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<u>Unveiling the Transformative Influence of Social Media in Amplifying Social
Movements, Driving Social Change, and Empowering Women: The case of
#womenlifefreedom in Iran</u>

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Abstract

Social media platforms have emerged as vital tools for activism, offering individuals the ability to express widely shared grievances, mobilise resources, and forge collective identities, all contributing to social change. However, given the relatively recent emergence of social media, research in this field is still in its early stages, and there remain major disagreements regarding social media's precise role. Furthermore, despite indications of the empowering role of social media, particularly for women who have historically encountered social, cultural, and legal barriers, there remains a notable lack of gendered analysis in this area of research. Consequently, by drawing on New Social Movement (NSM) theories and adopting a multidimensional perspective on empowerment, this study explores social media's role in facilitating social movements and driving societal transformation within the context of Iran. Additionally, as this movement appears to be women-led, it seeks to investigate the involvement of Iranian women in the protests and how these engagements can contribute to their empowerment. To address these, this study adopts a qualitative method approach, predominantly focusing on visual content analysis of Instagram posts under the hashtag #womenlifefreedom. The findings indicate that the affordances of social media, specifically Instagram, has significantly enabled Iranian women's empowerment in three key areas: amplification of voices, raising consciousness, and fostering identity formation.

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Abbreviations

NSM	New Social Movements
MSF	My Stealthy Freedom
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Introduction

"Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world". In what has been deemed the age of 'digitisation', this quote by Dolores Huerta has seemingly never been truer. The emergence of social media platforms has revolutionised how people connect, share information, and engage in public discourse, opening up new possibilities for activism and making it potentially accessible to more people than ever before (Brown, 2020). While initially envisaged as a means of personal communication and entertainment, social media has increasingly been recognised as a powerful tool for social change (Castells, 2015; Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). Particularly for women, who have historically faced social, cultural, and legal barriers, social media presents an unprecedented opportunity to amplify their voices and promote gender equality. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that active participation in social media platforms carries inherent risks, particularly in authoritarian regimes that employ extensive surveillance measures to monitor online activities closely (Poell, 2014). Although still relatively new, in recent years, more studies have examined the role of digital technologies as a virtual space for activism. This trend arguably began with the Arab Spring in 2010, which many consider a turning point for social movements due to its role in facilitating communication and interaction among protesters (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). Since then, most of the research exploring the impact of social media and social movements has predominantly concentrated on text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter, leaving limited scope for investigations into visually-based platforms such as Instagram (Highfield and Leaver (2016). Moreover, there have been very few attempts at analysing the influence of social media on social change in regions such as Iran, which fall outside the conventional Western context. As such, this thesis seeks to contribute to the continuously expanding field of research by offering insights into the transformative potential of social media as a facilitator for social movements within the Iranian context. In addition it aims to emphasise its ability to enable empowerment of Iranian women specifically. Consequently, the following question was devised to construct the research's foundation and address its objectives: *What is social media's role in facilitating social movements leading to social change, namely in terms of facilitating women empowerment, and women-led movements?* Within this the questions are two-fold. The first aims to examine the strategies used on visual social media platforms such as Instagram, whilst the second assesses how new social media technologies are affecting the situation for women in Iran.

