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**Dr. Akbar Zare Shahabadi, Dr. Mohammad Bay Basharat Rahamani,
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Dr. Akbar Zare Shahabadi¹, Dr. Mohammad Bay Basharat Rahamani², Dr. Sayed Mohammad Firozi³

¹ Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran.

<a_zare@yazd.ac.ir> ORCID: 0000-0003-3421-1036

² Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences Kabul Education University, Kabul, Afghanistan. <m.basharat2222@gmail.com> ORCID: 0009-0002-0996-7974

³ Former Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Baghlan University, Afghanistan. Currently a researcher at the Academy in Exile, TU Dortmund University, Germany. <mohammad.firozi@tu-dortmund.de> ORCID: 0000-0002-3886-7326

Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the cultural impacts of the U.S. and allied presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Utilizing a critical paradigm and a qualitative research approach, this study explores the perspectives of Afghan cultural and social elites. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 28 participants who were critical of the US and Western presence in Afghanistan. While the participants – and the critical research paradigm of this study – acknowledged that such presence had positive dimensions, the critical paradigm focused on examining its perceived negative cultural impacts, and was analyzed using thematic analysis. From the interviews, several key sub-themes emerged: the weakening of indigenous culture, the expansion of Western cultural values, project-based cultural institutions, the spread of militant cultural capital, cultural distortion, shifts in consumer behavior, cultural vulgarization, the secularization of social culture, changes in lifestyle, and cultural lag and discrimination. These sub-themes were synthesized into the overarching theme of a “cultural crisis.” The findings reveal that the two-decade presence of the United States in Afghanistan left profound cultural imprints beyond political and security dimensions. By introducing abrupt changes and externally imposed values, the intervention contributed to the erosion of cultural identity, social fragmentation, and increased cultural dependency. Instead of fostering sustainable development, Afghan society experienced intergenerational gaps, tensions between tradition and modernity, and the proliferation of an imitative culture, all culminating in an overarching cultural crisis.

Keywords: United States, Afghanistan, Occupation, Critical Analysis, Crisis, Culture, 2001-2021



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1. Introduction

In the past century, Afghanistan has endured three major invasions by global powers: the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Each of these invasions has left behind profound socio-cultural consequences. The British invasions,¹ including the Anglo-Afghan wars, resulted in Afghanistan's formal independence but also introduced ethnic conflicts, increased dependence on foreign powers, and setbacks in social development.² The Soviet invasion of 1979, driven by communist ideology, led to the destruction of cultural infrastructures and the rise of jihadist movements, culminating in prolonged civil wars and mass displacement.³

According to critics of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the 2001 U.S. invasion, launched under slogans such as democracy, human rights, and reconstruction, likewise brought about significant cultural repercussions that diverted the country from its natural developmental path and disrupted its social and cultural order. While the U.S. campaign may have achieved some positive results in certain domains, its cultural interventions caused notable damage,⁴ warranting critical examination.

As viewed by critics of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. intervention⁵ diverted Afghanistan from its organic trajectory of cultural development, reinforcing foreign dependency and eroding cultural autonomy.⁶ American presence led to structural changes in Afghan cultural values, such as the erosion of traditional norms and the emergence of new values that often clashed with local realities, producing cultural and social dissonance. Simultaneously, the intensification of internal conflicts and mass migrations following the U.S. intervention significantly impacted Afghan cultural identity. Migration weakened the preservation of indigenous culture and accelerated the penetration of foreign cultural elements.⁷

From the perspective of critics of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. intervention has profoundly altered Afghanistan's cultural fabric and societal order. It has not only transformed material and non-material values but also disrupted political, social, and cultural structures. The influx of foreign cultural elements led to a state of cultural disarray, leaving Afghan society suspended between tradition and modernity. These shifts weakened national pride, undermined social cohesion, and intensified the clash between traditional and modern values. As a result, Afghan society entered a state of cultural anomie, fostering skepticism toward modern life and strengthening conservative tendencies.⁸

From a cultural standpoint, today's Afghanistan reflects a disrupted order and a socio-cultural crisis, largely induced by the entrance and withdrawal of global powers. This instability has exacerbated the tension between traditional and modern cultural

¹ Britain launched military invasions of Afghanistan three times: the first from 1839 to 1842, the second between 1878 and 1880, and the third in 1919, which led to Afghanistan's full independence.

² Nozar Shafiee, "Strategic Issues and Trends in Afghanistan," *Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (2023): 98–110.

³ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁴ Shuja Jamal, "When Diplomacy Is More Harmful to Human Rights than Conflict: The Effects of America's Deal with the Taliban," *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 28, nos. 2–3 (2022): 442–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2022.2135168>.

⁵ The U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, was carried out under the banner of "the war on terror" following the September 11, 2001, attacks on U.S. soil by Al-Qaeda.

⁶ Abdul Qahar Sarwari, *Afghanistan: Chronic Crisis and Its Solution* (Kabul: Khorasan Publishing, 2019).

⁷ Rohollah Eslami and Wahidullah Rahimi, "The Antagonistic Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in Afghanistan and the Violent Outcome (1919–1929)," *Central Eurasia Studies* 17, no. 1 (2024): 27–52.

⁸ Atiqullah Monib, "A Historical Look at the Reforms of Amir Amanullah Khan," *Kunduz University International Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences* (2024): 149–64, <https://kuijis.edu.af/index.php/kuijis/article/view/111>.

forces. The current cultural disorientation calls for an in-depth academic investigation to uncover its root causes and long-term effects. Despite the volume of studies on Afghanistan's political and security landscape, relatively few have focused on the cultural consequences of the U.S. invasion. Thus, a significant research gap exists.

