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Compensatory Cultural Technology: Mobile Technology and the Social History of Music Listening in a Minoritized Border City

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Research Article

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Abstract

For two decades, the mobile phone has been doing in Sardasht what Iran's state media refused to do: carrying Kurdish music into Kurdish households as a matter of daily course. This article, based on twelve months of ethnography in a Sunni Kurdish border city, traces how that happened — and proposes a concept to name it. *Compensatory cultural technology* describes what occurs when a personal device's affordances (privacy, portability, storage, curation, networked reach) meet a politically produced cultural deficit and quietly repair it. The concept sits deliberately between the existing options. It is not an organized cultural resistance, because most listeners experience their phones as preference rather than politics. It is not a diasporic public sphere, because the work happens at home, in cars, in shop counters, in kitchens. It is the routine, unorganized correction of an imposed absence through an ordinary object — and, at scale, it has reshaped what Kurdish identity sounds and feels like in everyday life. The article contributes to digital anthropology's material-culture turn by reconceiving the phone as an object whose cultural work deepens across media generations, and places *Rojhelat (Kurdish region of Iran)* Kurdish experience — systematically neglected in comparative music and minority studies — where it belongs: at the center of any serious account of sound, marginalization, and everyday identity repair.

1. Introduction

Music listening in Sardasht has changed in ways that earlier accounts of Kurdish media could not have predicted. The city — a predominantly Kurdish settlement of approximately 118,000 people in the mountainous borderlands of Iran's West Azerbaijan Province — moved, within the span of a single generation, from a media environment in which Kurdish-language music was all but absent from everyday life to one in which the same music is the daily soundtrack of cars, shops, kitchens, and headphones. This article asks what made that transformation possible, and what role the mobile phone played in it. The question is not, on its face, a novel one: the relationship between new media and minority cultural revival has been studied extensively across the Kurdish regions and beyond (Hassanpour 1998; Sheyholislami 2011; Costa 2016; Smets 2016). Miller and his collaborators put it sharply: the smartphone has stopped being a tool people use and become a place where they live (Miller et al. 2021; Horst and Miller 2006). It is a composite object whose material features reshape daily life in ways platform-centered analysis tends to miss. In Sardasht, this matters specifically. State media here function as an apparatus of absence, and the question becomes what personal devices are doing in the space the state has emptied.

Late on a spring evening in an apartment above one of Sardasht's main streets, a thirty-two-year-old teacher named Edris set his phone face-up on the low table between us, thumbed through a music app, and let a Kurdish song fill the room. He then said something that I have kept returning to. When he was a child, he explained, Kurdish music reached the household only on rare occasions, by accident of a state television schedule, at a time when such moments were almost never expected. When it did, the screen never showed the musicians — only a river, a field, a bird. He described gathering around the set with neighbors who had been summoned to listen. Listen, he stressed, not watch. The state had authorized

the sound, but not the sight of Kurdish music being made. What he kept returning to, with a kind of quiet gratitude throughout our hour-long conversation, was that his phone now carried several hundred Kurdish tracks, and that he no longer had to think about it. The phone, as he put it, sounded Kurdish. How did it become possible, in a city where Kurdish-language broadcasting has never been available on Iran's own state channels, for a personal handheld device to sound Kurdish as a matter of everyday course? The answer, I argue, lies neither in a triumphal story of technological liberation nor in a narrative of organized cultural resistance, but in a quieter, more material process: the slow entry of an object into households, pockets, cars, and shop counters — and the rearrangement of cultural possibility that such entry sets in motion.

The concept through which I interpret this transformation is **compensatory cultural technology** — a term I introduce to name what happens when a device's material affordances meet a historically produced cultural deficit, and to do analytical work that existing concepts do not quite accomplish. The affordances are familiar: privacy, portability, personal storage, curation, and networked connectivity. The deficit is the long exclusion of Kurdish music from Iran's state-controlled media. My concept overlaps with several others in the field but does not collapse into them. Alternative media, in Downing's (2008) usage, points to deliberate counter-hegemonic production. The diasporic public sphere (Hassanpour 1998) points to a dispersed constituency building shared symbolic space. Cultural resistance (Natali 2005) points to organized political opposition. What I am after is humbler and analytically earlier: the habitual, often unreflective correction of an imposed cultural deficit through the ordinary use of a consumer device that most of my participants would not call political. The phone has not produced the desire for Kurdish music — that desire was already there. It has made it routine to act on it. What it produces are the material conditions under which that desire can be routinely, privately, and eventually publicly enacted. Compensation sits between resistance and acquiescence — neither opposition nor submission, but a third mode in which cultural deficits are quietly corrected through the intimate use of a personal object.

I develop the argument through music, though I did not set out to study music in particular. Fieldwork began with a more general interest in how mobile phones had changed everyday life in Sardasht. Music came up because participants kept returning to it — the topic on which they most readily described what the phone had altered, and the area where the state's restrictions had bitten hardest. That the findings clustered here is itself a finding. Two questions, related but distinct, run through what follows. How have the material affordances of mobile phones transformed the conditions under which Kurdish music is accessed and shared in a context of state-imposed cultural deprivation? And what does the biographical trajectory of this transformation — from basic handsets to smartphones — reveal about the relationship between everyday technology use and identity formation among a stateless, marginalized community?

Three contributions follow. First, I introduce the concept of compensatory cultural technology as an addition to the material-culture vocabulary for thinking about mobile phones in contexts of mineralization — a concept that draws on material culture studies (Miller 1987; Horst and Miller 2006; Miller et al. 2021), scholarship on music, portable listening, and identity (DeNora 2000; Bull 2000; Bull

2015; Slobin 1993), and comparative work on informal media circulation in the Global South (Manuel 1993; Larkin 2008), but is organized around four ethnographic dimensions that the existing literature has not brought together: the device's absorption of the specific risks that earlier formats imposed on minority listeners; its support for intimate, gendered self-relation in the domestic interior; its role in the distributed peer maintenance of a minoritized-language sonic commons; and the temporal layering of compensation across successive media generations. Second, the article adds a Rojhelati case to a comparative literature that has leaned heavily toward Turkey, Iraq, and the European diaspora (Costa 2016; Smets 2018; Keles 2015; Hamelink 2016); Sardasht presents a linguistic repression, administrative marginalization, and cross-border informal circulation come together there in ways that complicate the more familiar Kurdish cases. Third, I extend the material-culture approach by tracing the phone through its successive generations and showing that the cultural effects of the device must be grasped as a biographical, layered process rather than a single event of adoption (Madianou and Miller 2012).