Research design and methods

A qualitative approach was employed to address these questions, emphasising qualitative elements by examining Instagram posts from the hashtag #womenlifefreedom. Instagram was selected as the platform analysis for several reasons. One reason concerns the gap in research for analysis on visual based social media platforms. As existing literature tends to concentrate more on text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter, this thesis chose to examine alternative, more visually based platforms such as Instagram. Perhaps a more significant reason is the Iranian context, where several social media platforms are prohibited, making Instagram one of the few exceptions that is accessible and widely used (Dagres, 2021). A closer examination of these reasons will be further provided in Chapter Five. Furthermore, the #womenlifefreedom hashtag was deliberately selected due to its broad recognition and the significant role its slogan plays in driving the campaign forward. Data for this study was collected using Phantom, an application that enables media to be searched by hashtag and downloaded in bulk. By examining the role of social media in ongoing protests, this study offers an informed analysis for a limited lapse of time, not covering or tracing the whole trajectory of a social change movement. As such, the time scale of data set spanned a two-month period between the 23rd April – 23rd June. Although it would have been ideal to establish a longer timeframe concerning the initial stages of the protests, it was not possible to access historical data due to the revised privacy policy and the limitations of the scraping tools used. Nonetheless, given that the protests are still ongoing, any research conducted on this topic can contribute valuable insights into the role of social media for women in Iran. The original dataset consisted of 500 posts associated with the hashtag #womenlifefreedom. However, after revision, the final dataset used for analysis comprised 346 posts. Following this, each post was categorised into three main themes using the categorisation framework developed by Benford and Snow (2000), encompassing diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing tasks Each post was organised into its appropriate category based on the image it portrayed and its relevance to the category. Images in the form of texts in languages other than English relied on Google Translate. In addition, post captions were drawn upon for further context and clarification, again with Google Translate used to facilitate comprehension. Once organised into one of the three main categories, a qualitative method approach was conducted in the data analysis, primarily drawing on visual content analysis.

Limitations of study

A comprehensive examination of social media's role in the ongoing protests is outside the scope of this study, primarily due to limitations in data collection accessibility. Per policy guidelines, Phantom could only scrape the most recent Instagram data, resulting in the inability to obtain data pertaining to the initial phases of the protests. Furthermore, another potential issue arises from language barriers. Since I am only proficient in English, analysing posts containing non-English text necessitated reliance on Google Translate. While Google Translate serves as a valuable translation tool, it does not replicate the fluency and nuances of a native speaker, thereby introducing a limitation to the study.

In addition, before we begin, it is essential to note that social movement theories have been primarily developed based on models from Western contexts. Even new social movement theories, which are this paper's central focus, were all developed in non-Muslim, non-authoritarian contexts such as the case presented in this paper. As such, this paper draws on some key points within these theories but shall later apply them to the appropriate context.

The rationale for undertaking the study

The main reason for choosing this topic is personal interest. In September 2022, my personal Instagram feed became inundated with photographs capturing protests and Iranian women courageously asserting their rights. The emergence of this came from the heart-breaking passing of Mahsi Amini. At the age of 22, coincidentally the same as mine, she tragically lost her life for the simple act of showing her hair. Ozkazanc-Pan (2018) emphasises the ethical responsibility of individuals in positions of power and privilege within academia to advocate for feminist research actively. Consequently, considering the liberties I enjoy and my active engagement with social media, I became intrigued by the potential of social media to foster social movements and contribute to women's empowerment.

Outline of thesis

The overall structure of this thesis takes the form of eight chapters. The first two chapters provide an understanding of key elements related to the topic. Chapter One begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research and examines the key characteristics of new social movements outlined by Scholl (2014), including culture and meaning; action, subjectivity, and experience; autonomy versus representation; and (collective) identity. Following this, in Chapter Two, Feminism and Empowerment theory are discussed. Specifically, central debates surrounding empowerment theory are examined to establish a comprehensive understanding, emphasising the importance of an intersectional feminist perspective. The Third Chapter situates social movements and women's empowerment within social media. In doing so, communication, mobilisation, and identity formation are identified as the primary domains where social media can be utilised. At the same time, the strengths and limitations associated with its application are also outlined. Chapter Four offers an in-depth exploration of the Iranian context, specifically delving into the status of women and examining previous instances of women's resistance against the regime through the utilisation of social media. Chapter Five presents the methodology employed in this study, providing a complete overview of the research approach and methods utilised. Following this, Chapter Six delineates the findings pertaining to the framework developed by Benford and Snow (2000), which encompasses diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing tasks. To advance the findings, the final chapter, Chapter Seven subsequently elaborates on the key elements and synthesises the literature from preceding chapters to address the research questions. Finally concluding by providing a comprehensive summary and overview of the study, encapsulating its key findings and insights.

