University of Tehran
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of Social Studies and Research

Social Studies and Research in Iran

Home page: https://jisr.ut.ac.ir/?lang=en

E- ISSN: 2588-6355

Iranian Youth Resilience in Economic Precariousness

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received: 12 June 2025
Received in revised form: 07 August 2025
Accepted: 31 August 2025
Published online: 22 December 2025

Keywords:
Critical Discourse Analysis, Economic Precariousness, Everyday Resistance, Iranian youth, Resilience

ABSTRACT

Economic precariousness, as a key structural characteristic of Iran's economy in recent decades, has had widespread effects on the labor market and the life practices of young people. In this context, resilience can be analyzed as a cultural-social mechanism for confronting unstable conditions—rather than merely a return to a prior state. This study aims to identify the components of the discourse of resilience among Iranian youth facing precarious employment and to analyze how these components are represented in experiential narratives.

The research follows a qualitative design and employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with students who are employed or seeking work in Tehran and were analyzed thematically.

Findings indicate that resilience is represented through four major discursive components: "a shared understanding of labor market dysfunction," "internalization of instability and acceptance of hardship," "micro-resistance and innovation," and "meaning reconstruction through humorous engagement." These components are interpreted using approaches from critical sociological theories, including Bourdieu's habitus and symbolic capital, Foucault's governmentality and subjectivity, James C. Scott's notion of everyday resistance, Asef Bayat's concept of viable action, and Butler's reconceptualization of agency within vulnerability.

The results suggest that the discourse of resilience under conditions of economic precariousness, while internalizing existing circumstances, also enables the creation of meaning and micro-scale agencies; rather than being a passive coping mechanism, resilience becomes a mode of living within crisis.

Cite this article: Alavi, L. (2025). Iranian Youth Resilience in Economic Precariousness. Social Studies and Research in Iran, 14(4), 579-600. https://doi.org/10.22059/jisr.2025.393258.1608

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22059/jisr.2025.393258.1608

1. Introduction

Iran's economy, as that of a country in the Global South, has long been exposed to extensive and multifaceted forms of precariousness—stemming from a combination of historical, structural, political, and international factors. From the Constitutional Revolution to the present, recurrent experiences of war, economic sanctions, fluctuations in oil prices, inefficient policymaking, and institutional corruption have created a context in which economic precariousness is not an exception but rather a normalized and persistent condition (Saikal, 2009: 4; Sohrabi, 2011: 91). Since the early 2010s, the effects of uneven development have become increasingly visible, and Iranian society has faced multiple economic and social crises that are hardly comparable to previous episodes of Iran's political economy (Azad Armaki et al., 2025: 177). Within such a setting, various social groups in Iran—particularly the younger generation—have inevitably confronted this lived condition and struggled to find ways of coping and enduring amid economic crisis and employment instability.

In recent years, Iran's labor market has increasingly witnessed the growth of phenomena such as precarious employment, temporary contracts, hidden unemployment, and informal work—a situation accompanied by rising inflation rates, declining opportunities for stable jobs, and the redefinition of the state's role in social welfare (Moghadam, 2023: 276; Moradi et al., 2022: 64). Although such trends in other countries are often interpreted through the expansion of neoliberal policies, in Iran they are primarily manifested as a form of structural and chronic economic precariousness, intertwined with distinctive patterns of welfare policymaking, cultural practices, and micro-resistances (Bayat, 2013: 12). Within this context, the question of *resilience* emerges as a key concept in the social sciences. Contrary to the conventional understanding of resilience as the ability to return to a prior state after crisis, critical studies conceptualize resilience as having two dimensions: first, the capacity of individuals or communities to adapt to crisis conditions; and second, the ability to resist mechanisms that reproduce inequality and crisis (Joseph, 2018: 11; Walker & Cooper, 2011:158). From this perspective, resilience is not merely a

psychological virtue but a social, historical, and discursive phenomenon that takes shape and acquires meaning within structures of power and inequality.

Theoretical and empirical literature indicates that in societies facing economic precariousness, resilience is practiced through multiple means by citizens who discover, create, and develop initiatives, strategies, and coping mechanisms (Bayat, 2013: 93; Biesta, 2015: 27; Joseph, 2018:11). However, the systematic sociological study of these practices has received insufficient attention in mainstream research. Accordingly, examining how resilient responses to economic precariousness are represented in individual narratives—particularly among young people—becomes crucial.

