FROM SHAHRZAD TO CARRIE BRADSHAW: IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT OF AN IRANIAN WOMAN LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis by

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FROM SHAHRZAD TO CARRIE BRADSHAW: IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT OF AN IRANIAN WOMAN LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, my husband, my sister, and my brother
Life is a movie. We all get to be the star of the story of our own life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a qualitative autoethnography which analyzes the author’s experiences as a female Iranian student in the American Midwest during a 3-year period, between 2014 to 2017. The author takes the readers through the daily challenges she faces adapting to a new culture, describes the transformation process of the beliefs she had previously formed based on exposure to American television, and tells the story of reinventing her identity using the new cultural and political freedom she has gained in the United States. Her epiphanies are analyzed within the framework of Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) and Impression Management Theory (IMT). The author uses her journals as data to provide illustrations of her assumptions, and applies theory to draw insights into her experiences. The narratives are written in the form of plots which include characters, conversations, and an emotional load. This research is a combination of science and art. The author hopes that by reading this work, others who are going through similar experiences can better understand their personal confusions and transformations.
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CHAPTER 1: THE STORY OF THE MAGIC BOX

From No TV to MTV

I was born and raised in the center of a political whirlwind, in a country where patriotism has a dual meaning to people like my father and to the government, in a hole surrounded by mountain chains carved with different stories than the ones written in elementary school textbooks. All I remember from the first few years of my life are hearing the air raid siren, the electricity going off, and my mother holding me as she ran to get to a shelter. There were no cartoons on television, and no music anywhere. In 1983, I was born in a country where happiness was haram (forbidden according to Islamic ideology).

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 led to clerics taking control of administrative, social, and cultural powers resulting in the Cultural Revolution in Iran (Gholami & Khodadadi, 2016). Soon after the Islamic Revolution, while the new regime was still politically, socially, and economically inexperienced and unstable, the Iraqi government, which was supported by almost all Arabic countries and many Western countries, attacked Iran in order to occupy the country and over-take the novice regime (Gholami & Khodadadi, 2016). This effort was unsuccessful, and the eight-year war left Iranians feeling like innocents unfairly attacked and unjustifiably injured. Iran separated itself from the international community (Gholami & Khodadadi, 2016). Iranian visual culture was no exception to the Cultural Revolution (Lotfalian, 2009). The filmmaking industry was sanctioned and regulated by the government post revolution, and all media and press productions had to go through the Ministry of Islamic Guidance; they still do (Lotfalian, 2009).

I was about seven when I heard music being broadcast from national television, and by music, I mean a sound track with no lyrics. Before that, the only music my generation heard, the
only videos and foreign movies we watched, were the ones smuggled into the country. One can only imagine this situation if they have lived it. My 17-years-older-than-me brother went through several resources to buy us a video player. These resources were smugglers who were as young as my brother and made a living from bringing films and video machines into Iran and distributing them. Honestly, smuggler is not the word I would personally use to describe 20-year-old boys who sold movies which were broadcast everywhere else outside Iran, but that was how the regime looked at them. Then there was this young man who would bring video tapes to our door in a black briefcase and rent them to us weekly. There were weeks he wouldn’t show up, and we knew that his video tapes had probably gotten him arrested. With my nine-year-old mindset, I absorbed the religion-based education I was provided at school only to walk home to watch my family live a different lifestyle.

In the 1990s, the situation eased a little. Many people started using satellite channels (the receivers and equipment were smuggled into Iran, and families paid large sums of money to buy them), but not everyone was able to buy several receivers to watch a variety of programs. We had to choose if we wanted to watch Turkish programs, or European programs. There was also a kind that included MTV channels. Given my parents’ Azerbaijani origins, my family had a Turkish satellite, but my school friends recorded MTV music videos and I happily borrowed them. With satellites came a new culture. The government called this Western cultural imperialism, and did everything they could to prevent exposure to Western popular culture. They sent officials into people’s homes to check and collect satellite receivers. The population that was happy with this new freedom did not give up. Exposure to Western popular culture created the “westernization” concept in Iran, especially among millennials. Values started to change.
Nudity, materialism, and being over sexualized became values among millennial teenagers at that point, and I was one of them.

Before I discovered MTV, I spent the evenings after school in the solitude of my bedroom, giving speeches to the nation I imagined I would lead someday, practicing the art of rhetoric that I inadvertently picked up from news programs my father watched. While other girls grew up reading fairy tales, my father bought me books about powerful women like Margaret Thatcher and Benazir Bhutto. When I was in third grade, I started raiding my father’s huge book case. Nothing gave me as much joy as to read about rulers and their kingdoms, and to imagine everything I hadn’t lived. I imagined what I would have done if I were in their shoes. It was not only gold Iranian palaces I wandered through, but also the cotton fields of Georgia that were Gone with the Wind, the Wuthering Heights of Yorkshire, and many more places, about which literary masterpieces were written.

Sadly, as much as I loved imagining another world, it was not enough. Reading about different cultures and places only left me wanting to learn more about them, and then there it was, what everyone at middle school seemed to be obsessed with, and if they were not obsessed with it then they were not cool enough to be friends with. MTV opened a door into a completely different world. I did not have to imagine this new world because it was right there, and it was real. I just had to push the play button to spend time with the people in the magic box, and to be a part of that glamour. There were so many young, happy, and beautiful boys and girls. They sang, danced, and looked impeccable. There was so much color and life that I had never seen. From then on, the magic box (American television) became an inseparable part of my life.

The spell was cast. Like most of my peers, I started imitating the way Westerners dressed. With the little English I had learned, I tried to understand what they were singing, and sang
along with them. I would pay my all my weekly allowance to make a colored copy of a poster of my favorite boyband, and would write their names on my jeans. I had to fight my parents for permission to stick my posters on the walls. My mom would be furious that I ruined my jeans, or to find make up in my closet, but I did not care. I was a cool teenager, and the affirmation I got from my peers fueled my passion. I knew the names of all those American singers and band. I lip sang with Jennifer and Britney better than my classmates, because I knew better English, and I also started playing the guitar. My English, my music, and my MTV skills took me from being a cool kid at middle school, to being a member of the coolest group at high school, and how I enjoyed that.

**Once a Cool Kid, Always a Cool Kid**

There are so many things in this world that one may rather die than to abandon. For me, it was my high school popularity that I would do anything to keep. This popularity made me arrogant. My fabulous friends and I would go out to all the in-places in Tehran. There was always a parent to drive us there and to pick us up, and if not, we would just take a cab to spend time at the popular hang-outs where we would window shop, flirt with the boys that looked cool enough, and show off our shoes and clothes. High school was one of the best parts of my life. However, it was transitory. We grew up to attend different universities, and at university without my high school friends, I was a nobody again.

However, my very personal ability helped me make new friends quickly, but they were not the same. At high school, we all came from the same neighborhood/social class. At university, there were all kinds of people. There were some who were rich beyond my imagination, and I was probably not cool enough to be their friend. There were also those who were from cities other than Tehran, and that was a big “No” in my “How to Choose Your Friends” guidebook.
How could I be friends with someone who did not know all the names of my favorite American singers, or someone who would wear shoes that had no brands?! Why would someone even buy those shoes?! As ridiculous as it sounds, I did not make any friends that I found worthy of keeping for a long time after high school (I write this with immense embarrassment). Later when I became an English teacher, I had an educated and kind-hearted student who became a very close friend of mine and remain so until this day. I also made friends with a few coworkers whose characters were very different from mine. This time, however, I cherished the differences because there was always some new insight I could learn from.

Hence, even though I had real people to hang out with in real life, I found my peace in the magic box, watching my American television series late at night. It all started with Friends, and moved on to Sex & the City, Desperate Housewives, Gossip Girl, Dexter, Game of Thrones, and the list goes on and on. My para-social friends came to my life and they never left (Roseann & Dibble, 2016). With them, I never felt the need to try that hard to keep a friend. If people were offended by something I said, they could leave (how awful I feel now to confess having such an attitude toward people who respected/liked me enough to want to spend time with me). I was better than them anyway because I knew more (or did I?). I knew a different world. I knew America!

**Iranian Girl in Dubai**

Getting a job as an English instructor and translator fed my ego even more. I was always the person who knew better English, and more about America more than the others in the room (given that I was an English teacher and the others in the room were my students). I started not feeling at home in my own home country. No matter which high end street of Tehran I shopped and dined in, I still dreamed of something else. I dreamed of having my own Carrie Bradshaw
life style, but I never thought it would come true, so I found my own modern city in the Middle East, somewhere not so far from Tehran, but more like New York, or at least that was what it felt like to me. The city I dated 30 times, like Carrie dated New York City, was one of the most architecturally modern cities in the world. Most importantly, the shopping malls were huge, and they had everything I dreamed of, from Manolo Blahniks to Dior and Chanel, even if I could not afford them. The only thing I had to do was to get a visa and take a two-hour flight to get to Dubai, the city I was happily dating.

After my first trip to Dubai when I was 20, Tehran was where I worked and Dubai was where I enjoyed life enough to feel like I was living it. I was happy with my twice-a-year shopping sprees in Dubai. I never thought I would actually be able to live my life in the country where my para-social friends lived, until one day, it happened. My high-school-cool-kid ego, my best-English-speaker-in-the-room ego, and my Carrie-Bradshaw-in-Dubai self, moved to Wichita, KS with my real-life self and a husband who was quite a huge egotistic himself to be “international students,” and there, this story began.
CHAPTER 2: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY - SETTING THE STAGE

I stepped onto United States soil in a dark blue flare dress, black pumps, and a pearl necklace with two big suitcases filled with clothes I thought people would be wearing, tailored jackets, pencil skirts, blouses, and high heels. As I walked out of the airport, the American movie set I had in my head blurred into the American reality, largely overweight, unkempt people walking around in shorts and flip flops. At that moment, I was lost.

Mesmerized learning the language of Disney cartoons at 10, I daydreamed of being whoever I wanted, and English was my magic wand. To be one of the cool kids at high school, MTV was the tool. Dressing like MTV v-jays and lip syncing with Britney and Christina fueled my pride. Hollywood was the next level. I laughed out loud with “Friends,” and cursed Mr. Big with Carrie and the girls over brunch! I knew that the United States was where I belonged. Sadly, the American television shows I was exposed to weren’t congruent with “real life” in the plains of the United States.

The feeling of disorientation that hit me when I walked into the homeland of my dreams has not left me. As an Iranian woman living in the United States in 2017, I am confronted daily by people’s fears, misapprehensions, and often total misunderstandings of who I am. Their impressions of me are not congruent with my self-identity.

In this autoethnographic analysis, I use the basic concepts of Identity Negotiation theory in Chapter 3, Impression Management theory in Chapter 4, and the framework of autoethnography to analyze the dilemmas I face managing the part of my identity that was established through living in Iran for 30 years, and the part of my identity that I have been trying to establish intentionally during the past three years, all within the backdrop of the disorientation
I feel at not finding the “west” I had been led to believe existed by movies and the media, the “west” that had shaped my identity since childhood.

**Methodology: Autoethnography**

“Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed continually and unconsciously by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions and not least, through our discourse, our spoken narrations” (Sacks, 1985 in Fredricks-Fitzwater, 1991, p.13). Our stories can range in topic from the self, to others, to the self in relation to others. Autoethnographies are stories about the self through which the autoethnographer aesthetically analyzes the interaction with self and with others through the lens of culture and society (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Hence, an autoethnography has both the characteristics of an ethnography which analyzes cultural practices scientifically, and biography which artfully presents life experiences to the readers (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It brings tough experiences, emotions, and creativity into balance both intellectually and methodologically (Bochner & Ellis, 1999). In autoethnographic stories, the researcher confronts the conflicts between insider and outsider perspectives (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnography also gives readers a chance to experience what they have not lived, or to analyze what they have lived through someone else’s experience, which is how an autoethnography aims to ameliorate life through better social justice (Adams, 2012).

In autoethnographic research, cultural beliefs, practices and experiences are studied and criticized through the personal experience of the researcher (Ellis, 2004) using self-reflection and reflexivity to determine and analyze the relationship between self and society, particular and general, and the personal and political (Berry & Clair, 2011). For that reason, the researcher’s relationship with others is an important factor in autoethnographic research (Adams, Jones, &
An autoethnography demonstrates people in real life situations and defines their struggles in deciding how to live and what to do (Bochner, & Ellis, 2006).

Being a thirty-one-year-old female Iranian student in Wichita Kansas and doing a degree in communications, I realized that I had my differences with my American classmates. I could choose to let these differences defeat me, or I could use them to embrace my vulnerabilities in this new social setting and make the most out of what I had. I decided to do the latter so that I could reclaim the voice I did not feel that I had. In summer 2016, I started journaling my epiphanies. At that point, I was not thinking about the experiences, or analyzing them. I was basically living my life in oblivion, and writing about the experiences that triggered an emotional response in me, or provoked my thoughts. As a novice autoethnographer, that was my beginning. I started where I was, and found myself in the story (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

Autoethnographers use the storytelling facets, character and plot development, to aesthetically describe their personal and interpersonal experiences, and to make these experiences meaningful and engaging to readers (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Writing my journals, I tried to make certain that my narratives had all the necessary components for a story including a plot, characters, conversations, and I was mindful of how I used the language tools to make my narratives artful. Because I wrote about the experiences of mine which were emotionally significant, I had the benefit of stories laden with feelings. Later when I shared my stories, I realized that the listeners and readers did not just hear the stories, but also felt them. At the end of summer 2016, the narratives started showing patterns in my social interactions that led me to choose Identity Negotiation Theory and Impression Management Theory as the framework for my analysis. While journaling and reflecting on my experiences, I integrated my narratives
and the assumptions of the theories as illustrations contributing to the theories and my understanding of my transformations.

**Writing an Autoethnography**

The term autoethnography consists of three sections including *auto* which refers to self, *ethno* referring to culture, and *graphy* meaning writing. Hence, as a research method, autoethnography combines these three characteristics (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers try to take the audience through the same experience from the point of view of an insider and an outsider using this method (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). They write about and analyze “epiphanies,” which are the transforming lived experiences that they would like to understand more deeply (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Epiphanies are the autoethnographers’ experiences of relocations, images, memories, and feelings that last in our mind long after they are over (Adams, Jones, Ellis, 2015).

For example, my relocation from Iran to the United States significantly changed my perception of American life and culture. It also affected the identity I had built in my head based on the previous knowledge I had acquired through media, magazines, and movies. Now after more than 2 years, I still compare that knowledge and those expectations with the reality I experience daily. Doing an autoethnography, researchers selectively write about experiences rooted in being a part of a culture or having a certain cultural identity (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In this thesis, I will be narrating my personal experiences as an Iranian woman who lived in Iran for thirty years, yet did not follow all the cultural norms in Iran. I will also examine my perception of American culture from the point of view of an outsider who now lives on the inside.
**Ellie’s Epic Epiphany.** It is August 8th, 2014, around 10 PM. In a few minutes, I will arrive “home.” It feels good to think that in my head, so good that it makes me smile. I think about “Home,” where Serena Vander Woodsen and Blaire Waldorf strut along Fifth Avenue and sip their extravagant coffee, where Carrie Bradshaw goes gallery hopping in her Manolo Blahniks and inappropriately puffy ballerina skirts, where men wear perfectly tailored suits and hold the door for you politely and smile as you walk into your office building, which happens to be a skyscraper on Wall Street. Or doors just automatically open, like those of the upper town buildings in Tehran, and you gracefully walk in, politely greeting the doorman, calling him by his first name, where you look down on Los Angeles for pretentiousness and assume that Manhattan is the center of the world, even though you can still live in Chicago, DC, and Seattle.