Chapter One: Social Movements in the Age of Digitisation

The Network Society

The last decade has been labelled as the age of digitisation (Lumineau, Schilke and Wang, 2022). Developed by Castells (2010) in his influential work "The Rise of the Network Society", the 'Network Society' accurately represents the current era in human history permitted by the rapid development of digital technologies and their integration into various aspects of our society. Castells (2010, p.156) considers the internet as not just a tool for organisation and activism but also a "new form of social interaction, mobilisation, and decision-making", thus making it the "agora of the movement". Informal communication methods are the primary means of communication in the network society. The concept of informal interactions pertains to how individuals engage with the network society in their daily lives. These interactions, facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as social media, are pervasive across various domains and play a significant role in mobilising collective action within social movements. Understanding the current trajectory and sustainability of social movements, especially those leveraging social media, hinges on situating social movements within the current era of the "Network Society".

Changing nature of social movements

Social movements play a crucial role in effecting social change globally; therefore, examining them is an integral aspect of this thesis. The term "social movements" embodies various concepts that have been analysed and explained to understand how they are formed. Traditional theories of social movements emerged during the 19th and early 20th centuries, influenced by Marxist and socialist perspectives, and focused primarily on class-based activities and the struggle for economic redistribution. These theories have provided valuable insights into social movements' dynamics, motivations, and strategies, particularly those centred around class-based struggles (Kavada, 2003). However, in contemporary society, where technology is constantly evolving, and people are more interconnected than ever, scholars have advocated for the need to rethink social movements theories to be more in touch with modern times (Kavada, 2003). This has led to a resurgence of new theories,

under the term 'New Social Movements' (NSMs), that attempt to understand better the complex dynamics that underlie social movements and how they impact our society. Unlike traditional theories, this new approach to social movements examines the significance of culture, meanings, collective identity, and social networks in understanding why movements occur (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). To do so, NSMs emphasise alternative forms of selfhood and identity to transform society through cultural changes rather than specific legislation (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). These new theories consist of multiple concepts contributing to the overall premise and, thus, per Buechler's (1995) suggestion, are considered in the plural.

<u>Understanding NSMs</u>

Although Buechler (1995) emphasises the existence of numerous theories, commonalities exist, with Scholl (2014) identifying four main interconnecting themes that encompass the critical characteristics of NSM theories: 'Culture and Meaning', 'Action, Subjectivity and Experience', 'Autonomy Versus Representation' and '(collective) Identity'. To fully understand what NSM entail, these themes shall be examined in the following section with reference to several NSM theorists.

<u>Culture and Meaning</u>

The first commonality highlighted by Scholl (2014) emphasises culture and meaning. Diverging from the conventional focus on material and economic factors, scholars studying NSMs emphasise the direct efforts of social movements to influence and transform societies, thereby enriching our understanding of the political realm through an analysis of cultural change (Castells, 2010; Melucci, 1985; Tarrow, 1989; Touraine, 1985). According to leading NSMs theorist Alberto Melucci (1980), NSMs arise from cultural factors such as the reproduction of social relations, symbols, and identities in everyday life. Melucci (1980) characterises NSMs as entities that challenge established codes and serve as agents of cultural change. They not only champion transformative goals but also exemplify those goals through their own behaviours and actions, thereby reshaping the understanding and significance of social action for the entire society. Similarly, Johnston and Klandermans (1995) also highlight the importance of culture for NSMs by asserting that the expression of cultural knowledge can reveal discrepancies, incongruities, and contradictions within the prevailing culture. This, in turn, can give rise to the

emergence of alternative symbols, values, languages, and perspectives, which have the potential to challenge the existing norms and inspire transformative change.