This study, focusing on language, narrative, metaphor, and the broader socio-economic context, seeks to identify the discursive components of resilience in the ways Iranian youth confront employment precariousness and economic crisis. The research is guided by the following questions: What are the discursive components of resilience in the narratives of Iranian youth facing economic precariousness?; How are these components stabilized and reproduced through language, metaphor, and experiential narratives?

2. Conceptual Framework

This section examines the sociological concepts and theories related to *resilience* within conditions of *economic precariousness* and seeks—through engagement with empirical evidence derived from interviews with participants and a rereading of critical perspectives and relevant sociological theories—to identify and extract the discursive components of Iranian youth resilience in the face of employment precariousness. Therefore, the approaches pertinent to this subject are briefly outlined here.

The concept of *resilience* was initially defined, in its classical sense, as the capacity of systems (from societies to individuals) to return to a state of equilibrium following crises. However, this concept gradually entered the social and economic domains and came to be used as an analytical tool to explore how societies adapt to crisis and instability. Some social theorists, such as Pierre

Bourdieu, argue that under conditions of economic precariousness, resilience is not merely a return to a prior state but may also function as a mechanism for the continuation of the existing order and as a form of adaptation to unstable structures. Within this framework, resilience becomes particularly significant in contexts where individuals experience economic fluctuations, job insecurity, and social instability and are compelled to discover ways of living amid such precarious conditions.

Bourdieu, by focusing on the internalization of social norms and conditions, explains how individuals, in interaction with cultural and economic structures, develop patterned modes of responding to unstable realities. Concepts such as *cultural*, *social*, and *symbolic capital* help to explain how social actors draw upon available resources to make sense of their circumstances and to cope with challenges (Bourdieu, 1991: 134). In this sense, resilience is less an instrument of domination than a form of adaptive persistence within existing inequalities—allowing individuals to flexibly negotiate precarious conditions using the resources at their disposal. From this perspective, resilience can be seen as an adaptive reaction formed within social structures and shaped by the symbolic and cultural relations that prevail in society.

In his work, Bourdieu demonstrates how individuals, through participation in social fields, acquire specific values and meanings that influence their responses to crisis and instability. Within this process, *symbolic capital* plays a key role in interpreting and redefining social reality and individual responses to precariousness. This form of capital—which encompasses prestige, reputation, social standing, and cultural legitimacy—enables actors, even under conditions of economic or occupational precariousness, to construct alternative meanings of their position by drawing upon symbolic resources such as education, lifestyle, social recognition, or membership in prestigious groups. Under such circumstances, individuals may represent precariousness not merely as economic failure but as a transitional phase, a personal choice, or even a form of independence and self-realization. In other words, symbolic capital allows them to generate alternative narratives about their situation and thereby exhibit a form of *semantic and cultural resilience* against structural pressures. This interpretive and narrative dimension of resilience

particularly contributes to the reconstruction of subjectivity and the enhancement of *agency* among social actors facing external constraints (Bourdieu, 1991: 9).

Another key Bourdieuian concept in analyzing precariousness is *habitus*. Bourdieu (1990) argues that habitus _ a set of acquired mental and behavioral dispositions formed through lifelong socialization _ plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions and reactions toward economic precariousness. In societies experiencing continuous instability, individuals gradually internalize such conditions as part of their social reality, perceiving them as normal and predictable (Mu, 2020: 1249). Bourdieu also points to a phenomenon he describes as *flexible exploitation*: a condition in which certain social groups, when confronted with instability, become entangled in precarious economic and employment relations. This process may be perpetuated through cultural norms and patterns that constrain the range of individual action in responding to job insecurity (Harrison et al., 2022: 224). Within this framework, *economic precariousness* is represented not as a temporary condition but as a sustainable state that has become routinized through symbolic and cultural patterns. Bourdieu explores how this order becomes institutionalized in everyday life and social interactions, demonstrating how individuals, through engagement with social institutions, develop adaptive strategies to accommodate these realities (Bourdieu, 1990: 134). From this analytical standpoint, resilience within such structures signifies adaptation to constraints and the strategic use of available capacities to sustain everyday life.

