

Digital Disruption:
Digital Feminist Activism and Resistance to Oppression in the 2022/2023 Iran Protests

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A. Background and Context

When an authoritarian regime falls under international scrutiny for crimes against humanity, regaining global trust can be extremely challenging. There are numerous strategies that authoritarian countries have executed to control the messages and organisation of digital activism and protests against their respective governments. As developing countries in the Middle Eastern and North African regions begin to upgrade their digital infrastructure and improve their technological capabilities, they are better able to control the dissemination of digital social movements. On September 13th, 2022, Mahsa Amini was beaten in a police van in Tehran by Iran's morality police for allegedly improperly wearing her mandatory hijab. On September 16th, Mahsa Amini died from head injuries which sparked national outrage across Iran and in the diasporic communities (Rahimpour, 2022). The morality police in Iran is the majority of the public's first and most common point of contact with the authoritarian laws in Iran. The regime uses morality police to enforce Islamic principles that are considered to be moral by the regime's standards. The main objective of the morality police is to ensure that the public adheres to the Islamic code of conduct and dress code that is prescribed by the regime. Their duties include surveilling public spaces and disciplining individuals that they believe to be inappropriate and inconsistent with Islamic teachings. The majority of the Iranian public argues that the strict enforcement of moral codes infringes upon individual freedoms and has led to an environment of fear and oppression where instances of abuse of power and excessive force by the morality police have become standard (Mansoor, 2022).

After the murder of Mahsa Amini, waves of protests began and Iranian youth and women were at the forefront. Demonstrators poured into approximately 120 cities across Iran, chanting anti-morality police and anti-regime slogans such as "Woman, life, freedom", "I am an

honourable woman, you are immoral and lewd”, “Undignified Basiji, you are our ISIS”, and “Khamenei is a murderer, an illegitimate ruler”. In an open act of defiance, many women removed their mandatory headscarves as they protested through the streets, burning their headscarves in bonfires to celebrate as well.



(NPR, 2022)

This became a symbolic act of the anti-authoritarian protests against the state-imposed laws that criminalise women for not wearing their hijabs in public. Surprisingly, even pious women were participating in the Iranian protests in solidarity and to call for an end to the strict state dress codes and the enforced ideological disciplining of public spaces and social life. Protests erupted across Iran in universities and high schools as well, despite a vicious crackdown by the police and paramilitaries (Khatam, 2023). Predictably, the use of social media has been prominent throughout the ongoing protests in Iran from September 2022 to January 2023. Iranians have used Instagram and Twitter to express their views, post images and videos of the regime’s brutality, teach and learn how to assist those exposed to tear gas and/or treat wounds, and communicate among themselves while engaging a higher sense of security (Khorrami, 2022).

Despite the state-sanctioned restrictions on the usage of the Internet and mobile applications such as Instagram and Twitter, the videos of protests and countless police brutalities

have nevertheless kindled the spirit of resistance to large and diverse cities, like Mashhad and Qom. These cities have previously been strong supporters of the regime in terms of public opinion, which also maintained the legitimacy of the Islamic regime (Oxford Middle East Review, 2022). Social media platforms during the Woman Life Freedom movement are pertinent since they play a significant role in amplifying previously silenced voices and feelings of dissatisfaction and hatred towards the Islamic regime amongst ethnicity-based groups, leftists, and progressive Iranians (Hoodashtian, 2023). The censorship, surveillance, disinformation, and propaganda enacted by the authoritarian regime only further emphasise the critical role that social media platforms and digital activists have played in the protests (Szurc, 2022).

The Islamic regime has actively attempted to suppress public outrage and the dissemination of information online and in turn, digital activists such as local citizens and Iranian influencers have actively attempted to fight back through the formation of the Woman Life Freedom movement. Similar to digital and on-the-ground protests in Iran from previous years, the 2022/2023 Iranian protests are highly decentralised as there is no central leader or organisation that the resistance against the current regime can look to or follow. Although there is a lack of central leadership, the resistance actively produces and publishes photos and images of on-the-ground protests daily, which has been able to gain the attention of international media and audiences. The efforts of the Iranian activists are similar to those of the Black Lives Matter movement, which successfully led to numerous legislative proposals combatting police brutality and systematic racism (Fandos, 2020). The circulation of videos depicting the murder of George Floyd and the efforts of Iranian digital activists are comparable in this instance, as both acted as catalysts for the global dissemination of information. Likewise, the murder of Mahsa Amini in

Iran has become a driving force behind the public's active resistance against the Islamic regime (Oxford Middle East Review, 2022).

The Iranian public has gained international media attention and support from diaspora communities as a result of the large media presence of digital activists who were able to disseminate information and circulate media and updates about the atrocities occurring in Iran. As a result of mass global attention to the violent street protests in Iran, the United Nations removed Iran from the United Nations Women's Rights Council. The UN also sanctioned Iran's morality police based on the evidence of human rights abuses (Johnson, 2023). Superficially, digital activism and social media usage appear to exert a clear and effective influence in protests against authoritarian regimes.

Although the Woman Life Freedom movement is widespread and well-known on international levels, there is currently no clear and distinct opposition group fighting against the Islamic regime on behalf of the movement. Opposition groups that formed in the Iranian diaspora that included famous and powerful Iranians, much like the exiled Prince of Iran and numerous actors and actresses, were broken apart due to disagreements regarding whether Iran should become a monarchy or republic as well as a lack of unity (Sinaee, 2023). Among various opposition groups, the ones formed during the WLF protests were the most significant and influential options available to the Iranian public for driving change. As of now, there is no other group that is comprised of such powerful and influential Iranians that actively stand against the Islamic regime. Because of the disbandment, Iranian activists no longer have a legitimate group to depend on and will now solely have to trust other local activists, none of whom hold any significant systematic power. Despite these challenges, Iranian protestors and activists have been

able to reach global audiences and increase awareness regarding the brutal and inhumane treatment of protestors to further strengthen their cause.

Amidst a fragmented public opinion, characterized by disharmony and disillusionment, the Iranian protests face a challenging landscape where the main obstacle lies in uniting diverse demographics in the Iranian public behind a common cause. Scrutinizing the strategies used by Iranian activists is crucial since it will ensure that their relentless efforts will yield tangible results and ultimately be freed from the grips of the Islamic regime. Iranians are specifically fighting for human rights, accountability, and to become a progressive, democratic, and secular society (De Witte, 2022). There is a myriad of factors that the Iranian public has been fighting for since Mahsa Amini's death ignited a movement that provided a platform for the expression of pent-up and long-building public anger and frustration. Different Iranian demographics are demanding various things, for instance, farmers are complaining about the lack of water, students about the lack of freedom, educators about the lack of pay, and retirees about the lack of benefits and protections. A common denominator throughout every demographic, however, is the fight for the extinction of the Islamic regime, which has been regularly seen in social media posts from Iran (Edelman and Takeyh, 2023).

B. Research Question and Objectives

This MRP aims to investigate the strong influence of feminist digital activism in Iran during the Woman Life Freedom movement by exploring the rhetorical strategies used by digital activists to resist the regime's terrorizing and brutal actions. My research aims to understand how social media posts regarding the WLF movement have impacted and changed the Iranian public's opinions and created shifts in Iranian society.

