belonging.

Keywords: Iranian immigrants, social production of space, emotional attachment, sense of belonging, multiscalar agency, Toronto suburbs.

Introduction

The concept of home extends far beyond its physical structure, encompassing complex layers of emotions, memories, and cultural practices that profoundly shape an individual's sense of belonging and attachment. For immigrants, the notion of home is particularly intricate, as they navigate the delicate balance between preserving their cultural identity and integrating into a new society. While a growing body of research examines immigrant homemaking practices, less attention has been paid to how established immigrants – those who have resided in their new country for extended periods – actively transform their domestic and neighbourhood spaces to create meaningful connections to place.

This study examines the multifaceted process of homemaking among established Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada, focusing on how they actively construct and engage with their living spaces to foster an emotional sense of belonging. We ask: How do Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in the social production of space through their homemaking practices to create a sense of belonging? And in what ways do cultural continuity and transnational material cultures contribute to the creation of “lived space” for Iranian immigrants in their suburban homes and neighbourhoods in Toronto?

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) influential theory of the social production of space, we investigate the dynamic interplay between physical environments, social interactions, and emotional dimensions in shaping immigrants' experiences of home. Lefebvre's framework provides a valuable lens through which space is understood not as a static backdrop, but as a fluid entity continually shaping and being shaped by social practices and cultural negotiations. By applying this theoretical perspective to Iranian immigrants' homemaking practices, our research offers three distinct contributions to the literature on migration, space, and belonging.

First, we extend understanding of immigrant homemaking beyond the initial settlement period by focusing on established immigrants who have resided in Canada for at least five years. This temporal perspective allows us to examine how emotional attachments to place develop and deepen over time through accumulated experiences and memories. Second, we illuminate the sensorial dimensions of belonging by analyzing how Iranian immigrants create multisensory home environments through material objects, culinary practices, gardening, and cultural celebrations. Third, we demonstrate how immigrants' agency in the social production of space extends beyond the domestic sphere to include neighbourhood dynamics and ethnic establishments.

Our research focuses on Iranian immigrants, a significant yet understudied group in Canada's multicultural landscape. Iran ranks as the 9th largest source country for immigrants to Canada as of 2021, constituting 2.2% of the total immigrant population, with Toronto hosting approximately 47% (add the number here) of Canada's Iranian immigrant population (Statistics Canada, 2021). Furthermore, Iranian immigrants are uniquely positioned in Toronto's social geography, with notable spatial concentration in relatively affluent northern suburbs (see chapter 2). This specific socio-spatial context offers a compelling case study for examining how immigrants negotiate belonging through homemaking practices in suburban settings that differ from the inner-city neighbourhoods often featured in immigration studies.

Our aim in this paper is to shed light on the complex processes through which immigrants create spaces of belonging that reflect both their cultural heritage and their new country. Our findings have implications for understanding the broader immigrant experience and contribute to ongoing discussions about homemaking, emotional belonging, and the meaning of home in increasingly diverse contexts.

We first review the existing literature on home, belonging, and immigrant experiences, highlighting strengths and limitations. We then introduce our conceptual framework grounded in Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, which we use to analyze the interplay between perceived, conceived, and lived spaces in the context of immigrant homemaking practices. Our methodology section details our qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining key informant interviews with real estate agents and semi-structured interviews with 54 Iranian immigrants, enhanced by an innovative photovoice component that adds visual dimensions to our data collection and analysis. Next, our findings reveal that Iranian immigrants actively engage in the social production of space through various homemaking practices. We focus on how their cultural practices and sensory experiences contribute to their emotional sense of belonging. Importantly, our analysis highlights the gendered dimensions of these experiences, showing that women, in particular, play a central role in cultivating the home as a site of cultural preservation and emotional attachment. We also discuss how the concentration of Iranian immigrants in certain neighbourhoods and the presence of ethnic establishments play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging. These spaces are further layered with temporal dimensions, where practices of memory-making and the interweaving of past and present enrich their meaning over time. We conclude by demonstrating how immigrants contribute to the social production of space in Toronto by reconfiguring domestic, neighbourhood, and public spaces, thereby integrating their cultural heritage with their Canadian present and fostering emotional belonging through a dynamic negotiation of space, culture, and identity.

Home, belonging, and the production of space in migration contexts

Our examination of Iranian immigrants' homemaking practices in Toronto draws on and connects three key areas of scholarship: studies of home and belonging in migration contexts,

research on material culture and transnational practices, and work on spatial production in ethnic neighbourhoods. By bringing these literatures into conversation through Lefebvre's spatial triad, we show how immigrants actively produce spaces of belonging across multiple scales—from domestic interiors to neighbourhood landscapes.

Home is both a physical place and an emotional space, imbued with meanings that vary across different social and cultural groups. How home is lived and experienced is complex and multifaceted and can take on very different and contradictory meanings (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Valentine, 2013). Housing may be homely for some residents, while it may be unwelcoming for others (Mezei & Briganti, 2012). Individuals may have different understandings of home and neighbourhood with respect to the intersections of their multiple identities of class, gender, ethnicity/race, religion, and sexuality (hooks, 2015; Imrie, 2004; Marcus, 2006; Valentine, 2013; Wise, 2000; Young, 1997). Among other characteristics, gender is crucial in the lived experiences and meaning making of home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006); men and women may experience conflicting or variable meanings of home in different circumstances (Gieseeking & Mangold, 2014).

To conceptualize the idea of home, Boym (1994) indicates that it is “not the space itself, not the house, but the way of inhabiting it that made it home” (Boym, 1994; Wise, 2000). A place is homely or unhomely through the process of inhabitation and use (Chan, 2012). For immigrants, the process of making a new home involves negotiating between past and present, here and there, in what Boccagni (2014) calls “homing” – the ongoing process of homemaking in mobility. The reciprocal relationship between people and place leads them to identify a sense of self with place all while they form and transform that place (Hauge, 2007). In this sense, the things of the past that were experienced in everyday life are re-created in the intimacy and

familiarity of objects and people (Bahloul, 2012). As such, home and its culture are continuously produced and reproduced through individuals' actions, habits and behaviour entangled with power dynamics, gender, class, and culture (Rybczynski, 1986; Wise, 2000). Immigrants may strive to reconfigure and rebuild their sense of culture and identity through negotiation with the new place in the face of multiple power relations and social structures they experience in their everyday lives (Nagel, 2011). In other words, immigrants' inherent need to be emotionally attached to people and places leads them to negotiate between the dominant culture and their origin home culture and identity through their interactions and practices in everyday spaces (Nagel, 2011). While this literature establishes the complex nature of home, particularly for immigrants, understanding how cultural identity is materially maintained and expressed requires attention to the objects, artifacts, and sensory elements that constitute homemaking practices.

Within this context, material culture plays a significant role in immigrants' home-making practices. As Blunt (2005) argues, domestic objects and spaces are central to the construction of diasporic identities and transnational connections. Immigrants often use material objects to create continuity between their past and present homes, importing furnishings, decorations, and everyday items that evoke memories and cultural practices from their country of origin. These objects become "re-memory triggers," allowing immigrants to maintain emotional connections to distant places and times (Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

Transnationalism further complicates notions of home for immigrants. As Vertovec (2009) argues, many immigrants maintain simultaneous connections to multiple places, creating "transnational social fields" that span national borders. This transnational perspective challenges binary notions of here/there or home/away, instead emphasizing the fluid and multi-sited nature of immigrant belonging. Boccagni (2014) suggests that for many immigrants, home becomes a

“mobile” concept, not tied to a single place but constructed through ongoing practices and connections across transnational spaces.

Lozanovska (2019) introduces the concept of the “migrant house” to explore how immigrants adapt and transform standardized housing to reflect their cultural identities and practices. Through modifications to interior layouts, decorative elements, and uses of space, immigrant homes become sites of cultural hybridity and negotiation. These material transformations are not merely aesthetic but reflect deeper processes of identity formation and cultural adaptation in the receiving society. While studies of material culture show how immigrants create meaningful homes, these homemaking processes extend beyond individual dwellings into broader social and spatial contexts. Neighbourhood spaces and ethnic establishments, play equally important roles in fostering connections to place.

At the neighbourhood scale, the presence of ethnic establishments and cultural markers in the local area can strengthen emotional bonds and create a sense of familiarity (Veronis, 2007). However, as Wise (2000) points out, these same markers can also generate feelings of exclusion for those who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group. A neighbourhood locale with foods, smells, materials, and structures can express a sense of identity and belonging for some of its residents, all while generating feelings of exclusion for others (Gieseeking & Mangold, 2014). This dual nature of cultural markers in urban spaces highlights the complex interplay between inclusion and exclusion in immigrant neighbourhoods, further emphasizing the multifaceted nature of home and belonging in diverse contexts.

Lefebvre’s social production of space

We employ Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptual framework of the “spatial triad,” emphasizing “everyday life” and “lived experience,” to examine how Iranian immigrants’

actively engage in the social production of space through their homemaking practices in Toronto. This theoretical approach allows us to analyze how immigrants transform and negotiate spaces at multiple scales – from domestic interiors to neighbourhoods – creating meaningful places that bridge their cultural heritage with their new environment.

Lefebvre's spatial triad consists of three interconnected dimensions: perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. Rather than viewing these as separate entities, we understand them as dialectically related aspects of spatial production that immigrants navigate and transform in their everyday lives (Delaisse et al., 2021; Pierce & Martin, 2015).

Perceived space (or spatial practices) encompasses the material observable aspects of space and the routines, circulations, transfers, and everyday interactions that reproduce it (Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottman, 2022). In our study, this dimension manifests in the physical modifications that Iranian immigrants make to their homes and neighbourhoods – renovating interiors, cultivating gardens, establishing businesses, and creating material environments that accommodate cultural practices. These tangible transformations reflect active agency in shaping immediate surroundings to align with cultural preferences and lived experiences.

Conceived space refers to dominant representations of space produced by those in power – architects, planners, and other authorities that shape how environments are organized (Zieleniec, 2008). For Iranian immigrants in Toronto, conceived space includes suburban housing designs, municipal regulations, and normative expectations about how homes and neighbourhoods should look and function. Rather than framing immigrants' relationship with conceived space primarily as resistance, we examine how they skillfully negotiate these structures, finding creating ways to adapt standardized environments to meet their cultural needs while still engaging with local norms.

Lived space encompasses the symbolic, emotional, and experiential dimensions of space—how people imbue physical environments with meaning through memories, sensory experiences, and social practices (Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottman, 2022). For Iranian immigrants, lived space manifests through multisensory homemaking practices: aromas of traditional cuisine, the sounds of Persian music, the visual aesthetics of cultural artifacts, and the embodied rituals of hospitality and celebration. These practices create emotional attachments to place that transcend the physical boundaries of space.

This framework offers several advantages for examining Iranian immigrants' homemaking practices. First, it acknowledges immigrant's agency in actively producing spaces that reflect their identities and values, rather than positioning them as passive recipients of dominant spatial structures (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010). Second, it allows us to analyze homemaking as a process involving material transformations, cultural negotiations, and emotional attachments. Third, it enables us to examine how immigrants' spatial practices extend beyond domestic confines to shape neighbourhood dynamics through ethnic businesses, community events, and public space utilization.

By applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to Iranian immigrants' experiences in Toronto, we illuminate how these immigrants actively transform their environments through everyday practices that merge aspects of their Iranian heritage with their Canadian present. Rather than focusing on opposition to dominant structures, we emphasize how immigrants skillfully navigate between different spatial dimensions to create meaningful places that foster belonging (Delaisse et al., 2021; Watkins, 2005; Zieleniec, 2008). This approach acknowledges the complex interplay between structure and agency, highlighting how immigrants contribute to the production of new

cultural spaces through new social relationships and spatial understandings within Toronto's diverse urban landscape (Zieleniec, 2008).

This theoretical perspective informs our methodological approach, guiding how we collected and analyzed data on the material, social, and emotional dimensions of Iranian immigrants' homemaking practices.