Alongside Bourdieu, the French philosopher Michel Foucault also provides valuable insight into the dynamics of instability through his concept of *governmentality*. Foucault argues that neoliberalism governs societies by redefining individuals as *entrepreneurial subjects*, mobilizing privatization and welfare instruments to extend power through the guise of individual freedom (Erlenbusch-Anderson, 2020: 24; Foucault, 2008: 19). Under conditions of economic and social precariousness, individuals are compelled to assume personal responsibility for failures and crises, internalizing a constant fear of failure, while systems of power reproduce domination by managing instability (Lemke, 2015: 3). Foucault's analysis reveals how neoliberalism utilizes precariousness as a tool of control, driving individuals into perpetual competition and self-

adaptation. This ongoing competition forces individuals to bear the risks of their own failures while leaving power structures intact. Hence, precariousness transforms into a *culture of risk*, in which individuals are induced to produce *personal satisfaction* while continuously exposed to danger and compelled to self-regulate (Foucault, 2008: 215). From Foucault's perspective, this process leads to the emergence of a *biopolitical order* in which human life is directly governed by states and economic institutions (Means, 2022: 1968). Consequently, precariousness ceases to be an exceptional condition and becomes a permanent feature of contemporary existence.

From the viewpoint of critical sociology, resilience is thus a multifaceted concept that simultaneously reproduces and stabilizes economic precariousness. While Foucault emphasizes governmentality and instability as mechanisms of social control—demonstrating how power systems regulate societies through the creation and management of precarious conditions—Bourdieu focuses on the deeper social and symbolic structures that shape individuals' internalization of economic precariousness through *habitus* (Khani & Tajmazinani, 2025: 369).

Bayat (2013: 116) examines the everyday reactions of people facing economic crises in Middle Eastern and North African societies. He argues that resilience in precarious societies—such as those in the Middle East—is not strengthened through formal policies or governmental programs, but rather through the everyday lives and passive survival strategies of ordinary people. Critiquing the concept of resilience as used in psychological and conservative sociological literature, Bayat contends that genuine economic resilience emerges not only through macro-level policies but also through micro-level, everyday practices of endurance and resistance. His perspective highlights how people facing economic precarity employ resilience as a passive tool to improve their conditions, even when they cannot transform unstable structures. Bayat explores how ordinary people, without engaging in formal political activities, resist instability and social change through their daily practices. His key concept of the "politicization of everyday life" emphasizes that small, informal acts can function as a form of active and meaningful politics in confronting unstable systems and economic crises.

Bayat shows how, in the absence of robust economic support systems in Middle Eastern societies, people develop informal strategies of resilience against economic and social crises (Bayat, 2013: 114). He explains that individuals facing precarious structures—such as economic precarity—employ strategies of "quiet encroachment." This concept refers to informal, everyday resistance against inequalities and constraints through which people seek to secure basic needs. However, these actions rarely lead to substantial structural change or transformation of power relations. Bayat critiques this type of resilience for its passive nature, arguing that it ultimately results in adaptation to precarious structures and the perpetuation of the status quo rather than transformative change.

On the other hand, Judith Butler addresses the formation of the subject within contexts of vulnerability, dependency, and socio-biological instability. She argues that instability is not merely a threat but a foundation for agency and critical reflection on power. According to Butler, the subject in precarious conditions—facing structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, or economic insecurity—is not only shaped by power relations but also capable of redefining the self and the surrounding world. In this sense, living within precarious conditions creates opportunities to disrupt hegemonic frameworks, as "vulnerable bodies," in Butler's words, can emerge from denial and exclusion to claim presence and rights (Butler, 2009: 29).

This analysis is particularly relevant to workers or young people engaged in temporary, insecure, or platform-based labor, who, through their direct experience of precarity, develop alternative and unconventional discourses of agency. In another work, Butler further emphasizes that "precarity is the foundation of social bonds" because it renders individuals interdependent and connected. Accordingly, resilience in this context does not signify individual endurance against risk, but rather the acceptance of mutual dependency and the creation of collective spaces for meaning-making and solidarity within precarity (Butler, 2004: 100).