In this MRP, I track the many shifts in on-the-ground and digital protest practices by activists during the WLF Movement period between September 2022 and January 2023. I do so by using critical feminist discourse analysis to analyze the Instagram posts, images, and videos posted by activists, during this period. This analysis focuses on how activists' posts create and contest gender ideologies, representations, and narratives. Specifically, I analyse how these discourses, which often depict intersectional forms of power, work to resist power dynamics and challenge gender norms. I aim to also analyze whether activists who are engaged in unique forms of protest were able to bring in new participants to the movement and successfully pressure the government to relieve and/or eliminate some forms of repression against women, hijab-wearing protestors, and disenfranchised groups and communities, such as Kurdish or Afghan people and members of the LGBTQ+.

The analysis includes three key areas. First, I critically analyze the digital activists' Instagram content to assess the effectiveness of these discourses in undermining Iranian government actions against protestors, thus far. My research will examine tangible evidence from digital movements in the Middle East over the last two decades to identify patterns and levels of success in activists' strategies in similar regions. Additionally, it will consider the dynamic landscape shaped by the use of digital platforms and communication technologies by Iranian activists. Next, I will track the factors that have influenced the protestors' actions. Specifically, I examine the core components of social movements, including affect (Jasper, 2018), sonic narratives (Belkind, 2020), everyday forms of protests (Bayat, 2003), and on-the-ground street protests (Bayat, 2017), in the context of the WLF movements, investigating how Iranian activists engage with each component.

C. Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in several key areas. This research contributes to the growing body of literature regarding digital activism in the MENA region, specifically Iran. It is a comprehensive analysis of both the challenges and limitations Iranian digital activists are faced with, such as censorship, surveillance, networked authoritarianism, and disinformation propagated by the Islamic regime. By examining the strategies and tactics used by both activists and the regime, the study provides a detailed understanding of the power dynamics within the Woman Life Freedom movement.

Furthermore, the study contributes to academic scholarship by exploring the role of affect, ethical soundscapes, everyday forms of resistance, and street protests in the Woman Life Freedom movement. I hope that this MRP contributes to the critical literature on effective strategies by protestors in the Woman Life Freedom movement and may also provide guidance to Iranian activists by highlighting impactful and successful strategies, addressing challenges, and helping them navigate obstacles to eventually reach their goals of freedom and democracy.

D. Scope of Research

This research begins with a thorough literature review that includes a historical overview of digital activism in Iran. Specific focus will be placed on feminist digital activism so as to examine the factors that are currently influencing the actions and motives of Iranian protestors. To further understand the conceptualization of social movement by communication scholars, I also define and analyze the key characteristics of digital social movements. These characteristics play fundamental roles in creating successful revolutions while also shifting public opinion. My research uses conceptual lenses such as James Jasper's research on affect and emotions in social

movements, Nili Belkind's insights on sonic narratives, and Asef Bayat's findings on everyday forms of resistance and on-the-ground street protests. I will apply these lenses to analyse the posts, images, and videos that Woman Life Freedom digital activists have uploaded to social media. Using content analysis, I will identify key themes, messages, and strategies of activists to support the movement. Overall, the objective of my research is to track the success of the movement by investigating activist strategies used thus far that may have been able to shift the political positions and opinions of the pro-Islamic regime Iranians towards supporting the WLF movement. Using these various analysis methods, I examine the roles the practices play when influencing public sentiment and garnering support for the movement.

E. Methodology

To investigate the impacts of these social media posts on the Iranian public and their varying political opinions, I will use critical feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007). With this approach, I will examine how gender ideologies, representations, and narratives are constructed and contested through various types of Instagram posts, images, and videos protestors posted on social media platforms; I do so in order to understand how these discursive practices work to shift and change public opinion in Iran regarding the regime.

Data was gathered by seeking out Instagram posts that were popular enough to end up on Instagram's Explore page as well as posts that were published by several popular Iranian anti-regime Instagram pages that had garnered a large amount of likes, comments, and reshares through September 2022 to January 2023. I captured and stored over 400 Instagram posts that I believed captured the essence of the movement while exhibiting the several factors that play a

part in creating a revolution. I chose specific accounts to follow as well, with an emphasis on those that posted daily or hourly updates on the protests across Iran and that reshared images and videos sent by protesters who were unable to post themselves. I also considered which Instagram posts were being used as covers for articles in international media sites, as this proves the popularity and impact of the posts. These are powerful instances of affective experience meeting the definition of my lens, as these are preliminary findings. The objective was to locate various examples that might suggest a trend.

I engage three of Lazar's five key interrelated principles for feminist discourse analysis as a structure to analyze my data (2007)—namely assessing how discourses engage or take power in ways that reinforce or challenge the social order. For example, I will look for evidence of how social media posts empower or disempower women, respond to the regime's media and propaganda, and discourses addressing the role that men play in the movement.

As a second technique of discourse analysis, I will analyze if and how the posts challenge gender ideology, by assessing the discourse for contestation and ruptures that challenge gender ideology in Iran, particularly seeking examples of gender transgression and creative expressions of gender.

As a third technique of discourse analysis, I seek to understand if the social media posts upset the internalization of gender common in hegemonic patriarchal regimes (148). To do so, I will analyse posts illustrating routine texts and talk with attention to how intersectional characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, culture, sexual orientation, age, and geography (148) conjoin with gender to disrupt internalized gender oppression. That is, gender oppression is experienced and enacted differently for different social groups and as such, feminist political action should be analyzed with attention to the specificity of the cultural and institutional

frameworks where it resides (149). I plan on using this key principle to identify the subtle mechanisms through which power is exercised, maintained, and resisted through different social media posts and sonic narratives. I will examine how the language used constructs, reinforces, or resists gender norms, ideologies, and inequalities.

I constructed an analytical lens that identifies four practices that support successful revolutions, referencing the work of Jasper (2018), Belkind (2020), and Bayat (2017). To create an analytical lens, I looked for patterns in Instagram posts by Iranian activists that I collected from September 2022 to January 2023 that were associated with four key practices that scholars have identified as key to building a movement; affect, social resistance, on-the-ground street protests, and sonic narratives. I did so by reviewing the Instagram posts, both text and video-based, associated with a focus on each theme below.

Social movement scholars contend that movements encompass actors seeking agency and autonomy. Jasper (2004) defines agency as deliberate choices steering individuals or groups towards distinct actions and responses that challenge societal norms (2). Hewson (2009) outlines three agency forms: individual, proxy, and collective. Individual agency involves micro- or macro-scale actions, as seen in Iranian activism's use of everyday resistance and defiant social media posting. Proxy agency manifests when individuals act on behalf of others; for the Woman Life Freedom movement, digital activists overseas represent on-the-ground protestors amidst Internet shutdowns and censorship (McCallum, 2022). However, the "principal-agent problem" warns of self-interest biases by proxies, accentuating the Iranian public's predicament when their voices are mediated through distant representatives (McCallum, 2022). Investigating proxy agency dynamics unveils the intricacies of remote representation of on-the-ground protestors' interests in Iran.

Within social movements, the concept of affect plays a crucial part as it interacts with emotional and physical experiences that control and fuel collective efforts. It considers the feelings and experiences that demonstrators go through while involved in a movement, both individually and together. Jasper's (2018) research studies the role of affect in social movements, concentrating on the functions of emotions in shaping group dynamics. Jasper argues that by scrutinizing the emotional interactions of protestors, we can better grasp the complexities of protest dynamics and the incentives that support individuals' participation in social movements. Emotions such as anger, fear, hope, and solidarity have instrumental roles when creating a sense of urgency and commitment among activists. These emotionally charged connections to the movement's objectives help increase collective action (80) and foster a profound communal identity (51). To track this variable, I looked for specific emotions in the Instagram posts of Iranian activists, specifically, those expressing anger, disappointment, sadness, and guilt. Additionally, I sought out posts that garnered extensive reposts by other activists, providing tangible proof of collective anger and identity.