This study seeks to address that gap by critically analyzing the cultural impacts of the U.S. and allied presence over the past two decades, drawing exclusively on the perspectives of Afghan social and cultural elites who are critics of this presence. The main research question guiding this inquiry is: What are the negative cultural consequences of the twenty-year U.S. presence in Afghanistan as perceived by these critical social and cultural elites?

2. Literature Review

Sayed Hashim Hashemi argues that tradition and cultural identity in Afghanistan have consistently reproduced elements of disorder, thereby obstructing the scientific and participatory governance of society and its transition toward a new socio-political order. Moreover, he identifies ethnic-centered state policies and shifts in official language as among the most significant contributors to political instability and disorder.⁹ Mohammad G. Eisazai et al. demonstrate that NATO's mission in Afghanistan, despite its proclaimed goals of establishing security and stability, encountered profound cultural and social challenges. Ultimately, it left behind a legacy of multiple crises and cultural fragmentation.¹⁰

Saei and Zaki show that the Loya Jirga, in contexts where tribalism was weakened and socio-economic development had occurred, supported democratization. Conversely, in settings marked by strong tribal structures, the Loya Jirga tended to align with authoritarianism.¹¹

Najafizada and Vahid find that international aid after 2001 not only failed to meet the basic needs of the Afghan population but also contributed to the spread of a culture of corruption and dependency.¹²

Ramyar, Majdi, and Mazlum Khorasani contend that foreign aid positively impacted human development, education, and healthcare. However, it had little to no effect on improving security, reducing unemployment, or curbing narcotics production.¹³

Finally, Hossai Khalili maintains that U.S.-led interventions after September 11, beginning with Afghanistan and culminating in Iraq, aimed at regime transformation under the banner of counterterrorism. He argues that the failure of preemptive

⁹ Sayed Hashim Hashemi, "A Historical Approach to Identifying the Factors of Crisis and Political Disorder in Contemporary Afghanistan," *Ma'rifat Farhangi Ejtemai* 13, no. 1 (2022): 53.

¹⁰ Mohammad G. Eisazai, Ali Amininia, and Javad Hasanpour, "Investigating the Moral Violations of the Decisions of International Organizations with the Withdrawal of NATO Troops from Afghanistan," *Political Sociology of Iran* 5, no. 11 (2023): 4568–4574, <https://doi.org/10.30510/psi.2022.297674.2067>.

¹¹ Ali Saei and Mohammad Baqer Zaki, "Analysis of the Political Construction of the State in Iran and Civil Society in Afghanistan: Case Study of the Loya Jirga (1928–2003)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2022): 251–76, <http://jhs.modares.ac.ir/article-25-44895-en.html>.

¹² Said Jawid Najafizada and Abdulhadi Vahid, "Construction Contracts in Afghanistan; the Factor of Development or Source of Corruption," *Legal Research Quarterly* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.22034/jlr.2018.155974.1268>.

¹³ S. J. Ramyar, A. A. Majdi, and Mohammad Mazlum Khorasani, "The Role of Foreign Aids in Economic and Social Development of Afghanistan," *Journal of Political Sociology of Islamic World* 6, no. 13 (2018): 1–32.

intervention and imposed democratization not only fell short of expected outcomes but also intensified security crises in Iraq and the broader region.¹⁴

2.1 Conceptual Framework

In sociology, the concept of culture is defined as a set of shared meanings that include values, norms, behavioral practices, and both material and immaterial productions. Edward Tylor describes culture as a complex whole that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, and customs. Likewise, Jean Cazeneuve and Ralph Linton have defined culture as the outcome of human efforts in social life and the transmission of values and traditions from one generation to the next.¹⁵

Military invasion can profoundly alter the cultural values and belief systems within a society. These transformations often arise from encounters with foreign norms and behaviors. Cultural values such as dignity, trust, and honesty may be undermined during periods of occupation, replaced by shifting political and economic values like power and wealth. At the same time, culture functions as a vessel for preserving national identity. Cultural changes triggered by military interventions can have significant effects on identity formation and social cohesion.¹⁶ In the aftermath of such invasions, societies frequently face challenges, including the erosion of cultural identity, disruption of value systems, and the emergence of cultural conflicts.¹⁷ Consequently, cultural reconstruction becomes essential to restore original societal values and beliefs. This process may involve reforming the education system and reinforcing cultural foundations.¹⁸

Cultural change in any society typically occurs through interaction with other cultures. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military and political presence accelerated such transformations. However, these changes have not always led to cultural advancement; rather, they have often produced identity-related and cultural tensions. Moreover, lifestyle is directly shaped by individuals' cultural capital.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, the introduction of new forms of cultural capital from the West has notably altered the lifestyles of youth, especially in urban centers. Education, as one manifestation of cultural capital, has a direct correlation with individual happiness and success.²⁰ Nonetheless, these changes have frequently clashed with local cultural and social expectations, leading to negative consequences in many regions.

Cultural development is also closely linked to economic development.²¹ In Afghanistan, the cultural transformations following the U.S. invasion facilitated the entry of new technologies and skills. However, these advancements were accompanied by growing economic dependency. The U.S. intervention also widened cultural divides within Afghan society. The influx of Western values undermined national identity and contributed to identity crises – particularly among younger generations influenced by Western media and education. The invasion introduced

¹⁴ Hossai Khalili, "The Intensification of Security Crisis in Iraq during the Course of 'Pre-emptive Operations,'" *Political Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2008): 39–59.

¹⁵ Leslie A. White, "The Concept of Culture," *American Anthropologist* 61, no. 2 (1959): 227–51.

¹⁶ Martyn Hammersley, *The Concept of Culture: A History and Reappraisal* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).

¹⁷ Masoud Chalabi, *Sociology of Order: Explanation and Analysis of the Theory of Social Order* (Tehran: Ney Publishing, 2016).