Research methodology

We employed a qualitative mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews, a sociodemographic survey, and photovoice interviews with Iranian immigrants in Toronto. These methods were selected to explore participants' lived experiences and their agency in creating meaningful spaces within their new environment. The photovoice component introduced a visual and participatory dimension well-suited to capturing the material and spatial aspects of homemaking practices (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). This method enables participants to articulate their perspectives through images and narratives, offering both evidence and validation of their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). In the context of this study, photovoice aligned with Lefebvre's concept of "lived space" by capturing how participants imbue physical environments with cultural meaning and emotional significance. By determining what aspects of their lived experiences to share through photography, participants exercised agency over the representation of their homemaking practices, highlighting elements they considered meaningful in their production of space. This approach reflects our aim to centre immigrant voices in examining how they negotiate and transform spaces to create a sense of belonging.

To complement these methods, 7 key informant interviews were conducted with Iranian real estate agents serving predominantly their co-ethnic community, offering insights into how Iranian immigrants navigate housing markets while maintaining cultural preferences.

Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork was integrated through participant observation, with the first author documenting social interactions, cultural practices, and spatial dynamics within Iranian immigrant neighbourhoods and communities.

Following ethics approval from the relevant review board, data collection was conducted from October 2022 to March 2023. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: Iranian immigrants who had resided in Canada for at least five years, had arrived as economic immigrants or through family sponsorship, and were aged 30 to 70. Recruitment strategies included purposive and snowball sampling, leveraging our Iranian social networks, social media platforms, and outreach in community spaces. The final sample included 54 participants (Table 1): 43 economic immigrants, 8 family reunification cases, and 3 refugees, representing two migration waves – 15 who arrived before 2000 and 39 between 2000 and 2017. While the study primarily focused on skilled economic immigrants, these three refugees were included due to their established status and demonstrated socioeconomic integration. Most participants lived in upper-/middle-class suburban neighbourhoods, particularly in North York and Richmond Hill (43 participants). A smaller number resided in Thornhill (8 participants) and Newmarket (3 participants). Most (42) were homeowners, with 37 residing in houses and the remainder in condominiums.

Each participant took part in two interview sessions. The first focused on their migration and settlement experiences, while the second centered on the photovoice component, allowing for deeper reflection on the visual materials they had prepared. All interviews were conducted in Farsi to ensure cultural and linguistic sensitivity. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently translated into English. Sessions were held at

locations chosen by participants (e.g., cafés, library, private homes) ensuring comfort and accessibility and lasted between 45 minutes to three and a half hours.

Data analysis followed a multi-stage process informed by Lefebvre's spatial triad. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically using a constant comparative method, incorporating open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and emergent insights (Creswell, 2013; Gaudet & Robert, 2018). We examined how participants actively negotiated between existing spatial structures and their cultural preferences through everyday practices. Special emphasis was placed on the role of gender in shaping spatial practices, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how homemaking practices are influenced by gender roles and expectations and how identity and place-making are co-constructed.

Our theoretical analysis using Lefebvre's spatial triad—conceived, perceived, and lived space—identified how immigrants engage in homemaking practices across multiple scales, from the home to the neighbourhood. This framework helped us recognize how participants transform standardized suburban spaces into sites of cultural expression and belonging through physical modifications, sensory practices, and emotional investments. These everyday spatial practices reflect both adaptation to new environments and the active creation of spaces that resonate with cultural identities and memories.

To ensure analytical depth and validity, we triangulated data from our multiple sources: interview narratives, photovoice materials, real estate agent insights, and ethnographic observations. This approach captured the complexity of how immigrants negotiate and transform spaces through everyday practices in both private and public realms, forging homes that bridge their cultural heritage with their new country.

Table1: Demographic Characteristics of Iranian Immigrant Participants

Characteristics	Category	Number/ Total:54
Immigration status	Economic immigrant	43
	Family reunification	8
	Refugee	3
Period of arrival	Before 2000	15
	2000-2010	18
	2011-2017	21
Age	30s	6
	40s	14
	50s	21
	60s	13
Gender	Female	34
	Male	20
Family status	Married	40
	Single	5
	Separated/divorced/widowed	9
Homeownership	Homeowner	42
	Renter	12
Dwelling type	Single-detached house	32
	Semi-detached house	3
	Townhouse	2
	Apartment (condo)	10
	Apartment (rental)	7
Location of residence	North York	23
	Richmond Hill	20
	Thornhill	8
	Newmarket	3

Homemaking and belonging

Our findings reveal that Iranian immigrants in Toronto actively engage in the social production of space through various homemaking practices that contribute significantly to their emotional sense of belonging. In the following sections, we examine four key dimensions of this process: physical transformations of domestic spaces, the role of transnational objects and cultural practices, the significance of ethnic neighbourhoods and communal connections, and the temporal aspects of place attachment through memory-making. Across these dimensions we observe how participants negotiate between conceived spatial structures, everyday spatial practices, and lived experiences to create meaningful places that bridge their Iranian heritage with their Canadian present.

Cultural continuity: Physical transformations

Iranian immigrants actively transform their domestic spaces in Toronto to align with cultural conceptions of home, demonstrating how perceived space is shaped through agency and cultural negotiation. The standardized suburban homes that dominate Toronto's housing market represent a form of conceived space—designed according to North American architectural norms and spatial organization (Ghosh, 2014; Mensah & Williams, 2014) that often conflict with Iranian domestic preferences. Rather than passively accepting these spatial arrangements, participants deliberately modify their homes to create environments that better reflect their cultural values and spatial needs.

Renovation emerges as a critical practice through which participants exercise agency in transforming unfamiliar spaces into meaningful homes. These modifications represent more than aesthetic preferences; they embody negotiations between dominant spatial structures and culturally informed spatial practices. As one participant explains:

Initially, I was hesitant to purchase the house because it seemed dull and lacked character. However, my husband and friends convinced me to give it a chance. My husband transformed the space by painting the walls in lighter colours, renovating the backyard, and building a lovely gazebo. Now, the house has become my dream home. (Woman, 40s, 13 years in Canada)

This narrative illustrates how conceived space (the physical home) is actively transformed through spatial practices informed by cultural preferences, creating a lived space imbued with personal meaning and emotional attachment.

The dialectical relationship between conceived and lived space is further underscored by Iranian real estate agents, who serve as cultural mediators between standardized housing designs and Iranian spatial preferences. One agent explained:

Older Canadian houses tend to have many walls dividing the rooms and are painted in colours other than white, which many Iranians don't prefer. I advise my Iranian clients that they can alter the layout during renovations and paint the spaces in lighter colours to better match their tastes. Modern houses, on the other hand, feature fewer walls and more open spaces. I often say these modern designs are 'Irani pasand' (ایرانی پسند), meaning 'Iranian-friendly'. (Agent#3)

The notion of "Irani pasand" encapsulates how conceived space is evaluated and negotiated through a cultural lens. The preference for well-lit, spacious, and open-concept designs reflects Iranian cultural values around hospitality and social gathering – spatial arrangements that facilitate the accommodation of extended family and guests, central aspects of Iranian cultural life. This is evident in the design of Iranian homes, which typically feature generous kitchens for preparing traditional meals, large living areas for socializing, and entrance

spaces that facilitate guest reception while balancing hospitality customs with privacy (Mohammadi & van den Scott, 2023). These preferences demonstrate how immigrants actively seek environments that allow for the continuation of important cultural practices rather than simply adapting to dominant spatial norms.

When suitable properties within conceived spatial structures cannot be found, participants actively transform existing spaces, as one participant described:

I was hesitant to buy the house because it was unattractive. However, it was the only affordable option in our desired neighbourhood. Our [Iranian] real estate agent persuaded me by envisioning how beautiful and welcoming it could become with renovations. We went ahead [...], removed extra walls, and did our best to bring in lighter, and now our home looks just as I had imagined. I love it! (Women, 40s, 18 years in Canada)

This account illustrates how immigrants navigate economic constraints while exercising agency to transform conceived space into lived space that resonates with their cultural identity and emotional needs. Through physical modifications and cultural practices, they reinforce their cultural identity while creating a sense of home (Pink, 2009). Figure 1 showcases a participant's living room, embodying Iranian Canadian homemaking practices with abundant natural light, light-coloured walls, and an open-concept layout – hallmarks of “Irani pasand” design preferences.



Figure 1: “Irani-pasand” living room with open-concept design, light-coloured walls, and natural lighting (Woman#2, 40s, 23 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

Significantly, homemaking practices are not limited to homeowners. Tenant participants also engage in substantial spatial transformations despite the constraints of rental properties, demonstrating how the production of meaningful lived space transcends property ownership. This drive to create a sense of home was evident among some Iranian immigrant tenants who expressed a profound desire to personalize and enhance their living environment – motivating them to undertake significant alterations to their rented dwellings:

When I first arrived in Canada, I lived in rental housing that was quite dark. I asked for permission to renovate the place, and I painted the walls, replaced the hardwood floors, and updated the bathroom flooring. When the owner saw the improvements, he was so

impressed that he covered all the renovation costs and gave me a letter recognizing me as a lifetime super A+ tenant. (Woman, 50s, 24 years in Canada)

These physical transformations of domestic space represent more than practical adjustments; they constitute active engagement in the social production of space that bridges cultural heritage with present circumstances. Through these modifications, Iranian immigrants create environments that support the continuity of cultural practices while simultaneously incorporating elements of Canadian spatial norms – demonstrating how the production of space occurs through negotiation (rather than opposition). These transformations illustrate Lefebvre’s dialectical understanding of space as simultaneously conceived, perceived, and lived, with immigrants actively participating in this production through their everyday spatial practices.

Transnational objects and cultural practices

While the previous section examined how Iranian immigrants modify the physical structure of their homes (conceived space), here we discuss how they actively produce lived space through transnational material culture and everyday practices. Beyond architectural modifications, participants engage in spatial practices that imbue their homes with cultural meaning through the circulation of objects, gardening, culinary traditions, and celebratory rituals. These practices represent forms of perceived and lived space where cultural norms and embodied experiences intersect to create multisensory environments that bridge Iranian heritage with Canadian contexts, shaping “migrant homes” (Lozanovska 2019) as sites of cultural hybridity, adaptation, and belonging. We examine four interconnected aspects of these transnational practices: the importation and display of material objects from Iran, gardening and cultivation of Iranian plants, traditional cooking and food preparation, and the celebration of Iranian holidays and hosting practices.

The transnational circulation of material culture plays a crucial role in transforming standardized Canadian homes into spaces that reflect Iranian cultural identity and personal history. Participants deliberately import and display objects that serve as tangible links to their homeland, creating what Tolia-Kelly (2004) terms “re-memory triggers” – material anchors to specific times, places, and relationships from their past. These objects range from Persian rugs and traditional furniture to books, handicrafts, and decorative items, each carrying personal and cultural significance, recreating an emotional sense of belonging that transcends geographical boundaries, thereby mitigating the feeling of displacement immigrants often experience. Rather than simply decorating space, these objects actively produce lived space by evoking memories and creating sensory connections to Iran:

When I moved here, I brought items from Iran that mean a lot to me. I love having my home filled with the scent and feel of Iran. For example, I wanted my living room to have a Persian rug and classic furniture. These items are significant to me. I love creating a space that reflects Iranian culture. I chose pieces I loved. Now, my home truly feels like my sanctuary. I love no place more than my home. (Woman, 40s, 13 years in Canada)

The practice of shipping books ahead of migration demonstrates the strategic importance of maintaining intellectual and cultural connections:

Before moving to Canada, I shipped my books ahead to ensure they arrived on time. Over time, since my family knows about my interest in books, they bring me books from Iran as gifts, which is valuable and means a lot to me. (Woman, 50s, 27 years in Canada)

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate how material culture creates hybrid domestic environments, integrating Iranian aesthetics with Canadian arrangements to maintain connections with the homeland while establishing new roots in Canada. Figure 2 highlights a participant’s living

room, where a Persian carpet, decorative pottery, and a traditional turquoise door artwork blend with terracotta walls and modern furnishings. Figure 3 presents a personal library, featuring Persian books in white shelving alongside traditional Iranian decorative objects on a black accent shelf. These carefully curated displays represent more than nostalgic preservation; they constitute active spatial practices that produce new forms of cultural space within Toronto's suburban landscape.