Scott's concept of everyday forms of resistance (1987) proves to have significant roles in a revolution as they encompass subtle and inconspicuous modes of contestation and contrast with overtly rebellious and collective acts of defiance. These acts are characterized by their discreet and dispersed nature, serving as unassuming tools for less empowered groups to challenge dominant norms (29). This mode of resistance demands minimal coordination and is employed by individuals and groups to challenge hegemonic norms without confrontation (137). Bayat builds on Scott's framework to analyze Middle Eastern social movements, asserting that the January 2011 Arab Spring uprisings largely failed due to a lack of strategic vision and internal organization (2017). Bayat emphasizes the transition from individualized quiet resistance to

collective mobilization when faced with governmental repression (Lilja, 43). The framework highlights the significance of subtle resistance in undermining power structure, particularly when sustained efforts merge into powerful collective action. To track this variable, I looked for Instagram posts by Iranian activists that portrayed kissing or unveiling in highly populated areas as an act of celebration and defiance. As these two actions are criminalized under the regime, these posts have garnered mass attention and significant reposts by other activists. I also sought out accompanying captions where the original poster would specifically state and link these actions to the WLF movement.

On-the-ground street protests have a large impact on digital activism and the creation of revolution. They possess the ability to transcend barriers and connect with individuals through media by creating awareness and broadcasting the objectives of the movement. These protests serve as platforms that strive to change opinions by engaging larger audiences beyond the immediate protest environment. According to Bayat (2003), street protests in the Middle East are representations of sentiment giving rise to unique expressions of dissent and shaping public perspectives. The application of these dynamics across Arab Spring countries and Iran emphasizes the importance of on-the-ground street protests in bringing about political transformation. To examine this factor, I conducted a search for Instagram posts by activists during the peak of the WLF movement's emotionally charged street protests. These posts included images, such as an unveiled woman preparing herself for a violent protest by tying her hair back or families of prisoners facing tear gas while visiting their loved ones in jail. Such posts played a role in energizing the movement attracting attention from media outlets and gaining support, from Iranians who were previously supportive of the regime.

Sonic narratives, in the context of social movements, play an integral role in the making of a revolution, specifically because they encapsulate the power of music and media as artistic reflections of the movement's ideals and stances. Belkind (2020) argues that music functions as a pathway for cultural territorialization and personal autonomy, enabling the construction of subjectivities and modes of resistance against forces of power and the regime (125). In the Iranian context, where individuals often navigate daily life under authoritarian rule, music is able to offer an alternative temporality that counters the sense of being immobilized in a seemingly endless struggle. In her research, Belkind uses variables of social justice and symbolism for discourse analysis, uncovering the dynamics of transformative movements. She utilizes social justice as a lens to understand the connections between political justice and movements demanding change. Her use of symbolism explores the profound meanings embedded in the lyrics and metaphors, uncovering collective memory and identity with these movements (165-166). These sonic narratives, as forms of cultural expression, serve as vital mediums for revolutions, communicating struggles and creating unity within movements.

Shervin Hajipour's song, "Baraye" (2022), perfectly reflects the Woman Life Freedom movement as the song is entirely comprised of Tweets from Iranian activists participating in a trend, stating what they are fighting for. The song has been used as a soundtrack for the movement as it is the background song to countless videos that have emerged since the protests. The inclusive nature of the song speaks to the values of Iranians while giving individuals agency and uniting not only Iranian activists but also the Iranian people. This research will further investigate the complex dynamics of Iranian activism and the role it plays in shaping public opinion through critical feminist discourse analysis. This study will highlight the diverse nature of the WLF movement and the interactions between emotional connections, challenges to

hegemonic norms, and the powers of cultural expression in pursuit of a revolution. The following literature review will critically examine existing research to contextualize and inform the current study's investigation into the digital and cultural landscape within Iran and its impacts on public opinion.

F. Literature Review: Exploring the Influence of Social Media in the Emergence of the Woman Life Freedom Movement

I. Iran's Social Media Landscape

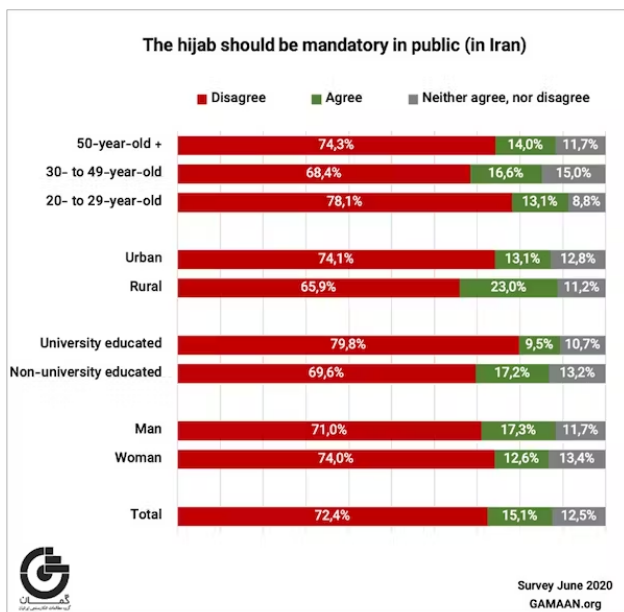
It is critical to examine social media posts from the Woman Life Freedom movement since digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become powerful platforms for activists to share information, mobilise support, and amplify their voices locally and internationally. Since traditional media outlets in Iran are entirely controlled and censored by the Islamic regime, social media platforms function as a space for activists to avoid and bypass restrictions and communicate directly to a larger audience (Aldroubi, 2022). Instagram specifically plays a crucial role when investigating the dynamics, trends, and perspectives within social movements in Iran. Instagram has encountered much less disruption than any other social networking app in Iran because it has become an attractive venue for several kinds of advertising which also plays a significant role in boosting small businesses in Iran. The BETA Research Center, located in Tehran, Iran, found that Iranian Instagram adoption increased from 24 million users in 2017 to 48 million in 2021. Furthermore, the economic dynamics in Iran are influenced by the growing presence of Iranian celebrities and influencers on Instagram, attracting significant followers. President Ebrahim Raisi has expressed support for granting unrestricted access to

Instagram in Iran, recognizing its economic potential. In line with this, the Majlis (House of Parliament) has implemented a new tax specifically targeting Instagram accounts with more than 500 thousand followers, as reported by Khalaji (2022). These developments shape the economic landscape and highlight the government's acknowledgement of the platform's potential for revenue generation and economic growth. Because of the regime's exploitation of Iranian users and influencers on Instagram, Iranians have found the platform to be a gateway between themselves and international communities, creating a mode to mobilize social and political movements.

II. The Shift in Public Opinion in Iran

It is also imperative to track how public opinion has shifted since the movement started. Between 2019 and 2022, the Group for Analysing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) conducted online surveys that ensured the anonymity of potentially fearful respondents. In 2020, GAMAAN conducted a religion-based survey that confirmed that a secular shift had begun to

take place in Iran. While more than 90% of respondents said that they had been raised in a believing or religious family, half of those individuals indicated that they had become non-religious in their lifetime. 72% of those individuals claimed to explicitly oppose the mandatory hijab. This secular shift can be seen as a collective agency since GAMAAN's findings revealed that women, Generation Z, and



university-educated people living in urban communities were opposed to the mandatory hijab. While this was indeed expected, the results of the survey also provided evidence that the majority of men, people living in rural communities, people over the age of 50, and those without higher education also opposed the mandatory hijab. These findings prove that through collective agency and collective action, Iran is moving towards a secular shift that spans nationwide towards an opposition to the authoritarian regime.