Action, Subjectivity and Experience

The second interrelated theme Scholl (2014) underscores refers to action, subjectivity, and experience. In the case of the first element, most social movements rely on the power of collective action as a significant driver of mobilisation and, as a result, social change (Smith González and Frigolett, 2021). Drawing on the point highlighted by Melucci (1985) further, culture forms the bases for collective action within NSMs. He emphasises the significance of subjective experiences and shared meanings that motivate individuals to engage in collective action. He posits that NSMs embody a collective identity and sense of belonging, creating a shared understanding of the issues at hand and inspiring individuals to participate in collective endeavours. Consequently, for Melucci (1985), collective action is created through everyday small-group interactions by which individuals experiment with new cultural forms and develop collective identities. Regarding the type of action that NSMs entail, Melucci (1985) indicates their often fluid and flexible form, adapting to changing circumstances and employing various tactics and strategies. NSMs may employ overt forms of protest, such as demonstrations and rallies, and more subtle tactics, such as cultural expressions, symbolic actions, and alternative practices, to challenge and transform social relations. While Melucci's (1985) work offers crucial insights into the elements of collective action, the emergence of the "Network Society" (Castells, 2010) has led some to suggest that the term "collective action" no longer adequately captures the nature of mobilisation.

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012) utilising digital media provides an avenue for personalised collective action, which they refer to as "connective action." Sharing personalised content across various media networks plays a vital role in facilitating connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain that while both collective and connective actions involve collaborative efforts towards a shared goal, it is the self-organising and public-driven nature of connective action, made possible by the affordances of new media, that sets it apart from traditional organisation-centred collective action. Key to Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) notion of connective action revolves around the personalised sharing of content across various media networks. According to them, the personal nature of the shared content is what precisely drives its wide distribution across social networks, influencing both actions and content dissemination.

Scholl (2014) emphasises that comprehending the concept of action within NSM literature is challenging without considering subjectivity and lived experiences. According to Scholl (2014), scholars who adopt NSM approaches emphasise the central role of actors and their construction of meaning when analysing society. Their objective is to comprehend the multifaceted development of a vibrant society by understanding the motivations and significance attributed by actors who generate knowledge. Furthermore, Scholl (2014) notes that an example of this can be seen in the women's movement of the 1970s, in which consciousness-raising proved to be a powerful instrument in transforming private and personal issues into political ones. This enabled women to establish their own identities, free from the influence of a male-dominated culture. By promoting self-awareness and collective empowerment, they played a significant role in reshaping societal norms and crafting an alternative narrative to the one previously accepted.

Autonomy Versus Representation

As already mentioned, it is widely acknowledged that social movements typically arise when individuals' personal issues become public and require a collective action response (Kendall, 2010). This transition from private to public is particularly evident in NSM. Referring again to this private and public distinction, Melucci (1980) argues that cultural contestations by NSMs blur the boundary between the private and public spheres, creating a new space. According to Melucci (1980), this new political and public space goes beyond the conventional separation between the state and "civil society." It aims to promote the messages of social movements to be translated into political decision-making while allowing the movements to maintain their autonomy. Furthermore, this allows NSMs to maintain their autonomy by enabling them to preserve their unique identities, values, and objectives.

Regarding representation, Scholl (2014) states that NSM seek to redefine traditional forms of representation by promoting more inclusive and participatory models as they emphasise the importance of direct participation, grassroots organising, and collective decision-making processes. In addition, NSMs often emphasise the voices and perspectives of groups who have been historically excluded from formal channels of representation (Weldon, 2011).

Consequently, numerous scholars have recognised and commended the pluralistic nature of NSMs, highlighting their ability to bring together individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds who share

common values or goals (Weldon, 2011). In relation to this, the significance of key feminist theories, including intersectionality and standpoint feminism, remains paramount when examining the concepts of subjectivity and experience. These theories will be thoroughly examined and discussed in subsequent sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of their relevance.