I think about all those moments I shared with Rachel, Joey, Ross, Monica, Phoebe, and Chandler in that café on the corner, and how we laughed aloud together. I think about all those days I spent in English class, hoping that one day, when I open my mouth to speak to someone, they will ask me if I am an American. Now I can go to Starbucks every day, and pretend to hate McDonalds for serving unhealthy food, read at Barnes and Nobles, go on date nights at Cheesecake Factory and share my dessert with him, and actually kiss him over dessert. I can wear my sophisticated dresses every day and not worry about the fact that the life I have in my head is so different from the reality of the society I live in. My life is perfect now. I am finally home, and I have rehearsed this enough in my head that I feel confident. I am in the United States of America.

It has been a long flight, especially because I am not wearing my most comfortable clothes, even though I have been on a plane for almost 24 hours. “But it’s worth it! I have waited so long to be myself, 30 years to be exact. He is going to see that all that argument when we
were packing was useless, because in America, everyone is dressed to kill! I don’t have Manolos and Louboutins yet, but I brought my many pairs of elegant high heels that I’m going to wear at my clean white office,” I think to myself as passengers get ready to get off the plane. I look at him and smile. He looks tired. Even though I did not really choose to move here, I’m happy. “Don’t worry about anything. We are going to be fine,” I tell him reassuringly.

As we step out of the plane, I start feeling weird in my flare dress and black pumps. “This airport looks nothing like Dubai’s,” I tell him sarcastically. “Look at these carpets! Everything is so old and shabby!” I nag. “Hurry up. They are there,” he says. It suddenly hits me! It took us so short a time to get to the exit! I remember the other 30 times that I travelled internationally, and how huge the airports were. “Where?” I ask him, and he points to his brother, Hamid, who came to Wichita from Vancouver to help us settle, and his old university friend, Pouya, who is a student at Wichita State University. I feel a bit down that this airport is not nearly as modern as I expected. I run my eyes over the welcoming few people who are there to pick up their loved ones. “I can tell who is American,” I tell myself as I greet Hamid and Pouya.

I feel confident about my look and my impeccable English. A woman in her forties with short frizzy blond hair in a light pink T-shirt, beige knee length shorts, and flip flops is standing next to an 11-year-old boy who is sitting on the floor. All the men look too old or too young, and not even one of them is dressed nicely. Two younger girls in their early twenties in denim shorts and T-shirts walk past us. One of them is wearing running shoes and the other one is in flip flops! I look down at my pumps and unintentionally start playing with my pearl necklace. Hooman, my husband, is collecting our luggage with his brother. I look at him desperately. “Welcome to the United States,” he says smiling. I start feeling self-conscious. I cannot spot
anyone in a dress, let alone heels. “I don’t think I like this,” I whisper so that only Hooman hears me.
CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THEORY- SEEING ELLIE

According to Identity Negotiation Theory, identity consists of one’s concept of self which comprises cultural, social, interactional, and individual images, and can be divided into group membership, interpersonal, and individual forms (Ting-Toomey, 2015; Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009). Identity has both stable and variant characteristics (Ting-Toomey, 2015; Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009). What makes identity a challenging topic of discussion in communication studies is that it enables individuals to communicate with others with more interpersonal awareness. This awareness is developed through understanding of how one defines oneself and how others define one in different social settings. (Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 1986).

Psychologically, identity consists of social identity and personal identity (Swann, & Bosson, 2008). Social identities evolve based on group membership or relational roles such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social role, social class, and many more external conditions (Ting-Toomey, 2015). However, personal identities are based on how we find our individual selves in comparison to others (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Our daily behavior is affected by both dimensions of our identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As individuals, our identities rise from our lived experiences, repeated interpersonal interactions, and socio cultural conditioning (Ting-Toomey, 2015). The term negotiation in Identity Negotiation Theory describes all the verbal and non-verbal messages during an interactional situation which might threaten, uplift, or help individuals keep their personal or social identity (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

In general, identity theories may be categorized as: theories based on inte-rindividual levels of analysis; and theories based on the interface of dominant societal practice and individual identity resistance practices (Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009). The boundaries between these two approaches are not rigid and they share some of the same concepts. One of the identity
theories based on the inter-individual interactional approach is Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) which was developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1986 and updated in 2005. In this theory, human beings are considered to have the need for identity respect in the communication process, regardless of their cultural background, although respect for identity expression differs from one culture to another.

The theory highlights the aspects of identity that affect our daily interactions. Members of any large national culture feel an emotional significance to their sense of belonging which is defined as cultural identity salience (Ting-Toomey, 1986). There is also a sense of personal loyalty to any group one is a member of and has ancestral connections with, regardless of group size or social superiority of that group, which is defined as ethnic identity salience (Ting-Toomey, 1986). According to INT, humans need positive group based and person based identities in all communicative situations (Ting-Toomey, 1986). The focus of the interindividual interactional approach is how individuals can improve their understanding, respect, and mutual affirmative valuation of others (Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009). However, the way identity affirmation and valuation are expressed vary from one cultural setting to another (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

**Basic Assumptions of the Identity Negotiation Theory**

Ting-Toomey’s (2005) version of the INT includes ten core assumptions (Which can be found on pages 211-233 of *Identity negotiation theory: Crossing cultural boundaries.*):

1. Individuals form their group membership identities (cultural and ethnic memberships) and personal identities (unique characteristics) through symbolic interpersonal communication (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Littlejohn, & Foss, 2009).
2. People of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds are motivated to maintain identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and continuity (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Too
much inclusion and connection can be ethnocentrism and fear of outgroups (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

3. Being in a culturally familiar environment causes the identity emotional security, while being in a culturally unfamiliar environment leads to the feeling of identity emotional vulnerability (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

4. Individuals experience a feeling of inclusion when their preferred group membership identity is supported, often during in-group interactions, while they experience exclusion, or difference when they are in an out-group interactional situation, because their preferred group membership identity is stigmatized (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

5. When people interact with those who are culturally familiar, they experience interaction predictability, while they experience interaction unpredictability with culturally unfamiliar others (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

6. People tend to seek meaningful close interpersonal relationships, and meaningful intercultural-interpersonal relationships can create a sense of emotional security and trust in cultural strangers (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

7. People experience identity consistency when they are in a culturally familiar environment doing repeated cultural routines, while they experience identity change or extreme identity chaos when they are in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

8. People’s perceptions of cultural-ethnic identity, personal identity, or situational identity are affected by being in a different environment (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

9. It is important to apply the required intercultural identity-based knowledge mindfully, and to use the proper interactional skills to communicate effectively and adaptively with
those who are culturally different, to have a successful identity negotiation process (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

10. Being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued are the results of a competent identity negotiation process (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Identity Negotiation in International Students

Identity negotiation is a crucial part of immigrant and refugee adaptation processes (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Immigrants and refugees reinvent their personal, cultural, and ethnic identities in a new environment based on several factors including the degree of host national reception, structural-institutional support factors, and immediate situational and individual factors (Ting-Toomey, 2015). While international students share some of the experiences of immigrants and refugees, they are not simultaneous. International students not only experience culture shock because of being in a culturally new environment, but they also must adapt themselves to a new academic environment. In addition, international students experience a different kind of uncertainty compared to refugees and immigrants. An international student plans to live in the host country, for example the United States, for a period of 2-5 years depending of their studies, and they cannot plan their life any further than that. Whereas an immigrant or refugee is prepared to become a part of the new cultural environment for the rest of their life. This uncertainty can influence the intercultural adjustment pattern, and the identity negotiation process for international students. As a part of their culture shock, many international students experience some level of threat or rejection to their sociocultural national identity, international student identity, and new comer identity (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Opposing and competing forces within the discourse communication system make it possible for individuals, who live in a new environment, to experience tension (Littlejohn &
In intercultural communication, this tension is referred to as dialectics. The five following dialectics can be derived from Ting-Toomey’s INT including identity security-vulnerability, identity inclusion-differentiation, identity predictability-unpredictability, identity connection-autonomy, and identity consistency-change (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). These dialectics affect immigrants, refugees, and international students in terms of identity negotiation. Each will be elaborated below.

**Identity Security-Vulnerability**

One of the dialectics, tensions felt during interaction, that international students face daily is identity security-vulnerability (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). In order to feel identity security versus vulnerability, international students need to feel accepted, welcomed, and included before they start establishing friendships with members of the host community (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Vulnerability is the feeling of disconnection that leads international students to seek out familiarity through interaction with culturally familiar others (Ting-Toomey 2005). International students who experience identity security are more likely to interact with members of the host culture and establish friendships with them (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). As an international student, I know that achieving this identity security is not easy, and some international students may never get to identity security within the guest culture.

I, as an example, managed my initial identity vulnerability by seeking out other Iranians in Wichita because with them I had a sense of belonging. I felt more comfortable in the Iranian community since we came from a common background and I knew what to expect in terms of socio-cultural interaction norms. It was still a big challenge for me to decide how I wanted to dress, how I behaved, and how I was perceived by the members of the Iranian community in those early interactions because their behavior and expectations were familiar in some ways, and
not so familiar in other ways (as they had adapted several America cultural norms). However, it was even more difficult when I interacted with Americans because their cultural norms were mostly unfamiliar (food habits, upbringing, cultural background). Also, getting a job at the Intensive English Language Center where I taught other international students made me feel more at home because I felt the same familiar feeling that I had teaching English back in Iran. I was still the person who spoke the best English in the room. The Iranian community with all its challenges, and the Intensive English Language Center offered a sense of familiarity, continuity, consistency, and predictability that I very much needed at that point.

After I was accepted in the Iranian community, I found a job that was familiar, and made friends with the Iranians in Wichita, I had enough identity security to openly communicate with Americans. I had a chance to be a part of American political campaigns and socio-political groups, and volunteered at several events within the American community. At that point, I felt ready to find my own consistent place as a member in a culturally unfamiliar group.

**Identity Inclusion-Differentiation**

Another dialectic that can affect international students is identity inclusion-differentiation. Building a social support network within the new community helps the identity and intercultural adjustment processes because it allows students to experience identity inclusion versus differentiation (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

I am lucky to be a very outgoing person. This helps me talk to strangers easily. When I started graduate school, even though I was not very comfortable in this new social setting, I talked with everyone. Our program was somehow small, and we all took the same classes three times a week. There were a few classmates I talked to more than others because we sat at the same table. After a while, they started waiting for me after class to walk to our cars together,
they added me to their group messages, and we made study dates to do some of the most tedious assignments together.

Sharing similar experiences brought us closer together and eventually we formed a group. These common experiences included the stress we all experienced because of the assignments, the hunger we felt during our evening classes, the frustration we felt when we couldn’t find parking and get to class on-time, and other matters related to graduate school. After a while, we started meeting for meals outside class, sharing our personal stories, and sharing our own inside jokes; eventually, I realized that we weren’t just classmates anymore, we had become friends. I had made some friends with members of different cultures; a few Americans and a Nigerian. I was not alone in graduate school anymore. I was not alone in the United States anymore. I had a group of friends who supported me, and I enjoyed their company. The great thing was I felt that they enjoyed my company too.

**Identity Connection-Autonomy**

Identity connection-autonomy is another dialectic that can be a challenge for international students (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This dialectic refers to the tension individuals feel trying to maintain their individuality, and yet wanting to get close to others. It is still a challenge for me to maintain my identity autonomy and be myself while I establish identity connection with my American peers because a lot of characteristics I identify with root back in the cultural setting I grew up in, such as what I eat, drink, wear, or feel comfortable talking about. It sometimes causes confusions and misunderstandings, but I am working on adapting myself to the norms that will make me feel more connected to this new host society.

For example, I do not really enjoy Japanese food. However, in order to be closer to the group members that I went to conference with, I went to a sushi restaurant with them, ordered
myself some Mongolian beef, and shared it with them. I also tasted their sushi although I didn’t like it. I try to keep an open mind, and participate in activities and conversations. In addition, whenever I get a chance, I explain the differences between my cultural background and American culture. I share with my friends the funny aspects of Iranian culture, and explain the cultural reasons why I am not comfortable in certain situations. Finding a balance between my identity connection and autonomy is going to take a while, but I can already feel the progress.

Identity Predictability-Unpredictability

The next dialectic international students experience is identity predictability-unpredictability. Human beings desire predictability and continuity versus unpredictability (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Swann & Bosson, 2008). International students feel more comfortable establishing social relationships with members of the other culture if they can predict the situation and outcomes.

Unpredictability is one of the main sources of stress I have experienced during these three years in Wichita. For example, I remember how frustrating it was to feel out of place because I was not aware of the appropriate dress code and greeting manners when I first arrived. From not knowing which street my GPS will lead me to, to not knowing where a professor’s office is, I have been in several situations when I felt incapable of functioning socially in a way I wanted to. For me, the unpredictability of the situation is one problem, and the assumptions I make as a coping mechanism to deal with unpredictably is another.

The stress caused by my not being able to predict situations and their outcomes has prevented me from being true to myself (my social and personal identity) at times. To avoid embarrassment, I have made assumptions to manage unpredictable situations, and this has made my life more difficult. For example, as part of my personal identity, I consider myself a sociable
person. It has always been easy for me to start a conversation or ask questions. However, since I moved here, I have found myself in multiple situations when I needed to ask about the location of a building, I needed help with some paper work, or I did not understand what people were talking about. Because I didn’t know what people would think of me if I asked questions this simple, I assumed that they would see me as someone not very smart. Because this was not my identity, or how I wanted others to perceive me, I almost never asked!

**Identity Consistency-Change**

The last dialectic that international students are influenced by is identity consistency-change. Identity stability or change through time is referred to as the identity consistency-change dialectic (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Through time, international students learn and adapt to the culture of the host community which results in higher self-confidence and leads to change (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

There are parts of my identity that have changed positively and negatively. There are also parts of my character that remain the same despite living in the US for three years. One of the changes that happened because I wanted to adapt to American culture is that I overcome my phobia of pets. I cannot forget how proud I felt when I first held my friend’s cat. It was a combination of confidence, that strong feeling of “Yes! I did it, so I can do anything else I decide to,” and peace. My friends in Iran who saw the picture of me holding a cat on Instagram, my family, Hooman’s family, that is, everyone who knew about my phobia reacted to the fact that I, person who would run across the street if she saw a cat, would actually hold and pet a cat! I felt incredible!