¹⁸ Manouchehr Mohseni, *Public Sociology* (Tehran: Tahouri Publishing, 2023).

¹⁹ Rasoul Rabani Khorasgani, Ali Rabani, Mohammad Reza Abedi, and Mohammad Ganji, "Culture and Happiness: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach to the Everyday Life of Household Heads in the City of Isfahan," *Iranian Journal of Cultural and Communication Studies*, no. 8 (2007): 41–78.

²⁰ Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²¹ Rabani Khorasgani et al., "Culture and Happiness,"

extensive changes to Afghan social norms and values, from everyday lifestyles to interpersonal relationships, which resulted in intergenerational conflicts and deepening cultural challenges.²²

Cultural transformations also affect individuals' emotional and psychological states.²³ In Afghanistan, the importation of new value systems amidst cultural contradictions has led to dissatisfaction and psychological distress among some segments of society. Overall, the U.S. invasion has had profound effects on Afghanistan's cultural fabric. These include the modernization of education systems, the imposition of Western values, and the creation of cultural rifts. The following sections discuss several theoretical perspectives relevant to this topic.

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony explains how dominant groups impose their values and ideologies through cultural institutions, the media, and education systems, presenting them as the natural order of society. Cultural hegemony operates through Western media, education, and cultural policies, replacing indigenous values with Western ones. Over time, this process weakens local cultural systems and fosters identity crises, in line with Gramsci's theoretical claims.²⁴ Similarly, Herbert Schiller's (1976) theory of cultural imperialism emphasizes that cultural domination is a key tool used by foreign powers to penetrate other societies. In Afghanistan, this imperialism was exercised not only through global media but also through the cultural agendas of international organizations, resulting in widespread changes in lifestyles and social attitudes. While these changes appeared to promote modernization, they in fact amounted to a form of cultural neo-colonialism that exacerbated social and cultural crises.²⁵

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural reproduction posits that educational and cultural systems unconsciously reproduce dominant values and solidify cultural inequalities. In Afghanistan, educational institutions shaped under foreign influence not only marginalized native culture but also institutionalized a new cultural capital rooted in Western values, thereby deepening generational and class divides.²⁶

Postcolonial studies offer a contemporary framework for analyzing the cultural and social conditions of non-Western societies, focusing on the legacies of colonialism and associated discourses. These studies aim to challenge Western hegemony and reverse the traditional Western gaze on the "other." The scope of postcolonial critique spans literary and cultural criticism to economic and political analysis.²⁷ In international relations, post-colonialism focuses on exposing power relations and colonial knowledge systems and their cultural implications in non-Western countries.²⁸ From a theoretical perspective, post-colonialism examines the cultural impacts of colonialism and how they are represented in literature, ethnography, and cinema. The theory critiques the colonial legacy and suggests new ways of critical representation. Drawing from postmodernism and post-structuralism, postcolonial

²² Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²³ Rabani Khorasgani et al., "Culture and Happiness."

²⁴ Gholam Abbas Tavassoli, *Sociological Theories*, 18th ed. (Tehran: SAMT, 2016).

²⁵ Leslie A. White, "On the Concept of Culture," in *Theory in Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 15–20.

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures and the Habitus," in *Material Culture: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*, vol. 1, part 1 (London: Routledge, 2004), 116–77.

²⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "A Small History of Subaltern Studies," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 467–85.

²⁸ Neil Lazarus, "Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46, no. 1 (2011): 119–37.

theory in the humanities and social sciences offers conceptual tools to resist cultural domination and cultivate everyday forms of resistance.²⁹

3. Methodology

This study is situated within the framework of the critical paradigm, which is particularly suited for research focused on social critique, the exposure of hidden structures, and the analysis of the adverse consequences of socio-political phenomena. The critical paradigm is deemed ideal for studies examining the impacts of colonialism and occupation, as it emphasizes power relations and the deconstruction of dominant social structures.

A qualitative research approach was adopted, with thematic analysis serving as the main analytical strategy. This approach was deemed appropriate for understanding both the subjective and objective dimensions of how elite critics of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan perceive its cultural consequences (2001–2021). The qualitative method was selected due to its flexibility and its capacity to deeply explore social realities and human experiences, focusing specifically on the perspectives of these critical elites.

The field of study comprises Afghan society, with a particular focus on social and cultural experts and intellectuals who are critical of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. A total of 28 participants were selected through purposive and progressive sampling, ensuring diversity across key demographic and professional backgrounds within this critical cohort. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent. The use of open-ended questions enabled participants to articulate their perspectives, experiences, and critical assessments freely.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Interviewees

No.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	Field of Study	Place of Study	Religion	Ethnicity	Main Residence
1	40	Male	Professor	PhD	Sociology	Iran	Sunni	Tajik	Takhar
2	40	Male	Professor	Master’s	Sociology	Iran	Shia	Hazara	Bamyan
3	40	Male	Professor	PhD	Sociology	Iran	Shia	Hazara	Ghazni
4	41	Male	Professor	Master’s	Sociology	Afghanistan	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan,
5	35	Male	Professor	Master’s	Islamic Studies	Pakistan	Sunni	Tajik	Kapisa
6	56	Male	Professor	Master’s	Sociology	Iran	Shia	Hazara	Bamyan
7	44	Male	Professor	PhD	Political Science	Iran	Sunni	Tajik	Takhar
8	52	Male	University Professor	Master’s	History	Iran	Shia	Hazara	Bamyan
9	42	Male	Professor	Master’s	Social Sciences	Afghanistan	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan
10	48	Male	Government Employee	Master’s	Sociology	Afghanistan	Sunni	Tajik	Kabul
11	35	Male	Professor	Master’s	Sociology	Iran	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan
12	39	Male	Professor	Master’s	Geography	Afghanistan	Hanafi	Tajik	Badakhshan
13	31	Male	Country Representative of a Company	Master’s Student	International Relations	Turkey	Sunni	Tajik	Kabul
14	30	Male	Teacher	Bachelor’s	Sociology	Afghanistan	Shia	Hazara	Ghazni
15	32	Male	Professor	Master’s	Political Geography	Iran	Sunni	Tajik	Kabul