III. Iranian Surveillance of Social Media Posting During the Woman Life Freedom Movement

Accessing and disseminating information is extremely difficult for Iranians as the Islamic regime employs several surveillance and censorship operations to control and maintain specific narratives regarding the regime both on a national and international scale. The Islamic regime strategically exploits Instagram for cyber propaganda and surveillance, shaping public opinion and influencing younger generations. Although the regime's use of Instagram yields many economic benefits, there are several other factors that motivate the government's use of the social platform. Authorities have used Instagram for cyber propaganda purposes and have systematically monitored influencer and celebrity accounts, oftentimes exploiting them. For instance, security and intelligence agencies have forced several celebrities to post pro-regime messages crafted to control and influence younger generations' perceptions on urgent issues, particularly in instances where state media is considered to be inefficient for the particular matter, for instance, in matters of voting. The regime also exploits the transparent nature of Instagram where user information is readily available by gathering information about average citizens, activists, and popular trends in public opinion. The quantity and quality of data that the

regime's intelligence and security services collect from Instagram cannot be gained (or would not be as accurate) by an alternative method (Khalaji, 2022). The significant aspect of this surveillance and propaganda activity lies in its direct impact on public opinion. By surveilling Instagram and other platforms, the regime manipulates narratives, shapes perceptions, and promotes its agenda among younger generations and a broader audience. Understanding the extent of this surveillance is crucial in assessing the information landscape and the challenges faced by activists in countering regime propaganda and promoting their own messages within digital spaces.

In addition to surveillance and propaganda, the regime also employed internet and service disruptions and blockages to limit communication among activists and access to information. The Washington Post conducted an analysis of internet data in Iran and found that traffic patterns showed a cyclical nature to daily internet disruptions and blackouts after September 21, 2022, when the protests for the Woman Life Freedom movement began to gain momentum. The Post found that the Internet blackouts began “every afternoon around 4 p.m. local time — the end of the Iranian workday, when most protests begin — and returning to normal levels after midnight” (Sohyun Lee, 2022). Instagram and WhatsApp were also shut down on September 21, and the restrictions coincided with the sudden decreases in visual evidence of brutalities during protests coming out of Iran (NetBlocks, 2022).

Highlighting the impact of severe internet control and manipulation, The Washington Post also tracked protest videos from a Telegram account that is widely used by Iranians, revealing a sharp decline in posts during periods of increased disruptions caused by the regime. Telegram is very widely used by Iranians living in and outside of the country and is one of the primary ways that they receive and share their news (Al-Rawi, 2021). The count revealed the

direct impact of the severe controlling and manipulation of internet connectivity, with the number of posts from Telegram dropping from approximately 80 new clips on September 21, 2022, to just 40 clips one day after on September 22. The immensely popular Instagram account, 1500 Tasvir, which has over 2 million followers and regularly posts about the protests and movement in Iran, told The Post that during the first few days of the Woman Life Freedom protests, the account received more than 3,000 videos per day. However, after the increase in Internet disruptions, that number dramatically dropped to only 100 to 200 videos per day (Sohyun Lee, 2022).

Both Iranians and the Islamic regime unequivocally recognize the profound and pivotal significance of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, as essential tools for disseminating information and galvanizing support. As Iranian Instagram users understand the censoring and controlling measures enacted by the regime, they find ways to navigate these obstacles by using VPNs and encrypted digital platforms. The regime has fomented a situation where they are exploiting two major Iranian demographics, influencers and activists, by controlling, surveilling, censoring, and even imprisoning them based on the content they post on Instagram.

G. Analysis of Practices that Support Successful Revolutions: Affect

Passion and empathy are the driving forces of change and more largely, the making of a revolution. Affect is a crucial variable that sheds light on both the emotional and physical experiences driving collective mobilization in social movements. I place focus in this MRP on how emotions shape group dynamics, particularly among Iranian activists. Following this lens, I sought out instances on Instagram of anger, sadness, disappointment, and guilt that were posted

and reposted. I then chose four key examples to include examples within this MRP that demonstrates these patterns effectively. By examining the affective aspects of the content, it becomes possible to discover the extent to which it resonated with the emotions, aspirations, and

concerns of the Iranian public, thereby mobilizing and fuelling support for the movement.

Affect played an intentional and crucial role throughout the Woman Life Freedom movement that made it possible to gain the traction and momentum that it did and its peak. Local digital activists were consistently posting images and videos on Instagram of the violent protests and

brutalities of the morality police, while digital activists in the diaspora were consistent in reposting and resharing these posts, ensuring that their international circles and communities were also aware of the situation in Iran. Posts circulating throughout Instagram throughout the first 4 weeks of the movement were primarily either anger-driven or informative. Interestingly



enough, the anger of the digital activists was pointed in two very distinct directions. First and foremost, Iranian digital activists were angry at the Islamic regime and authoritarian leader. Posts outside of reporting on-the-ground protests primarily consisted of hatred and insults towards the regime and also had the ability to gain popularity or virality

because of the same shareability factors that marketers use to promote their posts. According to an Instagram marketer, content that is in line with what is trending, adds value to the conversation, thinks evergreen, tells a story, and is original is able to be widely shared and reposted (Gagliardi, 2023). Iranian digital activists seemed to follow this structure as opinion posts were unique in either a tone of anger or dark humour. For instance, the following Instagram posts are able to convey a level of anger and hatred for the regime without using words or reporting the on-the-ground protests. However, it is easily shareable since the message is clearly conveyed at first glance. For instance, the first image on page 20 resembles the current flag of Iran, however, instead of the “Allah” sign in the middle of the flag, there is an image of a devil’s spear with a shadow of the Ayatollah. Although these types of images are not new to Iranian internet users, they have gained mass popularity because of the increasingly horrific actions of the Islamic regime.

On the other hand, Iranians living in the diaspora also created and shared posts of anger towards international communities and their non-Iranian circles (p. 21). It seemed to be clear that Iranians living in the diaspora felt hopeless in the movement and felt that they were not



... able to contribute or fight for their country the way they wanted to. This type of message has been protested in the past in Middle Eastern movements, where activists will argue that attention to their causes does not gain nearly as much care or attention as movements in Western or European countries. Essentially, all that could

be done by an average Iranian living abroad was to post and re-share the events of Iran while

making sure the international community is informed about Iran's state as well. The need for public awareness became extremely critical as the authoritarian regime began killing and executing protesters, and many have debated could have been avoided with international



intervention (Tizhoosh, 2022). Thus, many Iranians living in the diaspora felt that the silence of their friends or community meant that they lacked care and interest or that they were against them as freedom fighters. Posts similar to the Instagram screenshots (p. 21) were trending in popularity as the situation in Iran became more violent and terrorizing while no international interference or tangible support was happening. As innocent men and women were being murdered and executed, most of whom were young and given sham trials (Amnesty International),

Iranians in the diaspora felt hopeless and angry, finding both the authoritarian regime and international communities at fault.