2. Theoretical Framework

The argument developed here runs across several literatures that rarely appear in the same theoretical frame. What the mobile phone did in Sardasht cannot be grasped by any one of them alone: a material-culture account of the device that ignored music would miss the substance of the transformation; an account of Kurdish cultural revival that ignored the object in the pocket would miss its mechanism; and an account of music and identity built from the pre-digital canon would leave the specific work of the smartphone undertheorized. The framework is organized into four moves. The first concerns the object itself — the mobile phone as a material thing, and more specifically as a music-playing thing — because this is the ground on which everything else in the article is built. The second move picks up the long-running argument that music does not just express ethnic and national identity but helps constitute it, and follows it into the era of portable, private, digital listening. The third places the Kurdish case within a layered history of media technologies — radio, cassette, satellite, internet, mobile phone — each of which opened a different seam in the wall that states built around Kurdish cultural life. The fourth engages the literature on minority culture, informal circulation, and everyday practice in the Global South, which supplies the concepts of *quiet encroachment* and compensation through which the Sardasht material is read. The aim is not an exhaustive survey but argumentative scaffolding: the concept of compensatory cultural technology developed in the discussion emerges from the gaps these literatures leave when placed in productive tension.

2.1 Material Culture, Objects, and the Mobile Phone as a Music Device

Material culture studies has been developing across the social sciences for about four decades. Its starting premise sounds simple but does real work: the things people live with are not props to social life, they participate in it; objects do not just express relations that already exist — they make some possible, rule others out, and pick up biographies of their own (Miller 1987, 2010; Appadurai 1986; Latour

2005; Hodder 2024). The injunction that follows is to trace the ordinary, often unnoticed work that things do in the making of cultural life — a discipline that has by now been applied to clothing, food, housing, cars, and, increasingly, digital devices. The tradition is useful here because it refuses two reductions common in writing about phones. The mobile is not a neutral conduit, its effects determined by the user. Nor is it a force that bulldozes passive recipients. It is an object whose affordances — to use the term Hutchby (2001) drew from Gibson — are enacted in relation to specific social, historical, and political conditions. For a study of a minoritized population in a media-restrictive state, that framing matters: it insists that what the phone *is* in Sardasht cannot be read off its specifications, and that the device is not merely a screen onto which users project whatever they like.

Anthropological work on mobile phones has built up around this point. Horst and Miller's (2006) early ethnography in low-income Jamaica showed that phones tend to amplify the social relationships people already have rather than generate new ones, and that things like cost, sharing arrangements, and physical wear shape use in ways general accounts miss. Ling and Donner (2013) gathered the comparative evidence that mobile communication extends existing patterns more than it disrupts them — a point that holds across contexts but stops short of theorizing the device as a material thing. Crowdy and Horst (2022) take up that gap directly: not just showing that smartphones can sustain community, but showing how specific features — offline transfer protocols, physical storage, the metered thinking of prepaid data economies — shape which bonds get kept up and which fall away. The phone does not passively carry music; it structures the conditions of access, obligation, and reciprocity through which sound circulates. The most sustained recent comparative statement pushes this material insight into a broader claim about personhood. Working across nine field sites, the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Aging project argues that the smartphone is less a bundle of apps than a transportable home — a portable place where the self is kept, arranged, shown, and worked over (Miller et al. 2021; Walton 2021). Madianou and Miller's (2012) idea of polymedia is also relevant: once people are moving between several platforms and devices, choosing one becomes a socially and emotionally loaded act, shaped by what relationships expect and what local norms permit, not just by what each medium can do.

This body of work establishes the phone as an anthropological object; it does not, however, yet establish it as a music object, and that gap matters for what follows. Kurdish music is not incidental to the Sardasht story — it is the substance of it — and the analytical traction of material-culture thinking is strongest where it has engaged directly with the artifacts of sonic life. The history of that engagement runs from Hosokawa's (1984) foundational account of the Walkman, which identified something that has since become basic to all portable listening: once music moves with the body, the listener acquires a form of sovereignty over their sonic environment — a private mobile space that the fixed arrangements of household, concert hall, and broadcast could not produce. Bull's (2000, 2015) extensions of that argument, from the Walkman through the iPod, showed that the private soundscape is not simply received but actively constructed — users curate playlists, moods, relationships, and senses of self through the device — while DeNora (2000) made the complementary theoretical move, treating music listening itself as a *technology of the self* through which identities are not merely expressed but rehearsed, managed, and sometimes made possible for the first time.

These conceptual tools — portable sovereignty, sonic self-construction, music as a technology of the self — were developed in Western urban contexts and through pre-smartphone devices, and have not yet been systematically integrated with the comparative ethnography of mobile phone use. A series of more recent interventions begin to close that distance. Sterne's (2012) history of the MP3 treats the digital audio format as itself a cultural object whose architecture of portability and compression helped enable the informal musical economies this article documents in Sardasht's parks and teahouses. Magaudda (2011) adds a useful corrective. Even when music is supposed to have dematerialized, materiality keeps reasserting itself: the device, its storage, its tinny speakers, the pillow it gets pressed against at night remain part of how listening actually happens, and platform-centered analyses skip past them. As I show below, the material form in which Kurdish music is stored has political consequences you cannot read off the audio file. Kumar and Parikh (2013) demonstrate the empirical pay-off in their work on rural and semi-urban India: the phone becomes a music device through sharing, copying, and informal repair, none of which can be detached from the specific infrastructure, economy, and culture in which they happen.

What none of this existing work has yet examined is the mobile phone as a music-playing object in contexts where the structuring condition is not class, caste, or migration but the active, ongoing, state-administered exclusion of a minority language and culture from public cultural life. This is the gap in which the argument of this article sits, and which the concept of compensatory cultural technology is designed to name: the proposition that in settings marked by sustained cultural deprivation, the mobile phone takes on a further specific property — not only as a personal or a polymedia object, but as a corrective one.

2.2 Music, Identity, and the Politics of Listening

If the mobile phone is a material object through which identity is done, the specific medium in which it does that work in Sardasht is music — and music has long been recognized as a privileged site for the articulation of national, ethnic, and sub-state identities, not least because it mobilizes affective, embodied, and collective registers that more explicitly discursive media cannot easily reach (Stokes 1994; Frith 1996; Bohlman 2004). Anderson's (1983) now-canonical argument that nations are imagined communities constituted through shared media practice was developed with reference to print capitalism, and the evidence from musical culture has always sat at an angle to it. The sonic domain does not merely accompany the work of national imagination; in many contexts it comes first and enables that work, producing the felt solidarity and shared experience that political nationalism later draws on (Bohlman 2004; Stokes 1994). Frith's (1996) formulation that music does not express identity but *creates* it gets at the mechanism. Listening, performing, and preferring particular music are not symptoms of an ethnic self that already exists; they are among the practices that build it. Turino's (2000) account of musical nation-building in Zimbabwe gives this claim its sharpest empirical form, demonstrating that shared musical participation did not decorate political nation-building but performed its integrative work — producing the affective solidarity on which the nationalist project depended, in a context where print media reached only a fraction of the population. That the same dynamic operates with equal or greater intensity among stateless and minoritized peoples — for whom the question is not

which medium carries national belonging but whether any medium is permitted to carry it at all — is the argument this section goes on to develop.