²⁹ Roland Paris, *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

16	30	Male	Employee	Master's	International Relations	Afghanistan	Sunni	Pashtun	Badakhshan
17	27	Male	Employee	Master's	International Relations	Afghanistan	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan
18	38	Male	Employee	Master's	Criminal Law & Criminology	Afghanistan	Sunni	Sadat	Takhar
19	—	Male	Professor	PhD	Sociology	Iran, Turkey	Shia	Sadat	Kabul
20	42	Female	Professor	Master's	English Language	Iran	Sunni	Tajik	Herat
21	39	Female	Professor	Master's	Educational Management	Afghanistan	Sunni	Uzbek	Mazar
22	57	Female	Employee	Master's	International Relations	Kabul	Sunni	Tajik	Herat
23	36	Female	Professor	Master's	History	India	Sunni	Pashtun	Kandahar
24	45	Female	Professor	PhD	Psychology	Iran, Pakistan	Shia	Hazara	Kabul
25	52	Female	Professor	Master's	Law	Iran	Shia	Hazara	Kabul
26	68	Female	Cultural & Economic Activist	Bachelor's	Economics	Afghanistan	Sunni	Uzbek	Balkh
27	59	Male	Religious Scholar & Teacher	Seminary Education	General	Pakistan	Sunni	Pashtun	Kandahar
28	64	Female	Human Rights Activist	Master's	Political Science	Turkey, Tajikistan	Shia	Hazara	Bamyan

Interview data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, specifically employing Colaizzi's seven-step method. These steps included:

1. Reading all the collected data thoroughly;
2. Extracting significant statements;
3. Formulating meanings from those statements;
4. Clustering formulated meanings into themes and categories;
5. Providing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon;
6. Returning to participants for validation of the findings;
7. Establishing the study's traceability and confirmability.³⁰

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study followed the criteria recommended by Creswell and Miller,³¹ which involve eight key strategies:

- Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field;
- Triangulation of data sources and perspectives;
- Peer debriefing and collaborative review;
- Analysis of discrepant or contradictory cases;
- Clarification of researcher bias and positionality;
- Member checking by returning findings to participants for feedback;
- Thick, rich description of contexts and experiences;
- External auditing for methodological rigor.

³⁰ K. R. Praveena and S. Sasikumar, "Application of Colaizzi's Method of Data Analysis in Phenomenological Research," *Medico-Legal Update* 21, no. 2 (2021): 914–918, <https://doi.org/10.37506/mlu.v21i2.2800>.

³¹ John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller, "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," *Theory into Practice* 39, no. 3 (2000): 124–130.

4. Findings

Table 2

Primary Codes, Sub-Themes, and Core Theme of the Study

Primary Codes	Sub-Themes	Core Theme
Promotion of Western values	Undermining Indigenous Culture	Cultural Crisis-Making
Negative effects of media productions		
Cultural incompatibility		
Disregard for indigenous culture		
Promotion of non-Islamic culture		
Penetration of foreign culture	Expansion of Western Culture	
Destruction of traditional culture		
Introduction of anti-local/ethnic values		
Rise of consumerist culture		
Increase in generational conflict		
Dissemination of the Western lifestyle	Project-Based Cultural Institutions	
Dependence on foreign expertise		
Superficiality		
Inconsistency		
Temporariness		
Lack of infrastructural initiatives in education	Expansion of Belligerent Cultural Capital	
Failure of democratization goals		
Failure in the nation-building culture		
Promotion of violent attitudes		
Spread of insecurity		
Militancy	Cultural Distortion (Alienation)	
Americanized role-modeling		
Spread of normlessness		
Cultural laxity		
Spread of American culture		
Promotion of immoral values	Change in Consumption Culture	
Anti-religious cultural propaganda		
Introduction of micro-consumerist subcultures		
Rise in consumerist desires.		
Escalation of ostentatious consumption		
Proliferation of modern consumption patterns	Cultural Vulgarization	
Symbolic consumption rivalry		
Transformation in cultural values		
Negative cultural impacts		
Cultural aggression		
Western cultural propaganda	Secularization of Social Culture	
Foreign media and moral corruption		
Cultural confrontation		
Promotion of Westernism		
Marginalization of religious values		
Cultural imposition		
Intervention in beliefs		
Lack of cultural control		
Weakening of cultural values		

Shift in youth tendencies	Lifestyle Transformation
Changes in leisure activities	
Transformation of family values	
Alteration of daily cultural practices	
Neglect of rural culture	Cultural Discrimination and Lag
Duality in programming	
Rural deprivation	
Social marginalization	
Materialistic focus of cultural development	

4.1 Undermining Indigenous Culture

One of the major cultural consequences of the foreign occupation of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 was the weakening of indigenous culture. Participants in this study consistently reported that during this period, numerous authentic cultural, social, and moral elements of Afghan society were reshaped under the influence of externally imposed policies, programs, and values. According to the data, the cultural activities led by occupying powers—especially the United States—were largely aimed at eroding social cohesion and replacing native values with Western concepts. This process was carried out through various tools, including the media, the newly established education system, and both overt and covert cultural initiatives.

