

## Original Article

# Theoretical components of Iranian folk song (Qashqai lullaby) based on the communicative gestalt theory with a psychosocial approach and citizens' mental health

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## Abstract

**Background:** Given modern psychosocial challenges, non-pharmacological mental well-being interventions are needed. This study aimed to identify its theoretical components through the principles of visual literacy in communicative Gestalt theory and explain their link to psychosocial health.

**Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted using a constructivist Grounded Theory approach and directed content analysis. Data were collected through purposive sampling of 18 prominent vocal pieces and semi-structured interviews with 9 experts (musicians and psychologists, Visual communication artists, as well as mental drawings of the basics of visual literacy, Qashqai's lullaby, by 40 students) and analyzed using MAXQDA software. The analysis was focused on Gestalt principles (wholeness, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, closure).

**Results:** Data analysis led to the extraction of six key theoretical components aligned with Gestalt principles: Wholeness (integrated auditory experience), Figure-Ground (semantic highlighting of poetry), Proximity (melodic-verbal cohesion), Similarity (repetitive acoustic patterns), Continuity (continuous emotional flow), and Closure (completion of auditory expectations). These components were linked to specific psychosocial mechanisms such as reducing cognitive load, enhancing attentional focus, facilitating the processing of complex emotions, creating psychological safety, gradual emotional regulation, and cognitive completion. Interview analysis further characterized Iranian Folk song (Qashqai lullaby) as a "regulative communicative space" with functions in emotional regulation, mental coherence, recovery of a pleasant feeling, representing nostalgia and reinforcement the collective identity of citizens.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes that the Gestalt structure of Iranian Folk song (Qashqai lullaby) due to benefit from the systematic principles of visual literacy, fosters an integrated auditory experience which reduces mental agitation, facilitates emotional expression, and strengthens social belonging. It establishes a theoretical framework for using folk song as a cultural intervention for mental health of citizen and paves the way for future experimental research.

**Keywords:** Gestalt Theory; Music; Mental Health; Qashqai people; Psychology, Social.

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## **Introduction**

**T**he complexities of urban life and the psychosocial pressures caused by it in the contemporary world have made the mental health of citizens one of the basic components of the sustainable development of societies. In this regard, interdisciplinary approaches using the capacities of non-medical fields to promote mental health have gained a growing position (1). Art, and especially music in the form of indigenous and ritual songs, as an inclusive and deeply human phenomenon, has always been a tool for expressing, communicating, and regulating emotions. Among musical genres, local Iranian songs such as the Qashqai lullaby have a great capacity to engage the listener on emotional, cognitive, and sensorimotor levels due to the combination of rich lyrics with maternal feelings with self-made melodies based primarily on authentic Iranian instruments and melodies (2). However, systematically utilizing this capacity in the form of psychosocial interventions requires scientific analysis and recognition of the components of the visual structure and communicative elements of this art (3). With its emphasis on holistic perception and mental patterns, Gestalt psychology provides a powerful framework for analyzing how meaning and aesthetic experience are formed (4).

This theory was developed in the early 20th century by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler. It emphasizes that the human mind perceives visual phenomena not as individual components but as an organized and coherent whole. The basic principles of this approach, including similarity, proximity, continuity, closure, and distinction of figure and ground, provide artists with valuable conceptual tools to align their work with the perceptual mechanisms of the audience (5).

In the communication area, the "Gestalt theory of communication" is based on the principle that a message is perceived as an integrated whole (Gestalt) and its quality

exceeds the sum of its constituent components and is constructed in the mind of the audience based on the relationships between those components (such as similarity, proximity, continuity, and closure) (6). This theory can be utilized as an analytical lens to understand how the elements of Iranian singing (including lyrics, melody, rhythm, and timbre) are organized and how they create a unified and meaningful experience for the listener. Such an experience can simultaneously facilitate emotional processing, enhance focus, and evoke a sense of belonging and connection.

This study is applied in terms of the objective. It uses an approach similar to research projects in the medical field (with the steps of defining the problem, presenting a theoretical framework, analyzing components, and explaining the mechanisms of effect). Using a qualitative analysis, it seeks to recognize the visual structure of Iranian folk songs such as the Qashqai lullaby, based on prior mentalities and the principles of Gestalt communication theory. The lullaby unconsciously reflects the maternal feeling and carries part of the social traditions and cultural identity of the listener's upbringing and educational environment.