For stateless nations, the stakes of musical identity are particularly acute, and the Kurdish case is almost paradigmatic. Print and broadcast media in Kurdish have been restricted for a long time across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. In that context, oral forms — the *dengbêj* epic tradition, the *beit u heyran* vocal genres — have carried a cultural and linguistic inheritance the states could not get at the source. Blum and Hassanpour (1996) described Kurdish popular song as a medium of national memory — preserving linguistic and historical narrative in the absence of the institutions that most nations take for granted. Hamelink (2016) shows that Kurdish musical performance *is at once* aesthetic and political — a performance of belonging to a nation that exists culturally but not as a sovereign state. Scalbert-Yücel (2009) documents the *dengbêj* as living archives of a collective memory that hostile states, through their control of written historiography, have tried to erase. Kuruoğlu and Hamelink (2017) show how, under decades of legal restriction, the Kurdish music scene in Turkey took on the role of what one of their interviewees called "a cultural ministry" — an institutional function performed by a movement scene rather than a state. These accounts cover different periods and genres, but they converge on one point: Kurdish music has done the work that the institutions Kurds were denied — schools, broadcasters, cultural ministries — would otherwise have done. It kept the language alive, carried memory, and built collective identity.

Slobin's (1993) broader framework for such *micromusics* — the musical practices of marginalized, diasporic, and minority communities, navigated within the relations he termed superculture, subculture, and interculture — provides the comparative vocabulary in which this Kurdish story belongs. Slobin's point — that micromusical practice is not rejection of the dominant culture but realignment within a wider musical field — fits what people in Sardasht describe. Most are not removing Persian or international music from their lives, though some report turning away from both. What they describe is a rebalancing, with Kurdish music moving from the edge to the center of daily listening. The gendered dimensions of this rebalancing — who listens, under what household conditions, and with what affective consequences — remain less developed in this literature than they should be, and emerge in the present study as a substantive empirical finding to which the discussion returns (DeNora 2000).

None of these accounts, however, was written for the era in which the pocket device became the primary site of musical encounter. The scholarship on music and Kurdish identity has focused on production, broadcast, and performance, leaving the device through which music now reaches the listener largely untheorized; the ethnography of portable listening, for its part, has rarely engaged the situation of a minoritized community recovering access to its own musical heritage. Born's (2011) argument for music as a material practice of identity-making — running across affective, embodied, and institutional planes at once — suggests why the Sardasht case sits at the productive intersection these literatures have left open.

2.3 Kurdish Media and the Long History of Technologies of Access

The mobile phone was not the first technology through which Kurdishness could be heard. Treating it that way risks two errors at once: missing what the phone shares with earlier Kurdish media, and missing what is genuinely new about it. Kurdish media studies has developed since the 1990s as a historical field, and its central analytic template is one that Hassanpour (1992 1998) established early and that subsequent scholarship has extended: each successive generation of media technology — print, radio, cassette, satellite television, internet, mobile telephony — has opened new possibilities for Kurdish cultural and linguistic life while being met with new configurations of state restriction. The transformation in Sardasht is the most recent movement in a long sequence, and its specificity only becomes legible in relation to what came before.

Radio and print in the early and mid-twentieth century were the sites of the first Kurdish-language public spheres — always partial, usually interrupted, geographically scattered across Baghdad, Yerevan, Tabriz, and, later, Sulaymaniyah — and the modern politicization of Kurdish language and culture is inseparable from this history (Hassanpour 1992). Cassette technology in the 1970s and 1980s democratized musical production and circulation at a crucial moment, allowing Kurdish artists to record, reproduce, and distribute material outside the grip of state broadcasting; Manuel's (1993) work on cassette culture in North India offers a direct parallel and helps explain why digital Kurdish music infrastructure took root so fast once portable storage made it possible. The satellite television era, which began in earnest with the launch of MED-TV from Western Europe in 1995, represented a qualitative shift in this long history. For the first time, Kurds spread across four states and a European diaspora had access to a shared cultural and political space that no single state could close on its own. Hassanpour's (1998) phrasing has stuck with the field since: satellite footprints rewrote what borders meant for a people who had never had a border of their own. The proliferation of Kurdish satellite channels from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah after 2003 deepened this process across much of the Kurdish world — though, as I detail in the next section, it reached Sardasht only in restricted and contested form. Sheyholislami's (2011) analysis of the subsequent internet era showed how digital platforms magnified the symbolic role of the Kurdish language in defining Kurdishness, and enabled a discursive construction of pan-Kurdish identity that earlier technologies could only anticipate.

Each of these technological openings has been met with state attempts to close it again, and each has produced its own user-side practice of working around the closure. In Iran, this dynamic has been documented across the post-2009 internet era: filtering of major platforms — Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, YouTube — has run alongside near-universal recourse to virtual private networks and proxies, with VPN use estimated at well over half the urban population (Michaelsen 2018; Akhavan 2013). For Kurdish users in border cities like Sardasht, this layer of practical circumvention is not a separate domain of digital life. It is continuous with the cassette-hiding, dish-concealing, satellite-channel-tuning practices

their parents developed across earlier media. Bypass is part of how each medium becomes Kurdish in this setting, and it is one of the things successive generations have transmitted to the next.

What this historical frame makes visible is that the satellite dish and the mobile phone are not parallel alternatives but sequential stages in a single decades-long process of reclaiming access. The phone inherits rather than invents the cultural work it does, completing a trajectory that radio, cassette, and satellite had each advanced in their time, and doing so by privatizing what those earlier technologies could only make collectively available — a privatization whose ethnographic substance the findings below will document.

Within this field, scholarship has concentrated disproportionately on Turkey, Iraq, and the European diaspora, with Iranian Kurdistan — Rojhelat — receiving comparatively little attention (Costa 2016; Hamelink 2016; Keles 2015; Smets 2018). Aghapouri (2020) and Aghapouri and Ahmadi (2021) have begun to correct this, examining Kurdish identity-making on social media in the diaspora and specifically in Rojhelat, respectively, demonstrating that the intensification of Kurdish cultural identification through digital platforms operates with force in exile as well as in the homeland. Sardasht presents a distinctive configuration within this Rojhelati subfield that sharpens the more familiar Kurdish media story: The city is excluded twice over: from the national Persian-language broadcasting system, and from the West Azerbaijan provincial channel, which broadcasts in Azerbaijani Turkish. The result is a more acute Kurdish media deprivation than other Iranian Kurdish cities. In such a setting, the mobile phone does not supplement an existing Kurdish cultural infrastructure; for much of the population, it *constitutes* that infrastructure.