As one interviewee remarked:

“With the American occupation, the cultural situation in the country deteriorated daily under the influence of project-based media... Visual and print media, by publishing content contrary to Islamic values, reshaped the mindset of the younger generation. Western series and programs, which often emphasized extreme forms of individual freedom, contributed to the spread of moral corruption and deviation from Islamic principles. In another instance, he added that the overall cultural condition of the society has worsened due to the cultural invasion by foreign forces. These external countries, driven by their own national interests, operated through audiovisual and print media, airing programs that conflicted with Islamic values and diverted the youth’s mindset.” (Participant No. 17).

Another participant stated:

“U.S. policies in Afghanistan ignored the local cultural traditions and values... These publications contributed to the normalization of moral corruption and behaviors that are considered criminal under Islamic culture, but are regarded as individual liberties in the West. Another interviewee emphasized the role of U.S. policies in exacerbating ethnic and sectarian tensions, explaining that such approaches destroyed unity among various ethnic groups and increased social tensions.” (Participant No. 8).

4.2 Expansion of Western Culture

The expansion of Western culture refers to the diffusion and penetration of Western values, lifestyles, and socio-cultural norms into other societies, particularly traditional and non-Western ones. According to many interviewees in this study, this phenomenon in Afghanistan was driven primarily by colonial legacies, globalization,

technological advancements in communication, and the military-political interventions of the United States. They pointed out that the influence of Western culture was especially evident during the U.S. military occupation (2001–2021). Observable impacts included transformations in lifestyle, the acceptance of modern educational and media institutions, and the tension between traditional and modern values.

While some viewed these changes as signs of modernization and improved access to cultural and educational resources, they also recognized the serious social and familial challenges they introduced. Participants frequently noted that the spread of Western culture occurred mainly through modern media, the internet, educational programs, and social development projects. These media platforms not only promoted Western content but also advocated universal values such as human rights, freedom of speech, and gender equality—values that often clashed with Afghanistan’s traditional cultural and social structures.

As one participant highlighted the role of media:

“Liberal culture, which conflicted with the ethnic and local conditions of Afghanistan, expanded... The media operating during the two decades of the republic had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, television and internet programs showed us how different the world can be. On the other hand, they challenged traditional families, as young people began desiring things that were previously unknown in our culture. Media showed us what was possible, but they did not show us how to manage those desires.” (Participant No. 22).

Another participant linked the spread of Western culture to capitalist imperatives:

“There were generational conflicts in perceptions of the U.S. and Western culture... These are consequences of the capitalist system. Modernization is not always positive. For instance, trust within the family unit was severely damaged. During this time, families encountered new models of living that undermined traditional values. In some cases, daughters no longer trusted their mothers. This was a cultural issue imported into our society, and we were not prepared for it.” (Participant No. 2).

4.3 Project-Based Cultural Institutions

The “project-based cultural institutions” refers to a condition in which cultural organizations operate within the confines of short-term, externally funded projects rather than pursuing sustainable, long-term initiatives. According to the participants of this study, particularly during the period of foreign occupation in Afghanistan (2001–2021), such institutions increasingly became instrumentalized as vehicles for executing the political and ideological agendas of foreign actors. Respondents indicated that this led to superficiality, lack of coherence, and a detachment from the country’s genuine cultural needs. Rather than fostering long-term development and strengthening Afghanistan’s cultural identity, these institutions were largely shaped as temporary projects. The transient and externally driven character of these institutions exacerbated infrastructural weaknesses and prevented the emergence of stable educational and cultural frameworks.

One participant elaborated:

“During the occupation, cultural institutions were mostly reduced to project-based initiatives with no durability. For example, educational programs funded by foreign aid changed annually and lacked coherence or alignment with the real needs of our society. Most of these institutions focused on showcasing superficial progress, with minimal attention to the deeper cultural and educational challenges we face. This dependency on foreign agendas resulted in shallow educational and cultural interventions, disconnected from our local cultural context. Instead of addressing fundamental issues through sustainable measures, efforts were short-term and dictated by external priorities, which severely limited their effectiveness. There was no genuine attempt to improve our cultural conditions based on our realities.” (Participant No. 14).

Another respondent noted:

“Over the course of twenty years, the United States did not establish a single modern academic institution or teaching hospital. Cultural institutions in Afghanistan became fragmented, project-based bodies that mainly responded to external demands. There was no long-term planning aimed at the cultural or educational development of the country. Consequently, these institutions failed to provide meaningful benefits to society, as their functions were tailored more toward the political and economic objectives of foreign actors rather than domestic needs. This externally-driven approach created inconsistencies in cultural and educational programming. Rather than functioning as independent and sustainable institutions, they remained temporary entities tied to foreign and international bodies. As a result, they were unable to foster meaningful cultural transformation.” (Participant No. 5).

In sum, cultural institutions during this period functioned more as executive tools for achieving foreign objectives than as self-sustaining entities that could serve Afghanistan’s long-term cultural and educational development.

4.4 Expansion of Belligerent Cultural Capital

The term “Expansion of Belligerent Cultural Capital” refers to the proliferation of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that foster a culture of confrontation, violence, and insecurity within society. According to participants in this study, during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021), the declared goals of democratization and nation-building frequently failed. Rather than forging a shared national culture or strengthening a sense of collective identity, these failures often contributed to the entrenchment of violence-oriented and divisive cultural narratives. Cultural capital, which ideally would have served to reinforce national and democratic values, was instead directed toward cultivating antagonistic, divisive, and conflict-prone attitudes. Several respondents asserted that this trend amplified feelings of insecurity across various segments of society. The compounded effect of democratic failure and societal instability intensified a culture of confrontation and social unrest.

One participant described this process as follows:

“The massive presence of U.S. forces had tangible and direct impacts on the culture and customs of the Afghan people, spreading a spirit of confrontation. In recent decades—especially during the occupation—not only did democratization goals fail, but many people came to feel as though they were in constant conflict, even among themselves. This resulted in increased distrust and hostility between ethnic and social groups. The confrontational culture, often reinforced by foreign propaganda and embedded within government structures, led people to prioritize their ethnic or group identities over a unified national identity. Thus, a culture of violence and resistance took root in the country.” (Participant No. 15).