(Collective) Identity

The emphasis of NSM on culture and the formation of meaning has resulted in a heightened curiosity towards identity development (Snow and Benford, 1988). As such, (collective) Identity is the final interrelated theme classified by Scholl (2014). Scholl (2014) recognises the pluralistic nature of identity and thus the 'collective' aspect is in brackets.

The concept of identity is deeply intertwined with social movements and holds a complex and multifaceted relationship, each influencing and shaping the other (Polletta and Jasper (2001). As the study of social movements expanded, there was a growing trend towards perceiving society as a social construct that can be transformed through collaborative endeavours (Buechler, 2000). As a result, numerous academics have come to view identities as multifaceted and shaped by social constructs. Thus, one person can take the form of multiple identities.

In particular, collective identity has consistently been regarded as an integral component of social movements. According to Melucci (1985), collective identity encompasses three key dimensions. Firstly, it involves cognitive definitions encompassing the objectives, strategies, and scope of action. Secondly, collective identity encompasses a network of dynamic relationships among actors, characterised by interaction, communication, influence, negotiation, and decision-making. However, it is crucial to recognise that the process of constructing a collective identity may not be equally available to all. According to Minkoff (1997), certain groups such as women, the elderly, those that identify as LGBTQ+ and the disabled have faced a lack of institutional infrastructures that would have facilitated regular interactions with other groups. Lastly, emotional investment plays a crucial role in collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging and unity among individuals within the collective (Melucci, 1985). Regarding this final dimension, more recently, work has examined emotion and affect's role in generating a strong collective identity, mobilising for action, and creating resonance (Cammaerts, 2021). Referring back to Castells (2010), there has been a significant increase in collective identity

expression since the technological revolution. The rise of the network society has challenged how identity has been constructed during globalisation, resulting in new forms of social change.

Polletta and Jasper (2001, p.285) further support this, emphasising emotions as forming collective identity, defining it as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution." Furthermore, Polletta and Jasper (2001) emphasise symbolic visual performances as crucial for creating identities. Identifying cultural expressions such as names, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, and clothing are being utilised by movement participants as part of their enacted processes.

Touraine (1985) further supports the importance of the relationship between individual and collective identities emphasising the importance of subjective experience and personal meaning in shaping identity within social movements. He argues that individuals' perceptions of their social reality, their understanding of their position within society, and their aspirations for change play a crucial role in shaping their collective identity and motivating their participation in social movements.

When looking at NSMs, it becomes clear that a person's individual identity is closely linked to their collective identity. This means that being part of a group significantly impacts how one sees themselves and vice versa. Moreover, this highlights the importance of considering social and cultural factors when examining the complexities of identity.

Using Scholl's (2014) conceptualisation of key themes and drawing from various theorists, a comprehensive framework emerges to delineate the defining characteristics of NSMs and, subsequently, analyse their role in driving social change. Notably, the contributions of Melucci (1985) hold significant importance in achieving an extensive understanding of the dynamics and impact of new social movements. Additionally, the theories proposed by scholars like Castells (2010) and Bennet and Segerberg (2012) provide a more up-to-date and pertinent perspective. These perspectives collectively appear to encompass the current movement within the Iranian context.

Analysis NSM through Framing

Within the realm of New Social Movements (NSMs) research, the analysis of framing has been highlighted as a valuable approach. This is particularly due both NSMs emphasis on culture and

framings effectiveness in investigating symbols, slogans, and messages that facilitate the public's comprehension and connection with the movement within their cultural context (Starr, 2017). Erving Goffman (1974) is widely regarded as the pioneer of the concept of frames (Shaw, 2013). Goffman (1974, p.21) defines frames as cognitive structures that facilitate interpretation, enabling individuals to perceive, identify, and assign labels to a wide range of occurrences. Despite Goffman's (1974) work not explicitly focused on social movements, his ideas have been influential in understanding how social movements present their message and how it is perceived by different audiences (Young, 2010).