Any account of music and media in Iran, finally, must engage the Islamic Republic's distinctive regime of cultural regulation, which has shaped what was possible for Sardasht's residents in specific ways. Siamdoust (2017) traces the politics of music in Iran across a regulatory history that has swung between outright prohibition, grudging permission, and active promotion of state-approved forms. Musicians, producers, and audiences spend a lot of time negotiating with red lines that keep moving. Nooshin (2005, 2009) has detailed how these negotiations play out across genres, and how the state's visual regulation of music — in particular its longstanding refusal to show musical instruments on television even when their music was permitted to be heard — produced a distinctive phenomenology that the older participants recall with startling vividness: music heard but never seen, legitimized in sound and erased in image. Hemmasi (2020) widens the picture, showing how the Tehrangeles diasporic music industry builds emotional connections between homeland and exile through a transnational economy the Iranian state can neither control nor shut down. Kurdish music sits at a particularly bad intersection of all this: it runs into the general restrictions on musical expression and is also marginalized structurally because the state privileges Persian content. The mobile phone arrived in the middle of that double bind.

2.4 Minority Culture, Informal Circulation, and Everyday Compensation

What the phone has been doing in Sardasht — together with its long Kurdish-media prehistory and Iran's specific regulatory environment — belongs to a broader story that has been told most forcefully from the Global South. A growing body of work has pushed back against the universalist assumptions of earlier digital-media studies. Global South digital practice, these scholars argue, is not a lagged version of what happened in the North; it has its own material, economic, and cultural shape (Arora 2019; Burrell 2012). Mobile phones reached populations that fixed-line, print, and broadcast infrastructures had never served properly, and the practical conditions of ownership — devices passed around, patchy connectivity, prepaid credit, informal repair — give the practice forms that platform-centered accounts miss.

Within this tradition, the history of music technology offers the most suggestive precedents for the Sardasht case. Manuel's (1993) *Cassette Culture* showed how cheap cassette technology empowered regional and minority-language musical cultures that state-controlled industries had excluded — not through organized resistance but through the simple fact that cheap technology is difficult to control at the point of consumption. Larkin (2004, 2008) showed that the informal circulation of cassettes and video in Nigeria amounted to an *infrastructure of piracy* — an alternative media system running outside state and corporate control on the accumulated choices of millions of users. Wallis (2013) and Sundaram (2010) carried that analysis into the mobile era, tracing how phones and urban pirate economies became the main route by which Chinese migrant women and the Indian urban poor accessed music and held onto cultural ties. Each looks like a version of what I see in Sardasht: a technology filling the gap left by official cultural infrastructure, through informal peer-to-peer circulation the state does not run or police. The Sardasht case belongs to this family, with one crucial difference: what is being recovered is not regional or class-based cultural identity but specifically linguistic and ethnic identity, under an active and ongoing state policy of cultural marginalization.

The mechanisms — memory cards traded in parks, Bluetooth transfers between Nokia handsets, Telegram channels curated from the diaspora — are recognizable from this broader literature. What is different are the stakes. Pype's (2016) ethnography of mobile phone practices in postcolonial Kinshasa is the closest methodological parallel: like Sardasht's residents, Kinshasa's phone users live where the political and the everyday cultural uses of the device cannot be cleanly separated, and where individual adoption decisions add up into structural change no one planned. This aggregation is the theoretical point at which the analysis meets Bayat's (2010/2013) concept of **quiet encroachment** — the cumulative, non-organized, individually motivated practices of ordinary people that, over time, reconfigure social norms without ever declaring themselves as politics. Kurdish music consumption on mobile phones in Sardasht is not, in most cases, experienced as resistance. It is experienced as preference, as pleasure, as the simple fact of having what ought to have been available all along. Its political significance is emergent and aggregate rather than intentional and organized — and this quality is precisely what the existing vocabulary of cultural resistance, alternative media, and diasporic public sphere cannot quite accommodate.

That limitation is worth naming directly, because the dominant framework within Kurdish studies for making sense of cultural practice under state pressure has long been cultural resistance. The tradition,

anchored in Hassanpour (1992), laid the groundwork by treating language and media as sites of cultural opposition. That argument was extended in comparative work on Kurdish nationalist mobilization (Romano 2006; Natali 2005), and more recent scholarship has framed Kurdish journalism and minority media as organized resistance to state assimilation (Aydın 2020). The tradition reads Kurdish cultural politics as conscious, organized opposition to assimilationist state policy, and it captures something real about the political history of Kurdish movements across four states. But as a frame for what the phone actually does in Sardasht, the resistance reading risks overshooting — at least at the level of conscious experience. Most participants do not experience their daily listening as opposition. They do not put it in movement terms. They would, I think, be puzzled to hear their phone described as an instrument of resistance, even if, in aggregate, that is part of what it has become. Costa's (2016) ethnography of social media in Mardin — a mixed Kurdish–Arab–Turkish town in southeastern Turkey — is the closest methodological and regional comparator to the present study, and it offers a sharp counterpoint: Costa showed how social media reproduced rather than transcended existing social norms, and how young people navigated layered audiences through selective visibility rather than any programmatic politics. Sardasht differs productively from Mardin in its demographic texture — overwhelmingly Kurdish in population and everyday linguistic life, rather than mixed — and the identity dynamics I observed operate less as boundary-marking against a co-present majority and more as a *rebalancing* of cultural consumption within a community whose access to its own cultural production has been structurally blocked. It is in this space between resistance and acquiescence — a space the existing literature has more often gestured at than theorized — that I locate what I call *compensation*, and in which I argue the mobile phone's cultural work in Sardasht is most accurately grasped.

The term *compensatory technology* already carries a specific meaning in rehabilitation science and disability studies, where it refers to devices designed to offset individual functional impairment. The concept proposed here departs from that usage on three counts: the deficit is collective rather than individual, politically rather than biologically produced, and the technology in question was not designed for compensatory purposes but comes to serve them through the accumulated informal practices of a community. What separates compensation from resistance, then, is not whether there is political significance — there is — but whether there is political intent. The residents of Sardasht who filled their phones with Kurdish music were not running a campaign; they were filling a gap. When that happens at scale, the cumulative outcome is political, but it is a structural consequence of choices made one at a time, not a shared purpose.

3. Research Context: Sardasht, Kurdistan, and Iran

Sardasht has roughly 118,000 inhabitants. It sits in the south-western corner of Iran's West Azerbaijan Province, near the Iraqi Kurdistan border. The population is overwhelmingly Sorani-speaking and Sunni Muslim, setting the city apart linguistically and religiously from Iran's Persian-speaking, Shia-majority center. This double marginality — ethnic and sectarian — has direct material consequences for cultural access that go beyond the general condition of Kurdish-language deprivation. Unlike the neighboring Kurdistan Province, which has a limited Kurdish-language provincial television channel, West Azerbaijan

does not. Its provincial channel broadcasts only in Azerbaijani Turkish, with nothing in Kurdish for the substantial Kurdish population in the province's southern districts. Sardasht's residents have thus been doubly excluded from broadcast media — from the national Persian-language system and from the regional Azerbaijani Turkish channel alike — producing a condition of structural media deprivation more acute than that experienced in other Iranian Kurdish centers.