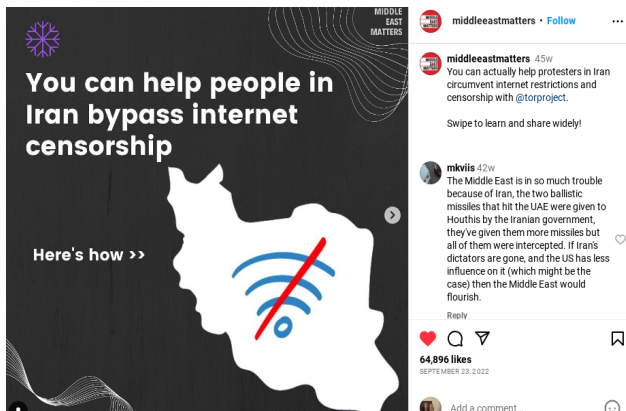
It is clear that during the beginning of the Woman Life Freedom protests, the high stakes and the intense emotions being felt by all Iranians were conveyed through the trends in the digital activism posts. However, the driving force of the movement during the first few weeks was reports of on-the-ground protests rather than anger-driven posts aimed at either the regime or international communities. As Jasper argues, the anger alone is insufficient to sustain a movement (46), which can be seen as the preceding trend of posts consisting mostly of informative posts that shared how to help and support Iranian communities. By using Instagram

to share ways to help Iranian activists, either emotionally or physically, activists are able to employ both power and agency to circumvent the censorship and restrictions of the regime to support activists in need. As seen in the Instagram posts attached (p. 22), members of the diaspora and international community created posts outlining how to aid in further mobilising the

movement and how to help people in Iran bypass internet censorship in their activism.

Disseminating strategies, either for emotional or practical aid, signifies a dynamic where both power and agency exist. Through Instagram, activists challenge the censorship restrictions imposed by the regime which enables the collective action of influence. This process highlights the feminist notion of empowerment as individuals and communities join together to counter the imposed restrictions. In this context, agency exists as a purposeful navigation and diversion between the regime's strict limitations.

Providing resources and guidance through



Instagram, and reposting and sharing these resources as well, clearly showcases agency by allowing activists to transcend physical and legal barriers and assert their capacity for creating change. As diaspora members and the international community unite with the creation, posting, and sharing of these resources, a transnational feminist perspective comes to light, revealing the interconnectedness of the struggles and shared commitment to undermining and deconstructing

oppressive systems. The two Instagram posts provided are just a few of the many examples that exemplify how Iranian activists engage both power and agency in the WLF movement. The posts encourage two key factors within the activists' strategies: 1) The posts illustrate the empowerment of activists as they aim to strengthen the momentum of the movement. 2) They serve as tools and gateways for the empowerment of individuals within Iran as they are being given the tools to successfully deviate from the regime's harsh restrictions and controls.

In a more logical and straightforward sense, the posts are literal resources in aiding Iranian activists to be able to fight for their cause freely and communicate with international communities. The first image includes a 4-step guide for non-Iranians to support Iranians fighting in the movement. By educating the international community, individuals are empowered to help support a movement, while Iranians are better equipped with support. The same can be applied to the second Instagram post, where proxies and web extensions are shared to help people in Iran bypass internet restrictions. By creating and sharing ways that Iranians can get around the harsh restrictions, the resource (and the act of reposting the resource) empowers Iranians to reclaim control of their digital environment. The post's call for volunteers also clearly depicts the power that operates within a collective agency. By calling for help and actively engaging individuals, the post reinforces the idea that collective action is a critical tool for activating change. Whether they are Iranian or not, this allows both activists and the general public to become active participants where they can contribute to dismantling the restrictions imposed upon people living in Iran. The post is a clear example of the relationship between power and agency since it empowers Iranians to navigate and counter the regime's internet restrictions while also enlisting a collective effort by the diaspora and international community to strengthen the movement.

H. Everyday Forms of Resistance

Everyday forms of resistance illuminate the impactful role of subtle and inconspicuous modes of contestation in revolutions including unveiling, publicly singing or dancing, and public displays of affection. These discreet and dispersed acts provide tools for marginalized groups to challenge dominant norms without direct confrontation (Bayat, 29). The data in this section includes a popular Instagram post of a woman walking unveiled in public and a couple kissing in the middle of a highly populated road. It is clear that everyday forms of resistance can manifest in various ways and also have the ability to create meaningful change, specifically in Iranian society. Throughout the Woman Life Freedom movement, the most popular and impactful forms of everyday resistance involve women actively choosing to be unveiled publicly and openly sharing their experiences on social media. Additionally, individuals are engaging in illegal acts such as public dancing and kissing in the streets, and posting the content to social media as well. While these actions may seem ordinary to individuals outside of Iran, this type of content is a powerful tool for both shifting public opinion and challenging hegemonic norms. By taking part and sharing their acts of everyday resistance, Iranian activists are able to reach wider audiences on a local and international level. The visibility and accessibility of social media platforms allow activists to challenge traditional beliefs and practices while also promoting discussions regarding freedom, gender equality, and personal autonomy. Additionally, widespread resistance-based social media content is able to create a chain reaction that inspires others to question the existing norms and contribute to a growing movement for change.

Unveiling in public is one of the most prominent ways that Iranian women engage in everyday forms of resistance. Although the law has not changed and government entities are still policing women who are unveiled or are dressed “improperly”, Iranians have shifted into a sense

of fearlessness, ready to fight to the death over their human rights and autonomy. In an interview with NPR, two anonymous Iranian women described their choice to be unveiled in public as in solidarity with the many young protesters who were killed when protesting against the regime. One of the women stated, “They have to get used to the fact that we women have our own freedoms... Just [like] the way that I respect the woman who wears the hijab and I don’t allow myself to [ask] her ‘Why aren’t you taking it off?’” (Tanis, 2023). These values are common among protesters, especially since many Iranian women are posting images and videos of themselves unveiled in public. However, to respect the anonymity of the activists, I will not be including images from individuals’ personal accounts and will only be analysing posts from public influencer pages that have already gained immense popularity and engagement. Thus, my analysis will be based on the images themselves and the impressions of the original posters and the audience.



In the image attached, an unveiled woman is seen walking next to a mullah, who is a teacher or scholar of Islam and can also refer to a leader of a mosque (Szczepanski, 2019). The image was posted by an Iranian digital activist with less than 100

thousand followers (Solhjoui, 2023), however, the image garnered over 500 thousand likes. The reason for the huge popularity of the image lies in the dichotomy between the unveiled woman

and the mullah. The woman represents the defiance of both traditional expectations and Islamic law while the mullah signifies religious and patriarchal authority.

Mullahs have been widely disrespected figures in Iran ever since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, especially in younger demographics. The Mullahs were led by Ayatollah Khomeini to take advantage of the enthusiasm for the 1979 revolution while also positioning themselves as the head of the new Islamic regime. After the 1979 revolution, Iran became a non-secular theocracy where religious laws took precedence over human rights. Various crackdowns were implemented, executing progressives, revolutionaries, lawyers, liberal women, and secular teachers (McBride, 2019). Thus, the Islamic regime and its varying leaders were regarded as hateful and intolerant entities that were widely disliked by the Iranian public. Mullahs are some of the public's first point of contact with the Islamic laws in Iran, as they can be found in mosques and almost all ceremonies and gatherings, like weddings, funerals, and religious holidays (Price, 2009). Therefore, the animosity towards Mullahs that many Iranians have is not a distant sentiment, but rather a response to the close proximity and extensive involvement Mullahs have with the Iranian public. Hence, the Instagram post sends a clear message that Mullahs no longer have influence and control over the Iranian people, especially young women.