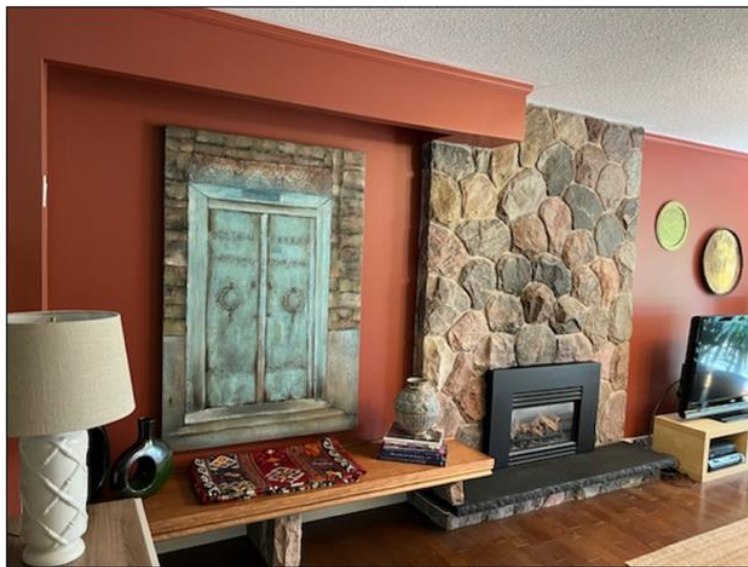


Figure 2: living room featuring traditional Persian door artwork and stone fireplace
(Woman#22, 50s, 23 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)



Figure 3: Room with Built-in Shelves, Showcasing Books in Persian and English, Traditional Decorative Items, and Family Photos (Man#25, 50s, 25 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

Gardening emerges as a particularly significant form of spatial practice that extends Iranian immigrants' cultural engagement beyond indoor spaces into their backyards and neighbourhood environments. Participants cultivate herbs specific to their Iranian regional origins, creating lived spaces that evoke particular landscapes and seasonal rhythms from their homeland. The practice connects participants to agricultural traditions and regional identities while fostering community connections through sharing, such as a communal harvest celebration held by one participant,

We plant herbs and vegetables in quantities ten times greater than their needs. When the harvest season arrives, we organize an event known as the 'Marise party.' We invite friends from Gilan³ to join us in our backyard, where they can collect their portion of

³ Gilan is a province in northern Iran, located along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea.

locally grown vegetables. These plants evoke nostalgia for me, reminding me of Gilan. [...] These plants not only enhance the flavours of our meals but also bring a touch of home to our new environment. (Man, 50s, 32 years in Canada)

These activities embody cultural heritage and identity, strengthening emotional and community bonds. For Iranians in Toronto, gardening and cultivating local herbs become meaningful ways to foster a sense of belonging to their Canadian homes. Figure 4 represents a participant's backyard garden with raised wooden beds and potted plants filled with traditional Iranian herbs, reflecting how Iranian immigrants cultivate familiar plants from their homeland to maintain cultural connections through gardening.



Figure 4: Raised garden beds with traditional Iranian herbs and vegetables (Woman#32, 50s, 28 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

Gardening practices also align with Iranian cultural celebrations, creating temporal connections between natural cycles and cultural traditions. One participant described cultivating specific plants as a meaningful connection to cultural heritage and seasonal celebrations,

I planted tulips and hyacinths in front of my home that bloom during our Persian New Year [...]—they make the place beautiful. [...] They remind me of the Persian New Year and look lovely... After these, other spring flowers bloom, followed by summer pansies.
(Woman, 50s, 28 years in Canada)

Cultivating herbs from home fosters a sensory connection to the past and strengthens cultural ties in a new environment. One participant's childhood memory of plants and flowers illustrate the deep emotional bond gardening can evoke,

Gardening is so important to me. I grew up surrounded by flowers and plants... This is why I think my love for greenery. [...] In our first house in Canada, I paid \$2,000 to \$3,000 to have a garden made. I need to work with soil, be in touch with nature. When the garden was finished, I said, I've finally achieved my dream. (Woman, 50s, 28 years in Canada)

Figure 5 showcases a cherished photograph from Iran, reflecting the participant's deep connection to nature. Early experiences with agriculture shaped her passion for gardening in Canada, highlighting how childhood memories influence homemaking and emotional ties to green spaces.



Figure 5: Childhood memories of agricultural landscapes in Iran (Woman#32, 50s, 28 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

These gardening practices demonstrate how conceived space (the physical garden) becomes lived space through cultivation practices that connect participants to childhood memories, seasonal celebrations, and regional identities from Iran.

Food preparation and consumption constitute central practices in the production of lived space, creating multisensory environments that evoke Iranian domestic life while accommodating Canadian contexts. Participants engage in complex transnational practices including importing specialized ingredients, adapting Canadian products to replicate Iranian flavours, and maintaining traditional cooking techniques. These culinary practices extend beyond mere food preparation to encompass broader hospitality traditions and social arrangements:

I like my home to have the scent and feel of Iran. Whenever you visit, my TV is on an Iranian channel... just to hear the voices. I watch old Iranian movies, play Iranian music. When my daughter's friends visit, they always remark that our home smells like Iran. My home is an Iranian home. The food we make is Iranian. The gatherings I host are Iranian.
(Women, 40s, 15 years in Canada)

Preparing and sharing traditional Iranian meals goes beyond nourishment – it is a multisensory experience that preserves heritage, evokes nostalgia, and fosters cultural transmission. Through home cooking and communal dining, participants maintain connections to their roots while adapting to their new environment. Hosting gatherings serves as spaces where cultural identity can be celebrated and reinforced through shared experiences. Figure 6 captures the elaborate presentation of Iranian hospitality, demonstrating how culinary practices create spaces for cultural expression and community building within Canadian homes.



Figure 6: Culinary practices associated with traditional Iranian cuisine (Woman#4, 40s, 20 years in Canada)

Some participants engage in transnational culinary practices, importing ingredients and traditional Iranian kitchen tools that are rarely available in Canada. Others recreate familiar flavours by adapting local products, using innovative techniques to replicate the taste of their homeland:

When I buy pickles from Canadian stores, I add herbs from my garden and some extra spices to recreate the flavours we used to have in Iran. My friends often ask, ‘We buy the same pickles, so why don’t ours taste like this?’ I tell them, ‘I customize them to match the Iranian taste’. (Woman, 50s, 27 years in Canada)

These strategies of culinary hybridization highlight how food becomes a meaningful bridge between past and present, embodying the dynamic nature of diasporic foodways and

illustrating how immigrants negotiate cultural identity through everyday practices (Parasecoli, 2014).

The organization of traditional Iranian celebrations represents a temporal dimension of spatial practice, where Canadian domestic and public spaces are temporarily transformed into sites of Iranian cultural expression. These events demonstrate how immigrants actively negotiate conceived space (regulations around celebrations) while creating powerful lived spaces of cultural continuity.

Traditional Iranian celebrations serve as tangible expressions of heritage, where symbolic rituals and artifacts reinforce cultural identity. Figure 7 represents a participant's traditional Norouz (Persian New Year) table setting, featuring symbolic elements arranged on a Persian textile, illustrating how Iranian immigrants maintain traditions and transform their Canadian homes into spaces of celebration.



Figure 7: Traditional Norouz (Persian New Year) Haft-Sin table with symbolic elements and Persian textiles (Woman#26, 40s, 15 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

These gatherings play a crucial role in cultural preservation and social connection, enabling Iranian immigrants to sustain ties to their heritage while adapting to Canadian life. One participant described transforming their suburban home into a site of celebration, hosting annual Chaharshanbe Suri⁴ gatherings despite local restrictions on open fires:

Hosting events like Chaharshanbe Suri is essential for me—I simply can’t live without it. We’ve celebrated it at our house for over 20 years, despite open fires being prohibited here. Our backyard layout and good neighbours make it possible—sometimes we’ve had up to 100 people. These traditions have such a beautiful, meaningful impact. I want to pass them down to my grandchildren [...] The gatherings, the occasion, and even the philosophy behind it [...] are all so beautiful (Man, 50s, 32 years in Canada).

The adaptation of Chaharshanbe Suri highlights how immigrants navigate cultural traditions within new regulatory landscapes. Beyond celebration, these gatherings facilitate intergenerational cultural transmission, shaping identity across different generations of Iranian Canadians.

Throughout these practices, a clear gender dimension emerges in how homemaking responsibilities are distributed and understood. While both men and women participate in creating meaningful spaces, women often take primary responsibility for curating domestic environments and maintaining cultural continuity. Iranian men in this study consistently emphasized their wives’ pivotal role in homemaking, a dynamic further reflected in their accounts of household material practices. One participant highlighted his wife’s critical role in sourcing and arranging the shipment of certain items:

⁴ Chaharshanbe Suri is a traditional Iranian fire festival celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Norouz (Persian New Year).

Yes, our home has Iranian elements, absolutely! My wife is from Shiraz and loves these traditional Laleh candlesticks. Each one cost \$1,000 to \$1,500, and she ordered them from somewhere in the U.S. [...] She always said she wanted them in our home. (Man, 50s, 25 years in Canada)

This gendered pattern reflects broader cultural expectations while also highlighting women's agency in the social production of space. Women's active curation of transnational material culture, maintenance of culinary traditions, and orchestration of celebrations positions them as key architects of lived space within Iranian Canadian households.

These transnational practices collectively demonstrate how Iranian immigrants actively produce spaces that bridge their heritage with their Canadian present. Rather than merely adapting to new environments participants create hybrid spatial arrangements that accommodate both Iranian cultural practices and Canadian spatial norms, illustrating the dynamic and creative nature of immigrant spatial production.

Neighbourhood dynamics and communal connections

For Iranian participants, the social production of space extends beyond individual homes to encompass neighbourhood dynamics and broader urban contexts that significantly contribute to their emotional sense of belonging. Building on the domestic practices examined in previous sections, this dimension of spatial production demonstrates how immigrants actively shape and are shaped by the perceived and lived spaces of their surrounding communities. Their engagement extends from immediate neighbourhoods through ethnic businesses and community networks to city-wide institutions and public spaces that support cultural continuity and identity expression.

Toronto's reputation as a multicultural metropolis reflects decades of immigrant spatial production, where successive waves of newcomers have actively contributed to creating what is now recognized as a "city of neighbourhoods" characterized by distinct ethno-racial concentrations (Anisef & Lanphier 2003; Hulchanski, 201). This spatial organization represents the cumulative result of numerous immigrant groups engaging in the social production of space, transforming Toronto's urban and suburban landscapes through their settlement patterns, business establishments, and community building practices (see Chapters 2 and 4).

For Iranian immigrants, this existing framework of ethnic diversity provides both a model and an opportunity for their own spatial production. The city's established patterns of ethno-racial neighbourhoods' concentration – where specific groups have shaped the physical and socio-cultural characteristics of particular areas (Harris, 2004; Harris, 2020; Walks, 2020) – provide Iranian immigrants with opportunities to cultivate their own cultural spaces while simultaneously engaging with Toronto's wider multicultural context. This dynamic is captured by one participant's reflection:

Toronto is a city where I can meet people from various countries and become familiar with their cultures and temperaments. This connection makes me feel part of a global community. It's a place that satisfies my sense of internationalism, connecting me to both a global society and my own national community, as there is a significant Iranian population here. (Man, 60s, 25 years in Canada)

Toronto's multicultural framework enables Iranian immigrants to simultaneously maintain connections with their ethnic community while engaging with the city's broader diversity, illustrating how conceived space (Toronto's multicultural policy framework) intersects with lived space (personal experiences of belonging and community connection).

Iranian-owned businesses function as crucial nodes in the social production of ethnic space, serving simultaneously as economic enterprises and cultural institutions that maintain connections to Iranian material culture and social practices. These establishments represent convergences of perceived space (physical commercial locations) and lived space (sites of cultural meaning and community interaction), while operating within conceived space (municipal regulations and commercial zoning).