This structural absence is inseparable from a broader history of political and cultural marginalization that gives media access particular affective weight in the city. The IRI's use of broadcasting, cinema, and psychological warfare to attack Kurdish identity and cultural cohesion has been documented systematically (Hassaniyan 2024). Sardasht was subjected to a chemical weapons attack by the Iraqi military in June 1987, an event that predated the more widely known Halabja attack and remains a defining collective trauma (Hashemian et al. 2006; Khateri and Soroush 2005); Sardasht also took part in the Kurdish uprising of 1979–1980 against the newly established Islamic Republic (Vali 2011); and it sits within a regional history of contentious relations with the Iranian central state that has shaped how residents understand the availability — or unavailability — of Kurdish cultural content as a political as well as a cultural matter (Soleimani and Osmanzadeh 2025). This article is not about that history, but the history matters here. It is part of why a technology that could carry Kurdish music without state permission ended up meaning more than a change in listening.

4. Methodology

This article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sardasht conducted between January 2019 and January 2020, with a follow-up visit in mid-2022. The fieldwork combined participant observation across the material settings in which mobile phones are bought, used, repaired, and discussed — primarily mobile phone shops, teahouses, barbershops, and household settings — with sustained digital ethnography of participants' practices on Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp. The hybrid offline-online design follows the approach now standard in material and digital anthropology (Hine 2015; Costa 2018; Pink et al. 2021), though one of the things the fieldwork itself made clear is that any clean separation between the two registers is analytically unhelpful: participants moved continuously between them, and the phone was the most consistent site of observation precisely because it was present in both — a point long argued by ethnographers of digital life (Miller and Slater 2020) and borne out across the fieldwork.

Digital ethnographic work, conducted with informed consent throughout, took several concrete forms. I followed participants' public and semi-public activity across these platforms, including the posts they shared, the pages and accounts they followed, and, where they directed me toward them, the Telegram channels and groups through which Kurdish music, news, and commentary circulated in their networks. In interviews, participants were inclined to open their phones and walk me through what was there: stored songs, the folders they were sorted into, the playlists they had built, the music and cultural pages they followed, the chat threads where songs got shared with friends and family. This walkthrough approach (Light et al. 2018) — treating the smartphone as a personal archive that participants

themselves curate and narrate — is developed further by Georgiou and Leurs (2022), who propose the smartphone as a personal archive that the user herself curates and narrates. The technique opened up conversations about taste, memory, and identity I could not have reached with interview questions alone. I did not request access to private one-to-one messages, and none are reproduced here; where screenshots or shared content appear in the analysis, they come from public or semi-public spaces that participants explicitly pointed me toward. The fieldwork spanned the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran, which briefly restricted access to most public sites in early 2020; in-person observation resumed as restrictions eased, and digital ethnographic contact with the same participants continued uninterrupted throughout.

Formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four participants, complemented by informal conversations recorded in fieldnotes. Participants were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling, beginning from contacts in mobile phone shops and the university and aiming for variation across age, gender, education, occupation, and political orientation. The sample size reflects the logic of case-based rather than representative inference that now anchors much qualitative research in anthropology and sociology (Small 2009): the aim is analytic depth across a heterogeneous range of positions, not statistical generalization. The final sample included twelve women and twelve men between nineteen and fifty-five years old; none was a public political activist. This matters analytically. Heavy sampling from activists would skew the picture of ordinary Kurdish digital life; the dynamics I describe belong to people for whom Kurdishness is salient but not the only thing in their everyday practice. Interviews were in Kurdish (Sorani) or Persian, depending on participant preference. Code-switching within a single interview was common, and I treated it as data rather than noise — following the sociolinguistic tradition that reads shifts between codes as socially and indexically meaningful (Auer 2013). All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by me, with selected passages translated into English for analysis. Where a Kurdish formulation resisted neat rendering, the original term has been retained or flagged. Names are pseudonyms, identifying details changed where needed. Analysis was iterative and inductive (Emerson et al. 2011); music, language, and technology biography came out as the most saturated themes.

Given the sensitivity of researching mediated cultural practice in the Rojhelat context, consent was sought verbally and on an ongoing basis rather than through written documentation — a decision made in recognition that signed consent forms could themselves create risk for participants in this setting. This choice follows a growing methodological literature on fieldwork in authoritarian and politically fragile settings. The argument, briefly: formal documentation practices designed for low-risk institutional environments can become a source of risk themselves when exported to surveilled fields without modification (Glasius et al. 2018). All participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research, were told they could withdraw or designate material off the record at any point, and material so designated has not been used in any form. The semi-structured interview guide used to structure these conversations is available as a supplementary document submitted with this article

5. Findings: The Social Life of Music Listening in Sardasht

5.1 The Pre-Mobile Era: Music under State Media Control

The significance of mobile phones for music in Sardasht only comes into focus once you grasp how severe the musical deprivation that preceded them was. Participants consistently described a pre-mobile environment in which Kurdish music was almost absent from everyday life — not because no one wanted it, but because of how Iran's state broadcasting system was structured. Soran, a thirty-eight-year-old man, recalled:

Before satellite TV, we only had regular TV. There were four or five official state channels, and they mostly showed news, series, films, or children's programs. Music was barely part of it. What little music they played was only Persian, and only by singers still living in Iran — the ones who had left after the 1979 Revolution were completely cut out.

Soran's account names a double restriction. Music in general was marginal in state programming; Kurdish music was absent altogether — not occasionally missing but consistently, structurally excluded. Edris, a thirty-two-year-old man, and Dlniya, a forty-one-year-old woman, described the communal and provincial sides of this absence:

Our time was a strange one. I remember when we were children, whenever Kurdish music came on TV, everyone in the house would gather around to listen. People would call the neighbors in to listen. I say listen, not watch, because the television never showed the music itself — just a river, a field, scenery in the background. (Edris)

Sometimes we had guests from Baneh or Saqez in Kurdistan Province. They were surprised to find that the Kurdish channel of Kurdistan Province did not reach Sardasht. They had at least one channel broadcasting in Kurdish. We had nothing. (Dlniya)

Edris's split between *listening* and *watching* matters. The state did not just decide what could be heard. It also decided how it could be heard — pulled apart from the bodies that made it, set against innocuous footage of rivers and fields. Dlniya's point is geographic. Sardasht sits inside West Azerbaijan, which is administered as a Turkish-speaking province, not inside Kurdish-majority Kurdistan Province next door. Her cousins in Baneh and Saqez had at least one Kurdish channel. Sardasht had none. This was not marginalization in the abstract. No Kurdish voice on the radio. No Kurdish song on the television. No Kurdish face on the screen.