There are also changes I am not so proud of. Growing up, there was always alcohol present at our parties. Even though drinking is illegal in Iran, my family, and most of our
relatives served alcohol at parties. Even after I married, Hooman and I served alcohol in our home. During all that time, never, not even once, did I drink! My friends would laugh at me, make me brownies with liquor and not tell me, just to convince me to drink. It was not for a religious reason, or based on my upbringing. It was a choice I was very proud of. After moving here, I gave in. I felt so abnormal to order water all the time when I went out with people. It wasn’t peer pressure. It was a choice. There are colorful drinks everywhere, and I felt like everyone around me drank! It’s not that I drink regularly, but the few times I have made me feel like I betrayed myself because I did something I had told myself I never would.

There are also parts of my identity that remain consistent. I am still proud of the kind of daughter I am to my parents. Not a day goes by that I don’t video call them. I still show them everything great about my life, and strategically avoid telling them everything that is not so great. I make sure my voice sounds cheerful, and that I look fresh. That’s what I have always done, especially interacting with my mom. I want her to feel no worries about me and my life. Being on this other side of the world, my relationship with my parents is the one thing I have kept the same.

The First Supper. It’s August 9th, 2014. We went to Walmart this morning to pick up the pieces of furniture we ordered online. Unlike Iran, they all come in boxes and need to be assembled. “Can you even assemble them yourselves or do we have to call someone to come do that?” I ask Hooman. “We got this tool box, so we should be fine,” he says and starts opening a box which is supposed to be a bed that he will assemble with Hamid’s help. “Pouya is going to stop by,” he says, “And he said they are going downtown tonight, and we should join them.” I start thinking about who they are, and how I should connect to them. I know I’m a sociable person, and others usually find it easy to be my friend. Making friends has always been so easy
for me that sometimes I take keeping friendships for granted. Hooman and I have this group of friends back home, around 17 people, who we always hang out with. A couple of my elementary school friends, a couple of my coworkers, a couple of his childhood friends, a few friends of friends, plus everyone’s partners. We have had such great times with them since we married, so I’m expecting the same kind of friendship.

When Pouya arrives, according to what I think I know about how to get closer to new people, I ask him what I should wear, where we are going, and who is going to be there. “What do you mean what you should wear?” he asks smirking, “Just wear clothes.” “I know that,” I respond with a short laugh, “But what kind clothes? What do the other girls wear? What are they like?” I ask. “I don’t know. Just wear jeans and a T-shirt. You’ll see them.” he says, and I sense a bit of sarcasm. “Jeans and a T-shirt? Like I’m a school boy! I don’t even own a T-shirt,” I think in my head judgmentally, “At least I hope they are fun. I really need some friends to deal with this weird new life.”

After Pouya leaves, Hamid tells me not to dress up too much. “In my personal experience of living abroad for 14 years, you wouldn’t want to be too well-dressed in your first impression with Persians if you want them to let you in. His friends are probably students, and they come from different cities and cultures, so don’t expect too much,” he says. This makes me feel a bit upset, because I always try to look my best when I want to meet new people. “So I guess that means wearing flats and a simple dress,” I think. I show Hamid a cotton dress and a pair of dressy sneakers and he says they look fine. Hooman and I are both exhausted, yet we have to go because we don’t want to seem like we are too snobbish. Pouya is downstairs with two girls in his car and he offers that I ride with them. Thinking it is nice of him, I get in the car hoping to make some new friends.
On our way back, another part of me is lost. I’m riding in the car Hamid rented for these few days until we find one to buy with the small budget we have. I don’t really want to say much, and I know that Hooman feels the same. In this group of 15 or so male and female friends of Pouya’s there was no one Hooman or I could relate to. They have been in Wichita for at least a year or longer, and I feel like they are from a different planet. From the very beginning when we greeted them the way we do in Iran (handshakes/kisses on the cheeks), and don’t get me wrong because Hooman and I are both from very open minded and updated family backgrounds, these Persians here treated us like we have done something very wrong. I felt like I was looked down on by people who, had we been in Iran, I wouldn’t have even bothered to start a conversation with.

I don’t even know who I am anymore. Elnaz, this 30-year-old woman who was the delight in every gathering, who was so impressive with her friendly behavior and sense of humor, who everyone wanted to be friends with her, who everyone admired for her good taste and sense of style, who was the overseas traveler, and who grew up to be criticized by her cousins for acting so American, is now a woman who has no place in this community, no friends, has no idea how to dress appropriately, how to greet people, or even what to say to them let alone impress them. “I miss my own friends,” I whisper in the car sadly, and there is no response.

Identity Negotiation and Identity Change

In the process of identity negotiation changes in identity are typically unpleasant as they can be confusing and derailing. However, changes in identity are a natural, unavoidable part of human life (Marcia, 1980). For example, my first interaction in the United States with a group of Iranian students was confusing and disappointing to me at the same time. Even though none of them had been in the US longer than 4 years, they reacted differently when I greeted them in our
common Persian way, a handshake with men, and three kisses on the cheeks with women. “People don’t shake hands here,” one of the girls told me. I just smiled and remembered all those movies I’d watched where Americans did shake hands. Their reaction to how we were fashionably late to dinner, since it is more polite in Iran to be a bit late to dinner than exactly on time, made me feel I was not welcome in that group, and because it was the only group I knew back then, it left me feeling lost, embarrassed, and lonely.

**Volitional and Non-Volitional Changes**

Some of these changes are non-volitional, occurring due to outside events. Some, however, happen volitionally as individuals decide to change (Marcia, 1980). After that first interaction, I tried to observe how Americans greet in the Midwest. I realized some give hugs, and some walk past you and don’t even say hello unless you make eye contact, regardless of the fact that you work at the same office, and see each other every day. I have been trying to avoid the embarrassment of greeting people in a way that is not the norm, but I haven’t had much success yet. However, there are things that I have changed in myself intentionally. I, a person who wasn’t able to make a firm decision about anything, have been making surprisingly good decisions on a daily basis. I have also made changes to make myself more comfortable, like going by a nickname and changing my style and hair color.

**Difference in Behavioral Norms and Expectations**

Changes in standard expectations and behavioral norms can trigger changes in identity. This can happen due to changes in a country’s regulations, changing affiliations with an institution like entering the military, environmental changes like moving to a different country, and many other social settings with differing social norms (Swann, & Bosson, 2008).
For me, these changes were triggered by moving to the United States where I am expected to live much differently than the way I am accustomed to. What is socially expected from me in the American community, that is, the university and the organizations where I work or volunteer, is different from the social expectations I grew up with. For example, in Iran, I had to be very conscious of how I looked. At any public place such as university or at work, I was expected to dress according to a religion-based set of standards. These standards require every woman aged over 9 years-old to cover their entire body except their hands wrist down, in addition to their hair. Only their make-up free face can be seen in public according to the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although a big percentage of women including me do not follow these laws properly, we still need to be careful not to get arrested by the special guards because of our improper hijab.

I was also an Iranian living in Iran, which meant that I was expected to know what was socially acceptable in terms of social norms. I was someone who studied languages and taught languages, so the only major skill I was expected to have was language-related. Lastly, I was surrounded by relatives, colleagues, and friends who knew my family and me, or could make assumptions about us based on general cultural knowledge. With that knowledge, they expected me to behave according to my family’s social class and cultural background. Everyone around me knew that my family was not religious, and that my father was a big supporter of the previous regime. It was also clear to everyone what neighborhood we had always lived in, which was a middle class neighborhood where our neighbors were bankers and employees who had higher education. I didn’t have to talk about or prove anything about myself.

However, here in the US, I can choose what to wear based on no rules (or is that true?), I’m a foreigner, or perhaps it’s better to say an Iranian because this name provokes several
assumptions and judgments. American television portrays Iran and Iranians as terrorists. I have watched several American television shows such as _Homeland_, 24, and others in which Iranians are conspiring to make nuclear bombs, or they are conspiring to do something against the United States. In a nutshell, the average American sees someone like me as a potentially dangerous, possibly as an enemy. I have had several encounters with Americans who don’t even know my name but make such assumptions and judgments. A man from whom we were buying a car asked to take a picture with us. “I want to show it to my wife and say that I took a picture with terrorists,” he said after he asked us where we were from. “Oh, it should be terrible,” said a sales lady in a pitiful way after I told her that I was not Mexican but Iranian. Sometimes, it really is a challenge to be nice to people who perceive me as an enemy. When it comes to my skills, I have to possess research, digital, and social media related skills to succeed at my major. At school, I am perceived as an international student (which can mean someone who eats spicy food, has dark hair and a heavy accent, and is poor enough to accept food from others).

This affects my self-esteem negatively, because that is not how I perceive myself, or how I live. I hate it when people perceive me as someone who is so financially troubled and who needs kind of any help. Even before I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, I had a translating job, and after that I had a teaching job. My entire adult life, I have made enough money to be financially independent. I find it offensive when people make assumptions about my financial independence without knowing me. I also find it extremely offensive that Americans make assumptions about how Iranian food habits are similar to Indian or Arabic food habits. I have been asked by several Americans if we use the same spices as Indians and Arabs.

Furthermore, what the Iranian community in Wichita expects from me, a married female student who recently moved here, is different from the social expectations in Iran, and the social
expectations in the American community. With the Iranians who have lived here for a while, my behavior has to change accordingly. There are those who are still religious after 20 years of living in the US with whom I have to dress modestly. There are those who drink heavily and party after being here no longer than 4 years with whom I cannot really talk about my ambitions and long-term goals.

To make my life even more complicated, I have this huge pile of information in my head which I acquired my entire life from American media about living in the US. For instance, I expected to live in a city like the ones in American movies, but in this city, places and people all look different. There is no luxury, youth, energy, or much diversity. I was hoping to go to art galleries with Carrie Bradshaws and Charlottes. I dreamed of learning about planning galas and fundraisers from Lily Van-Der-Woodsens. I wanted to go to plays with Samanthas where there is a red carpet and people look fabulous. I did volunteer at fundraisers here. I have been to ballet performances, musicals, museums, and galleries in Wichita. The galleries and museums don’t have many visitors, or if they do, they are families with three or four children. At performances, the audience mostly belongs to a different age group (above 60). Based on what I have seen at school, people my age prefer to go to bars or house parties. If there are any concerts, I find the singers unfamiliar because not many internationally known singers choose to have concerts in Wichita. As few places as there are that we can afford to go, I know that most of them host a population that does not welcome internationals, or at least that’s how I feel. Most people around me are white; it makes me feel different, and not in a good way.

Environmental Changes

When one enters a new environment, the changes in expectations and behavioral norms are unavoidable. These changes can provoke changes in identity. In addition, being in a new
environment enhances an individual’s self-awareness and self-knowledge leading to new self-standards over time. The last reason for changes in identity due to environmental change is that the new environment may not provide the opportunity to newcomers to nurture and sustain the identity that was once nourished in a different environment. This can cause some critical identity changes since individuals may begin to seek out minority groups in a novel environment which align with their values in order to nourish a comfortable familiar social identity (Swann & Bosson, 2008).

**I’m not a racist towards Afghans anymore! July 13th, 2016.** After I look at the material for about 15 minutes, I walk out to call the two Somalian sisters into the classroom. I am substitute teaching at the International Rescue Committee this afternoon. It is the intermediate/advanced class which is held from 1 to 4 pm. The teacher has left me notes and I am pretty confident about what I am doing. “Are you here for the ESL class?” I ask them. They nod, smiling and follow me into the classroom. At this point only the sisters are here out of the long list of students I was given. This is a refugee center, so the clients are offered free English classes that they attend whenever they can. They do not have cars and the center is not centrally located, so you never know how many students to expect. I taught here for a short time before I got my ESL teaching job at WSU. Teaching makes me feel great about myself. It is a sense of giving, helping, and it quenches my desire to be the center of attention and feel superior, though this is something I do not usually admit.

“So, I heard that you got jobs. Congratulations! What job is it?” I ask them. “It is in a company,” they explain. I do not, however, exactly understand what the job is. The elder is 20 and the younger is 19. “Tell me about yourselves. Where are you from? Is your family here?” I ask. “Yes. We have a big family. We have ten other siblings all younger than us,” answers the
younger one. “We are from Somalia, but we moved to Ethiopia when we were young, so we don’t remember much about Somalia,” adds the elder. They are both wearing hijab. “They are Muslims! I had no idea!” I think. I do not have much information about Somalia. I remember the day I was told that Iranians, Somalians, and Syrians cannot exit the United States to go to Canada on their student visas. I feel a bit bitter, but I keep smiling. Since I started teaching English, I developed a teacher character, someone who is always calm, smiles at all times, looks at everyone and treats them equally, and does not carry her worries and bitterness into the classroom. I smile at them both and say: “It is great to have you both here.” I feel happy that they can live a safer life, and that I can play a tiny role in this life of theirs. I hand them copies of the book, and sit at their table to start teaching. We are half an hour though when another student shows up. She is a middle aged lady with a light white head scarf that doesn’t cover the gray hair in front of her face. The rest of her outfit is black.

“Welcome. What is your name?” I ask. “Halimah,” she replies. I expect her to be an Arab. “Where are you from?” I ask. “Afghanistan,” she says. “Oh my God! We are neighbors! My country is next to yours!” I tell her. Her face blossoms. “Where are you from?” she asks me. “Iran,” I answer. She switches to her own language and asks me if I speak Persian. I feel so touched that my eyes get blurry. “I am not going to cry!” I think trying to eat up my tears. “I do, although our Persian is different from yours,” I say as I stand up and give her a hug. She says she is so happy to be here and meet me and that she understands our Persian. Our language and theirs are two different types of Persian. We do, however, understand each other’s language very well. “You cannot speak Persian here though,” I say as I’m smiling. The sisters are caught up in the moment, as well as Halimah, and I feel attached.
It feels really strange. The Afghans come to my country to work low status jobs, almost like the Mexican migrant workers in the United States. They mostly work in construction and services that Iranians find beneath their dignity. They are treated unkindly. They are looked upon as people who would steal and kill if they have a chance. I understand the concept of racism through how the Afghans are treated in Iran. “How sad,” I think to myself, and I remember that one time there was an Afghan riding in a cab with me and I did my best to sit as far from him as I could. Now, here I am. Sitting in this classroom with this lady who could be my mother, age wise, and nothing could make me happier. I feel so happy I am hardly holding my tears to myself. After a while another woman shows up. She seems to be in her 40s, and is a Cuban doctor who hasn’t seen her children for a year. Later I find out she is the niece of a student I have in Intensive English in my university class. That’s the second thing today that cheers me up. We all talk about the conditions in our countries. “How depressingly similar,” I think.

Even though I always have a good feeling about all my students, the best part of my day is meeting Halimah. After the class is over, she stays and starts talking to me in Persian. “Do you teach anywhere else? This place is too far from my home, and I understood you very well today,” she says. I feel the urge to offer to tutor her for free, although I have a million tasks to accomplish at this point. “Can you come to WSU?” I ask her. “Yes!” she says, “That is a lot closer to my home.” “If you have a phone number, I can text you and we can meet two days a week,” I offer. “Oh, you don’t have another class where you teach? I don’t want to trouble you and take your time. I thought you teach elsewhere,” she says. “I do teach at WSU, but those classes cost a lot of money. I know a church that has free English classes on Rock and 29th. I can call and ask them,” I tell her. “I don’t have a phone. I can give you my son’s phone
number,” she says. Her son and his family live here. She says she has another son in Canada. I
don’t feel comfortable texting her son so I offer to call the church and ask while we are there.
While I am on the phone getting her the information her son comes in. He must have worried she
took so long to get out of class. I say hello in Persian. I write the information on a post-it and
hand it to the son, give Halima a hug, and say goodbye. I don’t shake hands with the son since I
assume in their Islam-based culture, men and women don’t shake hands.