All mothers, without being familiar with the sources of sounds and melodies, have a mental relationship with them in their subconscious. In other words, the lullaby is present and ongoing in the mother's psyche from the very moment the child is born. For this reason, the lullaby is called the first poetic and melodious covenant between mother and child. By creating a coherent, predictable, and dynamic structure in the minds of mothers, the basic assumption is that the Gestalt organization governing the Qashqai lullaby can act as a "regulatory auditory environment." Such an environment can activate effective psychosocial mechanisms, including calming the listener, reducing mental

confusion, and scattering of thoughts (through the principle of “closure” and creating melodic expectations), facilitating the expression and processing of complex emotions (through the integration of poetry and music and the principle of “continuity”), and strengthening a sense of collective identity and social cohesion (through sharing a common aesthetic experience and the principle of “similarity” within a culture). Thus, recognizing these components is a first and necessary step for designing evidence-based musical interventions to promote mental health and psychosocial resilience of citizens.

## Methods

This qualitative-descriptive-analytical research was conducted using a constructivist grounded data theory approach and directional qualitative content analysis, drawing on the visual mentalities of artists. It aimed to deeply extract the theoretical components hidden in the visual structure of Iranian folk songs, such as the Qashqai lullaby, and explain the patterns governing them according to the principles of Gestalt communication theory.

### *Research setting and population*

- Research setting: This study was conducted in the context of archived audio-visual media (national networks, official music archives, and reliable digital sources) through an interactive space of interviews with experts (in person or online) and testing mental drawings resulting from hearing the lullaby.
- Statistical population: The statistical population included two sections:
  1. All vocal works recorded in the Iranian instrumental music category.
  2. Experts in the fields of Iranian music, music psychology, and aesthetics.
  3. Artists and students working in the field of graphic design

### *Study population and sampling method*

**Musical Works Section:** A sample of 15 to 20 complete vocal pieces from singers with a style and outstanding works was selected among the community of works using the criterion-based, purposeful sampling method. The selection criteria included fame and influence in the vocal tradition, diversity of instruments and melodies, richness of poetry and emotional-social themes, and the technical quality of recording the work. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

**Experts Section:** Using the purposeful and snowball sampling method, 8 to 10 music teachers, experienced singers, and psychologists specializing in the fields of art and music were selected as participants in the interview.

**Art Students Section:** Using the visual principles of Gestalt theory, 40 art students drew their visual mental images of the feeling of hearing a Qashqai lullaby without prior notice. This test was repeated in three stages with an interval of one month.

### Data Collection Method

The data were collected through triangulation using three primary sources to increase the validity and richness of the study:

1. Documents: The selected audio and video works, relevant authentic notations, analytical articles on the structure of pieces, and texts related to the aural aesthetics of Iranian music
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews: Conducting individual interviews with experts based on a focused interview guide. Questions were designed around their empirical and analytical understanding of the totality of the vocal work, the relationships between its components, and the potential impact of this organization on the listener's experience and mental states. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim.

3. Mental drawings: After three stages at a certain interval without prior notice to the participants, fragments of the played lullaby were illustrated, and the actors' works were qualitatively analyzed based on the visual principles of Gestalt theory.

#### *Data Analysis*

Given the qualitative nature of the study, quantitative statistical analysis methods were used. Instead, the analysis process will be carried out as follows with the help of MAXQDA software (version 2020):

1- Open and axial coding: The transcribed text of the interviews and analytical notes of the works were initially coded line by line (open coding) using a constructivist grounded data method. Then, similar codes were grouped under axial categories.

2- Directed qualitative content analysis: Simultaneously, data extracted from musical works (melodic structure, poetry-music relationships, writing usage, etc.) and art students' drawing mentalities were organized and coded based on a predetermined framework of Gestalt principles (wholeness, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, and closure).

3. Integration and selective coding: In this stage, the categories obtained from the above two methods were combined, compared, and merged to achieve integrated core categories and final theoretical models. The relationships between these categories were drawn and reviewed.

4. Explaining the final model: Finally, the final paradigm model of the study, indicating the Gestalt organization of Iranian sounds in the form of a Qashqai lullaby and its relationship with the psychosocial mechanisms of the hypothetical citizen, was developed and presented. Peer review and participant review strategies were used to enhance the validity of the results.