Khazraee and Novak (2018) highlight collective action frames in particular as playing a crucial role in conveying meaning about the social system to actors. Moreover, they state that the construction of collective action frames necessitates the process of meaning-making and the development of shared understanding among movement actors. This allows them to identify the problematic situation and its attributions, decipher who or what is to blame and propose potential solutions. Drawing on Goffman's (1974) work and focusing on collective action frames, Snow and Benford (1988) consider three frames necessary for successful social movements: Diagnostic, Prognostic and Motivational.

Diagnostic Framing

The first frame, diagnostic, encompasses two key elements. Firstly, it involves identifying and diagnosing a specific event, social aspect, or government system as problematic, requiring modification or improvement. Secondly, it entails attributing blame or responsibility for the identified issues, thereby pinpointing the individuals or entities accountable for the problematic situation (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars, 2019). Consequently, diagnostic framing offers responses to the questions of "What is or went wrong?" and "Who or what is responsible?" Extensive research exploring the content of collective action frames indicates that diagnostic framing often involves defining or redefining an event or situation as an "injustice" (Benford and Snow 2000, pp.615; Gamson 1992).

Prognostic framing

According to Snow and Benford's (1988) framework, the second important frame is prognostic framing. This involves suggesting solutions to the identified problem and specifying the necessary

actions that need to be taken. Benford and Snow (2000) also assert that prognostic framing can include the incorporation of future aspirations and desired outcomes. This approach involves referencing optimistic perspectives on what is to come to potentially influence present actions and choices.

Motivational framing

Motivational framing is the final core frame established by Snow and Benford (1988). This frame frequently entails issuing a call to action by establishing a compelling motive or purpose beyond mere recognition of the problem and its consequences. It does so by emphasising the gravity of the problem, the need for immediate action rather than delay, the potential effectiveness of collective participation, the moral imperative of engagement, and the potential for personal advancement or elevation of one's status (Benford, 1993). Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars (2019) assert that motivational framing frequently incorporates the utilisation of emotions to enhance the appeal of a message. A clear framework is provided by Gamson (1992) who asserts that motivational frames consist of three elements, injustice, identity, and agency. Injustice entails recognising the unfairness of the current state of affairs and assigning fault to those who oppose it. Agency involves recognising the potential for altering the current state through united efforts. Identity encompasses defining the "we," the main figures in the movement, in contrast to the "them," the antagonists or those held responsible for the injustice. In regard to identity, the work of Bennett and Segerberg (2012), as mentioned previously, highlights frames that require an interactive process of personalisation and sharing.

The focus on meaning, culture, and emotions within framings exhibits a strong alignment with the key components of NSM that have been previously discussed. The forthcoming chapter incorporates diverse feminist perspectives to explore women's movements specifically. In addition, it delves into empowerment theories to develop a comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted concept. By considering different perspectives, a more complete and comprehensive comprehension of women's movements and empowerment can be formed.

Chapter Two: Feminism and Empowerment Theory

<u>Feminism</u>

Academics often refer to women's movements as a prime example of a NSM and how collective action and advocacy can act as catalysts for social change (Lotz, 2003). Furthermore, as hinted, the ongoing movement in Iran has been characterised as women-led. Consequently, as an aspect of this thesis examines women's role in the facilitation of NSMs, it is crucial to explore the concepts of feminism and feminist theory. In the latter part of the twentieth century, women across the globe have actively protested against various forms of oppression, leading to the emergence of numerous women's movements. These movements have been distinguished by their unique characteristics, with scholars often illustrating them through a sequential development of ideas over time (Fawcett, 2022). As a result, they are frequently categorised into distinct "waves."