Another participant added:

“In post-2001 Afghanistan, widespread insecurity and fear of the future became common. Foreign-led democratization projects, instead of promoting unity and nation-building, deepened societal divisions and intensified group-based hostilities. In many cases, these initiatives served foreign political interests rather than responding to the genuine cultural and social needs of the Afghan people.” (Participant No. 24).

4.5 Cultural Distortion (Alienation)

Cultural disfigurement/ Distortion (Alienation) refers to the profound transformation of a society’s cultural identity under external influence—particularly Western—leading to the erosion of traditional and indigenous values, norms, and social structures. Participants in this study indicated that during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021), the process of American modeling and the imposition of Western values played a key role in this cultural disfiguration. These changes affected core aspects of daily life, including family values, social interactions, and even religious beliefs.

One respondent emphasized:

“In recent decades, especially following the U.S. intervention, we observed significant shifts in cultural and social behaviors. American cultural modeling, through a systematic effort to promote Western lifestyles and values, pulled many youth toward unethical and anti-religious behaviors. Media and television programming introduced habits and practices that contradicted our religious and cultural norms. Young people, unconsciously, began drifting away from traditional Afghan customs, leading to the deterioration of core social and cultural institutions. Western values were glamorized as hallmarks of modernity and enlightenment—such as nightlife parties and non-traditional relationships like cohabitation—none of which align with our Islamic culture.” (Participant No. 23).

Another participant remarked:

“They propagated normlessness in the name of modern living. This shift was not limited to social domains—it permeated everyday life. With the spread of American cultural influence, immoral and anti-religious behaviors became increasingly visible, leading many young people to feel

culturally disoriented. Those who had grown up with Islamic values were suddenly bombarded with media promoting lifestyles that stood in stark contrast. Over time, they grew distant from religious principles. The Afghan cultural fabric—traditionally rooted in Islamic and moral values—underwent considerable change, leaving many youth believing they needed to conform to this new order to claim a place in the modern world.” (Participant No. 18).

4.6 Change in Consumption Culture

The term “Change in Consumption Culture” refers to the evolution in patterns of goods and services consumption within a society, influenced by economic, cultural, and social shifts. Interviewees in this study believed that during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021), one of the notable cultural changes was the introduction and internalization of a consumerist subculture within Afghan society. Consumerism, in this context, emphasizes the significance of purchasing and consuming goods and services, where the value of individuals and society is increasingly associated with the quantity and prestige of material consumption.

According to respondents, this consumerist culture grew predominantly due to the widespread presence of international and Western media and advertising, which significantly altered the attitudes and behaviors of Afghan consumers. These changes manifested in heightened consumer desires, the proliferation of status competition, and the expansion of a culture rooted in material comparison. Several participants argued that the spread of new consumption patterns and the shifting economic and social standards were also key components of this transformation.

During this period, many Afghans—particularly the younger generation—gradually became aware of stark contrasts in lifestyle and consumption norms compared to the pre-occupation era. Western commercial advertisements, digital products, luxury brands, and consumption-oriented lifestyles entered the Afghan market extensively and eventually became aspirational ways of life.

As one participant described:

“Ever since foreign media entered Afghanistan and advertisements for various brands became widely accessible, Afghan society—especially the youth—began rapidly imitating the Western consumerist lifestyle. In the past, people were primarily focused on basic needs, but now more than ever, they chase the latest smartphones, popular clothing brands, and even luxury cars. These changes happened rapidly, and it felt like having the newest, branded products became necessary for social acceptance.” (Participant No. 26).

Another interviewee similarly noted:

“A culture of comparison has genuinely taken root in Afghan society. People, especially in urban areas, indirectly compete with each other, striving for higher economic and social status. This has led many—particularly the youth—to consume beyond their actual needs. In truth, consumption during this period became a marker of social success. If you did not own high-quality goods, it was as if you had no social standing.” (Participant No. 27).

In summary, the transformation of consumption culture in Afghanistan during the occupation period was significantly influenced by media advertising and the introduction of Western consumerist values. The rise in material desires, the intensification of competitive consumption, and the normalization of material comparison were among the cultural consequences driven by foreign media and cultural penetration.

4.7 Cultural Vulgarization

Cultural permissiveness refers to the erosion and breakdown of established cultural and moral norms within a society, often triggered by external influence or cultural invasion. Interviewees in this study asserted that such a phenomenon became particularly evident during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021). Western culture, transmitted through media and advertising, promoted its own lifestyle, values, and social norms. As a result, many deeply rooted Afghan cultural, religious, and social values were either altered or gradually abandoned.

This cultural shift was especially pronounced among younger generations, who were the most exposed to socio-cultural pressures. Many respondents believed that these value changes led to a transformation in social behaviors, especially in urban centers, where once-traditional and religious norms were increasingly eroded. The negative cultural effects, particularly from the influx of Western media, contributed to the rise of cultural degradation, secularism, and moral laxity. This not only undermined national and cultural identity but also fostered various social and ethical abnormalities.

As one interviewee noted:

“A kind of cultural permissiveness emerged in society that affected not only social institutions but even families and schools. When young people watched television at home or accessed the internet, they saw the lives and cultures being promoted in Western countries.” (Participant No. 26).

Another participant pointed out:

“Various Indian and Turkish television dramas were incompatible with our societal values and contributed to the spread of violence and moral laxity... People began following Western media trends and tried to imitate them. This did not just change Afghan culture—it also promoted cultural corruption and disregard for religious principles. Foreign media played a strong role in disseminating Western culture, and those caught up in this media wave ended up completely detached from their cultural and religious values.” (Participant No. 18).