James Scott, meanwhile, emphasizes informal and muted forms of resistance in everyday life. From his perspective, in contexts where collective, overt, and organized protest is not possible, subaltern groups engage in "hidden transcripts" of resistance through micro-acts such as evasion,

rumor, satire, irony, and symbolic sabotage. These acts constitute a marginal and informal narrative that contests dominant discourse. Within the context of economic precarity and temporary employment, such everyday forms of resistance can function as mechanisms of resilience—preserving dignity, reconstructing meaning, and reclaiming agency amid unstable social orders. Scott demonstrates that these modest, dispersed acts of defiance, though individually minor, hold significant potential for understanding lived experiences of domination and for redefining the boundaries of power in everyday life (Scott, 1985: 16).

3. Methodology

The aim of discourse theory is to understand the social world as a socially constructed phenomenon; therefore, any social phenomenon can be analyzed through discursive tools (Alipoor et al., 2017: 221). This study adopts the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, drawing specifically on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 2013: 189), to identify the discursive components of Iranian youth resilience in the face of economic precarity. This model encompasses three interrelated dimensions: 1) Descriptive Level – Textual Analysis, 2) Interpretative Level – Analysis of Discursive Processes, 3) Explanatory Level – Analysis of Socio-Cultural Structures. This research is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore the experiences, attitudes, and narratives of young university students—both employed and job-seeking—who are facing unstable economic conditions and their effects on subjectivity and resilience. The research population consisted of 20 students from major public universities in Tehran, aged between 18 and 30, who were either working while studying or actively seeking employment. This group was selected purposefully, using snowball sampling, due to their direct experience of the social and economic pressures arising from economic precarity. Participants were identified through social networks and personal referrals. All interviews were conducted by the author in an informal and comfortable setting. Each session lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. Special attention was paid to the possible power asymmetry between interviewer (a university faculty member) and

interviewees (students), and to the socio-cultural position of the researcher, in order to minimize distorted or biased representations. The interview interaction was thus treated as a dialogical process, grounded in the shared knowledge and resources of both parties regarding the economic context. Interview environments were intentionally chosen to maximize participants' comfort and openness—for instance, most interviews were conducted in student cafés, where the atmosphere was relaxed and familiar. The interviews revolved around two main thematic axes: 1) Students' strategies for coping with the economic crisis and precarious employment; 2) The representation of resilience in students' discourse regarding precarious work. The recorded interviews were transcribed for detailed analysis. In the initial stage, data were thematically coded, and sections related to resilience and economic precarity were extracted. Subsequently, using discourse analysis tools, dominant linguistic patterns within participants' narratives were identified. The analysis proceeded by examining language in relation to participants' socio-cultural contexts. Relevant excerpts were first selected, followed by the identification of common patterns, regularities, and lines of reasoning across discourses. In the next stage, these discursive regularities were interpreted in connection with macro-level social and economic structures, informed by relevant theoretical frameworks. Theories of economic resilience from critical social science perspectives served as the main conceptual foundation for analysis. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a set of discursive components of youth resilience in response to precarious working conditions.

4. Findings

In the analysis of participants' narratives, four distinct discursive components were identified in their encounters with *precarious work,* each representing a particular mechanism of resilience in the experience of job instability. These components include: *a shared understanding of the inefficiency of the labor market, the internalization of precarity and normalization of suffering, micro and innovative forms of resistance*, and *reconstruction of meaning through humorous engagement*. Each of these components not only reflects the ways in which young people live

under precarious economic conditions but also illustrates how agency is shaped within structural inequalities. In what follows, these components are described with reference to the participants' experiential narratives and their discursive analysis.

4-1. Shared Understanding: Belief in the Inefficiency of the Labor Market

The first discursive manifestation appears as a belief in the systemic dysfunction of the labor market. Saeed spoke about one of his jobs as a graphic designer in Tehran. He tried to describe his workplace using the common expression *"bi-dar-o-pikar" (literally, unregulated or disorderly)*; as the Iranian audience knows, this phrase is a widespread cliché used to describe various sectors of Iran's employment system. In other words, there is a shared understanding of this linguistic cliché between Saeed and the interviewer. The interviewer's decision not to ask for further clarification confirms this mutual comprehension. Saeed believes this is an inherent feature of the Iranian labor market and provides evidence from his workplace—lack of organization, poor management, informal relations (*parti-bazi*, or nepotism), job insecurity, low wages, and lack of transparency—all stereotypically attributed to the broader Iranian labor market. Saeed uses this phrase to explain his own situation but implicitly suggests that his work environment, like many others, suffers from these negative characteristics. Thus, he employs the expression to frame his personal experience within a cultural cliché and to justify leaving his job. Mitra similarly notes: *"... anyone with connections gets ahead of the rest ..."*, reflecting a similar encounter with the existing situation as Saeed. Indeed, what is offered here is a *shared cultural description* (Butler, 2004: 101), highlighting the structural problems and unfavorable conditions of employment in Iran's labor market. Maryam adds: *"It was the same everywhere. At first, when I was job-hunting, I didn't want to accept it and kept moving from one company to another looking for better conditions, but as time passed, I realized I had no choice but to stay in one of these places."* The interviewees try to present themselves as hardworking individuals. Mohammad remarks: *"... Because of this situation, I had to put up with my ignorant and arrogant boss. My situation had gotten a bit better, and I didn't want to ruin it. You know? I kind*