Figure 9 illustrates how Iranian businesses create visible markers of cultural presence through Farsi signage and culturally specific services, transforming neighbourhood streetscapes into familiar cultural environments. These businesses facilitate everyday practices that connect participants to their cultural heritage:

I love my neighbourhood; the things happening around me. It makes me happy that I can get up in the middle of the night and buy *Ghormeh Sabzi*,⁵ or go and grab my favourite Persian *Sarshir*, or a *Tee Top* snack. Whenever I crave for Barbary bread, it's just five minutes away—bread is more than food; it's culture. It's a connection to the culture you come from. [...] These things make me really feeling attached. (Woman, 40s, 11 years in Canada)

⁵ Ghormeh sabzi is a popular Iranian stew made with herbs, meat or beans, dried lime, and served with rice.



Figure 9: Iranian commercial streetscape with Farsi signage and culturally specific businesses
(Woman#4, 40s, 20 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023).

This participant's narrative demonstrates how ethnic businesses enable routine spatial practices that maintain cultural connections while fostering neighbourhood attachment. The accessibility of Iranian products creates lived space that bridges participants' current location with memories and traditions from their homeland, contributing to the maintenance of their cultural identity in a diasporic context.

These businesses also serve as cultural repositories, that support the emotional and material dimensions of Iranian homemaking practices:

In Toronto, when you visit friends' homes, it often feels like you've stepped into a house in Iran—Iranian rugs, Iranian furniture, Iranian curtains... Toronto allows you to embrace

and experience being Iranian. You can find stores selling Iranian-style furniture, Iranian rugs. (Woman, 40s, 13 years in Canada)

Figure 10 captures how Iranian retail spaces display both intellectual and material elements of Iranian culture, functioning as sites where immigrants can access the objects and resources necessary for creating meaningful domestic environments – in this case a rich collection of Persian literature alongside traditional decorative artifacts.



Figure 10: Iranian retail space displaying Persian literature and traditional decorative artifacts
(Woman#13, 30s, 10 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

Iranian immigrants also engage in temporal forms of spatial production, temporarily transforming neighbourhood spaces during cultural celebrations and events (see Veronis 2006). These practices demonstrate how lived space can be activated through seasonal rhythms and cultural calendars that differ from dominant Canadian temporal frameworks. One participant

noted how ethnic establishments create an immersive atmosphere that encourages Iranian immigrants to engage with and maintain their cultural practices:

Norouz [Iranian New Year] remains a vital part of our lives. At least the area where I live—is so enthusiastic during this time. [...] here, the Norouz celebrations are so lively within Iranian businesses, grocery stores, bakeries, pastries, that they unconsciously affect you, pulling you into that festive atmosphere. (Man, 60s, 32 years in Canada).

These celebrations represent moments when the neighbourhood spaces become a stage for Iranian cultural expression, illustrating how immigrant communities can temporarily reconfigure public and commercial spaces to reflect their cultural practices and temporal orientations.

The presence of Farsi signage and the prevalence of Persian language use in these “Iranian neighbourhoods” creates linguistic landscapes that serve as both practical and symbolic markers of cultural territory. These linguistic elements transform conceived space (standardized Canadian commercial environments) into lived space imbued with cultural meaning and belonging.

Regular interactions in Farsi with neighbours and shopkeepers create social networks that mirror communal structures from Iran, providing both emotional support and practical assistance. These everyday linguistic practices represent forms of perceived space – routine interactions that produce cultural community – while simultaneously creating lived space through the emotional comfort and cultural recognition they provide.

Beyond commercial spaces, Iranian immigrants also engage with Toronto’s public institutions in ways that support cultural continuity and community building. Public libraries, in

particular, emerge as significant sites for maintaining connections to Iranian intellectual and literary culture:

I feel connected to the walls, the library—this library truly means something to me. I love it here. Here you can find Iranian books and materials. My son was born in Dubai and has only been to Iran a few times, and we don't plan to go back soon. (Woman, 40s, 11 years in Canada)

This participant's emotional connection to the library illustrates how public institutions become meaningful places where immigrants can access cultural resources within Canadian contexts. Libraries transform from repositories of general knowledge into personalized spaces of cultural connection and belonging.

Public spaces also serve as venues for Iranian cultural events and community gatherings. Participants mentioned several key locations in Toronto that have become meaningful for Iranian cultural expression. In particular, Mel Lastman Square exemplifies how immigrants can temporarily transform conceived space into sites of cultural expression: "Mel Lastman Square is one of my favourite hangout spots. Before [COVID-19] comes, it had festivals every day; there were orchestras, and Iranian singers would perform. I love the area" (Man, 50s, 8 years in Canada). In addition to fostering emotional belonging, the utilization of public spaces for Iranian cultural events contribute to the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Iranian heritage in the diaspora. Figure 12 captures how public spaces facilitate cultural expression and community gatherings, demonstrating how Iranian immigrants contribute to Toronto's diverse cultural landscape while creating spaces of belonging within the broader urban environment.



Figure 12: Mel Lastman Square in Toronto during Iranian cultural events (Man#4, 50s, 9 years in Canada; Photovoice Interview, 2023)

These neighbourhood-level practices collectively demonstrate how Iranian immigrants actively participate in the ongoing social production of Toronto’s urban space. Rather than simply adapting to existing spatial arrangements, they contribute to the continuous transformation of neighbourhood character, commercial landscapes, and public space utilization – building on Toronto’s established framework of ethnic diversity while adding their own distinct spatial practices and cultural contributions to the city’s multicultural tapestry.

Memory-making and temporal ties

The fourth dimension of spatial production among Iranian immigrants involves the accumulation of meaningful experiences and memories that deepen emotional connections to place over time. This temporal aspect of belonging demonstrates how lived space develops through the layering of personal and connective memories within domestic and neighbourhood environments. Unlike the immediate practices of physical modification or cultural display examined in previous sections, memory-making represents a gradual process through which immigrants develop profound attachments to their Canadian homes and communities through

accumulated experiences, significant life events, and the creation of new biographical narratives tied to specific places.

The home becomes a repository of significant life events and emotional experiences that strengthen place attachment over extended periods of residence. Critical life moments – childbirth, family celebrations, daily interactions with loved ones, and seasonal routines – transform physical spaces into meaningful sites of personal history embedded with emotional significance.

The temporal dimension of belonging is evident in how participants describe their relationship to homes where they have lived for extended periods: “We made good memories. My kids were born in this place. I remember playing with them in the backyard” (Woman, 50s, 40 years in Canada). This participant’s account illustrates how extended residence in a particular dwelling fosters the development of personal narratives and deep emotional connections to living space. The backyard, initially conceived space designed for recreational use, becomes lived space imbued with memories of parental care and childhood development.

Physical modifications to domestic spaces often serve as tangible markers of temporal investment and emotional attachment, creating what might be termed “memorial landscapes” within the home environment:

We are planning to downsize our home. However, if we move out, we will miss our home. We made valuable memories. My daughter’s wedding was in the backyard. We planted trees for our grandchildren in the backyard. Our friends also made special memories in our home, and they tell us if you sell this house, we [will] feel depressed. (Man, 60s, 32 years in Canada)

This narrative demonstrates how spatial practices – planting trees, hosting celebrations – create temporal anchors that bind participants to specific locations. The trees planted for grandchildren represent a future-oriented investment in place, while the wedding celebrations creates a past-oriented memory that renders the space emotionally irreplaceable.

Figure 13 illustrates how domestic spaces become sites of remembrance, with carefully preserved objects and arrangements serving as material markers of significant relationships and life transitions. The piano in the photograph represents both connection and loss – an object that bridges past aspirations with present grief while maintaining spatial continuity across temporal change.

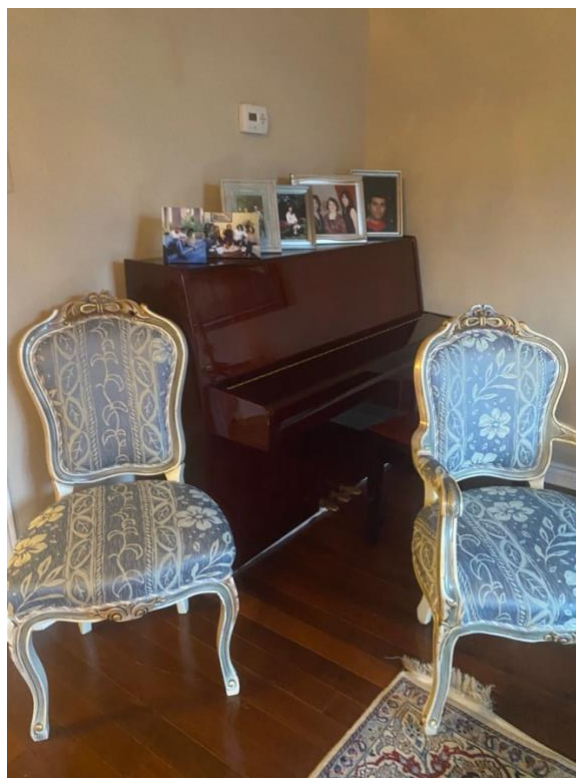


Figure 13: Remembrance through objects and arrangements that serve as connection while representing loss (Man#33, 60s, 28 years in Canada; photovoice interview, 2023)

Memory-making can also involve painful experiences that reshape relationships to place and necessitate spatial reconfigurations. The loss of significant others can profoundly impact how lived space is experienced and navigated:

Every corner of our former home held memories of my wife. The memories of that house were distressing for us. We moved from that house because we wanted to distance ourselves from the memories; seeing it constantly was difficult. We still have some belongings... For instance, this piano was something my wife encouraged me to get because I was interested in learning music. [...] but after she passed away, I stopped playing. (Man, 60s, years in Canada)

This account illustrates how lived space saturated with memories can become emotionally overwhelming, necessitating spatial strategies for managing grief while maintaining connections to past relationships. The piano represents a form of portable memory that enables emotional continuity across spatial relocations (see Figure 13).

Memory-making extends beyond domestic spaces to encompass neighbourhood landscapes where streets, institutions, and community spaces acquire layers of personal and collective significance over time. These accumulated spatial experiences create what Tolia-Kelly (2004a) describes as “textural landscapes of memory” – environments where routine movements and interactions become embedded with emotional significance. One participant’s narrative captures this multifaceted relationship between memory and neighbourhood space:

I feel a deep connection to this area. My son grew up here, and I have many memories—walking past his school and daycare, and even the church. I remember when a friend was near death; I was very distressed and wanted a place to pray. I went into this church, prayed intensely, and felt comforted. Since I never connected with a mosque here, I

found solace in the church. I sat, cried, and now, passing by the church brings back those memories. Walking these streets reminds me of beautiful moments that were once painful but are now cherished. I recall family visits—going out to eat with my father, spending time with my sister, and other relatives. I have memories with this street and this city.

(Woman, 40s, 11 years in Canada)

This narrative illustrates how various neighbourhood locations – schools, religious institutions, restaurants, streets – become sites of emotional significance through accumulated experiences. The church, initially conceived space for Christian worship, becomes lived space for an Iranian immigrant seeking comfort during crisis, demonstrating how spatial meaning can transcend original design intentions through personal experience and emotional investment.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Iranian immigrants in Toronto engage in social production of space that extends from intimate domestic arrangements to neighbourhood landscapes and public institutions. By applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to established immigrants' homemaking practices, our findings reveal how spatial production operates simultaneously across multiple dimensions and scales, creating layered geographies of belonging that develop over time.

Our analysis demonstrates that spatial production among Iranian immigrants operates through interconnected practices spanning from room-level arrangements to city-wide institutional engagement. Physical modifications create foundation spaces for cultural practices, while transnational material culture imbues these spaces with sensory significance. These domestic transformations extend outward through ethnic businesses, community celebrations, and public space utilization, creating nested scales of cultural space production.

These practices form interconnected systems where domestic, neighbourhood, and institutional spaces reinforce each other. The Persian rug connects to the Iranian bookstore, which relates to Norouz celebrations in public squares and Persian collections in libraries. This demonstrates how immigrants create coherent cultural landscapes spanning multiple scales while remaining embedded within Toronto's multicultural framework.