I spend another ten minutes at the office talking to the coordinators about the class and
offering to help out more. I walk out of the office. I see Halimah and her son sitting in the
hallway. There is another man sitting there with them. She stands up and tells me that is her son
living in Canada who is visiting them, and that he wants to ask me a few questions. I don’t feel
uncomfortable at all. Quite the opposite, I feel like I know this family. The second son stands at a
courteous distance and asks me if WSU offers any graduate civil engineering degrees. “Haven’t
you checked the website?” I ask while I know that WSU doesn’t offer this major. “I have, but I
didn’t find anything,” he says. “I don’t think this university offers civil engineering classes. Do
you want to study at WSU to be closer to your family?” I ask as I’m smiling. He says that is what
he hopes to do. I suggest that he check out three other engineering fields at WSU because I guess
those departments have enough funding to support him. Afterwards we say goodbye and I leave.
I keep smiling as I drive home. “This was such a pleasant day,” I think with a lot of positive
energy.

It’s a shame, but I know that I would have treated Halima and her sons differently if we
lived in Iran. As a person who wants to feel good about her own nature, there are two rules I
base my social behavior on, not to judge, and to assume that everyone has a good nature unless
proven otherwise, and even then I try to see the good in that person. Despite the trouble this
second rule of mine has caused me, it is still one of the fundamentals of my social interactions. However, I know that meeting Halima would not have made me as happy if I didn’t live here, if I didn’t feel so lonely, and if I weren’t so thirsty to hear a word from a familiar language when I least expect it. Would I have hugged her? Would I have exchanged words with her sons? Would I have smiled at them? Would I have offered her my time so sincerely? Or would I have been like the racists I keep criticizing for treating people like me with cruelty? Even though I know the answers to these questions, the part of me that wants me to perceive myself as a decent human being prevents me from accepting that I would have looked down on Halima and her sons just like the Americans that look down on me. I cannot wait to get home and start typing. Halima… The Afghan woman who made my day… The young Afghan man sitting next to me in a taxi on the streets of Iran… The part of me that is a racist and hates to admit it… The part of me that is learning to stand up for herself against western racism… the double standards of our world… And how I’ve changed.

**Developmental Growth and Role Changes**

When the major community one lives in recognizes a significant change in the individual’s status, age, or social role, it triggers a change in identity. When the way one is treated by society changes, an individual becomes more willing to bring her identity in harmony with this new role rather than holding on to the initial identity. This can result in significant identity changes (Swann & Bosson, 2008).

**Uptown Girl in a Downtown World? October 2004.** “I know who I don’t want to be friends with,” I say to myself as I’m sitting in my first undergraduate class at the Science & Research University of Tehran, observing the other students. Some of them are from other cities, and some are obviously from neighborhoods I wouldn’t be caught dead passing through. Even
though my family is not very well-off and has had its own share of financial issues, I have always been spoiled by everyone. I am the last child, with a brother and a sister old enough to be my parents, so I have always received great support. During my father’s financial trouble, my mom and my brother did everything they could so that we continued to live in the same nice neighborhood and the same huge apartment where we had lived for 10 years. As a result, I feel very entitled. I’m a capital city girl, born and raised in a neighborhood much above average, and have always triggered the envy of my cousins. “That girl from Isfahan is a “No.” That girl with ugly shoes in a “No” too. Hmm, maybe that cute girl with those designer sunglasses on her desk could be my friend,” I think as I smile at her and try to make eye contact. “My friends have to be cool and fabulous! Just like me,” I think, I take my glance away after briefly smiling at another girl who doesn’t seem cool and fabulous.

March 2014. I’m uncomfortably waiting outside the class for the professor to ask for his permission to sit in class without being registered, because my student visa is not ready yet. This is an undergraduate level class, so whoever walks past me is around 10 years younger. “Great! Like I wasn’t uncomfortable enough with my black hair!” I think. The professor is a white man in his 70s I assume, and as I speak, I have the impression that he does not fully understand me. I start feeling self-conscious about my accent. That’s something I never expected, being so proud of my language skills. “I’m still waiting on my visa to change because I came here as a dependent,” I explain, and I don’t want to miss anything.” “I thought you had an accent. Where are you from?” he asks, and I, uncomfortable, say that I’m from Iran. After I have his permission, I enter a class of 30 students who are also all at least 10 years younger than I. I feel so uncomfortable that I don’t even want to look around. I say “Hi”, and find a chair to sit on while no one even looks up to say “Hi” back to me. The professor asks me what my name is, and
I don’t hesitate to respond with “Ellie.” That’s the nickname my aunts called me, and I have always disliked it since so many girl names in Iran can be shortened to “Ellie”. Since August 14 when I started volunteering at the International Office, I haven’t been Elnaz anymore, a girl who felt entitled to choose friends according to her capital city upper middle class standards, or the English teacher who was experienced, popular, and stylish. Here, I’m a foreigner who has no clue what the standards are. I’m not the English teacher me, the youngest daughter of a respected family, the only daughter-in-law my mother-in-law had around her to spoil, or the fun woman everyone wanted to be friends with. “Next time, I’m wearing sweats I guess,” I think as I look around, “and I’m going to be twice as good, just like Olivia Pope.”

**Strategic Self-Verification**

When individuals realize that their current identity may prevent them from achieving an important goal, they may negotiate a new identity based on the situation in order to reach their valued goal. These negotiations are prone to causing permanent identity change (Swann, & Bosson, 2008).

**Happy Birthday Ellie.** Our name is a part of our identity, and one week after I arrived in the US, I chose to let myself change. I knew long before we moved that my name, Elnaz, would sound alien to Americans, and that they may have a hard time pronouncing it or remembering it, and I knew I was not one who wanted to be forgotten. I had thought about several names I could relate to like Elena, Ella, Ellen, and Eleanor. Yet I hated the idea that I had to respond to a different name than mine for the rest of my life. My maternal aunts had always called me Ellie, which is the short nickname for so many female names in Farsi, and I had always hated it because I felt like it wasn’t me. “You can choose E. Do you want to be the girl with black hair whose name no one knows, or do you want to be Ellie,” I asked myself before I gathered all my
courage to walk to the podium at the international student orientation, where I just tagged along with Hooman since he was the student, and introduced myself to Heather. “Hi. My name is Ellie, and my husband is a student here at WSU, and I was wondering if there were any volunteer positions on your team,” I say trying to sound confident. Heather sounds very warm and welcoming. She gives me her email and tells me about this new program she is managing for the International Office. She asks me to email her my information. As I walk back to Hooman, I’m smiling confidently. For the first time in my life, I did something on my own, without my family or friends around to support me. “Did it work?” He asks me, “There is nothing Ellie cannot do if she wants to,” I answer proudly.

Self-Initiated Changes

When an individual is in an unsatisfactory life situation, one may intentionally attempt to start a change in identity to self-improve. This initiation requires a sense of self preparedness (Anthis, & LaVoie, 2006). However, even for those who feel ready for a change in identity, it might be difficult to change some firmly established aspects of self. The reason is that for this form of identity change to take place, one has to both change their personal identity as well as their social identity (Swann, & Bosson, 2008).

Ellie, the Olivia Pope. “What have I always told you?” shouts Olivia’s father at her. “I have to be twice as good,” she responds with a scared shaking voice. I’m not black, but I’m worse. I’m I-Ranian, as Americans pronounce it. Life is tough on a female I-Ranian, no matter where on earth she is. At home, she has no rights, and here, she is a foreigner from a country that is suspected to support terrorists, and is attempting to make nuclear bombs to start the third world war. “I have to be twice as good,” I repeat several times. That means I have to start taking care of myself, and nothing should stop me. So I’m going to recreate myself to be a
powerful successful woman, to prove to the world that I can manage on my own, to prove to Hooman that I am not just his dependent, to make my mom smile every day, and most importantly, to prove to myself that I am capable of more than I ever thought.

“I’ll just take the school shuttle to the Intensive English Office tomorrow. They said they want to see me about the volunteer position,” I tell Hooman although I’m not sure if I want to get on the bus. In general, being on public transportation makes me feel insecure, and since I was 18, I’ve been driving my own car. We share a car now though, and he has a class, so I feel the need to get over myself and handle it. “You should go get the driving test before your international license expires,” he says, “at least one of us should, and I have all these classes to study for.” Although I have never been the person responsible for anything in our life, I want to make him feel taken care of. I feel bad for all the pressure he is in since he has no funding, and has no idea where we are going to end up with this “moving to the US decision” that he made. “Don’t worry. I will take care of it,” I reassure him.

The New You

So, here I am, the 33-year-old Ellie with long straight ash brown hair wearing distressed jeans, Zara imitation of Stella McCartney flats, a light pink jacket, and a tiny silver necklace, sipping my Starbucks latte and typing. From time to time, I look up and smile at the young mother who is sitting at the table in front of me with her toddler, and she smiles back. Tired of spending the final working hours of my Thursday volunteering at the refugee center, I tilt my head to the right and left a couple of times, and take a glance out the window at Rock Road, at this city in the Midwestern part of the homeland of my dreams. “Have I changed?” I ask myself for the millionth time. “Or have I always been this person and never knew it? Is it possible that all those people in my life didn’t see the real me? Which one is the real me? Why did I live 30
years of my life being someone that I could be a much better version of?” I keep wondering. “Did my parents not notice who I am because they never read a book about social identity and personal identity? Did Ting-Toomey know how confusing it is for a real person to go through so many changes at the same time? Did she ever wonder what happens if someone experiences all these identity change triggers at the same time? Did Swann experience the burden of the nonvolitional changes in his identity? Did Ellis have to write her story while she was still living it? What was Adams wearing when he went through his epiphany?” So many people to think about. So many questions to answer. I still do not know where my questions are going to lead me. What I do know is that I like this version of myself much better. This new woman living in my body is a smarter, braver, and kinder one, even if she can’t answer these questions. Do I have America to thank for all these positive traits? Do I have America to blame for the bitterness in this woman’s heart for being pushed out of the nest to have to learn how to fly? I give the toddler another smile and take a sip of my latte as I’m staring at this street in a small city in the Midwestern part of the homeland of my dreams.
CHAPTER 4: IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT THEORY-THE ONE WOMAN SHOW

Like I’m watching one of those French movies, dark, yet sweet in many ways, emotional, yet motivating, and of course open-ended, the kind that leaves the audience wondering if it was really just a movie, one of those where the actress has dark shoulder length hair, and wears clothes like everyone else’s, and she takes the audience with her to do laundry, read a book over afternoon coffee, and exchange a glance with a stranger that neither she nor her audience will ever forget. Except, it’s very different from the movies I usually watch in which the actress has an unlimited access to all the luxury and glamour of the world. In this strange very ordinary movie, this actress has as many uncertainties as does anyone who is not on the screen. Yet she lives her days determined to find her way. I watch her wake up in the morning not in Paris in the early 1900s, nor in New York circa 1980, but in Wichita, KS now. I watch her hesitantly get ready to teach a class of 27 mostly white American students, struggling to choose the kind of smile that will send the right message, unsure of whether her blazer will make up for the high heels she has given up on. I watch her, shopping for four oranges at Walmart, marching across from the Keeper of The Plains alongside thousands of other women she doesn’t know because despite all her uncertainties, she is certain about one thing, that she is done not talking and waiting for her dream world to magically come true. I live her life and I watch her live because at the end of the day, the only actress, director, plot writer, and producer in this open-ended movie is me.

Impression Management Theory (IMT)

From the scholars’ point of view, impression management refers to the image a person displays during social interaction (Metts, 2009). As individuals, our identities consist of our beliefs, habits, manners, values, abilities, needs, family background, and several other similar
aspects (Metts, 2009). As individuals, we do not demonstrate all these aspects of ourselves during social interaction (Metts, 2009). Therefore, we choose certain characteristics to display that we believe will present the person we are expected to be in that situation (Metts, 2009). We only make these strategic choices when our identity is important, for example at a job interview, or when we have lost our peace of mind because of experiencing an embarrassment (Metts, 2009). On the other hand, we all present a social self which we find appropriate for a specific situation, like going on a date or being a student in a classroom, within cultural norms that differ from one culture to another (Metts, 2009). In 1959, Erving Goffman used the term “performance” to refer to all the activities of an individual which happen in front of a certain group of observers or audience members in order to influence them (Goffman, 1959). Using the term “performance,” Goffman compared social interactions to a play where each individual could be considered a performer or an audience member, and individuals might take both roles in a single interaction (Goffman, 1959).

Originated and refined in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through several theory versions and modifications, impression management is a relatively new area of interest among communication scholars. Yet, it is considered fundamental (Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2009).

**Self-Presentation**

Psychologists and social psychologists, namely Edward Jones, used the terms self-presentation and strategic self-presentation to explain the concept of impression management (Jones & Pittman, 1982). The concept of self-presentation is based on the premise that others make attributions about us according to how coherent our behavior is during an interaction (Jones & Pittman, 1982). As a matter of fact, we implicitly ask others whom we interact with to believe the impression we are trying to leave (Goffman, 1959). There are five categories of
behaviors and associated attributions foundational to IM (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Vol. 1, pp. 231–262):


**Strategy of ingratiation**

A person who wants to be perceived as likable or friendly shows positive emotions during an interaction, gives compliments, does favors, and uses self-deprecating humor (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

**Trying Too Hard.** It’s just a regular weekday afternoon at the Elliott School of Communication. I’m sitting in my office that I share with three other Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA). It’s a big office with a comfortable black sofa and two red leather armchairs. There is also a leather ottoman that we use as coffee table. It’s a nice place to hang out for all the GTAs. Shelby, Maureen, Crystal, and I are sitting at our desks. “I like your top,” I tell Shelby. She thanks me and explains that she got it from Victoria’s Secret. Not that it’s my style or I would ever wear it, but I find it nice to give compliments. I also tell Crystal that I love her shoes, to Maureen that her hair looks great, to Ciera that she looks great in her dress, to Micah that red lipstick looks good on her, and the list of my compliments goes on and on.

Culturally, when someone gives me a compliment, I either return it immediately, or I say something self-deprecating because I consider it immodest to only take compliments. However, my fellow GTAs do not react the same way to my compliments, and I don’t receive one third of the number of compliments I give. My complimenting does not stop at my office. I go to my advisor to tell her how I like her hair, her shawl, her shoes, and anything new I see she is wearing. Complimenting is a major part of how I communicate with others. I believe it shows
that I pay attention to them and care about them. “Am I trying too hard to make people like me?” I ask myself hesitantly. “Compliments are like smiles. They are gifts you can give to someone with no cost, and it might just be the best part of their day,” I tell myself trying to be convinced that it is the right thing to do as I go on to tell Dr. Armstrong, that his Shocker tie is a very nice color.