4.8 Secularization of Social Culture

The secularization of cultural values refers to the gradual decline of religious and spiritual influences in both public and private life, whereby religious norms become increasingly marginalized in favor of secular and non-religious values. Many participants in this study believed that, during the occupation period (2001–2021), Afghanistan underwent a noticeable process of secularization, largely driven by foreign cultural interventions. Religious values, once integral to everyday life, were gradually diminished or sidelined.

This transformation was attributed to the cultural impositions introduced through media, international education systems, and global institutions. Some interviewees emphasized that interference in religious and cultural beliefs—especially among younger generations—led to the weakening or removal of Islamic norms from the public sphere. Instead of promoting Islamic principles, secular and Western ideals increasingly permeated public consciousness and behavior.

As one respondent expressed:

“Religious values were sidelined during the American presence, while Western values were promoted. The most important point is that these cultural changes entered through the imposition of foreign culture and even through Western educational systems. International media and education programs that were widely disseminated placed Islamic values side-by-side with Western teachings, causing many people—especially youth—to pay less attention to religious principles. This situation was especially prevalent in urban areas, where Western culture had the strongest influence.” (Participant No. 10).

Another participant added:

“As a society with an Islamic identity, we have no mechanisms to resist these changes. In practice, no institution exists to counter this trend. This cultural imposition has caused many people to become confused about their values and beliefs.” (Participant No. 16).

4.9 Lifestyle Transformation

“Changes in lifestyle” refer to a set of significant shifts in behaviors, priorities, and social habits, particularly among youth, as a response to new socio-economic and cultural conditions. According to the participants in this study, during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021), major transformations occurred in the lifestyles of the Afghan people, especially among the younger generation. These changes affected not only individual aspects, such as how leisure time was spent and personal interests, but also brought about alterations in social domains, including cultural relations, family dynamics, and traditional values.

A prominent feature of these changes was the influence of Western culture and global media, which had penetrated Afghan youth with considerable intensity. These transformations included a growing tendency toward the consumption of cultural products, shifts in how leisure was utilized, and an increasing emphasis on values such as individualism and materialism. Additionally, family relationships, once grounded in traditional and religious norms, were gradually reshaped, gravitating toward models less dependent on social and religious structures. These changes were evident not only in individual behaviors but also in patterns of interaction and communication within families and communities.

As one participant described:

“We witnessed how young people began to gravitate toward Western-style entertainment. For instance, instead of attending religious gatherings, they became more interested in watching foreign movies and TV shows. These changes led to a decline in religious and traditional values among

youth, with individualism and consumer-oriented leisure replacing them.” (Participant No. 28).

Another interviewee stated:

“The younger generation tries to emulate Western culture, viewing it as a symbol of progress... Since the proliferation of foreign media and cultural advertisements in the country, young people’s perspectives have drastically shifted. Instead of reading religious or traditional books, they are now more attracted to social media and digital entertainment. Even in their clothing and social behavior, we see substantial changes. These shifts are strongly visible in everyday cultural practices—those deep cultural bonds we once had are no longer present.” (Participant No. 17).

In general, the period of occupation witnessed substantial lifestyle transformations, particularly among the youth. These included inclinations toward Western forms of entertainment, evolving family and social relations, and the diminishing importance of religious and traditional values. Influenced by foreign media and cultural exposure, Afghan youth increasingly turned to individualism, consumerism, and digital amusements.

4.10 Cultural Discrimination and Lag

“Cultural discrimination and lag” refers to a series of phenomena and processes whereby certain segments of society—particularly economically and socially underdeveloped groups or regions—are marginalized and deprived of cultural, social, and educational opportunities. In this context, rural and traditional cultures, which are rooted in close-knit social relations and lifestyle patterns aligned with nature, are often overlooked or undervalued. According to the participants in this study, such discrimination became more apparent during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, as the attention of both national authorities and foreign institutions largely focused on urban centers and modern, materialist cultures.

Some interviewees believed that this cultural marginalization and developmental delay not only entailed a disregard for rural traditions in favor of urban cultural dimensions but also led to feelings of social exclusion among rural populations. The lack of equitable distribution of resources and attention fostered a cultural gap between rural and urban areas.

As one participant noted:

“During the occupation and even afterward, people in rural areas always felt ignored. While significant emphasis was placed on development and modernization in urban areas, we in the villages had no cultural or educational programming. Development projects mostly targeted cities and specific social groups, leaving no space for rural communities and traditional cultures. Rural children remained tied to farming and manual labor, without any real opportunity to benefit from modern education.” (Participant No. 27).

Another participant similarly remarked:

“Cultural initiatives and programs had little impact on rural communities because cities always remained the focal point. Most policies and activities were implemented only in urban areas. Meanwhile, rural regions lacked any strategy for preserving or promoting indigenous culture. Even in education, rural schools faced a shortage of teachers and basic resources. This created a wide cultural and social gap between urban and rural communities, making villagers feel like they had no place in the modern world.” (Participant No. 6).

Collectively, the interviews underscore how the occupation period sharply revealed the deep cultural, social, and economic divides between urban and rural areas. With foreign and domestic attention directed overwhelmingly toward urban development and modern culture, rural populations were excluded from many developmental benefits. This form of cultural discrimination not only sidelined traditional rural cultures but also fostered deep socio-cultural divides within Afghan society.

5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in a critical paradigm and employing a qualitative critical ethnographic approach, examined the cultural effects of the U.S. presence by exclusively focusing on the perspectives of Afghan intellectuals and elites who were all critics of this presence. The data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing that the U.S. entry and withdrawal did not lead to sustainable cultural development. Rather, it resulted in the weakening of indigenous culture, the expansion of Western cultural influences, project-based and externally dependent cultural institutions, the proliferation of combative cultural capital, cultural disorientation, shifts in consumer behavior, cultural laxity, secularization of public life, lifestyle changes, and cultural marginalization and lag. Through thematic network analysis, the overarching theme identified in this study is “Cultural Crisis Construction.”