The dialectical relationship between Lefebvre's spatial dimensions emerges through these practices. Conceived space—suburban designs, municipal regulations, public frameworks—provides constraints and opportunities that immigrants navigate creatively. Participants demonstrate skill in working within conceived space to create meaningful environments. Their perceived space practices—routine modifications, shopping patterns, celebrations—gradually transform standardized environments while establishing spatial rhythms informed by Iranian cultural calendars. These material and social practices collectively produce lived space that transcends individual locations, creating emotional geographies connecting Iranian immigrants to both their cultural heritage and Canadian present.

Spatial production among established immigrants involves crucial temporal dimensions developing through duration and repetition. Unlike immediate settlement practices, established immigrants' homemaking demonstrates how belonging deepens through accumulated biographical experiences. The layering of memories—children's birthdays, family celebrations, seasonal routines, moments of crisis—gradually transforms neutral locations into emotionally significant places.

This creates "biographical landscapes" where personal narratives become embedded in Canadian spaces without replacing Iranian connections. Participants develop complex temporal geographies accommodating both Iranian heritage and Canadian experiences. Trees planted for

grandchildren, churches providing comfort, streets walked daily—these temporal anchors demonstrate future-oriented investments in Canadian places while maintaining Iranian cultural practices.

These processes involve both individual and collective memory-making. Community celebrations and intergenerational gatherings create collective memories binding Iranian immigrants to places and each other, fostering social networks that adapt communal structures from Iran to Canadian contexts.

Our analysis extends Lefebvre's spatial triad by demonstrating how its three dimensions operate simultaneously across multiple scales in immigrant contexts. Previous applications often focus on one given scale – e.g., material practices within homes (Sezginalp Özçetin & Rottmann, 2022), ethnic businesses (Zhuang & Chen, 2017), cultural events and celebrations in public space (Veronis 2006) –, whereas our findings show how conceived, perceived, and lived space interact dialectically across domestic, neighbourhood, and institutional scales. This reveals how immigrants' spatial agency operates through both direct physical modification and strategic engagement with broader urban systems.

Focusing on established immigrants provides insights missing from settlement-focused research. Our findings demonstrate that spatial belonging continues developing long after initial settlement, suggesting integration involves ongoing place-making rather than one-time adaptation. Our temporal analysis reveals how emotional attachments to Canadian places develop alongside rather than replace Iranian connections, challenging binary notions of immigrant belonging.

Our attention to gender reveals how homemaking involves complex negotiations of cultural expectations and personal agency. While women often take primary responsibility for

curating domestic environments, this reflects both constraint and empowerment—highlighting women’s role as architects of meaningful space while reflecting gendered expectations around domestic responsibility.

These findings illuminate how contemporary cities develop through immigrant spatial production. Rather than viewing ethnic neighbourhoods as separate from mainstream development, our analysis shows how immigrant practices contribute to ongoing urban transformation. Iranian immigrants build on Toronto’s multicultural framework while adding distinct contributions, demonstrating how cities become multicultural through accumulated spatial production over time.

Supporting immigrant belonging requires attention to spatial production across scales—from housing policies accommodating cultural modifications to public programming facilitating celebrations and institutional support for ethnic businesses. Understanding these interconnections becomes crucial for fostering inclusive urban environments celebrating cultural diversity while promoting emotional belonging. As cities continue diversifying, understanding these processes of spatial production and identity negotiation becomes increasingly crucial for fostering inclusive environments that celebrate cultural diversity while promoting emotional belonging.

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

The aim of this doctoral thesis was to investigate the multifaceted processes through which Iranian immigrants in Toronto negotiate residential choices, socioeconomic integration, community building practices, and homemaking strategies to foster belonging in their adopted urban environment. Guided by Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, Askins' (2016) emotional citizenry, and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998), this thesis advances four interconnected objectives. First, the thesis applied Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space to analyze the residential behaviour of Iranian immigrants, offering a rich, nuanced, and flexible framework for understanding settlement experiences. This objective is addressed in Article 1, which challenges conventional models of immigrant settlement by illustrating how immigrants' spatial concentration in affluent suburbs reflects both cultural agency and structural negotiations, thereby redefining Toronto's suburban geographies. Second, the study analyzed the residential, socioeconomic, and emotional dimensions of integration, with attention to gendered pathways in professional mobility, housing choices, and affective experiences. This is the focus of Article 2, which reveals how the interplay of these factors shapes immigrants' long-term sense of belonging and produces differentiated integration outcomes for men and women. Third, the research examined how immigrants leverage multiscale social networks—including bonding, bridging, and linking ties—to foster emotional belonging. This objective is explored in Article 3, which demonstrates how social capital practices and institutional engagement contribute to emotional citizenship, framed through the lens of social capital theory and Askins' concept of emotional citizenry. Finally, the thesis investigated homemaking practices across physical, sensory, and cultural dimensions, and how these contribute to the production of lived space and identity negotiation in the suburbs. Article

4 addresses this objective by uncovering how everyday spatial practices transform suburban environments into meaningful sites of home and belonging.

Methodologically, the thesis employs a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative spatial analysis of Canadian census data (2021) with qualitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews, photovoice sessions, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations. This framework bridges macro-level settlement patterns with micro-level narratives, capturing the interplay of structural constraints and immigrant agency.

Through four interconnected articles, this research advances a comprehensive understanding of immigrant experiences in superdiverse cities, challenging conventional narratives of assimilation and integration. The remainder of this conclusion synthesizes the empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions of the four articles, situating their findings within broader debates on immigrant integration. It then discusses policy implications for fostering inclusive communities in superdiverse cities and outlines future research directions, including comparative studies of diverse immigrant groups and longitudinal analyses of generational belonging.

Empirical contributions

This doctoral thesis makes significant empirical contributions to the study of immigrant integration by examining the experiences of Iranian immigrants in Toronto, Canada, a group that remains relatively understudied, with a focus on established immigrants in affluent suburban neighbourhoods. Through four interconnected articles, the research advances knowledge across six key dimensions.

First, this study contributes to the emerging scholarship on the Iranian diaspora in Canada (e.g., Mohammadi, 2023; Ahadi, 2022) by focusing on the case of Toronto, where nearly half of

the country's Iranian population resides. Despite this demographic concentration, the settlement and integration experiences of this group in Toronto remain comparatively understudied, making this context a critical site for advancing understanding of Iranian immigrant pathways in Canada. By analyzing residential patterns, socioeconomic trajectories, and homemaking practices, the research reveals how Iranian immigrants navigate Toronto's suburban landscapes to create distinct "Iranian neighbourhoods" (e.g., Richmond Hill, North York). Article 1 reveals that Iranian immigrants in the Toronto census metropolitan area reside in neighbourhoods with above-average incomes and housing values, a pattern distinct from many other visible minority groups. This concentration reflects strategic alignments with perceived "White" neighbourhoods and selective engagement with Toronto's ethno-racial hierarchy, mediated by cultural narratives like the "Aryan myth" (Maghbouleh, 2017). These findings complicate narratives of suburban assimilation by showing how immigrants reconcile cultural preservation with spatial privilege. The findings challenge assumptions about ethno-racial minorities' access to privileged spaces, demonstrating that Iranian immigrants – despite their visible minority status – leverage cultural capital and pre-migration resources to concentrate in affluent areas dominated by single-detached housing. This contrasts with the experiences of other recent immigrant groups – such as Bangladeshis (Ghosh, 2014), and Ghanaians (Firang, 2019) – who face greater barriers to suburban homeownership.

Second, moving beyond the predominant focus on newcomers, this research provides critical insights into the experiences of established immigrants who have resided in Canada for five years or more. The findings reveal that integration is a dynamic, non-linear process shaped by evolving negotiations between structural constraints (e.g., credential recognition) and agency (e.g., spatial practices). Article 2 demonstrates how sustained professional mobility and

residential stability reinforce one another over time. Such long-term perspectives can enrich understandings of how immigrants negotiate belonging beyond the initial settlement phase.

Third, this thesis redefines the temporal and emotional dimensions of integration by examining the distinct experiences of two key cohorts of Iranian immigrants in Toronto: pre-2000 arrivals (primarily post-revolution immigrants from the 1980s–1990s) and post-2000 arrivals (economic-class immigrants arriving between 2000–2017). The research reveals how shifting geopolitical, economic, and policy contexts shape integration trajectories, residential behaviours, and emotional belonging over time. This thesis incorporates a long-term temporal perspective to acknowledge the temporal dimension of integration, recognizing that immigrant experiences are shaped by evolving socioeconomic contexts, policy shifts, and life-course transitions. While the analysis does not foreground cohort-specific narratives, it implicitly accounts for time as a critical axis through its examination of long-term residential stability, professional trajectories, and emotional belonging. The temporal lens underscores integration as a continuous, non-linear process rather than a static outcome, emphasizing how structural opportunities and constraints unfold dynamically across immigrants' settlement journeys.

Fourth, the research advances intersectional analyses of immigrant experiences by foregrounding gendered experiences and differences. Article 2 identifies a notable pattern: many women participants achieved professional roles commensurate with their qualifications, compared to men. Women's narratives revealed how professional success fostered emotional belonging through increased societal recognition, while some men often grappled with downward mobility. These gendered dynamics challenge stereotypes of patriarchal immigrant communities and contribute to debates about women's agency in shaping suburban social landscapes, while also shaping family integration trajectories, sustaining cultural continuity and

mediating cross-cultural socialization. Their agency extended beyond individual mobility to collective social advancement, catalyzing improvements in family socioeconomic status.

Fifth, the thesis advances empirical understanding of community building practices among Iranian immigrants in Toronto by documenting the dual role of social capital in fostering cohesion and perpetuating fragmentation. The study reveals that while bonding capital within co-ethnic networks provides critical emotional support and cultural continuity, it also fractures solidarity through generational divides and political tensions, such as those between secular and religious identities or pre- and post-2000 migration cohorts. Bridging capital, meanwhile, operates selectively, with Iranian immigrants prioritizing cross-cultural ties to socially dominant groups (e.g., white, middle-class neighbours) over other racialized minorities, reflecting aspirational hierarchies embedded in Toronto's spatial and social landscapes.

Lastly, the thesis adopts a multiscale perspective that empirically captures integration processes across various spatial levels – from the micro scale of homemaking practices within the domestic sphere, to neighbourhood formation and ethnic community development, and extending to broader suburban and metropolitan scales, including community institutions and societal engagement. This multilevel analysis reveals how Iranian immigrants actively produce and negotiate spaces of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity in complex and dynamic ways. Together, this approach, visualized in Figure 1, contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of immigrant integration, emphasizing the interplay between spatial settlement, socioeconomic mobility, gendered experiences, and emotional belonging within superdiverse urban contexts.

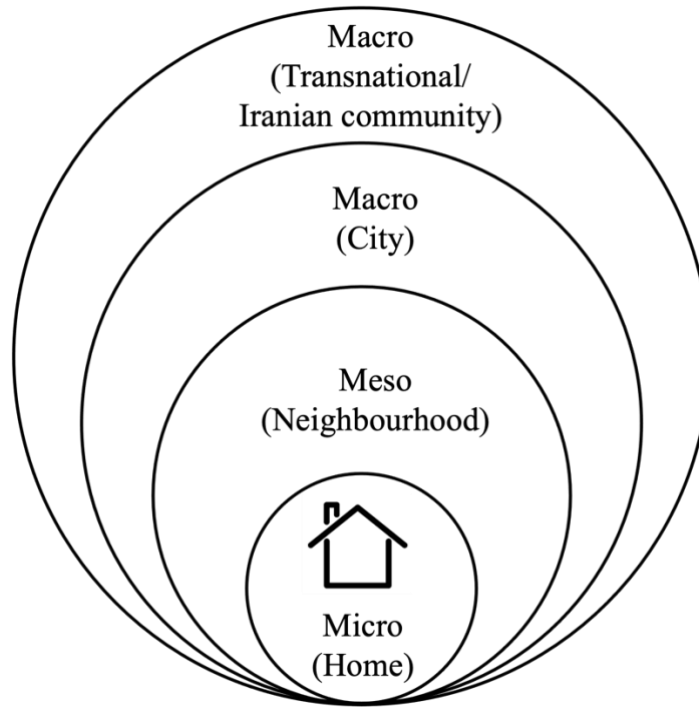


Figure 1: Interconnected multiscalar sociospatial processes of Iranian immigrants' integration

By addressing these empirical elements, the thesis documents Iranian immigrants' experiences and provides a robust evidence base for rethinking immigrant integration in superdiverse cities. It illuminates how cultural capital, gender dynamics, and suburban spatial markets interact to produce distinct integration pathways for skilled immigrants, a critical contribution as Canada increasingly relies on economic class immigration to address labour shortages and support its economic prosperity. These findings invite comparative studies with other privileged immigrant groups to explore how ethnicity/race, class, and migration trajectories intersect in shaping urban outcomes and immigrant integration.