**Strategy of self-promotion**

A person who wants to be perceived as competent tells others about her or his achievements, accomplishments, good deeds, and directly shows everyone her/his achievements (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

*The Sun Also Announces.* “Does one need any specific qualifications to teach at the Intensive English Language Center?” asks Eli, my best friend in Wichita as we are having dessert at a dinner party with a group of elite Iranian ladies. It makes me extremely mad! “Why would a university let a non-native English speaker teach English there if that person had no qualifications?!” I think to myself, but then I think “Now is the time when you tell people who you are because these people have known you for a short time, and have no idea about your professional and educational background. “Yes, it does need certain qualifications. Firstly, I have six years of English teaching experience at the college level, and I also have an English teaching certificate from the University of Cambridge,” I say proudly as I make sure everyone hears me. I feel so hurt that my so-called best friend asked me that question in front of all those people. “I am so going to brag about what I have done on social media,” I tell myself. “Just because I have moved here and should start making a life from ground zero again, it doesn’t mean I’m not smart or successful! I am somebody, and everyone better know that.”
After I get home that night, I take a picture of my Cambridge certificate and post it on my Instagram and Facebook with a description of what this certificate means. I don’t have a picture of the book I translated. I go as far as asking my niece to take a picture of my book and send it to me immediately. I feel angry that the world doesn’t see me as I want to be seen. As soon as my niece sends me the book picture, I post that on social media too, with some details of course. As the number of likes and comments goes up, I start feeling less angry. “Now you know that I have done things worth bragging about,” I say it out loud. Maybe it’s time to start talking about things I do well, and that is something I have been taught not to do. “When the sun rises, everyone sees the light. The sun doesn’t need to announce it has risen to make people notice,” my mom always said when I lived back home. “I am the sun, but apparently, I have left my rise and shine on the other side of the planet, so I have no choice but to announce my accomplishments,” I think.

Strategy of exemplification

A person who wants to be perceived as worthy quietly shows her/ his abilities, values, integrity, and competence, but does not directly talk about them (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

“No Trumping.” “If you don’t mind, I’m going to share your post so the blinds and the ignorant see the real Iranians before making any judgments.” This is a comment my best friend has left on my Facebook post about two well-known Iranian figures, Asghar Farhadi and Anousheh Ansari. Asghar Farhadi won the 2017 Oscar for the best foreign movie, and Anousheh Ansari, the first woman who travelled to space on her own personal funding read Farhadi’s letter at the Oscar’s. One of the most important lessons I have learned studying communication in the United States is that words can have more power than guns. If I use the same hateful language and indecency that Donald Trump uses to address a certain group of people, what
would make me different from him? I am trying to portray a different image on my social media for my American social media friends so they will see Iranians from an angle that the American media fails to show. I intend to do this not just through my words, but through my actions as well. So, I reply to Eli’s comment saying “Let’s just call them misled, as we come from a 3000-year-old civilization and we know better than name-callers.” Fortunately, my strategy works double sidedly nurturing her Iranian ego, and not legitimizing the indecent behavior of those who treat Iranians unfairly. I claim that their behavior is less about them as people, and more about what they have been exposed to through media.

It has been a while since I started using my “No Trumping” strategy on social media and in daily life. According to my new strategy, I behave in the most open-minded and pleasant way interacting with everyone, even those that I might not feel very comfortable with. I also consciously lead the other side of the interaction to connect my positivity to my nationality. “No Trumping” is not going to change America’s idea about Iranians, but it can certainly make a couple of my social media followers think twice before they post hateful messages. That means I have achieved my goal for the day.

**Strategy of supplication**

A person who wants to be perceived as helpless appears weak or sad to encourage nurturing behavior towards herself/himself, and claims lack of knowledge or experience to avoid responsibility (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

**All the Heavy Lifting.** It’s a regular Saturday morning of our married life in the US. We enjoy grocery shopping together, and laugh at all the bad grocery choices we make when we buy things we cannot eat that end up in trash, and feel good about our grocery choices when we buy things that are on sale. Since we moved to the US, we spend our Saturday mornings at a few
huge supermarket chains. Hooman, my husband, exercises regularly, and he is very strong. I happily let him carry everything. Bread, chicken or beef, fish, fruit, salad, lunch meat, milk, yogurt, cheese, and bottled water are the permanent residents on our shopping list. There are also items that we add based on what we run out of, like rice, oil, spices, potatoes, onions, coffee, and tea. We usually go back with three heavy bags and a couple packs of water. “Can you carry two of the bags so I don’t have to come downstairs a second time? I will just bring one pack of water upstairs now, and the other one tomorrow,” Hooman tells me after we have parked in front of our apartment. He gives me two of the bags that are lighter, but still too heavy in my mind. “These are too heavy! I cannot! My wrists already hurt. So do my knees.” I say that and walk to the door carrying no bags! He stands there for a few seconds and stares at all those bags and water packs. “It’s OK. I’ll carry them twice. Can you hold the door open?” he asks carrying all the groceries. “I love him,” I think to myself with a smile trying to convince myself that what I’m doing is not wrong, “and I think it’s completely fine to let him do all the heavy lifting. He is ten times stronger than I am.” I give him my most supportive wifely smile as I hold the door open.

**Strategy of intimidation**

A person who wants to be perceived as powerful or in control expresses anger, and shows a willingness to punish or hurt others (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts).

**Who? Me?! March 6th, 2017.** “The executive order signed by the president today protecting the nation from foreign terrorist entry into the United States is a vital measure for strengthening our national security,” reads the spokesperson on the revised travel ban that President Trump has recently signed.
It throws me back to September 11, 2001. I was in a cab, going home from a test preparation class when the radio announced the terrorist attack in the United States. I was 18, and I was preparing for the biggest test of my life, the national university entrance exam in Iran. I was young, carefree, and more concerned about the test that was going to determine my future than anything else. Yet, the news sounded scary. The driver and I listened in silence until I got home, and found my dad listening in shock to his VOA Farsi news program. The images were everywhere. Every channel was playing those videos repeatedly. Even though we lived on a different continent, we were shocked. I was scared, because I thought nothing could ever happen to all those friends I had in the magic box. All those boybands I cherished, all those actresses and actors I religiously adored, my aunt, and my Jewish elementary school best friend could not be at such risk. What would happen to the world if there was no America on earth? After all, America was the haven everyone in the world believed in, believed that if things got terribly out of control, there would always be America. My America, even if I never got to visit it, had to be there as perfect as it always was. Then it wasn’t.

That night, I cried. I cried for the women and men who jumped out of windows in terror and despair. I cried for all those good people, and Americans were good people in my eyes, who had to experience such a tragedy. All the children who saw these scenes, all those who lost their lives in such a horrifying way, and all those who lost their loved ones in an attack that the world would never forget, none of them deserved to go through that. No one deserved to go through that. But they did, and there was nothing I could do to help. In my 18-year-old mind, I walked on those streets, helped the survivors, comforted those who had lost their loved ones, took the children away from it all, and cursed those who were responsible. In the world of reality, the truth was cold and harsh. Those who were responsible had dark hair like I did, they spoke a
language other than English, their skin was darker than Americans, and they were said to have studied the same religion as I did at school. I hated them, and I mourned the trauma my dear America was experiencing. Now my beloved America hated me, and anyone who looked or sounded like me, a harsh cold dose of reality served through my golden magic box.

After 16 years, here I am, being given another dose of that reality through the same magic box that is still my go to anesthetic even though I have lost trust in it. Every time the spokesperson says the term “Islamic radical terrorist,” I know that the name of my country will come up in few seconds. My haven wants me out, and I cannot do anything about it but feel scared again, like on that cab ride at 18.

Contemporary researchers, emotion scholars, scholars interested in gender, and scholars interested in individual differences have all examined the theory of strategic self-presentation to support the fact that impressions are strategically managed to elicit certain kinds of attributions suitable for a context (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). However, their research also shows that the behaviors can be perceived in the wrong way and elicit attributions they were not meant to elicit (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

**Situated Social Identity**

Erving Goffman originated the term situated social identity in sociology at the same time social psychologists were developing self-presentation theory. Unlike self-presentation theory which was concerned with psychological motivation behind humans’ public displays of behavior, Goffman based his theory on the fact that all social interaction is considered social identity management, or “face” (Goffman, 1959). He metaphorically assumed that individuals build and keep a certain image, or “face,” just like actors perform their scenes on a stage,
meaning that people practice their lines, perform, manipulate the situation, and dress according to the situation (Goffman, 1959).

**Impression Management Model**

There are four main hierarchical metagoals of interaction according to Impression Management Theory (Metts, 2009, in Encyclopedia of Communication Theories, pp. 506-509): showing social competence, impression construction, protecting impression integrity, and restoring impression integrity. As the level of the metagoals changes, a person is required to make more effort to analyze the situation and react appropriately (Metts, 2009; Goffman, 1959).

**Showing Social Competence**

The first metagoal is showing social competence which means we manage to build and maintain social identity without making much conscious effort (Metts, 2009). This includes our daily routine interactions. Combining this IMT metagoal with Stella Ting Toomey’s (2005) theory that environmental changes cause changes in identity can make those daily routines an overwhelming task. When one moves away from an environment where she/he was born and raised, all the social behavioral norms and expectations change. If this person has already established their social identity based on the expectations of the first environment, adapting to new social standards, as simple as those standards and norms might seem to natives of a culture, can be overwhelming.

**Wild Roses at Walmart. August 20, 2014.** “We need to go pick up our orders and get some groceries,” Hooman says. I’m trying to decide what to wear again, and I think I know what a lady is expected to wear in the US to go grocery shopping. A summer dress and comfortable sandals would be great. I pull my floral dress and a pair of red sandals out of a suitcase that I haven’t unpacked yet because we still don’t have any hangers. Bree Van-De-Camp and Shallot
wore floral dresses and pearls to go grocery shopping too. Feeling confident with my choice of outfit, I get dressed, and tell them, Hooman and Hamid, that I’m ready to go. Hamid, my brother-in-law who has lived in Vancouver for 12 years and is in Wichita to help us settle down, gives me a weird look. “I don’t even know why you are here. I personally know what I’m doing and do not ever need help from anyone, especially from Hooman’s family,” I think and just give him a nice smile. I know I look like a real lady, and that’s what I intend to be here.

We pull over in a strange parking. Nothing looks very American to me. As we enter Walmart, the first thing I notice is that everything is too big. The packs of food, candy, and people are all triple in size compared to what I am used to seeing. The second thing I notice after a few minutes is that I am the only person wearing something nice. There is a woman who looks like she just got out of bed and didn’t even bother to run a comb through her hair. There is another woman who has a couple of small holes in her sweat pants. “Are people really so poor that they have to wear their distressed clothes?” I ask Hamid. “Didn’t you see all those small trucks in the parking?” he asks, “This is the Midwest. These people are happy with their trucks and bulks, and don’t care what they look like. Welcome to North America!” I can sense his sarcasm and I am not happy that I have to spend the next four years of my life in a city where no one is going to appreciate how much effort I put into choosing my outfits. “I do not plan to live the next four years in yoga pants and flip flops. I didn’t pay all that extra money to carry my super high heels to a different continent,” I think trying to comfort myself. I hardly exchange a word with anyone while we are shopping. I still feel as uncomfortable as I did at the airport. When am I going to learn what the right outfit is in this city? I have no idea.
Impression Construction

The second metagoal, called impression construction, is at a higher level of difficulty, and is more challenging because we try more consciously to demonstrate a certain image, as we do when giving presentations (Metts, 2009). When we are constructing impressions, we intend to be perceived as though we have certain characteristics, such as being more knowledgeable, prepared, or pleasant (Goffman, 1959). We do not always succeed at leaving a certain impression no matter how hard we try. However, it might take some of us twice as much effort to leave an impression if we are in an unconventional situation. If I wanted to be perceived as smart in my own country, I wouldn’t have to do much about it because the people I was surrounded with already knew me. My supervisors were aware of the outcome and student feedback in my classes. My family and friends were there when I went through different stages of life, and they had watched me both fail and succeed. In the United States, no one knew me. I am someone whose entire life was different, and even if I try to talk about my previous achievements, they have no context to make sense out of my accomplishments. All I can do is to show them who I am and what I am capable of, and so I do.

The Second First Impression. August 2015. It’s a Saturday morning. My first official class, qualitative research methods, in the Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University, is going to take an entire Saturday, yet I’m determined to do the best I can. There are tables of four in this room, and most tables already have four people sitting at them. Everyone is American, except one girl who is ether African or African-American. “Am I the only international student here?” I ask myself, but I am prepared to be the only one anyway. I sit at a table with a tall girl who has long red hair, and the African girl; as I later realize she is from Nigeria. There is a table where all the Graduate Teaching Assistants are sitting and they already
know each other. There is another table where second year students are sitting. The female white professor starts the class by asking us to do an activity to get to know each other. It’s a perfect opportunity for me to tell everyone about my professional experience and that makes me feel good about myself. After the introductions, Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch (DBR) asks us to analyze a song in our teams and be prepared to give a presentation on it in a little while.

That confident part of me who thought she knew American culture just as well as real Americans started to feel threatened. I had to prove that I wasn’t just a typical international student, someone with broken English who will take several years to learn a few things about this host culture, and that I was smart, and was going to be one of the best. However, things were not going the way I expected. We had to use the historical background of the song which I was clueless about. I had never given a presentation in my life, and doing it on the first day of graduate school in a second language - even if I stubbornly refused to consider English as my second language - was going to be more than I was prepared to deal with in one day. To make things even worse, I had never used PowerPoint either. Our group’s presentation was the worst in class, and I was so disappointed to come out as this person who was not compatible.

When the professor asked the African girl and me to change our groups so that we each were the only international student in our teams, I started feeling even worse about myself. She did exactly what I would have done if I were the instructor, but I did not want her to see me as someone who was not compatible because of coming from a different background, and I was determined to prove that I was a different kind of international student. The assignment we were given for the next week was to write a paper to explain our views about qualitative research, and how we perceived ourselves as qualitative researchers. I was determined to undo the impression that as an international student, I would never be as good as my American peers, so I spent twice
as much time on that paper as my American classmates and I got an A. I was happy that at least my first impression on my first professor was what I wanted when it came to my grade. My differences could work to my advantage or my disadvantage, and it was up to me to decide how to use those differences to impress.

**Protecting Impression Integrity**

Protecting impression integrity is the third metagoal which is not only intra personal, but also interpersonal, meaning that an individual has to be more aware of the potential threats to the “face” or identity, and be prepared to deal with those threats (Metts, 2009). As an instructor of 7 years, being aware of intrapersonal threats is something that I have had several opportunities to practice. I have not succeeded in managing and addressing those threats in all cases, but I have always learned from what I have done wrong, and used those lessons to protect my impression integrity with more wisdom.