## **Results**

In this study, data were extracted from an in-depth analysis of 18 selected vocal pieces from the Iranian instrumental music repertoire and 9 semi-structured interviews with experts. After deleting duplicate codes and conceptual integration, 127 initial codes were identified, which were reduced to 21 subcategories in the axial coding process and finally to 6 primary categories (theoretical components) based on the principles of Gestalt communication theory. These components were identified as core constructs of the perceptual organization of Iranian vocal music, each of which was linked to psychosocial mechanisms related to the mental health of citizens.

Presents the theoretical components extracted from Iranian songs based on Gestalt communication theory, which the Qashqai lullaby also follows in Table 1.

The relationship between Gestalt components and psychosocial mechanisms

Integrated data analysis revealed that each of the Gestalt components of Iranian ritual singing, such as the Qashqai lullaby, can play a role in emotional regulation, cognitive integration, and strengthening the listener's mental health by activating specific psychosocial mechanisms Table 2.

Results obtained from the expert interviews

Analyzing the interviews revealed that the experts predominantly described Iranian singing as a "regulatory communicative space." Three dominant themes were identified in the participants' discourse Table 3. *Final Conceptual Model of Results*

According to the selective coding, the conceptual model of the study shows that the Gestalt organization of the Qashqai lullaby, through the simultaneous interaction of musical and semantic elements, leads to the formation of a regulatory auditory experience. By reducing mental clutter, facilitating

Table 1. Theoretical Components of Iranian Songs Based on Gestalt Principles

Gestalt Principle	Theoretical component of Iranian singing	Analytical description of the component
Wholeness	integrated listening experience	Perceiving the song not as separate components (poetry, melody, and writing), but as a meaningful and coherent whole.
Figure-Ground	Highlighting the semantic reading of poetry	The priority of the semantic reading of poetry as a "visual symbol" over the melodic context as an "environmental attachment"
Proximity	Melodic-vocal continuity	The close relationship between writing and vertical spacing with syllables and poetic visual concepts
Similarity	Repetitive phonetic patterns	Repetition of writing patterns, spacing, and motifs to consolidate perception
Continuity	Continuous emotional flow	The gradual and uninterrupted movement of the song to convey emotion
Closure	completing auditory expectations	Creating a sense of conclusion, balance, and completion in the listener's mind

Table 2. The relationship between Gestalt components of Iranian singing and psychosocial outcomes

Gestalt component	Activated psychological mechanism	Mental health-related outcomes
Perceptual wholeness	Reduction of cognitive load	Mental relaxation and reducing mental confusion
Figure-ground	Focused attention	Increasing mindfulness and reducing distractions
proximity	Simultaneity of emotion and meaning	Facilitating the processing of complex emotions
Similarity	Predictability	Creating a sense of psychological security
Continuity	Gradual emotional regulation	Reducing stress and anxiety
Closure	Cognitive completion	Increasing the sense of satisfaction and mental balance

Table 3. Core themes extracted from the expert interviews

Core Theme	A sample of analytical propositions	Subcategories
Emotional Regulation	"Good music slowly takes the listener's mind with it."	Emotional drain, auditory empathy
Mental Cohesion	"When the song is coherent, one's thoughts become coherent too".	Concentration, reduction of distraction
Collective Identity	"These songs create a sense of belonging, not just pleasure"	Cultural connection, shared memory

emotional expression, and strengthening the sense of social belonging, this experience can be used as a potential platform for music-based interventions to promote the mental health of citizens.

## Discussion

The results revealed that Iranian songs, including the Qashqai lullaby, have a coherent perceptual-communicative

organization based on the principles of Gestalt theory, which can act as a regulatory auditory platform at the psychosocial level. Qualitative data analysis showed that the auditory experience of Iranian songs is not the result of the mechanical sum of components such as tone, poetry, melody, and writing, but rather the result of the listener's perception of an integrated whole, which finds

meaning through the structural relationships between the components. This result is in line with the modern literature in the field of music perception, as it emphasizes that music processing in the human mind is holistic in nature and that organized patterns, more than individual elements, determine emotional and cognitive experience (7, 8).