Theoretical contributions

This doctoral thesis advances three interconnected theoretical innovations by synthesizing Lefebvre's spatial triad, Askins' emotional citizenry framework and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998), offering an integrated, multidimensional lens to analyze immigrant settlement and integration. By bridging structural constraints and immigrant agency across scales, the research redefines how residential patterns and integration processes are conceptualized in superdiverse urban contexts.

The integration of Lefebvre's spatial triad across Articles 1 and 4 demonstrates how immigrants actively produce space across distinct scales—from the micro-level domestic sphere to the meso-level suburban neighbourhood—while situating these practices within a macro-scale transnational context. This approach challenges static conceptions of urban landscapes by foregrounding the dynamic interplay between local spatial production and global diasporic networks. Article 1 reveals how Iranian immigrants actively transform Toronto's suburban landscapes into culturally resonant environments. Their residential concentration in affluent neighbourhoods like Richmond Hill and Willowdale in North York reflects strategic negotiations between cultural preferences (e.g., safety, social prestige, ethnoracial composition, etc.) and structural opportunities (e.g., access to housing markets). This agency-driven process contrasts with traditional spatial assimilation models by emphasizing immigrants' role as producers of suburban landscapes rather than passive assimilators.

Article 4 extends Lefebvre's framework to homemaking practices, illustrating how immigrants actively engage in the social production of space to cultivate an emotional sense of belonging in their new homes. Through their homemaking practices, participants transform initially unfamiliar domestic spaces and architectural designs into environments that resonate

with their cultural preferences and aesthetic sensibilities. Participants' renovation practices and integration of Iranian aesthetics into suburban homes exemplifies the dialectic between structural constraints (e.g., Canadian housing norms) and creative agency. As such, domestic spaces become sites of lived space where cultural memory and transnational identity are materially enacted. Beyond the home, Iranian immigrants also contribute to the production of ethnic spaces through the establishment of culturally specific businesses and the cultivation of neighbourhood networks, reinforcing collective identity and fostering a sense of familiarity in the urban landscape. Their practices extend further into the public realm, where cultural celebrations and seasonal rituals temporarily transform shared spaces into sites of Iranian cultural expression. These activities illustrate how immigrant homemaking operates across spatial scales—domestic, neighbourhood, and city-wide—adding distinct cultural layers to Toronto's existing multicultural fabric. In doing so, Iranian immigrants not only reconfigure their immediate environments but also contribute actively to the evolving social production of space in Toronto's diverse and dynamic urban context.

Articles 2 integrates Askins' emotional citizenry with structural analyses of integration, positing that residential, socioeconomic, and emotional dimensions are co-constitutive. The analysis demonstrates how Iranian immigrants' suburban concentration (residential integration) intersects with professional mobility (socioeconomic integration) to foster emotional belonging. The thesis contributes to integration theory by introducing emotional citizenry as both an outcome and a catalyst of immigrant incorporation. For instance, women who achieved professional mobility linked their career success to feelings of societal recognition, deepening their emotional ties to Canada. Conversely, stalled mobility among men exacerbated transnational ambivalence, revealing how structural barriers (e.g., credential devaluation) disrupt

affective integration. The conceptual innovation lies in framing integration not as a linear progression but as a dynamic interplay between structural negotiations (access to housing markets, labor market integration) and affective practices (cultivating belonging through everyday interactions).

Article 3 further complicates this interplay by analyzing communityformation and network development through an emotional lens. By integrating Askins' (2016) concept of emotional citizenry, the study demonstrates that bonding within co-ethnic networks is not merely transactional but deeply rooted in shared cultural identity and emotional belonging. Conversely, bridging capital with non-Iranian groups is primarily shaped by perceived cultural alignment and socioeconomic hierarchies (e.g., affluent White neighbours). This strategic engagement underscores how emotional citizenry is stratified by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, and gender. The study demonstrates that emotional belonging constitutes an active, multiscalar process shaped by bonding capital (shared cultural practices, familial/co-ethnic solidarity), bridging capital (cross-cultural networks), and linking capital (ethnic associations mediating institutional access). By situating these dynamics within Toronto's ethno-racial diversity, the study advances our understanding of how immigrant communities negotiate belonging at different scales—from close social circles to broader societal participation.

The thesis also makes an important contribution to understanding gendered dynamics in the integration pathways of skilled immigrants. Article 2 reveals how women's professional success renegotiated patriarchal norms from the country and culture of origin, with female participants reporting greater emotional belonging through career empowerment in the new society. This gendered analysis extends Askins' framework by illustrating how affective

integration is mediated by intersecting identities, where immigrant women's agency disrupts both origin-country gender roles and destination-society racialized hierarchies. Simultaneously, the thesis advances social capital theory by foregrounding gendered agency and transnational practices. Article 3 demonstrates that Iranian women predominantly drive the development and expansion of familial social networks, with men often participating in networks initially established by their spouses. As such, women emerge as catalysts of their family's integration pathways and social mobility achievements.

Collectively, through these theoretical contributions, this thesis develops a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing the integration experiences of immigrants from diverse ethnoracial and class backgrounds. By situating Iranian immigrants within Toronto's suburban fabric, this research underscores the importance of multidimensional approaches to understanding integration—including its residential, socioeconomic, communal, and emotional dimensions—and the agency of immigrants in shaping their integration pathways. This thesis underscore that material success alone does not guarantee social or emotional belonging; rather, these dimensions are deeply intertwined with relational practices and affective experiences. In fact, it is the emotional journey associated with the challenges and successes of the broader integration trajectory—including overcoming professional barriers, achieving educational and career goals, and civic participation in Canadian society—that shapes Iranian immigrants' sense of belonging and emotional citizenry. Additionally, this thesis contributes significantly to the analysis of immigrants' social networks by examining their formation and function across micro to macro levels. This multiscalar analysis reveals the intricate interplay between personal relationships, community dynamics, and structural opportunities in shaping immigrant trajectories in their new society.

Methodological contributions

This research advances methodological innovation in immigration studies through its tripartite integration of spatial theory, participatory praxis, and reflexive triangulation. The study's mixed-methods design systematically operationalizes the Lefebvre's spatial triad framework – conceived (census/GIS mapping), perceived (mental maps/photovoice), and lived (ethnography/narratives) – to reveal how Iranian immigrants negotiate Toronto's suburban landscape. This design enabled simultaneous examination of structural housing markets through quantitative spatial analysis, perceived neighbourhood hierarchies via participatory mapping, and lived homemaking practices through visual components and ethnographic immersion.

The triangulation of six data streams created a robust validation matrix that addressed multiple dimensions of space production. Census data revealed population-level settlement patterns that informed targeted qualitative inquiry, while real estate agents' market insights contextualized residential narratives. Mental maps drawn during interviews visually articulated perceived spatial hierarchies that GIS mapping later correlated with housing value distributions. This pluralistic approach bridged positivist and constructivist paradigms, with sociodemographic survey data refining the interpretation of qualitative narratives through stratified analysis of age, gender, and cohort differences.

The photovoice methodology introduced a participatory visual dimension (Gaudet & Robert, 2018) that operationalized Lefebvre's perceived space concept. By enabling immigrants to document and curate images of meaningful places, this method captured tacit dimensions of homemaking practices through participant-directed visual storytelling. It allowed participants to determine what aspects of their lived experiences to share, thereby exercising agency over the information presented and highlighting what they considered meaningful. The approach revealed

disparities between urban planners' conceived spaces and immigrants' perceived lived environments while empowering participants as co-interpreters through image selection and narrative control. As both methodological tool and analytic framework, photovoice provided a visual description of cultural preservation strategies that verbal narratives alone could not capture. This approach not only enriched the data but also aligned with our aim to centre immigrant voices in the interpretation of place-making and belonging. The method's emphasis on aesthetic expression resonated deeply with participants' cultural values, reflecting Iran's rich tradition of visual symbolism in arts and domestic rituals.

Ethnographic immersion provided critical context for these visual narratives, with home visits revealing how domestic spatial practices mediate between Iranian cultural heritage and Canadian integration. The extended residence with a community leader offered unique insights into the dialectic between institutional conceived spaces (ethnic associations) and grassroots lived spaces (household rituals).

The study's reflexive approach to insider-outsider dynamics constitutes a significant methodological advancement. As a culturally fluent researcher navigating Toronto's politically stratified Iranian diaspora, I implemented generational brokerage strategies to mediate pre/post-Revolution immigrant narratives, geopolitical sensitivity protocols for discussions of recent sociopolitical unrest, and secular-religious interface techniques balancing ritual literacy with professional boundaries. These measures transformed potential biases into analytic assets, leveraging cultural capital to access guarded communities while maintaining critical distance.

By synthesizing spatial theory with mixed methods and reflexive rigour, this approach establishes an adaptable framework for studying the dialectical relationship between urban structures and immigrant agency. It attends to the interplay between material conditions and

affective dimensions, offering a more holistic and nuanced understanding of immigrants' complex and multidimensional experiences of integration. The methodological innovations in visual participatory methods, multiscalar triangulation which is informed by Lefebvre's spatial triad set new standards for research in contested diaspora spaces, particularly for analyzing visible minorities in gateway cities. By adopting a mixed-methods design, this study bridges macro-level spatial patterns with micro-level lived experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of immigrants' complex and multidimensional experiences of integration.

Policy implications

As Canada increasingly relies on immigration to sustain demographic and economic growth, cities like Toronto have become laboratories of superdiversity (Vertovec et al., 2023), where newcomers from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds negotiate complex pathways to belonging. This thesis, through its focus on Iranian immigrants — as established individuals with professional backgrounds — reveals that integration is not a linear process but a multidimensional interplay of residential, socioeconomic, and emotional recognition. Meaningful belonging, as articulated by participants, emerges when immigrants achieve societal validation, social mobility, and affective ties to place across interconnected domains. These insights challenge policymakers to move beyond siloed metrics of integration and adopt holistic frameworks that reflect the lived realities of increasingly diverse populations.

This research underscores the need for comprehensive policy frameworks that address the structural, cultural, and emotional dimensions of immigrant experiences. First, urban planners and policymakers must recognize that immigrant settlement patterns are not merely shaped by economic factors but also by cultural values and structural constraints. Housing initiatives are crucial to ensure equitable access to desirable neighbourhoods for all immigrant groups,

particularly those who face systemic barriers in accessing advantaged areas (Piekut et al., 2019; Sharkey, 2013).

Second, another critical area is the recognition of foreign credentials, particularly for skilled professionals such as university professors, surgeons, and physicians, who often face significant challenges in requalifying for their professions in Canada (Bourgeault et al., 2010; Girard & Bauder, 2022; Guo, 2013). Streamlining credential recognition processes and expanding bridging programs tailored to high-demand sectors like healthcare and academia are essential to enable these professionals to access meaningful employment opportunities more quickly, thereby facilitating socioeconomic mobility. Additionally, gender-sensitive programs should be prioritized to address the unique challenges faced by immigrant men and women in balancing professional aspirations. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, professional networking opportunities can empower immigrants to achieve their full potential while contributing to family-level integration outcomes.