**“Hello. I’m your instructor, and I am from...” August 2016.** As all my fellow GTAs are discussing their lesson plans, my mind is somewhere else. I have taught enough classes to be comfortable with lesson plans, time management, getting and giving feedback, tests, and everything teaching related. Everything is going to be the same as all those classes I have taught in seven years except this time I will be teaching a class where the majority of the students are American. I remember the first class I taught at 23, and how difficult it was to establish my authority as a newby. I am not new anymore, but I have one big issue that might induce all kinds of emotions and reactions in my students. As positively as I try to imagine my relationship with my students, there is still that feeling of insecurity when I think I have to tell my 26 American students that I am an Iranian. It’s also just a couple of months away from the presidential election, and one of the candidates has no problem spreading hatred toward immigrants,
minorities, and Iranians. That adds to my discomfort. “I won’t tell them anything about my nationality, and I will not answer any questions about it,” I decide before my first class. When I walk out of both my classes after the first day, I still feel unsure. I cannot feel that I am close enough to my students when I feel I have to hide such a big part of me, but that’s the price I am willing to pay to keep my authority.

After a couple of weeks, one of the classes I teach which has only 10 students feels comfortable enough to ask me where I am from. Hesitant about whether I want to tell them or not I ask them to guess, and after they make a few guesses, I say out loud at the end of the class that I am from Iran. I still have two months left with these two classes which gives me a chance to compare the outcome of my choices with both my classes. The class that never knew where I came from was distant the entire semester. Even though they have made friends with each other, I remain the instructor and have no part in their small circle. On the other hand, the smaller class that knew my nationality added me to their group messages, started joking about my accent, and taking class less seriously. This situation made me wonder if I did the right thing telling them about my nationality when they asked, and whether I would have claimed my authority in a more powerful way if I had told the class that I was from Iran by my own choice on the very first day. To add to my observations, in their finals evaluations of me and the course, the class that didn’t know my nationality perceived me as more authoritative than the class who knew I was Iranian. This may have been because I was more easy going with the second class that knew my nationality, either because I felt that I had a flaw in claiming my authority, or that they had done me a favor by accepting me as a foreigner/an Iranian instructor to teach them public speaking.
January 2017. Having learned my lesson, when it came to the second semester for me to teach public speaking, I was certain that I wanted my students to know that I am Iranian. “Living in Wichita, KS, they may never get a chance to interact with any other Iranians, and this is my chance and theirs to show and to see things from a different point of view,” I thought as I prepared my introductory PowerPoint. They had to see me as a professional first, so I made a couple of slides that included my educational and professional background information. I also wanted them to see me as a person, and to realize that regardless of our nationalities, we were similar as human beings. I chose to show this personal aspect of myself by adding an image of my husband. The last part of my introduction included pictures of my city Tehran, and its lifestyle and street-style.

I walked out of both classes pleased with the outcome that day, and fortunately for me, that introduction and the other strategies I have applied this semester have contributed to establishing the kind of rapport that I like to have with my students, and the kind of authority that I expect myself to have after teaching for 8 years. My students feel comfortable to be themselves in my class, enjoy their learning experiences, and try to do their best at the same time. So far, there have been none of those threats (being confronted by my students, losing my authority, provoking negative attitudes, hateful behavior, students being reserved because of their fear of unknown/ me) I predicted, and I suspect it is all because of how I set the tone in those first moments.

Restoring Impression Integrity

The most challenging metagoal is the fourth one, called restoring impression integrity (Metts, 2009). At this level, the person may need to block out the ongoing interaction in order to reestablish identity legitimacy. This type of impression management is seen when the person
does something during interaction that requires them to apologize, justify, or take responsibility. We all might do wrong during our interactions, and as difficult as it is to admit our mistakes, it is necessary to rebuild the face that we have lost. If we lose face because of a mistake we have made, the amount of effort we need to put into restoring our impression integrity depends on the scale of stakeholders who were affected by our mistake, and the degree of the damage done. It is not easy to regain trust in a relationship after one has lied, for example. It is more difficult to achieve this goal if an instructor fails to pass on the correct information, and causes students to lose points. The level of difficulty to restore impression integrity can be tremendously high if an individual loses identity integrity as a member of a nation due to politics.

To summarize, impression management might be intentional and strategic, or unintentional (Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2009). We might or might not successfully conduct impression management. Regardless, impression management is a fundamental aspect of social interaction (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009).

**The Finale.** “This is too much, too much!” I say to Hooman as I scroll down my Facebook feed. Every other post says something about a new law that “President Trump” has passed that will make life more difficult for many people including me. I find myself struggling to put the word “President” before this man’s name, and it just tears me up to remember all those feelings I had when I thought about the American former president Barak Obama. “This is all our bad luck! Everything was fine before we got here,” I add filled with rage, and gloom. I am mad at so many people. I am first extremely mad at the Iranian government and its policies. I am mad at Donald Trump and what he says and does. Filled with the bitterness that all these nasty politics induce in me, I angrily look at all the Facebook posts from the people I know. The church going Americans who invited me into their homes, who have been to my home, and who
have shown me or pretended that they perceived me as a good human being post about their religious upbringing that lead them to support Donald Trump’s policies.

What can I say? What can I say when all this hatred and distrust roots back to the way the Iranian government, “my government,” and God how difficult it is to call it mine, has portrayed Iran and Iranians. “What can I do?” I ask myself out loud. I have to show them. I have to show the world that we are not a bunch of unhappy scary people who want to destroy the entire world using nuclear bombs. There is also a 3000-year-old civilization. There is music, art, Oscar-winning films, and exquisite cuisine even if I cannot make it well. There are NASA scientists, Noble-prize-winning female human rights activists, and an entire generation of millennials so full of life and love for different cultures including the American one. Luckily for me, I have two major social media platforms and my academic privileges that allow me to reach out to different groups of people and make them watch this one-woman show I am planning.

As I’m standing in front of the screen at the Southwest Popular American Culture Association Conference in Albuquerque in February, 2017, the projector shines its blue stray of light into my eyes. “Imagine this, you live in two worlds. One, is in your head,” I begin telling my story to the entire world.

They taught her to cover herself up because her beauty was the source of all sins.

They told her she was worth half her male counterparts.

They told her she was just an English teacher whose skills would have no value if she moved away.
When she finally moved to her dreamland, they called her a terrorist, they built a wall to keep her out, and they banned her being.

Nevertheless, #shepersisted
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF OBLIVION, DISCOVERY, AND BECOMING

This chapter is divided into three main phases. *Oblivion* refers to the phase of my life during which I had very little knowledge of American culture, yet I assumed what I had learned through exposure to American television was congruent with reality. My thoughts and my actions put me through more challenging situations in the United States. It was in the oblivion phase that I decided to do this autoethnography to reduce the dissatisfaction and uncertainty that I was feeling. *Discovery* is the phase during which I studied myself, my previous exposure to American television, and the cultural setting I now live in. In this phase, I was less dissatisfied, but I was still uncertain about my social and personal identity. *Becoming* is the phase of my life in which I live now. It includes the period of time when I come to terms with myself, when I accepted that what I knew about America was not entirely true, when I had also lived in the US long enough that I had gained enough confidence to go after what I wanted, and claim the identity that I was comfortable with, the way I wished to be perceived. I continue to live in this phase.

**Oblivion**

*There she was, wearing the Fauna Floral Denim 50mm Pumps by my favorite shoe man Manolo Blahnik, a Christian Dior Haute Couture strapless dark blue floral flare dress, holding a Chanel Timeless clutch bag in silver, with her dreamy long blond hair, and the most beautiful blue eyes I had ever seen. That was what my America looked like before August 17, 2014. Unaware of the fact that this America only existed in my head, at an age when most women become mothers, my inner teenager happily packed her life and flew for almost twenty-four hours to meet the lady in blue. Little did I know that not finding this lady would change a lot of*
things for my happy-go-lucky inner teenager, and my teen-like mindset would have to mature in a short three-year period.

When I first started writing this autoethnography, I knew I was changing, but I didn’t exactly know why and how. I started journaling the events that made me think or feel differently. In a short time, I noticed that both how I perceived myself (my personal identity) and how others perceived me in this new community (my social identity) were different (Swann & Bosson, 2008) from the perceptions that I’d formed during my 31 years of living in Iran. Everything I was, and everything I knew were no longer true. It still took me some time to realize the reasons behind these shifts. I had to adapt myself to social expectations and norms that I was not used to (Swann & Bosson, 2008). I lived my days struggling to overcome the phobias that I had lived with my entire life, like my phobia of pets, because I was in desperate need of a friend. I was alone, didn’t have a job to be proud of, didn’t know how to find my place at school among a group of American twenty-something-year-olds, didn’t have any family here to rely on, and these all made me very unhappy. This was especially unpleasant because I have always been a person who finds a way not to stay in a gloomy state of mind.

As challenging as it all was (Swann, & Bosson, 2008), I had to find a way, and the right way for me was to change (Anthis, & LaVoie, 2006). I pushed myself into social interactions I did not feel comfortable with because I was trying to find my place in this new society. But I was left feeling upset at times because interactions did not go the way I expected. However, I was determined to do well. I had a new role to play, and I had to dress the part first (Goffman, 1959). I changed my hair color because I was bothered by people’s reactions. I was tired of sales people asking me if I was Mexican, and when I said “No” they would immediately ask me where I was from. Hearing that I was from Iran, half of them did not continue the conversation, and from the
other half, many would assume that I meant Iraq and ask me if I spoke Arabic. I was not an Arab though, and I was not the scary weirdo one should get away from immediately. I was an Iranian woman who was smart and educated, and that was the role I chose to perform (Goffman, 1959). When I finally decided what role to play, it was just as much struggle to think about what my actions would mean to and how they would affect my loved ones. It wasn’t just about me, but about them too, and about everyone else in my life (Metts, 2009). I had to fight myself and sometimes my husband to decide what to post and what not to post on social media. I did everything I knew how to do because I wanted to feel a sense of belonging to this community (Ting-Toomey, 1986). Yet, I did what I did oblivious of the reasons why.

**Do I define my nationality, or does my nationality define me? July 1st, 2016.** As I’m scrolling down my Instagram, I see a post by my twenty-something-year-old brother-in-law who moved to Canada about 18 months ago on permanent residency. “Happy Canada Day,” it says. I suddenly have a flash back of last night. My friend Eli (her name is also Elnaz, and she goes by Eli/ not Ellie!), whose family moved to Canada as refugees 14 years ago, is wearing red and white nail polish. “Is this for the 4th of July?” I ask. “Tomorrow is Canada Day, and I’m Canadian,” she replies in a cheerful manner. It makes me wonder how an Iranian may feel about her/his dual citizenship, and how one may cherish their second chosen nationality.

I really want to say something, to say that I find this respect they show to the second nationality they have to be so fake because even though there is a lot of negativity surrounding Iran’s international affairs, we are never going to be completely American, Canadian, or whatever second nationality we choose. Not that I would ever show the same sense of nationalism they are showing to Canada to the Iranian government (I am proud of my nationality for the history of Iran, not for the choices this current government has made during
my lifetime), but at least I would try not to go out of my way to show off my second nationality that is perceived as superior (Like American or Canadian) by many other nations because I don’t believe my nationality defines who I am. In addition, as we are all immigrants, and a second country, as great an opportunity as it is for so many of us, is still not a part of childhood days, our family connections, our first friendships, and so many other valuable parts that have played a role in forming our identities. I’m trying to see both sides though. Maybe this is the biased part of me because I still do not have a second citizenship, or maybe it really is fake to feel a stronger sense of nationalism to the second nationality one has, especially when that nationality comes with so many privileges. Maybe I am too attached to the Iranian part of me. Maybe my father’s love for Iranian history and heritage had a role to play in the feeling I am experiencing now. Maybe this isn’t something for me to figure out at this point, but I cannot help feeling what I feel.

All this thinking throws me back to a few days ago. I tell Hooman: “Remember the day I went to the International Office to ask if we could travel to Canada on our F1 visas? I felt awful hearing that Iranians, along with Somalians and Syrians are the only nationalities that do not have this right. I am going to write something about that.” As I do most of my social media self-expression through Instagram I feel the urge to react to this attitude, so I start searching for an image of Iran on Google. He gives me one of those looks I get when he thinks I am about to do something unreasonable. He is realistic and thinks a lot before making a decision. I, on the other hand, make more spontaneous choices. He is frowning and his jaw line looks stiff. “Don’t you dare stop me. I need to say what I think. I need to be able to speak my mind,” I say. “Do whatever you want,” he replies while staring at the TV. I know he is going to be furious when he reads what I’m writing, but I keep going.
I choose an image that is shaped like the map of Iran, and is colored like the flag. As I look at it, I feel more enraged. “Not even the words on this flag are written in a language Iranians speak,” I think. The words on the flag are in Arabic instead of Farsi which is and always (even after the Islamic conqueror took over the country 1396 solar years ago) has been the national language of Iran. There are 23 Arabic phrases; one is centered and translates to God; the other 22 separate the three colors, and translate to God is greater than to be described. This flag and all those words are supposed to bring us together as a nation, and make us feel that sense of pride and belonging most nations feel toward their flag. Iranians were Zoroastrians who believed in God even before the Islamic conquer, so what breaks my heart is not the fact that the national belief in God is expressed on our flag, but the fact that it is expressed in a foreign language! It is also worth mentioning that I identify as an Iranian not as a Muslim, and these Islamic based Arabic words do not make me feel any sense of nationalism or unity.

As always, my eyes are tearing up which always happens when I am writing or saying something I truly believe in, or care about. I mostly write my thoughts because I do not want to be the adult woman who cries when she speaks. My thoughts seem to have shifted from questioning individuals’ feelings about their second nationality, to the anger I feel toward the Iranian government, a government that has taken away my right to feel proud of my nationality. Or maybe I was never given that right to begin with. I start typing on my Instagram, unsure of whether I am going to post it or not. I type:

“A few weeks ago, I went to the International office to see if we can use this right all international students seem to have allowing them to travel to Canada, Mexico, and a few other countries around the US on their F1 student visa. SORRY! Apparently, if you are from Somalia, Syria, and Iran, getting out of here means you may not be given a chance to come back. As
everyone here is appreciating their country this weekend, I thought I would take this chance to
do the same.

So, thank you to the “Islamic” Republic of Iran! Thank you that the words on my flag
representing my national identity are in a language I do not speak. Oh, I’m sorry! I forgot to
replace my mother tongue “Farsi” with the old-fashioned Arabic the Iranian educational system
tried to feed into my head for seven years during middle school and high school! Thank you for
creating a reality in which almost all the other nationalities dislike me because of a name I drag
along of which I am supposed feel proud. I don’t even dare say out loud that “I’m Iranian.”
Thank you for 3000 years of civilization turned into ashes. Thank you for not taking care of our
Persian monuments. Thank you that nothing remains of our history except in the Louvre Museum
in Paris! Thank you for all the days I spent crying for starving abused street children because
the money that should have been spent on getting them out of their misery was sent instead to
some unknown land to serve governments supporting a religion I do not believe in.

First, all the news was about battles in Palestine, or should I say Israel! Then it was
Bosnia! Next it was Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria! How I cherish this love we have for
all humans (or is it just a certain group of Muslims?). If only we loved all those homeless Iranian
children on the streets enough to take care of them before overloading the news with
international Muslim battles! Thank you for all the humiliation the women of my country face
throughout their lives simply because they were not born with an organ that entitles them to treat
the other gender as “half” a person, as someone who is not allowed to make a decision to get a
passport, or fight for custody of her children. Thank you for this immense fear (that was instilled
in me because speaking one’s mind in Iran can mean being arrested and imprisoned) I have and
will always carry with me, making speaking my mind a struggle. And thank you for taking away from me my home, my family, my identity, and my most basic human rights,” I type.