The first wave is generally understood to have originated in the early 1900s and was primarily focused on achieving middle-class women's suffrage (Fawcett, 2022). The second wave emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasising cultivating self-reliant female subjectivity to challenge the predominant male-centric culture (Lee, 2007). The most prominent perspectives to emerge included Socialist, Marxist, and Liberal (Fawcett, 2022). Whilst differing in their messages, all were united under the common slogan 'the personal is political' and their emphasis on conscious raising through legal methods (Tanenbaum and Engler, 2017). Despite highlighting women's individual experiences, the second wave was criticised for its universalising tendencies and focused on only one type of experience, the white middle-class women's. Many dominant perspectives appeared to ignore the individual and collective experiences of women of different classes, 'races' and sexuality; thus, rising out of this critique was a third wave, focused on including those voices that had been previously ignored (Mann and Huffman, 2005). Essentially feminist perspectives in this wave moved away from individualistic notions. Instead, they raised awareness and consciousness among women by emphasising the similarities between their shared goals and actions while acknowledging the differences in their life experiences, histories, and identities across different life stages (Wan, 2023). There is significant debate over the final fourth wave's existence. Generally, the origins of the fourth wave have been traced back to the early 2010s, with the facilitation of the Internet and, more recently, social media considered the most distinguishing characteristics of this wave (Baumgardner, 2011; Chamberlain, 2017). In addition, others have

recognised the fourth wave's role in bringing together second and third-wave feminisms whilst incorporating additional aspects such as internationalism and decentralisation to facilitate discussion and activism (Munro, 2013).

Although these waves appear significantly different, at the core of all feminism is the objective of gender equality and empowering all women and girls (UN, 2022). The feminist frameworks of these feminist movements were developed based on a particular historical context, and each allows for a different perspective. Concerning empowerment specifically, Ozkazanc-Pan (2018) states that by examining a wide range of feminisms, one can gain a set of distinct theoretical tools that can assist us in reviewing women's empowerment. Thus to answer the research question, these different feminist approaches and perspectives will be drawn upon to understand women's empowerment fully.

Empowerment

As Drury and Reicher (2009) emphasise, empowerment forms the fundamental basis for instigating social change. Prior to exploring the influence of social media on the empowerment of Iranian women in the campaign, it is vital to obtain a clear comprehension of the concept of empowerment. The term 'empowerment' first gained widespread recognition through the women's movement (Mosedale, 2005). Like different facets of feminism, empowerment can adopt diverse connotations contingent upon the specific context and circumstances. Consequently, debates ensue, difficulties arise when defining it, and clarifications must be made.

Outcome or Process?

The first concerns whether empowerment should be understood as an 'outcome' or a 'process'. Emphasis on empowerment as a process refers to the ongoing journey and series of actions, transformations, and developments that individuals or groups undertake to gain control, autonomy, and influence over their lives (Gram, L., Morrison, J. and Skordis-Worral, J., 2018)**.** Meanwhile, empowerment as an outcome refers to the end result or state achieved due to the empowerment process (Gram, L., Morrison, J. and Skordis-Worral, J., 2018). Many often view empowerment as a process and an outcome (Luttrell et al., 2009). Whilst this thesis considers both, empowerment is emphasised as a process due to the ongoing nature of the protest.

Type of empowerment

A further discussion concerns the type. As mentioned, empowerment has been used in various contexts and defined and measured in numerous ways. Concerning women's empowerment specifically, Malhotra et al. (2002) view it as a process and contend it can entail the following dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. Each of which can be achieved at both smaller and larger scales. The most relevant to this study are socio-cultural and psychological dimensions and thus shall be the focus. Combining social and cultural elements, Malhotra et al. (2002, p.13) indicate several descriptions of socio-cultural empowerment. Specifically, it includes women's ability to freely move about in society, encompassing their visibility and access to various social spaces and networks. Socio-cultural empowerment also involves recognising women's roles and contributions and promoting positive media images of women. According to Malhotra et al. (2002, p.13), psychological empowerment entails several crucial components, including self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which relate closely to identity. In addition, both are critical determinants of one's ability to take charge of their life and pursue their goals effectively. Furthermore, the authors highlight the importance of collective awareness of injustice. This refers to recognising inequities and discriminatory practices that exist in society and their impact on individuals and groups. It is also important to note that this largely aligns with the Gamson's (1992) injustice frames mentioned in Chapter Two. Finally, the potential of mobilisation is established as another vital component. This involves the capacity of individuals and groups to come together and work towards common goals, such as fighting against injustice and promoting social change.