Satellite television in the 1990s was the first real crack in the wall. It did not arrive easily. The dishes were illegal, expensive, and unwelcome in more conservative households. Kamal, thirty-seven, said his religious father held out against buying a receiver for five years; when the dish finally arrived, Kamal described it as *"a window cut into the wall of the house."* But the dish remained a household technology — visible on the roof, shared rather than personal, subject to family negotiation. The satellite era established that Kurdish music and image could exist together in a domestic space, but not yet that they could belong to any single listener. The phone did not replace the satellite dish. It took what the dish had

begun and made it personal. Radio, cassette, and satellite had each pushed Kurdish music a little further into reach. The phone finished that work.

A significant part of the Kurdish musical repertoire has long carried explicitly political content — songs of the nationalist movements, laments for the fallen, anthems of peshmerga resistance, musical elegies for executed political figures — and the Iranian state has treated certain of these songs as threats to national security. The pre-mobile formats imposed two distinct constraints on access to this material, which Hiwa, a twenty-four-year-old man, and Nashmil, a twenty-nine-year-old woman, described in conversations recorded respectively in a phone-repair shop on the main commercial street and in the back room of a women's hairdressing salon:

In my father's time, having a cassette of certain singers was like having a weapon in the house. If you were stopped at a checkpoint and they searched the car, a Kurdish political cassette could mean interrogation. Some of those songs are still banned. But now, I can play them online, without saving them or leaving any trace anywhere. (Hiwa)

When the satellite came, it was a miracle — we could finally hear Kurdish music with the musicians on screen. But you had to wait for them to play it. If you loved a particular song, you could not just put it on. You would sit and watch for hours, hoping it would come. With the phone, it was the opposite — you press the song, and it plays. The satellite gave us the music, but the phone gave us the choice. (Nashmil)

The two accounts name two distinct limitations that the mobile phone subsequently resolved: the cassette's material visibility as evidence, and the satellite's broadcast-timing dependency. What the mobile phone did — and what no earlier Kurdish media technology had done — was combine personal storage with material deniability. A listener could carry politically charged Kurdish music on their person, play it when they chose, and hide it the rest of the time. The device does not make the listener immune to state attention — users in Sardasht know screens can be searched and histories retrieved. But in comparison with the cassette hidden under a seat, or the satellite broadcast that aired once and vanished, the phone offers a different calculus of risk — one in which Kurdish music can be both possessed and, when necessary, withheld from view. This is a further dimension of what the phone's compensatory function involves: it compensates not only for absence but for the specific forms of danger that earlier attempts to close that absence carried.

Hana, a forty-eight-year-old woman, described the emotional texture of the pre-mobile era in terms that several other participants echoed:

When there was no Kurdish music at all, the absence did not feel sharp. It was more like a dullness — a background fact of life. It was only later, when the satellite came, and then the phones, that we understood what we had been missing. Then the absence became visible — like a wound you did not know you had until someone showed you the scar.

What Hana describes is not a single event of loss. It is a chronic background condition — one you only see clearly afterward, once there is something to compare it to. The phone did not just add Kurdish music to an absence people already felt. It showed people how deep that absence ran by making it fixable. This retrospective shape matters for the concept I work out in the discussion. The phone compensates for the missing music, and it also compensates for something else: the missing awareness that the music was missing.

5.2 The Mobile Phone and the Reorientation of Listening

Mobile phones with music-playing capabilities — beginning with models such as the Nokia 6230 in the mid-2000s — were a qualitatively different intervention. The satellite remained a household technology, subject to family negotiation. The phone was personal, portable, and private. Aram, a twenty-seven-year-old shopkeeper interviewed during a slow afternoon at his shop, described the Bluetooth-era circulation that came before smartphone connectivity:

We used to sit in the park after work and send each other songs by Bluetooth. Someone would have a new Kurdish album on their phone — maybe they got it from a cousin who had been to Sulaymaniyah — and we would all copy it. That was how music spread: phone to phone, person to person. You did not need the internet. You did not need a shop. You just needed a friend with a good collection.

This peer-to-peer mode of circulation — songs traveling through Bluetooth networks, memory cards swapped in parks and teahouses — formed an informal infrastructure for Kurdish music distribution operating entirely outside state broadcasting. It also ran across the border. Sardasht's Kurdish musical supply came largely from Iraqi Kurdistan and the European diaspora, folding the Rojhelati listener into a pan-Kurdish cultural space the Iranian state had no way to police at the point of consumption. The architecture of this circulation closely resembles the informal media economies documented in Larkin's (2008) account of Nigerian piracy infrastructure and Wallis's (2013) study of Chinese migrant women's mobile phone use, where personal devices and peer networks substitute for absent or restricted commercial channels — with the difference that the Sardasht infrastructure was atomized and personal rather than organized and commercial, operating at the scale of individual devices rather than market networks.

Shilan is a university student, twenty-four. We met in a café near her campus. She remembered what early mobile music actually felt like, and what she said captures both the privacy the phone gave her and how that privacy changed what listening even was:

My first phone that played music was a Nokia with a tiny speaker. The sound was terrible — thin and buzzy. But I remember listening to Hassan Zirak on it, lying on my bed at night with the phone on the pillow next to my ear, and feeling that this small, private thing was mine. Nobody chose it for me. Nobody could turn it off. I found the songs myself, and I kept them myself. That was new.

Shilan's account illustrates how the material properties of even the most basic music-capable phone — its smallness, its proximity to the body, its capacity for personal storage — produced a qualitative shift in

the phenomenology of listening (Bull 2000; Magaudda 2011). The phone is experienced not as a communication device but as a body-close companion whose most important property is that it belongs to her: *mine*, private, unchosen-for-me. This sense of personal ownership over a sonic environment is what the pre-mobile broadcasting system had denied.

The phone begins to function as a compensatory object well before its users would describe it in political terms: what it quietly corrects is more than the absence of Kurdish music — it is the absence of any personal claim on the conditions of listening itself.

That personal claim, once available, reshaped not just how but what people listened to. The biggest pattern across the interviews is a clear shift in taste from Persian to Kurdish, and participants tied that shift to the wider choice the phone gave them. The shift had a specific shape. When Persian music stuck around in someone's listening, it was almost always the pre-revolutionary singers — Hayedeh, Mahasti, Ebi, and Moein recurred across multiple interviews — whom they had been listening to before mobile phones became available. New Persian-language artists were rarely added to anyone's repertoire, while Kurdish listening grew in both depth and breadth. Ako, a thirty-five-year-old man with a master's degree, and Evin, a thirty-three-year-old woman, both interviewed at work, described the same reorientation from different angles:

*I am not really into Persian music — not that I dislike it, but I have little interest in Persian-language singers. There are only two or three of the older ones [he later clarified this meant singers like Ebi and Mahasti] I still listen to. Mostly I listen to Kurdish music — both the classical and the much older forms, like***beit u heyran**, *and some Kurdish rap and pop now and then. (Ako)*

Before, Persian music was what I mostly listened to, but now I have shifted to Kurdish and English. I even follow a few dedicated Kurdish music pages on Instagram, and I check them regularly. (Evin)

Across very different registers — Ako's layered engagement with ancient *beit u heyran* alongside Kurdish rap, Evin's movement from Persian toward Kurdish and English — the same structural reorientation appears. A smartphone can hold and pull up a huge, varied Kurdish catalog, and that changes more than what gets listened to. It changes what is even possible to listen to. A young woman in a small border city can now build the same Kurdish music collection that someone in Erbil or Stockholm could build. Evin's mention of Instagram pages adds another layer. Anonymous fans, diaspora activists, and local musicians run those pages, and they end up doing what archives and tastemakers do — deciding what counts as Kurdish music and who its audience is.