If the image above had been taken even one week before the emergence of the Woman Life Freedom protests, the circumstances and outcome of the situation would have been drastically different for several reasons. 1) The woman in the photo would most likely be arrested for being unveiled in public. 2) The Mullah would not be simply walking past the woman, and would most likely be scolding or disciplining her regarding her violation of the Islamic dress code. 3) The image would not have been posted and would not have gained the

mass amount of popularity, as surveillance is a major issue in Iran, even before the resistance, and would risk the safety of the woman and original poster. Therefore, by posting this powerful image, the young woman and poster are not only successfully spreading awareness of the Woman Life Freedom movement and its pursuit of human rights, but also playing a role in transforming Iranian public opinion in favour of Iranian activists fighting for a secular and democratic government. They are promoting the normalisation of being unveiled in public spaces, regardless of the presence of governmental or authoritative figures. This image also proves to the Iranian public that there is no longer reason to be afraid of these authoritative figures as they are seemingly unable to police every single person who chooses to disobey Islamic law. Thus, the idea of collective resistance plays a huge role in supporting Iranians to act and dress how they please knowing that their fellow countrymen are also taking part in the brave pursuit of resisting Islamic authorities.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting that the caption of the image introduces an intriguing concept. The caption translates to “This is not a record of tomorrow, it is today itself” (Solhjoui, 2022) and holds significant meaning and adds to the depth of the image. The original poster seems to want to remind the audience that autonomy and agency are not out of reach for Iranian people. The days of longing for human rights are over and it is time for Iranians to take what is rightfully theirs. The caption also suggests that the Woman Life Freedom movement is not solely based on envisioning change for the future, but rather actively engaging in everyday forms of resistance and breaking barriers in the present. Although being unveiled in public may seem like an inconsequential action to international audiences, this form of everyday resistance carries immense significance in the Woman Life Freedom movement and demonstrates to Iranians that through their activism, visible change is already occurring.

As mentioned earlier in my paper, public displays of affection are considered illegal and are punishable by law under the authoritarian regime. Many protesters, specifically Iranian youth, have made use of everyday forms of resistance by documenting moments of public



displays of affection and posting them online. One particular image has been widespread and reposted by several popular Instagram accounts, including celebrities like the Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani. The image to the left is a screenshot from a video that

Farahani posted to her Instagram account in 2022 (link: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhvfyt9>). The thumbnail and first image from the video is the image of two young Iranians sharing a kiss in the middle of a busy street in Shiraz, Iran. As Bayat found in his research, although this form of everyday resistance, it does not necessarily mean it is a quiet or invisible action (Lilja, 43). Instead, this form of everyday resistance aims to be seen by everyone in the public and digital space. Although kissing and public displays of affection are the norm in Western countries, these types of actions are hugely frowned upon and not seen often in Iran. Therefore, by positioning themselves in the middle of a busy road in front of a line of traffic, these two individuals emphasize the point that their act of everyday resistance is not harmful, dangerous, or offensive. It is merely a symbol of affection between two individuals that more largely symbolizes the desire for personal freedoms and autonomy, the rejection of oppressive societal standards, and the demand for more liberal and inclusive cultural norms.

The choice to kiss on a busy road with heavy traffic also lies in the intentional disruption of a public space and the defiance of social norms in a highly visible manner. By choosing to kiss someone in a prominent and congested location, the act of kissing becomes impossible to ignore. This everyday form of resistance has the ability to draw the attention of commuters and bystanders which creates a spectacle that challenges the expected behaviours of the public realm. The presence of many cars in a busy environment further exemplifies the impact of the form of resistance, as it intentionally disrupts the flow of regular activities and forces the public to confront the act of kissing. Additionally, kissing in a busy environment is also symbolic of reclaiming public spaces for the use of personal expression and emotional connection. As the two individuals engage in a kiss surrounded by the bustling streets, they are making a statement regarding their right to both occupy and shape the public space according to their own desires and expressions of love. Although kissing in public is seen as immoral and taboo under Islamic rulings, the two individuals are able to divert from the societal norms and resist the regime in a way that is not only harmless but loving and affectionate.

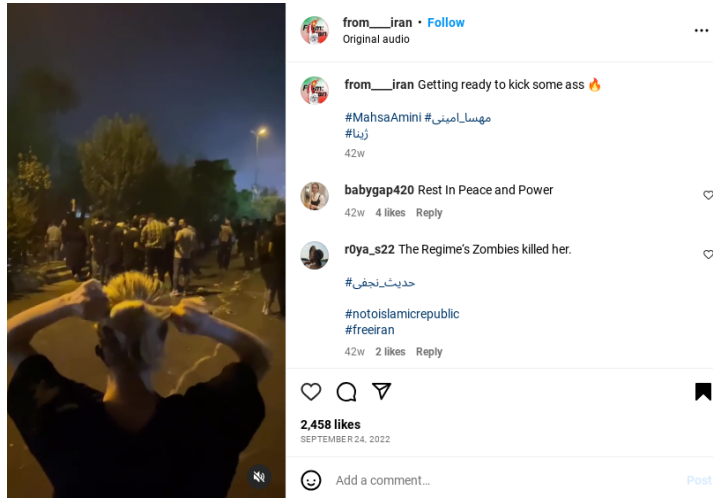
I. The Role of Street Protests

On-the-ground street protests are instrumental in driving digital activism and fostering revolutionary change. These protests possess the remarkable ability to use social media to amplify awareness and also project movement objectives. Bayat's (2003) analysis highlights Middle Eastern street protests as intricate reflections of public sentiment, while also shaping and shifting public opinions and perceptions. To explore this, I examine viral Instagram posts by Iranian activists that captured emotionally charged and impactful moments from the heights of the street protests in Iran. These posts, such as a young girl tying her hair to fight to the death in

a protest and families being tear-gassed for waiting for their imprisoned loved ones, garnered attention from both international media and Iranians formerly supportive of the regime. This is tangible proof of the impacts that the collaborations between on-the-ground street protests and social media posting can have.

The Islamic regime is highly eager to limit the dissemination of any evidence showcasing the violent street protests on international and social media platforms. Thus, Iranian activists are forced to be extremely strategic when deciding how to portray and disseminate their movement in order to deflect from the controls and censorship measures of the authorities. Simultaneously, they seek to influence supporters of the regime and sway their opinions from being in favour of the regime to becoming opponents of the regime. Similar to Bayat's findings, it seems that Iranian activists have employed the use of emotional sentiment to appeal to the public. Many of the social media posts regarding the Woman Life Freedom protests are extremely emotional, showcasing uncensored violence such as beatings and even death. Additionally, many digital activists post about the people who have been killed in the protests, turning their names into popular hashtags with thousands of uses. These include #HadisNajafi which has more than 84,000 posts and #NikaShakarami which currently has more than 175,000 posts (Instagram, 2023). By turning the names of murdered activists into popular hashtags, Iranian activists strive to ensure that the public never forgets these brave individuals. They are determined to remind activists that the pursuit of freedom and democracy is a cause worth fighting for, considering the significant sacrifices made by, primarily, Iranian youth who have lost their lives in this movement while also revealing the regime as being barbaric and cruel.

The image below is a screenshot from a video of a young woman tying her hair, ready to fight in a brutal street protest in Karaj, Iran (link: <https://tinyurl.com/mrxya2s4>). The video was



reposted on multiple platforms, garnering thousands of views as many people called her a “badass” and fearless hero. Days after the video was posted, Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist and activist, reported that the young woman in the video was shot and killed by six bullets by the Islamic regime’s security

forces. Her name was Hadis Najafi and she became a symbol of both tragedy and defiance in the Woman Life Freedom movement (IranWire, 2022).