of weighed the costs and benefits!" In this dominant pattern of encounter, *agency* is shaped within a corrupt and inefficient structure—neither complete silence and submission nor outright rebellion or resistance, but rather a negotiation and compromise for survival. Although accompanied by a critical discourse, this pattern does not invite collective action or structural defiance. The participants criticize the situation in their narratives but perceive it as entrenched and largely unchangeable. In these micro-narratives, they rarely frame the labor market as a national crisis demanding solutions; rather, they share an understanding that precarity is a normal and natural part of employment in Iran.

4-2. Acceptance: Internalization of Precarity and Normalization of Suffering

Hoda uses the term *"exploitation"* to describe her company's working conditions. She depicts this exploitation as something *visible* (*"you could see it"*) yet *unspeakable* (*"you couldn't say anything… you just can't talk about it"*). She attributes this silence to high unemployment rates: *"What's the point of protesting? All my friends are jobless!"* She repeatedly uses the second-person pronoun (*you*), seemingly in an effort to present exploitation as a widespread phenomenon—not unique to her workplace but representative of a broader, normalized system. In this way, Hoda explains why most of her coworkers, despite harsh conditions, remain silent and inactive. This points to the *normalization of suffering* (Deranty, 2008: 443; Lazzarato, 2012: 15) the pain caused by precarious labor becomes so pervasive that it no longer requires description, analysis, or critique.

In this pattern, participants represent acceptance of precarity and job insecurity as a *forced choice* in the absence of viable opportunities. Mitra similarly portrays herself and her coworkers as powerless to act or protest: *"Many of my coworkers would leave if they had a better option… we're all in the same situation."* She uses the common Persian metaphor *"ne rah-e pish dari ne rah-e pas"* (*"you have no way forward or back"*) to describe her deadlocked position, explaining that workers are forced to choose between two bad options—temporary employment or complete unemployment. This micro-narrative rests upon the internalization of precarity as a social

destiny. Maryam once used the expression *"joon kandan"* (*"to struggle with one's life"*) to justify her position. Within a neoliberal labor regime that valorizes hard work, the term denotes intense effort (Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010: 492). She and her coworkers portray themselves as diligent individuals who, despite tremendous effort, face insecurity and instability. This discursive narrative reveals that within Iran's quasi-neoliberal system, even persistent hard work cannot guarantee job security. Hoda, Mitra, and Maryam often employ the dichotomy *"we and they"*: *we*—those forced to choose between precarious work and unemployment, and *they*—the employers and employment system that set the rules of this unequal game.

4-3. Resistance: Creating Innovative Strategies Against Job Insecurity

Among the participants' narratives, a different pattern of engagement emerges—one that transcends mere acceptance: *innovative resistance*. This resistance, although lacking political organization and often individual and informal, arises from everyday life and lived experience, allowing individuals to reconstitute their agency amid uncertainty. Participants' discursive narratives about confronting job precarity show that individuals, not from passivity or obligation but with active, creative, and sometimes oppositional perspectives, seek alternative paths for employment, income, and meaning-making in their work. Some job-seekers, while filling out formal job applications and attending interviews, simultaneously entered informal or home-based workspaces. Sara says: *"When I saw that with a bachelor's degree I couldn't find a proper job, I started baking cakes at home. At first just for relatives, then I started getting orders on Instagram […] I also have an exam in two months."*

Others have entirely left the formal labor system, creating alternative economic structures using minimal capital and personal or family resources. Mohammad explains: *"My dad's financially stable. My friend Alireza and I pooled some money to buy rice, beans, and nuts in bulk, stocked my dad's shop, and now we sell both in-store and online. Alireza made a website and we advertise there too."* Saeed, who recently quit his corporate job, says: *"I've got a Telegram channel where I sell clothes, posting a few times a day. I make more money than at my office job. Nobody tells me*

what to do or not do." Such actions exemplify Asef Bayat's theory of the *"politics of everyday life"*: resistances that move from the street to the household, from the political arena to daily life, challenging the existing order without slogans or organization (Bayat, 2013: 114).