Rezan, a nineteen-year-old university student, offered a generational perspective:

These days I listen to a lot of Kurdish music, and my taste has really changed. Earlier I used to listen to ridiculous music — things like Amir Tataloo [a Persian rapper] — but now I listen to that kind of music much less.

Rezan's characterization of her former listening as *ridiculous* is analytically revealing. This is more than a change in taste. Rezan is looking back at her younger listening and reevaluating it in identity terms — putting distance between her current Kurdish self and a past self she now reads as not Kurdish enough. The word carries embarrassment in it. Embarrassment at having once liked what she now sees as the cultural product of her own marginalization.

Karwan, a thirty-year-old mobile phone repair technician whose shop functioned as an informal hub for music sharing, offered a supply-side view:

Before smartphones, if you wanted Kurdish music you had to find someone who had been to Sulaymaniyah or Erbil and brought cassettes or CDs back. Or you waited for satellite. Now, any young person has more Kurdish music on their phone than all the old cassette shops in the bazaar ever stocked combined. And it is not only the famous singers — village songs, **dengbêj** *recordings, new rappers from Duhok, Kurdish covers of English songs. The phone opened a door that was locked for decades.*

Karwan's view from the shop counter captures the structural transformation that consumer-side accounts only partially reveal. Where Kurdish music in the cassette and satellite era required deliberate, often cross-border effort to obtain — a relative traveling to Sulaymaniyah or Erbil and returning with material, or hours of waiting for a satellite broadcast — the smartphone era inverts this relation entirely. What used to be scarce, costly, and reliant on someone traveling to get it is now there on the device, instantly. The change is not just about quantity. Old village songs, new Kurdish production from Iraq and the diaspora, and Kurdish material that borrows from global pop all sit in the same playlist. The phone did not just put more Kurdish music within reach. It changed how Kurdish musical taste even forms.

5.3 Music as Identity Practice

The change did not stop at taste. It got tangled up with something larger — the rising Kurdish identity consciousness that scholars have tracked across the Kurdish regions for the past twenty years. Several participants described a climate in which listening to and sharing Kurdish music was now expected of you within your peer group — a form of *quiet encroachment* in which individual practices cumulatively produce structural shifts in cultural norms (Bayat 2010/2013). Music, like language, is now a place where Kurdish identity gets expressed and where peers quietly watch each other do the expressing. The phone is the main stage for this. The pattern is rebalancing, not replacement. Some participants still love the pre-revolutionary Persian singers and play them alongside the Kurdish music they have come to listen to more — a move toward more adequate representation of an identity that was suppressed, without throwing out what came before (Slobin 1993). Read this way, the phone is not generating ethnic antagonism. It is correcting an imbalance that was put there on purpose.

Zhina, a twenty-two-year-old university student, described the social dynamics of music sharing in group chats:

In our university Telegram group, if anyone — Persian or Kurdish — shares a Persian song, there is usually a Kurdish student who responds with a Kurdish alternative. It is not aggressive — more like teasing, like a

game — but there is a message underneath. When there are Kurdish students in the group, the group must sound Kurdish too, and our Kurdish friends deliver it regularly. Telegram is filtered, of course, but everyone has a VPN. We do not even think about it anymore — it is just how the phone works for us.

The normative expectation to prefer Kurdish music operates not through explicit enforcement but through the ambient social pressure of digital peer interaction — through jokes, substitutions, and the quiet legibility of what appears on a shared screen. What Zhina describes goes beyond individual taste: certain participants take on, or are recognized as taking on, the work of keeping the group's sonic environment Kurdish. The phone is the medium through which this work is done, but the work itself is collective and distributed — a small Kurdish-language sonic commons sustained song by song, response by response, against the background of a state media environment that has never offered such a commons of its own. Zhina's offhand remark about the VPN is itself analytically telling: the practical skill of bypassing state filtering is taken for granted in her cohort, and it is one of the conditions on which the sonic commons depends. Bypass is not a separate political practice running parallel to Kurdish cultural life; it is part of the everyday infrastructure that makes Kurdish cultural life on the phone possible. "The group must sound Kurdish too" is the line in the data that pulls everything together. It is the moment an ordinary digital habit becomes an act of cultural self-making, kept going collectively through the device in the pocket.

If Zhina's account locates the normative work of Kurdish music in the public space of peer networks, other participants pointed to a quieter dimension of the same transformation — one that operates not in group chats but in the intimate space of private listening. Shahla is thirty-six. We talked one afternoon at her home. She described how the phone changed what she could listen to and what she felt when she listened:

In our house, the TV was always on, whatever the family agreed on, which mostly meant whatever the children wanted or what came on the news. There was not much Kurdish music to find on TV anyway — even my father, who loved Kurdish music, would say there was nothing to listen to. Then I got a phone, and suddenly I could put on Hassan Zirak in the kitchen while I cooked, in my headphones while I did the laundry, in the car when I drove the children. It was the first time in my life that what I listened to was something I had chosen, not something the house had on. And I noticed something — when I listen to Kurdish music alone, something settles in me that does not settle when I listen to anything else. It is not that I think about it as politics. It is that I feel myself more. My daughter has had this from the beginning — for her, it is normal. For me it is still new, and I am still surprised by it.

What Shahla names is the dimension of compensation that operates below the level of public peer norms — the intimate, body-close work the phone does for individual listeners whose access to their own cultural inheritance was previously absorbed into the rhythms of shared household media. Aghapouri and Ahmadi (2021) have argued that the digital intensification of Kurdish identity in Rojhelat carries a specifically gendered dimension that is irreducible to either the diaspora-centred or the male-default literature; Shahla's account confirms this, not because the household was hostile to Kurdish music — her

own father loved it — but because the affordance of an individually controlled listening space falls differently on those whose listening had previously been most absorbed into the collective. Shahla feels this as *settling in*, as feeling more like herself. She does not feel it as a political act. That is what makes it compensation rather than resistance, in the strict sense of an organized political act. What Shahla describes can be read as an instance of what Scott (1990) called the hidden transcripts of the dominated, or what other scholars have theorized as unconscious resistance. The connection is real, and not incidental: compensation, as I use the term, grows out of unconscious resistance rather than standing beside it. What changes is the moment in the cycle — what begins as the muted, often unrecognized refusal of a deprived population becomes, once a technology arrives that can carry the refusal into ordinary practice, something more habitual: a quiet, daily correction of the deficit that no longer needs to recognize itself as refusal at all.