Third, the findings of this study suggest that policymakers should support ethnic associations and cultural organizations that facilitate professional networking, cultural exchanges, and leadership development within immigrant communities (Boccagni & Pilat, 2015; Veronis, 2013). These associations play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage while fostering integration into broader society. Programs aimed at promoting intercultural engagement can help bridge divides between immigrant groups and non-immigrant residents, fostering mutual understanding and inclusivity. Addressing challenges such as intergenerational divides or political fragmentation within immigrant communities requires nuanced approaches that promote internal cohesion while encouraging broader societal participation. Lastly, supporting cross-

cultural events or intergenerational initiatives within immigrant communities can enhance social cohesion while promoting mutual understanding between diverse groups.

These recommendations collectively advocate for policies that mirror the relational complexity of integration. By centering immigrants' agency in navigating integration's paradoxes – preserving heritage while forging new identities – this thesis redefines belonging as both a structural outcome and an affective achievement, essential for building inclusive cities in an era of global migration.

Concluding remarks

As cities continue to diversify, understanding the processes through which immigrants transform spaces into sites of memory and aspiration becomes increasingly crucial for fostering inclusive environments that celebrate diversity while promoting social cohesion. This thesis demonstrates that immigrant integration is not solely about achieving economic stability or spatial proximity but involves cultivating meaningful relationships with people and places that foster an emotional sense of belonging. By illuminating how Iranian immigrants reshape suburban landscapes into sites of memory and aspiration, this research challenges policymakers and scholars to move beyond simplistic narratives of diversity or assimilation. Instead, it advocates for frameworks that honour immigrants' spatial creativity, emotional complexity, and agency in forging belonging. By embracing this perspective, cities like Toronto can foster inclusive environments where immigrants actively contribute to the social fabric while preserving their heritage and aspirations. This approach not only benefits immigrant communities but also enriches broader society by promoting diversity, equity, and social cohesion in an era of increasing global mobility. In an era where migration reshapes cities

worldwide, this work underscores a universal truth: home is not simply where one lives but how one *lives*—through practices that weave identity and community into the fabric of place.

Future research should extend this approach to other immigrant groups with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to explore how different intersections of race, class, gender, and migration histories shape integration pathways. Comparative research involving other immigrant groups in Toronto, across different Canadian cities and even beyond would help test the generalizability of the multidimensional framework developed here. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into how integration trajectories and senses of belonging evolve over time, particularly across generations. Additionally, future research ought to explore the impact of changing housing markets, immigration policies, and transnational ties on the integration experiences of Iranian and other immigrant communities. Such inquiries would further refine our understanding of the complex, relational, and dynamic processes that underpin immigrant integration in Canada and other superdiverse societies.

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Appendix I: Certificate of Ethics Approval

11/10/2022

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

S-09-22-8425

Titre du projet / Project Title

The Social Significance of
Housing for Iranian Immigrant in
the Toronto CMA

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral
thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Approuvé / Approved

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

11/10/2022

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

10/10/2023

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

**Chercheur /
Researcher**

Affiliation

Role

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University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Riana MARCOTTE

Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer

Pour/For **Barbara GRAVES** Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

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Appendix II: Consent Forms

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Stage one: key informant interview consent form

Title of the study: The Social Significance of Housing for Iranian Immigrants in Toronto

Negar Valizadeh
Ph.D. Student
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Supervisor: Luisa Veronis
Associate professor
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Invitation to Key informant: I, _____, am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Negar Valizadeh, under the supervision of Dr. Luisa Veronis of the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: I understand that the purpose of the study is to examine the social significance of housing for Iranian immigrants living in the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) with respect to their gender and cultural identities. The aim is to understand not only the social meaning of housing and neighbourhood choices for Iranian immigrant men and women but also the implications of how their residential mobility from apartments (in Iran) to single-family housing in the suburbs may influence their integration and the way they relate to the broader heterogeneous environment in which they live.

Participation: My participation will consist of discussing my experiences as a professional real estate agent supporting Iranian clients with their search for housing in the suburbs of Toronto. The personal interview will last approximately 60-90 min, during which time we will discuss my thoughts on the role of home and neighbourhood in the formation of a sense of identity, community and belonging for Iranian immigrants based on my experience as a real estate agent. I will also be asked about the role of housing on Iranian immigrants' integration experiences and social status in Canadian society. This audio-recorded discussion is designed to help the researcher gather information about the social meaning of home and neighbourhood for Iranian immigrants following their immigration to Canada. This interview will take place at _____ on _____.

Inconveniences and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this personal interview. **Benefits:** My participation in this study will help the researcher to better understand what the choice of housing and neighbourhood means for Iranian immigrants in Canada relative to their housing experiences in my country of origin based on my experience as a real estate agent. This information will help the researcher to better understand the broader context of housing markets and neighbourhood dynamics that may influence

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Iranian immigrants' choices and experiences, including the role of culture, identity and sense of belonging while fostering common identities with co-ethnics and other minorities, as well as the value Iranian immigrants put on community ties and the significance of neighbouring.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. Only information that has been pooled with results from other interviews and stripped of personal identifiers may be used for public communication of research results. It is possible the researcher may wish to use anonymous/unattributed quotations from this interview in the thesis and in scholarly journal articles stemming from this project to illustrate important findings. Such quotations, should they occur, will be referenced using pseudonyms or codes and will not contain any information that might conceivably be used to identify the source or the participant. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the key informants will not give me clients' names or provide any information that could serve to identify clients.

Conservation of Data: I have been informed that the interviews will be audio-recorded. The notes, audio recordings and any written transcripts resulting from this discussion will be retained by the investigator for the sole purpose of research in this study. The researcher will retain these notes in their home in a locked file cabinet until 2032, at which time the notes, recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. I may request a copy of the audio recording of the interview and/or any written transcripts.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate. If I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions and receive the total compensation. Any information gathered up to the time of my withdrawal will be destroyed unless I indicate otherwise.

Questions, comments, or requests for withdrawal: If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I (*keep/print/save*) a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Key informant's name: _____ Date: _____

Key informant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Stage 2a: personal introductory interview consent form

Title of the study: The Social Significance of Housing for Iranian Immigrants in Toronto

Negar Valizadeh
Ph.D. Student
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Supervisor: Luisa Veronis
Associate professor
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Invitation to Participate: I, _____, am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Negar Valizadeh, under the supervision of Dr. Luisa Veronis of the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: I understand that the purpose of the study is to examine the social significance of housing for Iranian immigrants living in the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) with respect to their gender and cultural identities. The aim is to understand not only the social meaning of housing and neighbourhood choices for Iranian immigrant men and women, but also the implications of how their residential mobility from apartments (in Iran) to single-family housing in the suburbs may influence their integration and the way they relate to the broader heterogeneous environment in which they live.

Participation: My participation will consist of filling out a short socio-demographic questionnaire and an introductory personal interview to discuss the questions asked by the researcher. The introductory interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, during which time we will discuss my initial and current housing experiences in Canada relative to my housing experiences in the homeland. This audio-recorded discussion is designed to help the researcher gather information about the social meaning of home and neighbourhood for Iranian immigrants following their immigration to Canada. At the end of the interview, I will be trained and asked to take pictures of spaces in my home and neighbourhood that are meaningful to me in the following week. I will also be asked to use and discuss potential pictures of my home and neighbourhood that are meaningful in Iran, my country of origin. I will be instructed to avoid taking photographs of people, particularly children. If there is any identifying information, including people's faces, the researcher will make them blurred and invisible. During the interview, I will receive a compensation of \$25 for my participation. This interview will take place at _____ on _____.

Inconveniences and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this personal interview.

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Benefits: My participation in this study will help the researcher to better understand what the choice of housing and neighbourhood means for me as an Iranian immigrant in Canada relative to my housing experiences in my country of origin. I have the opportunity to share and reflect on my experiences of home and neighbourhood since arriving in Canada. We will co-produce knowledge on the social meaning of home and neighbourhood for Iranian immigrants living in the suburbs of Toronto. This information will help the researcher to shed light on how Iranian immigrants produce new social spaces evoking a sense of culture, identity and belonging while fostering common identities with co-ethnics and other minorities. This research may also shed light on the value Iranian immigrants put on community ties and the significance of neighbouring. I may gain insights into my housing trajectories, what has worked and what maybe did not work, and identify potential strategies, resources and networks that may help me improve my housing trajectories.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. Only information that has been pooled with results from other interviews and stripped of personal identifiers may be used for public communication of research results. It is possible the researcher may wish to use anonymous/unattributed quotations and photos from this interview in scholarly journal articles stemming from this project, to illustrate important findings. Such quotations and photos, should they occur, will be referenced using pseudonyms or codes, and will not contain any information that might conceivably be used to identify the source or the participant.

Conservation of Data: I have been informed that the interviews will be audio-recorded. The notes, audio recordings and any written transcripts resulting from this discussion will be retained by the investigator for the sole purpose of research in this study. The researcher will retain these notes in their home in a locked file cabinet until 2032, at which time the notes, recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. I may request a copy of the audio recording of the interview and/or any written transcripts.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate. If I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions and receive the total compensation. Any information gathered up to the time of my withdrawal will be destroyed unless I indicate otherwise.

Questions, comments, or requests for withdrawal: If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I (*keep/print/save*) a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____ Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Stage 2b: second interview consent form

Title of the study: The Social Significance of Housing for Iranian Immigrants in Toronto

Negar Valizadeh
Ph.D. Student
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Supervisor: Luisa Veronis
Associate professor
Department of Geography,
Environment and Geomatics

Invitation to Participate: I, _____, am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Negar Valizadeh, under the supervision of Dr. Luisa Veronis of the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Study: I understand that the purpose of the study is to examine the social significance of housing for Iranian immigrants living in the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) with respect to their gender and cultural identities. The aim is to understand not only the social meaning of housing and neighbourhood choices for Iranian immigrant men and women, but also the implications of how their residential mobility from apartments (in Iran) to single-family housing in the suburbs may influence their integration and the way they relate to the broader heterogeneous environment in which they live.

Participation: My participation will consist of discussing 5-10 photographs that I have taken and selected in the previous week for the purpose of this research. The personal interview and photovoice interview will last approximately 60-90 min, during which time we will discuss the role of home and neighbourhood in the formation of a sense of identity, community and belonging. I will also be asked about the role of housing on my integration experiences and social status in Canadian society. This audio-recorded discussion is designed to help the researcher gather information about the social meaning of home and neighbourhood for Iranian immigrants following their immigration to Canada. I understand that these photos will be used for the research project on the social significance of housing for Iranian immigrants in Toronto. According to the researcher's instructions, I avoided taking photographs of people, particularly children. I understand if there is any identifying information, including people's faces, they will be blurred and invisible.

I give consent for:

- the public use of the photographs in the thesis and for any future publications that may result from the research study;
- the use of the photographs only for research analysis but not any future publications that may result from the research study;

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This interview will take place at _____ on _____.

Inconveniences and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this personal interview.

Benefits: My participation in this study will help the researcher to better understand what the choice of housing and neighbourhood means for me as an Iranian immigrant in Canada relative to my housing experiences in my country of origin. I have the opportunity to share and reflect on my experiences of home and neighbourhood since arriving in Canada. We will co-produce knowledge on the social meaning of home and neighbourhood for Iranian immigrants living in the suburbs of Toronto. This information will help the researcher to shed light on how Iranian immigrants produce new social spaces evoking a sense of culture, identity and belonging while fostering common identities with co-ethnics and other minorities. This research may also shed light on the value Iranian immigrants put on community ties and the significance of neighbouring. I may gain insights into my housing trajectories, what has worked and what maybe did not work, and identify potential strategies, resources and networks that may help me improve my housing trajectories.

Confidentiality and Privacy: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. Only information that has been pooled with results from other interviews and stripped of personal identifiers may be used for public communication of research results. It is possible the researcher may wish to use anonymous/unattributed quotations and photos from this interview in the thesis and in scholarly journal articles stemming from this project, to illustrate important findings. Such quotations and photos, should they occur, will be referenced using pseudonyms or codes, and will not contain any information that might conceivably be used to identify the source or the participant.