The power of the video, and what one can assume is also the reason for the video’s popularity, lies in the symbolic act of a young woman tying her hair and preparing for battle. As Hadis ties her hair, she is expressing her preparedness and determination. The protests had been ongoing for a week up to the point of the video, meaning that Hadis knew of the dangers and risks that would occur if she entered the deadly protest. While Hadis could have chosen to avoid the dangers in front of her and stay on the side of caution, she courageously chose to join her fellow compatriots and activists in the fight for freedom and democracy, knowing that it could cost her her life. Hadis’ bravery not only lies in her determination but also in her unveiledness as a form of defiance, since the regime criminalizes unveiled women.

Power and agency are both highly present in the video of Hadis. During the peak of the Woman Life Freedom protests, many Iranians cut their hair as a sign of unity for all of those who were murdered by the regime. Cutting one’s hair has strong historical roots in Persian culture and is also part of the Iranian mourning ritual. A Persian poem dated from 1,000 years ago describes

the death of a hero, whose wife and friends cut their hair as a sign of mourning and respect (Delap, 2022). Iranian women face the risk of criminalization and police brutality if they reveal their publicly, making hair a powerful symbol of defiance and rebellion, especially in the WLF movement. Paradoxically, despite the risks that are involved, Iranian women also use their hair as a tool for acts of resistance, expressing their refusal to conform to cultural norms and expectations. Lastly, hair also becomes a channel for mourning and sorrow, allowing people to join in a collective grief while serving as a testament to the sacrifices made in the pursuit of freedom and democracy. Hadis showed bravery as she unveiled herself in public and proceeded to show heroism when fighting bullets. Therefore, one could argue that the video of Hadis is not only influential because of her determination but also due to the several meanings and purposes Iranians hold with the representation of hair. Hadis uses her autonomy and agency to present herself the way she pleases, prepares herself for battle, and is ultimately murdered in her struggle for freedom.

While the viral video of Hadis creates deep and personal emotions among Iranians, the Woman Life Freedom activists have also shared content that urges the international community to help and support Iranians. Many activists have opted to post extremely violent content regardless of Instagram's censorship measures in order to show the international community the violence and brutality that Iranians are facing. The screenshot below is an Instagram post



captioned, “They are shooting tear grenades at people and worried families [who are waiting] in front of a prison” (2023). The image

shows a tear gas bomb released onto a group of people, whom the original poster claims are the families of prisoners waiting for their loved ones outside of a jail. The dark setting of the photo in contrast with the white smoke from the tear gas almost resembles an image of a war zone. The man walking away from the tear gas with his shoulders down, as if in defeat, encapsulates the horrors that the Iranian people are enduring just to simply be with their loved ones. The cruelty and violence of the regime are effectively shown in this post since it can capture the attention and anger of international audiences who could support Iranians in igniting change. Posting this type of violent content is critical, as the primary goal of the movement is to report the true terrors and brutalities occurring in Iran so that powerful government entities worldwide can be aware of the situation and hopefully intervene.

The Islamic regime depends on Iranians to not share the horrors and brutalities of the protests, which is why authorities created mobile network blocks from 4 PM to midnight during the peak of the protests (Höppner, 2022). Despite all these obstacles, Iranian activists consistently reported on the gruesome violence from the protests, which can serve several strategic purposes for activists. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, posting violent content from the protests is able to raise awareness for the movement, garnering international support. Secondly, as Bayat (2003) found in his research, on-the-ground street protests are able to create emotion and empathy which also aids in shifting the opinions of regime supporters. If regime supporters come across video evidence showing their government, which they trust and follow, inflicting harm on its citizens, it may prompt them to question the authority they believe in, at the very least. While state-sponsored media reports solely on the beliefs and ideologies of the authoritarian regime (BBC, 2011), citizen journalists play an essential role in informing the public of the truth and oftentimes acting as an alternative source to media from Iran (Pajooh,

2023). Finally, exposing the violence and brutalities emerging from the WLF protests is able to put immense pressure on authority figures. As visual evidence of the horrific acts committed by the Iranian Guard Corps (beating, gun violence, rape, and murder) becomes widespread across international media platforms, activists are able to increase their demands for authorities to end their oppressive and inhuman actions. By circulating these images and videos, the regime is forced to be held accountable for its violence, murder, and terrorism against the Iranian people at the international level. There have been a few successes in this realm, as the United Nations voted in November 2022 to establish a fact-finding mission in order to investigate the abuses in Iran's handling of anti-government protests (Motamedi, 2022).

J. Sonic Narratives

Sonic narratives highlight an integral role in shaping and creating revolutions, encompassing music and media and serving as reflective mediums of a movement's ideals. Belkind (2020) emphasizes music's function in cultural autonomy and resistance against conflict. She uses symbolism and social justice as variables in her discourse analysis (165), which I will also be employing alongside concepts from feminist discourse analysis such as agency, empowerment, and disempowerment.

The concept of agency being placed in the care of the listeners rather than the oppressor or occupier is prominent when investigating the music that was released during the Woman Life Freedom movement. The song that is widely seen to define the movement as a whole is a song by Shervin Hajipour titled "Baraye", which translates to "For". The reason for its immense popularity and why it is widely seen as the quintessential song of the movement is that the lyrics of the song are entirely from Tweets that were posted by Iranians regarding their reasons for

protesting. A popular trend had been circulating throughout Twitter where Iranian activists would list why and for what sake they were protesting. As mentioned on page 5, this movement is the expression of pent-up and long-building anger and protestors in the movement are fighting for a myriad of reasons. When Hajipour posted the song to social media on September 28, roughly two weeks after the protests had begun, the song quickly received more than 40 million views within one day. The Islamic regime responded by arresting Hajipour and the video was then removed from his Instagram page (Parvini and Khazani, 2022). When examining Hajipour's song, it is critical to analyse the lyrics as they are quite literally a reflection of the voices of the Iranian people and also provide social and historical context to the movement. The popularity and use of the song within the movement will be examined to determine the impact of Hajipour's work in incorporating Tweets from Iranian digital activists into his music.

The first verse of the song sets a clear and impactful tone for what the Woman Life Freedom movement stands for, as both the lack of agency and disempowerment are reflected in the lyrics. The song begins with the lyrics, "Because of dancing in the street / Because of fear while kissing / Because of my sister, your sister, our sisters / Because of changing rotten minds" (Hajipour, 2022). While each line of the song is a Tweet from different Iranian activists, it is noteworthy that these four tweets are the first verse of the song. Both lack of agency and disempowerment are quickly evident within the first line of the song. "Because of dancing in the streets" is a simple luxury that people in Iran are not able to enjoy. Even though dancing itself is not defined as a crime in Iran's penal code, the Iranian constitution states that an "indecent" act in public is a crime, thus dancing in public could be deemed as indecent and be punished (BBC, 2018). Dance is a form of self-expression and the communication of emotion (Britannica, n.d.), which when suppressed by a government entity, can feel extremely limiting and oppressive. This

line is able to set a clear tone for the song as a message that the Iranian people lack agency and are deprived of expressing joy and genuine emotions. The restrictions on the bodies of Iranians are not only limited to how they dress and cover themselves but it also applies to how they move and where they move. Dancing in the privacy of one's home is not illegal, however, dancing in public where one can be seen is considered to be immoral. The regime criminalizes and fears individuals dancing and expressing their emotions to the public and would rather shame and label people as being unlawful. Through further analysis of the opening line, it is evident that the Iranian people are fighting for more than regime change. They are fighting for basic human rights that they have been denied for decades, including agency and autonomy over their own bodies.