Rebwar, a fifty-five-year-old government employee, offered a generational reflection:

When I was young, we all listened to whatever was available, which was mostly Persian. Nobody thought of it as a political choice — it was simply what there was. Now my teenage son listens almost entirely to Kurdish music and he thinks it was always this way. The phone gave him a choice that we never had, and he does not know that the choice is also a kind of freedom.

Rebwar's observation captures a generational dynamic central to the argument: older participants describe the shift to Kurdish music as something they consciously did once new technology made it possible. Younger participants do not describe it at all — for them, Kurdish music is just what people in Sardasht listen to. That default is itself the product of a technology landing in a particular history of cultural suppression. In one technological generation, the phone has turned a hard-won achievement into something nobody has to think about. This is what makes compensatory technologies stick over time. They generate defaults that the next generation receives without seeing them as a generation's worth of work.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that the transformation in musical life that Sardasht has undergone over the past two decades is best understood through the concept of *compensatory cultural technology*: the proposition that, in settings of sustained state-imposed cultural deficit, a personal device whose material affordances meet that deficit acquires a corrective function distinct from anything its designers intended. The Sardasht material asks the concept to do four kinds of analytical work, each of which extends the existing literature in a specific direction.

The first is the absorption of historical risk. The most distinctive thing this ethnography contributes to the wider literature on minority media is what Hiwa and Nashmil told me: pre-mobile formats imposed not just access constraints but evidentiary ones. A Kurdish political cassette in a glove compartment was a physical object. It could be found. It could be confiscated. It could be used against you. A satellite

broadcast did the opposite — it played once and was gone, which left the listener with nothing to keep but also nothing to answer for.

The mobile phone resolves both at once: it carries a vast Kurdish archive *and* offers — through streaming, through file-burial, through the deniability of a screen turned off — a degree of material withdrawability that no earlier Kurdish media technology could provide. This is not merely an extension of the established Kurdish media studies argument that successive generations of technology have strengthened Kurdish identity (Hassanpour 1992, 1998; Sheyholislami 2011). It is a more specific claim about *what changes when storage and deniability combine in a single device*, and one of the reasons compensation here is not experienced, by most users, as resistance.

The second is the relocation of identity work into an intimate space. Much of the Kurdish media literature has, with good reason, focused on what digital platforms do in public — the visible, performative side of Kurdish identification (Smets 2018; Keles 2015). Shahla's account points somewhere quieter. Indoors. Inside the kitchen. The phone changes what listening can be for someone whose listening had always been folded into whatever the household had on. Sardasht confirms what the Rojhelat literature has noted about the gendered dimensions of digital Kurdish identity — and adds detail. The phone's compensatory work falls differently on women whose listening had been most subordinated to other people's schedules, and what they feel — Shahla's *settling in*, feeling more like herself — is intimate and self-repairing, not declarative. Born's (2011) work on how identity is materialized helps see this. The point is not that the music is a symbol of Kurdishness. The point is the listener's relation to herself, made possible by an object she holds.

The third is the distributed maintenance of a Kurdish-language sonic commons. Zhina's account of the university Telegram group — in which Kurdish students respond to a Persian song with a Kurdish alternative, *deliver it regularly*, and quietly keep the group's sound Kurdish — extends the compensation argument beyond individual practice. Compensation is not only what one listener does in private; It is also what a group of listeners do together, song by song, message by message, to keep a small Kurdish-language public sphere alive in a country where the institutions never built one. This intersects directly with Bayat's (2010/2013) concept of *quiet encroachment* — the cumulative, non-organized, individually motivated practices of ordinary people that, over time, reconfigure social norms without ever declaring themselves as politics — but adds a layer Bayat's framework does not emphasize: the voluntary collective labor of those who take on, and are recognized as taking on, the work of keeping the cultural environment minoritized-language. This is not resistance, because there is no campaign and no opposition is named. But it is also not mere preference, because someone is doing the work.

The fourth is the temporal layering of compensation across media generations. The mobile phone did not arrive as the first technology through which Kurdishness could be heard. Radio, cassette, and satellite each opened a partial seam in the wall the state had built around Kurdish life. Each was met with a different configuration of state restriction tailored to its medium. Each one fell short of what the next would do. The phone is finishing this trajectory, not starting it. What that means for compensation

as a concept is that compensatory cultural technology is not a property of any one phone. It is a property of a *sequence* of devices, where each one closes a bit more of a deficit that was politically created, not technologically created. Madianou and Miller's (2012) polymedia framework is one resource for this layered story. But the Kurdish case adds something polymedia does not centrally address: the layering is not just across platforms in one moment. It is across media generations across decades. And it is not only the media that layer; the practical skills of working around state restriction layer too. The cassette-hider, the dish-concealer, and the VPN-user are recognizably continuous figures, separated by technology but not by the underlying disposition that minoritized users develop across generations of restricted media.

These four moves together suggest that compensation is best understood not as the opposite of resistance but as a structurally distinct mode of cultural recovery that the existing vocabulary — alternative media, diasporic public sphere, cultural resistance — does not quite name. The concept's value, I would suggest, extends beyond the Kurdish case. The concept will be most useful in settings where three things hold at once. First, a cultural deficit that politics created. Second, a personal device whose affordances correct that deficit at the level of what people consume, not what they produce. Third, a community whose informal practices repurpose the device for cultural recovery without ever organizing into a movement. Comparable conditions exist in many minoritized-language contexts across the contemporary Global South and beyond, and the concept is offered here in the expectation that other cases will refine, qualify, and extend it.

Several dimensions of the transformation documented here remain underexplored. The gendered dimensions of Kurdish music consumption on mobile phones, opened up here through Shahla's account, merit a study of their own. The relationship between everyday compensatory practice and the more explicitly political forms of digital mobilization that have followed the 2022 Jina Mahsa Amini uprising is a second dimension that subsequent research should pursue. The generational pattern visible in the data also needs more work. Younger participants experience as natural what older participants experienced as a hard-won transformation, and tracing how that happens — how technologies and cultural identities co-evolve across cohorts — will need longitudinal research that this article cannot do.

The mobile phone that Edris carries in his pocket — the device on which he stores hundreds of Kurdish songs, follows artists in Erbil and Stockholm, and navigates Kurdish music pages on Instagram — is the material outcome of a social process that spans decades of deprivation, partial remedy, and technological transformation. It is, in the most precise sense of the term, a compensatory object: not a weapon, not a manifesto, not a political program, but a thing that quietly corrects what politics has distorted. Understanding how such objects work, and for whom, and under what conditions, is a task that material culture studies and Kurdish media scholarship are now jointly equipped to pursue.

Declarations

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No funding was received for conducting this study.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted as part of my M.A. dissertation. The study was approved through the Faculty Graduate Studies Committee at the author's institution and was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for fieldwork in politically sensitive settings. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants.

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