Another form of resistance can be seen in *intentional career shifts* and conscious distancing from formal academic or professional tracks. Sina, who viewed his field of study as devoid of future prospects, says: *"My major has no job market, I'm just studying to get the degree. But I'm good with computers […] I work at night and take freelance projects during the day. Most of my clients are students."* This narrative shows that resistance is not necessarily confrontation—it may take the form of redefining one's role and career path. A young person who steps away from the social expectation of "job stability" symbolically challenges the dominant order. In such acts, the combination of agency and flexibility forms a key component of creative resilience. In most cases, participants' micro-narratives reveal that the use of *digital tools* for livelihood helps them reclaim independence and control amid precarity. The *platform space* functions as a site for the emergence of new subjectivities—where individuals detach from traditional hierarchical relations (employer–employee) and engage directly with audiences and markets. This form of digital action aligns with Bayat's notion of *"silent but effective acts"* (Bayat, 2000: 550).

Some participants adopted a *rotational employment strategy* to avoid being trapped in precarity. Ehsan states: *"I never stay anywhere long—six months here, a year there […] I've changed jobs several times. I gain more experience and don't get stuck. I don't cling to one place."* While acknowledging changing conditions, this strategy resists the internalization of job insecurity. Elahe adds: *"There are plenty of jobs, but the conditions suck—it's a quality problem, not quantity (laughs). My boss was younger than me; I couldn't stand her bossing me around, so I quit!"* Through mobility, the participant subverts hidden domination and avoids being fixed in a subordinate position. This subtle, smart, and quiet resistance corresponds to James Scott's concept of *everyday hidden resistance* (Scott, 1985: 16).

In some narratives, resistance occurs not at the structural or behavioral level but through *identity and discursive reconstruction*. Maryam, though accepting her temporary employment, adopts a

distinct strategy toward her job insecurity: *"I know my job is contractual, but I don't want to stay in one office for thirty years like my dad."* By comparing the lifestyle of the previous generation with her own, the subject constructs a new meaning of work. Precarity is reimagined not as failure but as *freedom*—liberation from repetitive, monotonous labor. These narratives suggest that identity and discursive reconstruction itself constitutes a form of resistance—one grounded in the *power of alternative representation* rather than external action.

Overall, the *resistance* component in this study reveals a complex picture of how Iranian youth confront economic precarity. They do not merely submit to circumstances; instead, they find opportunities within constraints to recreate paths, redefine values, and reclaim agency. This form of resilience transcends psychological or moral coping, becoming a *sociocultural mode of creative living within crisis*. The theories of Asef Bayat and James Scott provide effective frameworks for understanding such resistances, as both emphasize the significance of the everyday field, micro-acts, meaningful silences, and subtle movements within—rather than against—the structures of power.

4-4. Meaning Reconstruction: Humorous and Mitigative Engagement with Precarious Work

In several participants' narratives, a distinct discursive engagement with job insecurity emerges—one that manifests neither as overt protest, silent submission, nor creative action, but rather through humor, irony, sarcasm, and linguistic play. This form of engagement can be understood as a mitigative and meaning-making strategy. Elaheh, when asked how many of her university classmates had found stable employment, responded: *"Employment?! (laughs) Does that even exist?"* Similarly, Maryam remarked: *"In this system, working yourself to death is an option—but the problem is, it's the only option! (Nervous laugh)."*

Such reactions represent a way of lightening the burden and managing the negative emotions arising from situations that are neither easily changed nor endurable without psychological cost. By turning their precarious or exhausting conditions into a joke, participants make suffering more bearable while simultaneously rendering the existing social order less serious and less legitimate.