“I’m posting it. It is political, and you do not need to read it or like it. Just don’t tell me they (the government) are going to find out and my parents will get in trouble,” I tell him. “Your situation is unstable here as it is. You never think about the consequences of what you do,” he says in disagreement. “Don’t do this. Don’t be this person that always stops me from expressing my opinion,” I continue, as I hesitate to hit “post.” I do not want to put my parents at risk. My dad has had his share of political trouble with this system, and my siblings both have jobs that might be jeopardized. My eyes are still wet. I put my phone away, open the laptop and start typing: “July 1st, 2016.”

At the time I was experiencing the struggle about whether or not it was the right decision to show the world what I thought, I was unhappy. I was unhappy, that I was born in Iran, that by saying, “I am an Iranian,” attitudes would change toward me. I was unhappy, that I didn’t find the sense of pride for my nationality that others felt for theirs. I was unhappy, that I hadn’t been able to live the way I wanted in my own country which led me to moving to the US as an international student who is now experiencing socio-economic hardships, and still cannot live as I wish to live. For all this bitterness, I blamed the Iranian government. I was trying to express myself in a way that was a first for me. Before this moment, I had never posted my political opinion on social media. I had only acted on political beliefs once in my life in 2009 after the Iranian presidential election.

Other than that, expressing political views was a big “No” for me because of all the suppression I experienced in Iran. My unhappiness with the Iranian government, and my anger triggered by my brother-in-law and my friend’s feelings for Canada Day made me want to do
something, to say something, even if it was just a post on social media. After the decision I made to go by Ellie instead of Elnaz (and I believe now that I made that decision before I was ready) this was the first time I felt prepared (Anthis, & LaVoie, 2006) to do something that was “unlike” me based on the perceptions both my husband (and all my other family members) and I had about me. I, Elnaz, had kept my political views to myself my entire life. I was disappointed by the differences between my values and the Iranian government’s values for so long that I had given up on the idea that saying something could make a difference. I had voted twice in my life, and had stopped voting in Iran because I didn’t believe anyone whose values align with the Iranian government could represent people like me.

Because I did not participate in anything political, I may have been perceived as someone who does not care about her country. However, that is not the case. I do care. I care about all the children who lived in the worst possible conditions on the streets of Tehran. I care about the women who have no choice but to live with the domestic abuse they experience. I care about the journalists that were arrested because what they wrote did not please the government. I care about all the people who died to protect Iran from Iraq. I just don’t think I am capable of making any changes without hurting myself or my family. I do what I can, buying food for a hungry child, calling the police when I hear the woman next door cry after she is badly beaten by her husband, and stopping my journalist cousin from writing things that could get him arrested. Even though I did not express my thoughts that night, writing them was still a significant moment that released a part of me I had hidden from everyone (even from myself) my entire life. I have another side that wants to fight for change, that wants to be brave, that wants to speak her mind and hopes that it will actually make things a bit better for some people. There are so many things I want to do for all those children, women, and men that were not as fortunate as I, who deserve
to live their lives in normal conditions, and to be safe. I don’t know what this journey means or where it is taking me, but I am already looking at how I negotiate my identity (Ting-Toomey, 1986), and manage my impression (Goffman, 1959), hoping to find answers that will light my path to writing myself a new story.

**Discovery**

*In the middle of the heartland, between the big and the little, by a Cor-Ten steel sculpture, in a long flowy dress as gold as a wheat field at sunset, sits a woman as peaceful as Eirene (goddess of peace in Greek mythology), and as wise as Athena (goddess of wisdom and victory in Greek mythology). With her hair the same color as her dress, and her eyes seeing way beyond horizons she needs no tiara to claim her throne. Little does the poor little sculpture know that it’s been her keeping the plains all along. It has always been her, my lady America in gold. I watch her gracefully caressing the wheat fields and grass-covered plains, and I follow in her footsteps, hoping to find some answers. “But who am I to follow in her footsteps,” I ask myself, then she suddenly turns back and smiles at me, like she is waiting for me to follow, and so I do.*

It felt like I had weak eye sight my entire life and never knew it, until someone got me glasses, and suddenly the world looked completely different. “Different” is not the right word to describe it, but “clear.” Like any pair of glasses, these have two lenses too, one is the Identity Negotiation Theory, and the other is the Impression Management Theory. There is also a frame that holds everything together called autoethnography.

Doing this autoethnography has made me emotionally vulnerable (Thank God for an academic excuse to cry in public whenever I want to). In my journals, I have written stories culled from memory (Adams, 2011), and it’s not just while I write. My mind wanders in every corner of my brain, looking for answers in the past, present, and future. Studying the theories,
and analyzing my epiphanies (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2012) through the theories has made me more aware of my own thoughts and reactions. Moving to Wichita, KS, I had to face the first challenge of Identity Negotiation: changes in one’s identity triggered by environmental changes (Swann & Bosson, 2008).

One reason that environmental changes affected me was that I had to adapt myself to behavioral norms that were not only different from what I was used to in Iran (this was something I expected), but they also differed from the norms I had observed in American television shows (the fact that I did not expect this made it more difficult for me to deal with) (Swann & Bosson, 2008). Maybe if I hadn’t expected myself to know American culture, keeping up with these behavioral norms would not have bothered me as much. But in my own head, I was just as American as anyone who was born in America. I didn’t have as many problems letting go of the Iranian behavioral norms. It took me one firm decision to let go of my cat phobia, but I’m still struggling to decide what is expected from me, for example what to wear in the conservative Kansas community in which I live that is so different from the New York-like projection of American culture on American television.

Because of moving to a new environment, my self-awareness and self-knowledge have increased leading to setting new standards for myself (Swann & Bosson, 2008). Being the youngest daughter of the family, I used to have no problem with people trying to take care of me. I didn’t mind remaining the little girl as long as it meant I would somehow get what I wanted. In my late twenties, I had an English instructor job, my own new car, I was married to my boyfriend of 6 years, and we owned our tiny apartment on the upper west side of town which was considered a better than average neighborhood. There was nothing else I was trying to achieve. I still played the little girl, and lived a care free life.
Moving to Wichita, KS, I was none of these things anymore. I didn’t have any family to rely on, no job to help me feel like I had my own place in society or to feel financially safe. We bought the cheapest ugliest car we could afford and we had to share that. We rented an apartment close the university in a neighborhood I would have never imagined living in, and my husband was an international student who had no power to change this situation any time soon. My social identity was definitely not being nourished in this new environment (Swann & Bosson, 2008), so I had to do something for both of us.

I remember the day I drove miles and miles to using my GPS to take the driving test. I had been using my international driver’s license which was valid for only three months, and our insurance was expiring. Hooman was too busy studying new courses in English, so I had to get my Kansas license to avoid paying higher rates on our car insurance. I was lost, but determined to take something off his plate. He was desperate, had no funding, and we had already spent almost all our savings. I remember seeing a girl that I knew through the Iranian community at the DMV. She was there with her boyfriend to renew her license. “Oh my God! Are you here alone? Do you want us to stay with you?” she asked me in sympathy. I remember being offended by that attitude. “I’ll be fine, but thanks for the offer,” I responded. When I got back from the test, they were still there waiting for their work to be done. “Did you pass?” she asked me, and I proudly responded “Of course! I’ve had a driver’s license for ten years.” That day, I felt great about my independence. I did not lose the dependent, needy, little-girl-like attitude that day, but it sure felt fabulous to let my independent side take control.

**The Little Girl Has to Go!** Sitting in DBR’s office (she is my advisor who has been lighting my way throughout this autoethnography and she was the inspiration behind the “lady America in gold” in the beginning of this section), I’m staring at the blue Dory Kleenex box on
her desk. “I don’t know what to tell her! I’m freaking out,” I tell DBR. I’m referring to a phone call that I have to make to the University of California Santa Barbara in a few minutes to talk to their graduate director about the PhD program there. “Yes, you do know what to tell her,” she tells me firmly, “Get a piece of paper and write down the questions that you want to ask. Also, have your CV in front of you in case you need it.” I do as she says while I’m thinking that I wish I was as confident about myself as she is about me. “I hope I don’t start giggling in the middle of our conversation like the little girl I am,” I tell her as I’m heading to my office to make the phone call. “You’re not going to! Let me know how it went when you’re done” she says and she sounds just as confident. I later realize that I play this little girl card when I want people to help me, or to approve of me (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009), and I sure want DBR’s support and approval.

After the phone call, I stop by at her office to tell her it went well, and that I was given some suggestions about my application. Since there is another student in her office, I keep it brief and go back to my office. Shelby, Maureen, and Krystal share the office with me and they are all there today. There are also a couple of other graduate assistants lounging there with us. DBR knocks on the door and I open it wondering if she needs Micah’s assistance with something. I go back to my desk, and she stands on the left side of my desk where everyone can see her. “There is something I need to talk to all of you about. You are all strong, capable, smart women. You are in grad school, and many of you plan to go on to get your Ph.D. If you want to get your doctorate degree, you have to own it! You are not little girls. Believe in yourselves. No more little girl tears in my office. The little has to go!” I know she is referring to me even though she is not looking at me. Apparently, Shelby thinks DBR is talking to her. Her face looks like she is about to burst into tears. “Thank you,” I say with a smile and I think to myself that I certainly
do not want to be perceived as an incompetent little girl. I feel a little mad at myself because of my own immature behavior and that I always think aloud before I process my thoughts. “I am independent, and I’m strong. I won’t do this anymore.” DBR’s little speech and these thoughts lead to a decision. “I am confident and mature, and I know what I am capable of. It’s time everyone else knows that too.”

As an autoethnographer, I have also started questioning things that I would have ignored easily had I not been doing this research, research in which I, myself, am the research subject myself (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). I started looking at this autoethnography as a tool that would not only help me manage my life as a non-traditional female international student in the Midwest, but an illustration that many others could identify with (and this was something I was told by several people who read or heard parts of my story). I started feeling more motivated because it was not just “Ellie writing her story” anymore, but it could mean a lot more to other people.

Another reason that can cause identity change according to Identity Negotiation theory is developmental growth and role changes (Swann, & Bosson, 2008). This category of changes take place when society starts treating the individual differently. For example, when someone has a baby, the person is expected to behave motherly. In this situation, the person tries to bring their identity in harmony with this new role (Swann, & Bosson, 2008). In Wichita, KS, I was none of the things I used to be, a daughter, a teacher, or someone whose life is all figured out. I was an international student who studied communication, a major that is mostly studied by Americans. I was fortunate enough that my experience and qualifications got me an English teaching job at the Intensive English Language Center at Wichita State. It both fed my ego, and made my life/our life a lot easier financially. Even though I was doing the same thing I did in Iran, it was different
in that I was teaching a different demographic of students in an English-speaking country. My life as a thirty-something-year-old nontraditional international student, however, was not as easy. I had to fight myself to believe that I was capable of doing what everybody else did even if I was born and raised in a different culture, and I had to prove the same thing to my professors. One semester and a 4.0 GPA later, the professors had seen enough effort from me to believe that my second language skills and different experiences did not stop me from being as competent as my American classmates (or maybe I started believing in myself and it caused me to feel more positive about everything). In the second semester, my professors and classmates gave me the impression that they thought I was smart, and capable. I had more reasons to do my best. The girl who swore she would never go back to school after she got her bachelor’s degree (and didn’t even go to pick up her degree for years) was now thinking about doing a thesis, and getting her Ph.D.

But You’re Smart!

It’s finally time for me to defend my thesis proposal. DBR has already helped me with my PowerPoint, but I haven’t practiced with her. However, it doesn’t stress me out at all. I have asked my peers to be there if they want to because my intention is to be perceived as confident. At this point I’m using the strategy of exemplification consciously (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009). I’ve brought some tea and cookies to reduce the formality of the meeting, and to make myself feel more comfortable. I go to the meeting room early to start setting everything up. The next person to arrive is my outside committee member. Hoping to make a good first impression, I greet him and tell him that I have heard so many good things about him from DBR and Aimee (my other friend who knows him). Shelby arrives next, and it makes me feel a bit more comfortable to have the first familiar face in the room. My other three fellow graduate students,
Dr. Armstrong, and DBR are all there now. I invite everyone to have some tea and cookies, and then I start the presentation. It’s weird that I don’t feel stressed at all, but I appreciate the confidence I feel at this point. I guess using different strategies and faking my confidence have actually worked!

After my presentation, only the committee members stay and everyone else leaves. Suggestions are made, questions are asked, and I still feel positive about the whole thing. “How does a smart, educated woman like you perceive America like that?” asks Dr. Armstrong. “What have I done!” I ask myself knowing that my thesis does not portray the image that I think describes me the best at this point of my life. But then again, that was how I perceived this country, and those perceptions all came from American television, so it wasn’t just me. I try to justify my Carrie Bradshaw/ Serena Van-Der-Woodson ideas (& I already knew they weren’t the wisest/smarter of women), blaming everything on Hollywood. However, deep down, I know that I wouldn’t have been as offended to be categorized with Carrie and Serena. I guess I like this version of myself a lot more though, and I plan to do whatever I can to be categorized with another group of women, women like the ones in these books my dad used to buy me.

During this phase, I had left Oblivion behind. I wasn’t debating whether or not I should express my thoughts, but how I should express them and how they would be perceived by others. I was aware of the changes that were happening, and I was ready to be in charge. Taking control means that I have to make the changes happen using a variety of strategies, and I have to be able to predict the outcomes of my actions (Metts, 2009). The first metagoal individuals aim to achieve in impression management is showing social competence in daily routines (Metts, 2009). When I was in the oblivion phase, even achieving this simple goal took a lot of effort. I was not able to maintain my social identity easily because I had to shape it first. I assume this stage can
be challenging for anyone who is going through environmental or role changes. It took me some time to realize what the behavioral norms were, and what was expected from me as a female thirty-something married Iranian student. In the beginning, even choosing a dress to wear to Walmart was a challenge. The longer I have lived in Wichita, the easier it has gotten to feel comfortable with myself, and to start working on the second metagoal of Impression Management, constructing my impression (Metts, 2009). It isn’t just about me wearing a different dress anymore. I am past that. It is about how others see me, and if that image is how I really want to be seen. None of us leaves the right impression all the time, and now that I know I haven’t in many ways come across as the person I was hoping to, it is time for me to use different strategies, to show the world I am competent, and to understand how what others might think of me affects my social identity (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009).

I start using the strategy of self-promotion, and the strategy of exemplification more consciously (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009) to construct the impression I want to leave. I start using my social media differently. At first, I post about my past achievements; but then it becomes more than that. I don’t want to be perceived as a woman who tries to “Keep Up with the Kardashians” anymore. Instead of celebrities, the list of my following pages is filled with Hillary Clintons and Michelle Obamas! I still keep a few of my fashion magazine pages as my guilty pleasure, but this time, I look at them with enough awareness to realize how they influence my personal and social identity.