The second line of the song, "Because of fear while kissing" (Hajipour, 2022), also clearly exemplifies the ways in which the Islamic regime controls both the bodies and actions of the Iranian public. According to Article 637 in the Islamic Penal Code of Iran, "if a man and a woman who are not married to each other become engaged in an illicit sexual relation other than sexual intercourse — such as kissing — ...they will be sentenced to [a] punishment of up to 99 lashes" (Tavassolian, 2016). Individual rights and personal freedoms are, again, impeded under the authoritarian regime, restricting people's abilities to express their love and emotions freely and publicly. The current leader of the Islamic regime, Ali Khamenei, claims "democracy is one of the achievements of the Islamic Revolution" (IranWire, 2021). Yet, the regime crosses several boundaries by imposing such restrictions on Iranian people, assuming an unnecessary level of control over the lives and personal choices of its citizens. These laws and restrictions are inhumane and unjust, completely rejecting principles of autonomy and self-expression, both of which are integral to a democratic society.

Within the first verse of the song, it is evident to any Iranian listener that these lyrics are not subjective or the opinion of the songwriter. These lyrics provide factual evidence of existing laws that are currently enforced under the Islamic regime. The song is able to effectively convey a message, even to Iranians who are pro-Islamic regime and against the WLF movement, that there is an undisputed problem that Iran is facing. Each verse of the song covers a different topic, such as environmental, economic, social, and political issues. The fifth verse of the song states, “Because of this forced paradise / Because of the imprisoned elites / Because of Afghan kids / Because of all the never-ending ‘because ofs’” (Hajipour, 2022). These lyrics have the power to shape and shift public opinion by appealing to a mass general audience, rather than solely supporters of the Woman Life Freedom movement.

When investigating whether social media posts from the Woman Life Freedom movement are able to create shifts in public opinion, it is critical to examine how the public interacts with the posts. Hajipour’s song is widely thought of as a voice for all Iranians and creates elevated self-awareness within Iranian society. Every demographic is represented in the song and speaks on behalf of the people, rather than solely the movement. In his song, Hajipour addresses those who are impoverished, struggling with mental illness, minorities, children, animals, and anyone who is living under the authoritarian rule of the regime. The inclusive nature of the song reminds Iranians and general listeners that, unfortunately, the problem with Iran does not only lie in strict morality laws but also in the governance and rules of the regime as well. For instance, in the third verse of the song, Hajipour writes “Because of air pollution / Because of Vali Asr Avenue and its dying trees / Because of an Asiatic cheetah (Pirouz) that may go extinct / Because of innocent, outlawed dogs” (2022). Clearly, the problem in Iran is not

limited to strict dress codes and compulsory education, it extends to the authoritarian regime's lack of concern when supporting its citizens and the environment that they inhabit.

If Hajipour's song solely described political and socio-cultural issues in Iran, it would be easy for regime supporters to refute and misinterpret the claims that Hajipour makes in the song. However, the deteriorating environmental condition in Iran is an undisputed and visibly apparent reality for everyone residing in the country. Currently, air pollution, water shortages and rising temperatures, as well as the mismanagement and lack of enforcement of existing environmental regulations all contribute to the environmental crisis in Iran (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri, 2021). Therefore, by addressing Iran's environmental crisis, Hajipour effectively communicates with supporters of the regime and exhibits that the problem is not rooted in differing beliefs of religion, but rather in the Iranian government's profound negligence and mismanagement that impacts all individuals, including its own supporters.

These factors all contribute to the mass popularity of Hajipour's song. Currently, the song has over three million views across Hajipour's official YouTube channel (2023) and millions of views across different Instagram accounts. He originally posted the song to his Instagram on September 27, 2022, which garnered more than 40 million views in less than 48 hours before it was removed from the platform (Radio Farda, 2022). Hajipour was arrested on September 29, 2022, days after he released his song. According to Hajipour's sister and also reverified by Human Rights Watch, the Iranian Intelligence Services in Mazandaran province informed Hajipour's parents of his arrest on October 1st. Hajipour was released on bail on October 4, but sources close to the singer believed that he was forced to remove the song by Iranian authorities when he was arrested. Since then, the song has been registered as having been written by someone else, which allows copyright infringement complaints to be made by Hajipour, as

forced by the regime. As a result, the song has been removed from several platforms where it was initially uploaded. Yet, despite these removals, the song has already been widely shared and users continue to upload it on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok (Swash, 2022).

In 2023, the Recording Academy of the United States announced the creation of the Best Song for Social Change Special Merit Award and 110,000 submissions were made for Hajipour's song "Baraye". Hajipour received the award at the 2023 Grammys, becoming the first-ever Iranian to win a Grammy (2023). The award signified to all Iranians that the Woman Life Freedom movement is gaining rapid attention from international audiences and that the movement is worth continuing to fight for. Through the recognition and praise that Hajipour's song received, it is apparent that the importance of the movement having a song or anthem lies in its ability to serve as a unifying and mobilising force for the movement and its supporters. While the song's lyrics described a disempowered community with a lack of agency, the song's popularity was able to retroactively create a strong sense of community amongst Iranians and empower activists through the collective action of stating what activists are fighting for. "Baraye" created emotional resonance and cultural expression for a new generation of Iranians, disseminated awareness, mobilized and energized supporters, and also created a sense of history. The song is a legacy of the movement for several generations to come and is an inspiration for future activism due to its inclusive nature. Hajipour's song is the embodiment of a growing international community of support that unites diverse voices, which encourages activists to continue to fight for their freedom and democracy.

K. Conclusion

The Woman Life Freedom movement has been able to create shifts in public opinions regarding the Islamic regime through several varying factors. Firstly, the sonic narratives created as a result of the movement are able to speak to all Iranians in an inclusive and accessible manner without being heavily focused on socio-political issues. As a result, Iranian listeners are able to connect and resonate with the song regardless of their positionalities. Secondly, Iranian activists can take part in everyday forms of resistance, where their actions are harmless and personal, oftentimes even simply expressions of love and joy. These behaviours prove to opposition groups that the Iranian public is simply fighting for human rights, peace, and democracy. Finally, on-the-ground street protests are used as fuel for digital activism, as capturing moments from both violent and heartfelt moments from the WLF protests can raise awareness, build empathy, and pressure the regime to be held accountable for their actions. This strategy also forces regime supporters to confront the visual evidence that the government they trust and support is brutal and harms its citizens. By employing feminist discourse analysis, I investigated how Iranian activists mainly use both power and agency (and lack thereof) to gain support for the movement while also resisting the oppressive regime's restraints.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the Woman Life Freedom movement and its use of various types of media, I have observed the potent impact of these intertwined forms of resistance. As the WLF movement continues to evolve and gain supporters, scholars and researchers must study the ever-changing dynamics and relationships of political activism in the MENA region. Due to limitations, I did not methodically track patterns in my research, however, I consistently found signs and evidence that the actions of activists seem to have made an impact on global audiences. I would urge future researchers to track the patterns of citizen journalists

and digital activists to further examine how they can build a strong followership and audience that effectively disseminates the messages of the movement. As an Iranian living in the diaspora, I hope I was able to play a small role in this movement and help my fellow compatriots become one step closer to freedom and democracy. My goal is that this MRP is a valuable addition to the existing literature and can guide activists to create digital strategies that can create meaningful and positive shifts in public opinion. Hopefully, Iranian activists will be able to implement these strategies to finally be able to live in a secular and democratic society that respects their human rights and allows them agency and autonomy.

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