Saeed, laughing, said: *"I was the company's Swiss Army knife… whatever needed to be done, I had to do it."*

In these micro-narratives, humor operates as a form of delegitimization of the dominant discourse of success and stability. From a social-psychological perspective, this kind of joking can be seen as a defense mechanism that helps individuals reduce the mental pressure caused by situational contradictions—for example, between occupational ideals and existing realities. Sigmund Freud, in his essay on *humor and the unconscious*, considered humor a way to express truth in a non-threatening form and a psychological safeguard (as cited in (Grotstein, 2013: 58)). In a similar way, participants transform painful experiences into something speakable, shareable, and less hazardous through laughter. As one put it: *"We're not living—we're just surviving (laughs)."*

In these statements, we observe a process of constructing a *controlled narrative of suffering*—not a denial of pain, but its transformation into something the subject can speak about, laugh at, and share. In this sense, humor functions as a form of *symbolic agency* (Billig, 2005: 196): what cannot be changed can be redefined, and what cannot be openly challenged can be mocked. Mohammad, who once worked part-time in a café but quit shortly after, recounted: *"My boss told me I was too smart for this job but still paid me little! So, I told him, maybe you're paying less because of my intelligence, not my work!"* He then burst into laughter.

In such moments, humor serves a dual function—as both an emotional relief mechanism and a subtle form of critique that exposes structural contradictions (Billig, 2005: 17). Billig argues that humor in society is not merely a tool of entertainment but a serious medium for resistance, coping, distancing, and meaning-making. He uses the term *"serious humor"* to describe the cultural function of humor as a means of revealing truths that cannot be directly spoken.

Some participants even employed metaphoric language to depict their situations. One said: *"We're like footballs—whenever they run out of people, they kick us around."* Another, describing his experience in a factory workshop, said: *"The place was like a circus!"* These metaphors, beyond simple jokes, serve as discursive representations of powerlessness,

degradation, and the objectification of labor—yet they are delivered through comic expression and laughter.

Such humorous statements create small cracks within the dominant discourse without overtly entering the realm of open resistance. They implicitly convey: *"We understand how ruthless the game is, even if we pretend to joke about it."* Importantly, this humorous engagement does not signify satisfaction or adaptation. On the contrary, it often reflects an acute awareness of domination and structural injustice—an awareness devoid of opportunity or desire for direct confrontation. Thus, humor here is not a language of indifference, but an underground language of suffering and meaning-making.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In confronting the precarious economic situation, the discourse of resilience among Iranian youth in this study appeared not as an individual or psychological reaction but as a set of actions, representations, and discursive mechanisms embedded within socio-economic structures. The analysis of participants' narratives, based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2013: 189), revealed four main components of resilience within the lived experiences of young people who are employed or seeking employment: a shared understanding of the dysfunctionality of the labor market, acceptance of precarity and the internalization of suffering, micro and innovative resistances, and meaning reconstruction through humorous engagement. Collectively, these components reflect adaptation, creativity, implicit resistance, and the recovery of agency within the context of structural economic inequalities. Importantly, resilience here is not understood as surrender but as a cultural and social strategy for survival, meaning-making, and preserving dignity in the face of instability.

The first component, *a shared understanding of the dysfunctionality of the labor market*, demonstrates that Iranian youth perceive precarious employment conditions not as an individual experience but as a structural, pervasive, and unavoidable condition. The use of linguistic clichés such as "bi dar o piker" ("disorderly" or "without structure") to describe workplaces reflects the

formation of a collective memory regarding labor market precarity—one that is simultaneously critical and disarming of protest. From this perspective, as Bourdieu explains through the concept of *habitus*, social actors, through their interaction with structures, develop a tendency to accept the existing order, and their practices are shaped by a "practical sense" grounded in the internalization of instability (Bourdieu, 1990: 135). This internalization of precarity culminates in the second component—*acceptance and internalization of suffering*. The participating youth, aware of job insecurity, exploitation, and lack of fairness in the labor market, adopt a form of micro-level acceptance rather than overt protest. This acceptance manifests in everyday language through phrases such as "we're killing ourselves working," "no way forward, no way back," or "what's the point of complaining?" The alignment of such representations of instability with what Foucault calls "subject formation within the neoliberal governmentality" is evident; individuals come to see themselves as responsible for crises and failures and turn inward rather than demanding structural change (Foucault, 2008: 216). In this process, the subject transforms from a protesting agent into a self-regulating one who considers managing suffering a personal duty (Kalb, 2024; Lemke, 2015).