Cultural crisis construction refers to the process by which a society’s native culture is weakened, transformed, and fragmented under the influence of external forces and imposed policies. This phenomenon has been observed in many societies exposed to cultural infiltration by global powers. During the period of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the country underwent major cultural changes that were neither organic nor self-generated but were instead the result of deliberate and systemic intervention. These transformations can be critically examined through frameworks such as Antonio Gramsci’s cultural hegemony, Herbert Schiller’s cultural imperialism, and Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction. These theoretical lenses illuminate how external powers manipulate cultural, media, and educational tools to reshape the identity of local communities, producing crises of identity and cultural cohesion.

A significant dimension of cultural crisis in Afghanistan was the weakening of indigenous culture and the substitution of local values with externally imposed Western ones. From the perspective of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony, colonial powers reinforce their dominance not only through military and economic means but also via cultural mechanisms. Foreign actors, through media, formal and informal education, and cultural policies, sought to implant new cultural narratives in place of

Afghanistan's traditional values. This led to a state of cultural distortion, in which native cultural elements were stripped of their original meanings and trapped in a liminal condition. These changes contributed to an identity crisis, the breakdown of social solidarity, and the rise of cultural anomalies in Afghan society.

Schiller's theory of cultural imperialism highlights how Western powers aim to export their lifestyles and values through media, education, and cultural policy. In Afghanistan, this occurred through international media outlets, social networks, educational programs, and cultural NGOs. One major consequence was the shift in lifestyle, whereby traditional family values and structures were altered. Afghan youth increasingly adopted consumerist, individualist, and secular values that clashed with the country's religious and communal norms.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction posits that educational and cultural institutions serve as instruments for the perpetuation of dominant power structures. In Afghanistan, institutions that could have fostered national identity were often reduced to temporary, externally funded projects. The project-based nature of these institutions meant that cultural programs were largely aligned with the agendas of foreign actors rather than the needs of Afghan society. This resulted in the erosion of indigenous culture and the emergence of cultural instability and dependency on external support.

While the U.S. presence claimed to promote democracy and modernization, one of its paradoxical cultural outcomes was the spread of combative cultural capital. War, insecurity, and social unrest contributed to the normalization of violence and conflict as cultural values. Among youth, this led to the formation of resistance identities and the growth of extremist discourse—developments that ran counter to the purported goals of nation-building. According to Bourdieu (year), symbolic violence is a subtle form of coercion embedded within cultural and social structures, which reproduces existing power relations. He also argues that identity crises emerge when individuals' habitus is disrupted by social transformations, creating tensions that may push them toward oppositional identities. Bourdieu's framework helps explain how cultural tools reproduce social violence and shape a new generation of social actors in opposition to existing structures³².

Consumer culture in Afghanistan also underwent fundamental change due to this foreign presence. The influx of Western goods and brands, aggressive commercial advertising, and the expansion of Western media introduced a new consumerist lifestyle, particularly among urban youth. This led to growing social divisions, as such lifestyles were incompatible with the economic realities of much of the population, thereby exacerbating socio-cultural inequalities. Bourdieu's theory of cultural consumption provides a useful lens for understanding how cultural goods become markers of social distinction and inequality.

Another consequence of this cultural crisis was the decline of traditional and religious values—a phenomenon that can be described as cultural laxity. Western media and imposed cultural policies weakened many social and religious norms. As a result, the secularization of public culture accelerated, with liberal and secular values replacing religious ones. This not only led to generational divides but also reduced the influence of traditional and religious authorities within society.

³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Previous research has similarly highlighted the cultural challenges that emerged during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. For instance, emphasizes the role of tradition and cultural identity in reproducing political instability³³, while this study shows how foreign interventions exacerbated such crises. The other findings on the cultural legacy of NATO missions align with this research³⁴, as both underscore the disruptive effects of external interference on cultural continuity. Likewise, Saei and Zaki explore traditional structures like the Loya Jirga in political transformation³⁵, while this study reveals how foreign influence destabilized Afghanistan's cultural institutions. Additional studies, such as those by Najafzadeh and Vahidi, argue that foreign aid fostered dependency and corruption rather than sustainable development—findings consistent with this study's conclusion that cultural crisis was driven not only by changes in social norms but also by the weakening of cultural and economic institutions³⁶.

In conclusion, according to critics of the American presence, the cultural crisis that unfolded during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan (2001–2021) introduced a set of fundamental transformations in the country's cultural landscape. This crisis involved the weakening of local culture, the promotion of values and norms often associated with Western liberalism—such as secularism, individualism, and consumerism—which, within a traditional, religious, and tribal social structure, did not necessarily lead to progress but rather produced new complexities, generated fresh crises, and deepened public distrust toward even modest modernization discourses. It also included project-based fragility of cultural institutions, expansion of combative cultural capital, lifestyle shifts, and the secularization of public life. The cumulative impact of these changes led to a cultural identity crisis, increased inequality, and social fragmentation. To address the consequences of this period, several remedial strategies are recommended: revitalizing independent cultural institutions, strengthening local media, revising cultural policies, and promoting education rooted in national identity. These measures may help mitigate the cultural damage inflicted during this period and foster a more stable cultural recovery.

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³³ Hashemi, "Historical Approach to Political Disorder,"

³⁴ Eisazai et al., "Moral Violations of International Organizations,"

³⁵ Saei and Zaki, "Political Construction of the State,"

³⁶ Najafzada and Vahid, "Construction Contracts in Afghanistan."

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