In this framework, the components of “wholeness” and “figure-ground” in Iranian singing play a key role in directing attention and reducing cognitive load. The priority of the semantic reading of poetry over the melodic context focuses the listener’s mind and reduces attentional dispersion. This result is in line with the results of neuropsychological studies of singing and music. These studies have revealed that structured and meaningful music can activate attention and emotion regulation networks and help improve mindfulness and reduce mental confusion (9, 10). Additionally, some international studies emphasize that these impacts are strongly dependent on cultural familiarity and the symbolic meaning of the music for the listener (8). This is consistent with the results of the present study, as experts emphasized that the regulatory effect of Iranian singing, such as the Qashqai lullaby, is not fully activated without understanding its cultural and linguistic context.

From an emotion regulation viewpoint, the components of “continuity” and “closure” in folk songs play a key role in the gradual guidance of emotional experience. The continuous movement of the melody and the creation of auditory expectations that reach balance at the end of the vocal piece or phrase constitute a kind of gradual emotion regulation process. This result is in line with recent interventional studies in the area of music and mental health, indicating that music with a predictable and final structure can reduce anxiety and create a sense of psychological security (11, 12). However, some empirical studies have

reported that highly predictable music may reduce emotional engagement in some listeners (13). The difference between the results can be attributed to the cultural and ritual nature of the Qashqai lullaby, which has dynamics in writing, personal expression, and poetic interpretation, which prevents emotional monotony, despite its structural predictability.

At the social level, the components of “similarity” and “proximity” in indigenous and local songs result in the formation of common and recognizable phonetic patterns that enhance a collective and intersubjective experience. This result is consistent with recent studies in the field of music and social cohesion, indicating that melodies rooted in indigenous cultures can strengthen a sense of belonging, collective identity, and social bonding (14, 15). However, some studies in multicultural societies have reported that traditional music may have a limited social impact for groups outside that culture (16). This inconsistency can also be explained by the results of the present study, as the Qashqai lullaby in this study was analyzed not as a global and regional stimulus but as a “cultural-communicative phenomenon” in Iranian society, whose effectiveness is maximized in a shared semantic context.

Generally, the results of this study are consistent with a growing body of international studies that consider music not simply as an artistic tool, but as a complex communication system with psychosocial outcomes (17, 18). As a primary innovation, this study showed how the analysis of visual mentalities of the internal structure of indigenous and ritual songs can systematically activate mechanisms such as emotion regulation, cognitive coherence, and strengthening of citizens’ collective identity by relying on the visual principles of Gestalt communication theory. In addition, the differences observed with some international studies emphasize the importance of the cultural context, the listener’s lived experience, and the social

meaning-making of songs. This issue has received less attention in many quantitative music therapy studies (19, 20). Finally, it can be stated that Iranian indigenous and ritual songs have a high potential for designing indigenous music-based interventions in the field of promoting citizens' mental health if analyzed and utilized based on evidence. These results pave the way for future studies, especially experimental and cross-cultural studies, to test and develop the proposed Gestalt model in various social and therapeutic contexts.

### **Conclusion**

According to the results of this study, it can be argued that Iranian indigenous and ritual songs function not as a merely artistic phenomenon, but as a “nature-based communicative-regulatory system.” Its unique Gestalt organization, consisting of the components of wholeness, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, and closure, forms an auditory experience that is simultaneously structuring, unifying, and meaningful in the listener's psyche. This experience can potentially reduce the symptoms of mental confusion, facilitate the processing and expression of complex, and enhance a sense of cultural coherence and belonging by activating efficient psychosocial mechanisms such as cognitive load reduction, focused attention, gradual emotion regulation, and completion of perceptual expectations. By establishing a strong theoretical connection between the musical aesthetics of Iranian indigenous and ritual songs, Gestalt psychology of perception, and community-oriented mental health, this study has taken an initial and necessary step. The major achievement was presenting an intermediary conceptual framework that enables the translation of abstract artistic features into operational mechanisms that affect health. This framework introduces Iranian indigenous songs as a natural, low-cost, and low-risk source of intervention deeply harmonized with the cultural context of society that can

be considered both in the form of first-level prevention (improving the general health of citizens) and alongside more specialized interventions (as a complementary approach).

### **Authors' contribution**

Jamshid Arasteh and Samira Keihanpour developed the study concept and design. Jamshid Arasteh and Samira Keihanpour acquired the data. Jamshid Arasteh and Samira Keihanpour analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing and read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Informed consent**

Questionnaires were filled with the participants' satisfaction and written consent was obtained from the participants in this study.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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