However, resilience in participants' narratives is not confined to mere acceptance. The third component, *micro and innovative resistances*, indicates that many young people, within the same unstable structure, adopt strategies to redefine their professional trajectories, create home-based or digital businesses, or even shift their fields of action. Such patterns correspond to what Asef Bayat (2013) terms "the politics of everyday life" and may also be understood through James Scott's (1985: 16) concept of "hidden resistance"—actions that neither necessarily transform structures nor align with domination but operate in the margins of the dominant order, creating micro-spaces of agency and survival. For instance, young people who have withdrawn from formal employment and initiated small-scale digital enterprises exemplify actors who, from within the crisis, generate new forms of agency.

The fourth component, *meaning reconstruction through humorous engagement*, reveals another layer of resilience: the use of humor, irony, and linguistic play as tools to mitigate suffering and

undermine official discourse. Although seemingly harmless, these humorous expressions carry critical awareness—observable in statements such as “we don’t live, we just survive,” or “we’re like footballs; they kick us wherever they need.” Billig (2005: 52) conceptualizes humor as a form of “symbolic resistance” that, without entering formal politics, generates fissures in the existing discursive order through language and meaning.

Accordingly, the findings of this study indicate that the resilience of Iranian youth is not a singular reaction but a multilayered combination of adaptation, resistance, creativity, and representation shaped within economic inequality. Resilience should not be reduced to a psychological virtue or individual skill but should be understood as a sociological, historical, and discursive phenomenon emerging from the complex interaction between power structures, cultural resources, and everyday language. As Butler (2004; 101) reminds us, precarity and vulnerability are not merely threats but also conditions for agency, reflexivity, and the formation of new social bonds. In confronting crisis, the subject is not only affected by it but also reclaims agency through re-signification and identity reconstruction. From Bourdieu’s perspective, symbolic capital plays an important role here; through values such as independence, creativity, education, or social status, young people reframe precarity, transforming it from a humiliating experience into a transitional phase or even a form of self-realization (Bourdieu, 1990: 135). Thus, at times, precarity among Iranian youth has shifted from threat to opportunity, and suffering from an obstacle to a source of meaning. This form of resilience emerges not in direct opposition to the existing order but in its margins—through subtle linguistic, narrative, and behavioral shifts.

Moreover, the findings show that all four identified discursive components reflect mechanisms that, through the expansion of temporary employment and the individualization of responsibility, normalize precarious order (Lemke, 2015: 23). In their narratives, young people criticize this order yet simultaneously negotiate with it, constructing possible forms of living within it. This duality aligns with Bayat’s (2013: 115) analysis of the politicization of everyday life—not

through collective mobilization, but through survival tactics, soft resistance, and the re-creation of meanings within lived experience.

In this context, the notion of the *precariat* can be regarded as one of the contemporary formations of labor instability. Precarity entails not only job, income, and identity insecurity but also psychological dimensions such as anxiety, isolation, and detachment from collective narratives of meaning and status (Standing, 2011: 71). The findings of this study suggest that the lived experience of Iranian youth regarding precarious work overlaps with many characteristics of the precariat, yet within Iran's specific cultural and structural context, it is also accompanied by narratives of resilience, micro-agency, and the reconstruction of everyday life meaning.

Furthermore, this study's approach demonstrates that critical discourse analysis, by enabling the simultaneous exploration of linguistic levels, meaning-making processes, and social structures, can serve as an effective tool for understanding the complexities of resilient responses within contexts of inequality (Fairclough, 2013: 130). Discourse analysis—especially in settings where overt action or collective protest is difficult—allows us to uncover subtle forms of agency, resistance, and meaning-making.

Therefore, this study emphasizes that to achieve a more realistic understanding of resilience, it should be conceived as an interdisciplinary phenomenon located at the intersection of psychology, sociology, linguistics, and cultural studies. Particularly in Global South societies—where economic precariousness is a normalized condition (Moghadam, 2023: 277; Sohrabi, 2011: 90)—resilient engagement with instability does not mean returning to a previous state but "living within crisis" and creating alternative pathways for meaning and survival. Hence, a deeper understanding of resilience requires recognizing its socio-cultural contexts, listening to marginal voices, and attending to the language and narratives through which everyday actors make sense of precarity.

Declaration of Competing Interest

I declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

This research was conducted independently without any external funding or institutional conflict.

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