Conservation of Data: I have been informed that the interviews will be audio-recorded. The notes, photos, audio recordings and any written transcripts resulting from this discussion will be retained by the investigator for the sole purpose of research in this study. The researcher will retain these notes in their home in a locked file cabinet until 2032, at which time the notes, photos, recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. I may request a copy of the audio recording of the interview and/or any written transcripts.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate. If I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions. Any information gathered up to the time of my withdrawal will be destroyed unless I indicate otherwise.

Questions, comments, or requests for withdrawal: If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I (*keep/print/save*) a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____ Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix III: Interview Guides

Stage 1: key informant interview guide

Date and time: _____

Place: _____

Interviews with key informants, such as ethnic real estate agents, will be used to collect additional, contextual information about the significance of housing for Iranian immigrants in the suburbs of Toronto.

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Theme: Initial questions
Can you tell me a little about your work (as a real estate agent) and your professional network? How do you find your clients? Who comprises the most significant proportion of your clients? Are they Iranian immigrants, and/or do they belong to different ethnic groups?
Can you tell me a little about what attracts Iranian immigrants in the suburbs of North York, Richmond Hill, Markham and Vaughan? What are the most significant factors that Iranian immigrants choose to live in these suburbs?
Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to culture and identity
Can you tell me a little about how Iranian immigrants feel about the suburban lifestyle in Toronto?
• According to your experiences with Iranian clients, how do they feel about the area of their residence? • Are they interested in living in suburban houses rather than apartments? How do they adjust to a suburban lifestyle, which contrasts with their apartment living style in Iran? • Are there any differences in this adjustment for Iranian men and women? How do women feel about their suburban houses? Do they feel a sense of comfort or ease, or rather isolation, loneliness? • Do you think they experience a heavier burden in terms of domestic work in suburban houses than in apartments?
Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to social mobility and integration processes
Can you tell me your thoughts about Iranian immigrants' spatial concentration in these suburbs?
• Would it facilitate or impede them from integrating into Canadian society's dominant norms and cultures? • Do you think living in the suburbs of North York, Richmond Hill, Markham, and Vaughan is an indicator of the social status for Iranian immigrant households? Do you feel their desire to live in suburban houses expresses their social status? • How do you think that Iranian immigrants' residence in these suburbs fulfills their expectations of social status and economic progress relative to their housing experiences in Iran?

- According to your experiences with Iranian immigrants' clients, do you think they are more concerned with the social status of their residences when searching for housing? Do they think of their housing as a financial investment?
- Are they experiencing social mobility when searching for housing (moving from a lower quality home/neighbourhood to better ones)?

Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to community building

Can you tell me how your clients, as Iranian immigrants, feel about living in close proximity to their co-ethnics?

- Do you think that Iranian immigrants choose to live close to their co-ethnics to build their ethnic community?
- According to your experiences with Iranian clients, how do they feel about living in close proximity to other ethnic groups?
- Do they prefer to experience neighbouring with their co-ethnics or other ethnic groups such as white Canadians or visible minority immigrant groups?
- Do you think living close to their co-ethnics, ethnic businesses, and services helped Iranian immigrants feel at home? Do you think that Iranian immigrants feel a sense of belonging to their homes and neighbourhoods in the suburbs of Toronto? Are they more attached to their homes in Canada or their origin homes?
- Do you think living in the suburbs close to co-ethnics has helped them improve their social interactions and relationships?

Introductory Interview Guide

Date and time: _____

Place: _____

This introductory session aims to help me as a researcher better understand whom I am speaking to. Please note that your participation is voluntary, and you can choose to stop anytime during the interview and ask questions if you do not understand. You may withdraw anytime should you wish to do so. All the information collected will be kept confidential.

A. Survey

1.	Name: Pseudonym:
2.	Age: a. 30-34 b. 35-39 c. 40-44 d. 45-49 e. 50-54 f. 55-59
3.	Gender: a. Female b. Male c. Non-binary d. There is no option that applies to me (please specify):
4.	What is your marital status? e. Single f. Married/common law relationship g. Separated h. Divorced i. Widowed j. Other, please specify:
5.	Do you have children? a. Yes, how many: b. No
6.	Under which admission category did you immigrate to Canada? a. Economic immigrant b. Family reunification
7.	Year of arrival in Canada?
8.	In which district or suburb do you currently reside in the Toronto CMA? a. North York b. Markham c. Richmond Hill d. Vaughan

9.	Which year did you arrive in Canada?
10.	Did you arrive in Canada alone or with your family? a. Alone b. With family members, please specify:
11.	Are you a Canadian citizen? a. Yes b. No
12.	What is your level of education? a. Diploma b. College/vocational training degree c. Bachelor degree d. Masters Degree e. Ph.D. degree f. Other, please specify:
13.	Please specify your occupation? a. Homemaker b. Employed for salary c. Self-employed d. Student e. Retired f. Out of work and looking for job positions g. Out of work but not looking for job positions h. Unable to work i. Other, please specify:
14.	Please indicate your annual household income? a. Less than \$10,000 b. \$10,000-\$29,000 c. \$30,000-\$49,000 d. \$50,000-\$69,000 e. \$70,000-\$99,000 f. \$100 or more
15.	Please specify your housing tenure? a. Homeowner (no mortgage) b. Homeowner with mortgage c. Renter d. Other, please specify:
16.	If relevant, please indicate what share (%) of your household income is allocated to your mortgage or rent payment? a. 0% b. Less than 10% c. 10% d. 20% e. 30% f. 40% g. 50% or more
17.	Please indicate your dwelling type?

	a. Single-detached house b. Semi-detached house c. Row house d. Apartment in a building that has fewer than 5 storeys e. Apartment in a building that has more than 5 storeys f. Other, please specify:
--	--

B. First Semi-structured Interview Guide

Theme: Initial housing experience	
Description of participants' initial experience of housing and neighbourhood in Canada	Can you tell me a little about yourself, your housing and settlement experiences since arriving in Canada? Where did you initially settle when you arrived in Canada and why? <i>In which city/suburb did you first live when you arrived in Canada and why?</i> <i>Did you directly settle in the city/suburb you currently live in? If yes, why? If not, why did you move?</i> How long have you been here? Why did you move in there (first/previous home)? Why did you move out of there (first/previous home)? Why did you move here (new home)?
Theme: Current housing experience	
Description of participants' current experience of housing and neighbourhood in Toronto	For how long have you lived in your current residence? Why and how did you choose to reside in your current housing and neighbourhood? <i>What are the most important reasons/factors that influenced you to choose your current residence?</i> How would you describe your feelings about the area where you live? <i>Is this a place that you feel at "home"? How so? Please explain.</i> What do you like/dislike, value/disvalue about where you live? <i>Tell me about whether there is anything in the area that makes you feel comfortable/uncomfortable? How so, why?</i> Is there anything you would you like to change in the area where you live? How so, why? How likely are you to move out of the current housing and neighbourhood? Why? Or why not?

	Are there any other areas where you would like to move to? Why? What are the characteristics of those areas? <i>Tell me about whether your current housing and neighbourhood fulfil your expectations about conditions in Canada relative to your housing experiences in Iran prior to migration? How so? Please explain.</i> Tell me about whether your feelings, sense of comfort or ease about the area where you live have been transformed during the time you have resided here? How so? Please explain.
Theme: Homeland's housing experience	
Description of participants' experience of housing and neighbourhood in Iran	I would now like to ask you about your living experiences in your home country, before immigration, and how these compare to your housing experiences since arriving in Canada. Where did you live in Iran? How was the type of your housing and neighbourhood like? Please describe (built environment, community/ social surroundings, etc.) How would you describe your feelings about your home and neighbourhood in Iran? Please explain. <i>Probes: did you feel a sense of comfort, attachment, even sense of belonging, did you feel at 'home' – how so and why? please describe.</i> Tell me about whether you feel a sense of emotional attachment to your home and neighbourhood in Iran? How so, why? Please explain. What memories of that place stick in your mind? What did you like/dislike, value/disvalue about that? Why and how? Please explain. How do you compare your experience of living in an apartment (or other type of housing) before and living in houses and suburbs after immigration to Canada? How do you compare your quality of life in terms of built environment, infrastructure, services, transportation before after immigration to Canada?

	How do you compare the quality of your social networks and relationships before after immigration to Canada? Would you like to move back to the area where you lived in Iran? Why, how so? Please discuss.
--	--

Second Interview Guide

Date and time: _____

Place: _____

The second interview session help me as a researcher to delve deeper into the meanings and emotions of housing and neighbourhood for participants.

A. Second Semi- structured interview Guide

Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to culture and identity	
Participants' views of housing and neighbourhood and its relation to culture, identity and a sense of belonging	Tell me about whether the material and social characteristics of your current home and neighbourhood express your culture and identity? How do they facilitate you to retain your Iranian culture and identity? Tell me about whether you feel a sense of belonging and attachment to your current place? How so, why? Or why not? How do you feel about living in close proximity to Iranian ethnic businesses and services? How has the suburban lifestyle changed your everyday practices and habits? Tell me about whether a suburban lifestyle and living in houses rather than apartments in high- density neighbourhoods made you feel away from your culture and identity prior to immigration to Canada? <i>Tell me about your gendered roles and gendered relations at home? Has suburban lifestyle and living in houses changed the gendered division of labour in the domestic life of your household after immigration to Canada? How so, why? Please explain.</i>
Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to social mobility and integration processes	
Participants' views of housing and neighbourhood and its relation to their social mobility and integration processes	Where did you live before you moved to your current residence and why? Why did you move out of there? Please explain. Where did you live before your previous residence? Why did you move there? Please explain. Why did you move out of there? Please explain. How many times have you moved? How do you describe your social status and economic situation in Canada compared to Iran?

	What is your priority when you seek housing? Are you more concerned with the role of housing and neighbourhood as social status and financial investment? Please discuss. <i>Tell me about whether your housing attainments and social status fulfill your expectations and what you were hoping to? How so, why?</i> <i>Tell me about the role of housing and neighbourhood in your integration experiences in Canada? Did it help to be intergrated into Canadian society? How so, why?</i>
Theme: Housing and neighbourhood in relation to community building	
Participants' views of housing and neighbourhood and its relation to their experience of neighbouring and a sense of community with their co-ethnics and other ethnic groups	Tell me about whether your suburban lifestyle and living in the house helped you to develop a sense of community? How so, why? Or why not? Tell me about whether suburban lifestyle has changed your feelings and perspectives of neighbouring? Please discuss. <i>Tell me about whether a suburban lifestyle and living in a house has influenced your social interactions and relationships with your neighbours from the same/different ethnic group? How so, why?</i> <i>Tell me about if your social networks and relationships in your neighbourhood helped you feel at "home"? How so, why?</i> How do you compare your social networks and relationships with neighbours (Iranians or other ethnic groups) in Toronto compared to those you had prior to immigration in Iran? How do you feel about living in close proximity to other Iranians in the ethno-racial diversity of Toronto CMA? <i>Do you prefer to live in close proximity to Iranians or other ethnic groups such as white Canadians and visible minority immigrant groups (e.g., Asians)? Why? Please discuss.</i>

B. Photovoice Interview Guide

How do photographs convey the meaning of housing and neighbourhood for participants?

- How do these photographs indicate participants' social status? How do they express his/her social mobility in Canada and Iran?
- How do these photographs express a sense of belonging to participant's area of residence both in Canada and in Iran?
- How do these photographs reveal the nature of your relationships with neighbours and community ties (Iranians or other ethnic groups)?

- How do these photographs indicate participant's lifestyle, gender relations, domesticity and gendered practices in his/her homes in Iran and Toronto?

Please describe the photographs you have taken and chosen.

Why did you choose these photographs to share with me? What is in these photographs that you would like to express? Please discuss.

How do these photographs express your experience of suburban home and neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada? Please explain.

How do these photographs express your experience of home and neighbourhood in Iran? Please explain.

How do you compare these photographs with respect to the characteristics of your current place and the area you lived in prior to immigration?

How do you describe your feelings about these photographs?