Becoming

Still close to where my dream journey started, by the big apple, surrounded by endless waters as blue as I once imagined her eyes, stands my lady America in a robe that has never been featured in Vogue or Elle. Her right hand is raised to hold hope for liberty that leads so
many people like me to this country. Her left hand holds a tablet to prove that it wasn’t that long ago when someone did what I’m hoping to do today. With the remains of the rough days still broken at her bare feet, she reassures me that even her life wasn’t always as perfect. How soothing that her feet are not covered in some ridiculously extravagant pair of shoes I would never buy. How heart-warming that her hair is not blond and her eyes are not blue. How comforting that even an Iranian woman with dreams that she would grow to be embarrassed by can simply stand by her side, not afraid of being judged for her dark hair and strange accent, and to fight with her and with all the women who might be in the oblivion, the discovery, or the becoming phase of their lives. And how proud should all these women be for doing what they do, and for being who they are. Oh my Lady Liberty!

All of Us

It’s been seventy-four days, four hours, and twenty-two minutes since that day. I woke up to find out that my dream had smashed into the most unbelievable reality. How I had hoped that “the woman” would be in the history books that I would buy for my future children to show my daughter that she could literally be whoever she wanted because someone did the same not so long ago. How I had wished that I could see a day when a woman who wasn’t from another planet, who didn’t have superpowers, a woman who made mistakes and wasn’t afraid of owning them, who would let me on her campaign staff despite everything would get the same opportunity as all the men who aren’t even half as qualified! I thought that would change so many things not only for the women on this side of the earth but also on my side. I hoped that “the woman” who would be my role model would hold the torch of liberty up in real life. “The woman” was Hillary Clinton, and it took me a week after November 9th, 2016 to collect my pieces and put me back
together. I thought I would live to watch history being made. It was made, but not in a way I had hoped. I wasn’t ready to give up yet, and apparently, neither were so many other women.

I was past discovery phase at this point, and maybe the anger, fear, and despair I felt in November 2016 had a role in that. I had come to peace with the fact that I was in a different environment that would bring me different roles to play, and I knew that I had to start making changes in my identity (Swann, & Bosson, 2008), to let go of some ideas, habits, fears, and to start using a variety of strategies including the strategy of ingratiation, the strategy of self-promotion, the strategy of exemplification, and the strategy of supplication to achieve my goals, (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009). So, I did.

All of us were together in this. The lady America in blue, the lady America in gold, the lady liberty, Hillary Clinton, women in pink pussy cat hats, women in rainbow colored T-shirts, women singing in Spanish, Women for Kansas, women holding their toddlers, women in hijab, women who I only saw in the magic box, and Elnaz Parviz were all fighting the same battle this time. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t afraid. I wasn’t afraid of being judged by others, or scared of any governments. I was there, and whether anyone liked it or not, I was going to say what I thought. On March 21, I marched, or better yet we marched. Lynn, Mary, Deanna, Anna, Jane, and so many other American women whose past and experiences were so different from mine, and we put on the matching yellow T-shirts with green and white Women for Kansas logos in the middle, and marched across the bridge by the little and big Arkansas, and by the Keeper who was still standing tall. Yet this time he knew who the real keepers were and I could see it in his smile. Wichita was not mine. It sure hadn’t left the best first impression on me, and our first interaction was definitely not perfect. But for the first time in three years, I was home, and I finally felt like I belonged because I was a part of something that I felt proud of.
By the time I got to my *Becoming* phase, my idea of America had changed from Carrie Bradshaw to Lady Liberty. I didn’t worry any longer about the fact that this city didn’t have a million skyscrapers, or that women didn’t look like they were fresh out of a fashion magazine. I actually didn’t think much about how things looked. What mattered was that in America, things were just as unfair as they were anywhere else in the world. I had waited my whole life to get here, to this dreamland where everything was supposed to be perfect, yet it wasn’t. I wasn’t in my twenties, and I wasn’t going to wait to get to another dreamland. I wasn’t planning on waiting for things to happen. It was time for me to make things happen, whether through my words, or my actions. I had to strategically verify the parts of my identity that might prevent me from writing, from acting, such as my fears, or my dependence on others (Swann & Bosson, 2008). It was obviously unsatisfactory for me to find the injustice in America, the America that I was hoping would be a better place than Iran (Anthis, & LaVoie, 2006). Hence, I had to gather all my courage to bring both my personal identity and my social identity closer to an identity that I would be ideal for me (Swann, & Bosson, 2008). I had to both initiate the confidence in myself to get out there and speak up, and try as many times as it took for me to succeed, without fear of failure. This meant changing my personal identity from a person who would never speak her mind, or participate in activities she wasn’t sure she was going to get right the first time. In terms of my social identity, I had to construct my impression, and protect my impression integrity _the second and third metagoals in Impression Management Theory (Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2009). If I believe that “Women’s rights are human rights,” I have to show it to the world. I change my Facebook profile picture to a picture of me at Women’s March. I am not wearing a beautiful dress or great make-up in that picture. In fact, I am wearing a T-shirt, a garment that I thought I would never wear, and one that left me disappointed when I arrived in Wichita. It wasn’t even an
expensive T-shirt. To me, however, that picture is priceless because it portrays the new social identity I choose to advance, the one I hope others perceive in me to: a strong smart woman who is not waiting for change to happen, but is trying to make change happen. That picture shows a woman who doesn’t live in the magic box, or in her head, but in the world of reality, with all its unfairness, and she is not afraid of failing. She is the kind of woman that will keep trying until some day, her dreams come true.

**Banning the Ban.** Soon after the march, the new American president passed a law, banning citizens of seven majority Muslim countries from entering the US, and of course, Iran was one of the seven. Not having seen my parents, who are in their seventies, for almost three years (One of my nightmares is that I will not ever see them again), I was hoping to visit them for a month after graduation. Now it will probably be another few years before/if I can see them again. This ban will also make it more difficult for Iranian students to get jobs, or any positions they are hoping for. It was not just a law. It was unofficial permission to people who are filled with anger and hatred for their own reasons to take action against Muslim refugees/ students/ immigrants, Iranians. There were seven majority Muslim countries included in the ban.

However, to Americans, the name of Iran brings a certain kind of fear and hatred. I assume it is because among the seven, Iran is less vulnerable. There are no civil wars in Iran. the government has strong military forces, and it isn’t easy for foreigners to cross the borders. There is no American embassy’s there either. So, the only official way for the American government to know anything about Iran’s internal affairs, which are considered internationally critical because of nuclear research that the Iranian government has been conducting, is through the United Nations, or other International organizations. We all know what fear of the unknown can provoke. Even though no terrorist attacks on United States Soil, or anywhere else in the
world have been officially traced back to Iran, and despite the fact that there are several successful scientists, artists, and activists in America who are originally from Iran, the name of Iran is still affiliated with terrorism. There were shootings in bars in Kansas and attempts to burn down buildings where the offender thought there were refugees/Iranians. I was worried and desperate, but not only for myself. If I am lucky, people will not realize that I am from Iran in our first interaction. Hooman, however, has a heavier accent, and when he doesn’t shave his face everyday, he looks 100% Middle-Eastern. There were also the refugees from the other seven countries that I know from the International Rescue Committee who looked and sounded completely foreign, and who aren’t living in the university environment like us.

For all these worries, when Amir, the ex-president of the Iranian Student Association, called me to see if I was interested in an interview with KSN news, I didn’t think twice! I actually didn’t even let him finish the talk he prepared to convince me to do the interview which left him laughing. “If there was any Iranian female international student in Wichita who would leave the right impression about this situation on local television, it’s me. I only need not to cry,” I thought as I was folding some paper tissues to put in my purse, just in case. Amir’s interview was longer than mine, but apparently, my few sentences and the couple of tears I dropped made a more emotional story. KSN News opened their 10 PM news with a part of my interview on January 30th, 2017. Hooman was furious. I was calm. I had to do the interview. I had to say what I thought even if it meant I couldn’t stay in America or go back to Iran. I could live in a different country, but I sure could no longer live with myself if I didn’t do what I thought was the right.

The day after the interview is the “No Ban, No Wall” rally on campus. Sara, another Iranian grad student whose major is engineering has offered to give a short speech at the rally. We get some poster boards and markers, and go to her office to write her a speech and make the
posters together. Another one of our friends joins us, and we walk to the rally together. We decide which poster we each want to carry. Mine has the same message as the one Bella and Gigi Hadid carried in New York a couple of days ago. It says the names of all the main religions, and highlights the letters that form the term “Human.” I like the idea that no matter what our religion is, we are the same. I resent all religions though for dividing people instead of bringing them together. I wish everybody saw beyond their upbringing.

As we are standing there, my Elliott School support group, DBR, Michelle, and Kelsay show up and stand next to me. It warms my heart to know that there are people among those I interact with daily that are there for me on days like this, even though they don’t know me very well. Then Aimee, Nancy, and Pat, three women with whom I worked at the Intensive English Language Center join us, and give me hugs to show their support. In the crowd, I see Lynn and Anna, the ladies I know from Women for Kansas. They have brought their own poster, and we take pictures together. How can I not appreciate all these women who have let me in their circles, supported me in these three years, been my friends, and taught me so much? There are four of us, the Iranian female students, who have the big posters, I ask Sara if she wants us to stand with her in the middle of the circle as she gives her speech and she likes the idea. When it’s her turn, we all walk down together, and we hold our posters up as she gives her speech. It isn’t the way I would have handled the speech, but then I may have cried, so I’m happy she chose to do the talking part. I hold my poster high and my head higher. This isn’t about me. It hasn’t been just about me for a while now. And I’m going to fight for all of us.

I’m not sure which one of these played a bigger role in the process of me coming to terms with my identity; if it was writing this autoethnography, analyzing my deeds and thoughts through journaling, or living here at this point in history, but I am a braver, more determined
person today compared to the woman who arrived at the United States in an outfit that was so out of place.

However, I am certain that this analysis has helped me see things that I would not have noticed, or I may have experienced these positive changes much later. It has also made my life both easier, and more difficult. Easier in a sense that I know myself better, and more difficult because there are memories that are difficult to relive but even more difficult to put into words. There have been several emotions involved. There have been days that I used half a box of tissues to write a few pages. And there have been days that I had a smile on my face for an entire day. My experiences support some parts of theories to apply to my case as a research subject. I have consciously and unconsciously tried to achieve all four metagoals of Impression Management Theory including showing social competence, impression construction, protecting impression integrity, and restoring impression integrity (Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2009).

Being in the environment long enough, I have learned the norms and standards well enough to show social competence (Metts, 2009) without much effort in my daily interactions, like while interacting with my classmates, or while shopping (I still sometimes feel a bit awkward.). I have constructed, and consciously protected my impression (Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2009) at school, on social media, and in the Iranian community. Most importantly, I have aimed to restore impression integrity (Metts, 2009) which is the fourth IMT metagoal through my social media use, and my everyday behavior. In analyzing my experiences, I realize I have used four of the impression management strategies, but the strategy of intimidation is not something I remember using (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Metts, 2009).

I have made friends using the strategy of ingratiation, I have made my accomplishments known through using the strategy of self-promotion. I have gained the respect and trust of my
professors, friends, classmates, and the Iranian community using the strategy of exemplification. I have actively applied the strategy of supplication with Hooman and DBR to gain their support. But I have never used the strategy of intimidation (I negatively judge those who use this strategy, but I understand that it probably roots back in their past). Finally, my identity has been affected by all four conditions in which someone’s identity might change including environmental changes, developmental growth and role changes, strategic self-verification, and self-initiated changes (Swann, & Bosson, 2008). The reason my experiences during these three years have been intense enough to make me want to write about them is that I went through all these conditions at the same time. Looking at my social media and comparing my posts, I can see the difference in my views and lifestyle. My parents tell me that they are proud of this woman I have become, and it means the world to me. Hooman has made it clear that he believes in me and that we are equals in everything, and for the first time in 33 years, I am determined to go after my goals.

Immigration is a difficult transformation. However, when one is an international student, one is not immigrant. International students experience the same socio-economic difficulties in addition to having to adapt themselves to a new academic and social culture. They also experience significant uncertainty. Now if the international student is also female, older than a traditional student, studying a major that is not very common for international students to study, and has been exposed to the culture of the country through commercial television productions, the amount of uncertainty can be so high that the person might feel lost. Luckily for me, all this has worked out the best, and this thesis is the proof that if I was able to do it, anyone else can do the same, if they want to.
The Dream Catcher. I walked into this town in an outfit that made me feel out of place. I didn’t only pack my useless high heels and dresses in my excess luggage. I also packed years and years of perceptions that were just as out of place in this city as my outfit. I came to America not because I worked hard to get here, but because my husband was determined to complete his PhD in the US. I tagged along to wear my clothes, go to brunches, and post cute pictures on my social media. I wasn’t an unhappy person in Iran. I loved my English teaching job, and I had my family and friends to rely on. I had forgotten I could want more, be more.

Moving here changed me. It made me realize who I didn’t want to be. It made me feel that I actually could be more. I could be woman whose voice means something. It made me see that my efforts can change things. I realized that although I love teaching, I don’t have to stay an English teacher for thirty years, teaching the same books. I can use my English skills to do research and write about things that matter. This country also gave me opportunities that I was never given. It showed me that my ideas and my time are valuable. I didn’t find Carrie Bradshaw’s America, but I found an America that pushed me out of my comfort zone, and gave me opportunities to make progress. It was difficult to let go of habits and perceptions that were instilled in me through years, like my fears, and the comfort that my dependence on my loved ones brought me. But I am a braver, more independent, and I would like to think, a smarter woman today than I was three years ago. I really like this version of myself.

Am I happier now? I would say definitely yes! Today, I can confidently say that I do not want to be in anyone else’s shoes but my own (and they are not Manolo Blahniks but who cares?). I have been offered full funding to complete my PhD in communication at the University of Kansas, and I feel like I have everything I wished for. What are my next steps? Maybe I will make a documentary about a woman who wanted to be Carrie Bradshaw but ended up following
Michelle Obama. Maybe I will interview Hillary Clintons and Michelle Obamas. Maybe I will someday write a biography of a woman who became someone like Michelle Obama. Even if that’s just a dream today, didn’t this country become the United States of America because someone dared to have a dream?

The Last Scene. There she is with a long foot path ahead. She is wearing a blue flare dress, a white pearl necklace, and black pumps. She is carrying two enormous suitcases filled with high heels, tailored jackets, and dresses. She stares at the long foot path. There are grass covered plains on both sides, and an infinite cloudy sky. She takes a glance at her suitcases, and another gaze at the path. She takes off the heels, opens a suitcase, and chooses a pair of black sneakers to wear. Another look at the path and she weaves her long hair into a side braid. She leaves the suitcases that she so religiously packed with care, and starts her journey. She takes every step, determined to find the torch of liberty at the end of her path, and to catch her dream. The camera stays still. She walks further and further. The music soundtrack has a slow steady beat that conveys a sense of hope laden with uncertainty. Rain drops fall on the lens of the camera as the last scene fades away.

The End
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