The amalgamation of Malhotra et al. (2002)'s psychological and socio-cultural empowerment categories strongly aligns with the characteristics of NSMs discussed in the preceding chapter. Hence, considering this thesis examines both aspects, it provides the most appropriate foundational conceptualisation of empowerment.

Individualistic versus Structure

There are two primary theoretical approaches to empowerment, both of which highlight the importance of agency. These are the individual perspective and structural perspective.

The individualistic approach primarily focuses on empowering individuals through internal factors, such as enhancing their decision-making abilities, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). Drawing on Malhotra et al.'s (2002) types, psychological empowerment is closely associated with this approach. For this highly independent perspective, personal growth is crucial in developing agency. The concept is based on the notion that people can make rational choices based on their own interests as social actors (Sardenberg, 2016). Drawing on different feminist perspectives, prominent contemporary strands associated with the West often associate agency with individuals (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). The liberalist perspective within the second wave stands out as a staunch proponent of individual empowerment. The traditional liberalist feminist emphasis on self-reliant female subjectivity contends that empowerment can only be achieved by dismantling patriarchal structures and norms that limit women's agency and perpetuate gender inequality (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). In recent times, this perspective has increasingly embraced neoliberal ideologies. According to Rottenberg (2014), neoliberal feminism revolves around the rational female neoliberal subject, shifting the focus of gender inequality from a structural issue to an individual matter. Similarly, it can also be argued that postmodernist perspectives, such as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, are a proponent of individual empowerment. According to Butler (1988), gender is not a fixed or innate characteristic but a social construct performed by repeating everyday actions and interactions. This means that individuals have the power to challenge and subvert dominant gender norms through their performances of gender. By recognising the performative nature of gender, individuals can become more aware of how societal norms constrain them and can work to resist and transform these norms. As such, agency is established through individuals' ability to change their performance. From both viewpoints, the driving force for agency and, thus, empowerment is established through the rational woman's ability to make decisions for herself (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). In some ways, by emphasising the individual, these perspectives recognise the diversity of women's experiences, considering the personal elements of empowerment. This is also important when discussing NSMs, as subjectivity and experience, as established, are key characteristics. However, Non-western feminist scholars have criticised the individualistic ideas within these conceptions, arguing that they do not acknowledge the experiences of marginalised women (Spivak, 1988).

The importance of individual experiences for empowerment cannot be overstated. However, when individual experiences remain just that, individual, we are unable to change cultural norms, organisational practices, and policies that affect us all collectively (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). Whilst traditional feminist perspectives lean towards individual empowerment, those rooted in non-western outlooks, drawing from postcolonial, intersectional, and transnational perspectives, tend to stress the collective aspects of agency (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). Hence these perspectives offer a more focused and tailored view of the female experience towards the structural approach. A post-colonial feminist perspective highlights the importance of recognising the diversity of women's experiences and identities and the need to disrupt simplistic dichotomies and fixed demarcations in understanding feminist agency and empowerment (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). One of the most influential post-colonial feminist scholars is Gayatri Spivak. Spivak's 1988 ground-breaking essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak" raised essential questions about the possibility of subaltern (marginalised and oppressed groups) voices being heard within dominant discourses. Spivak (1988) critiqued traditional Western feminist theories that tend to essentialise and homogenise the experiences of marginalised groups, often reducing them to victims incapable of agency. As such, Spivak (1988) called for a political strategy deemed 'Strategic Essentialism' to enable the empowerment of minority groups through an emphasis on commonalities to create unity and achieve a common goal.–Emphasising the importance of collective action to empowerment, a post-colonial feminist perspective thus supports a structural approach. Nevertheless, some feminist scholars have criticised strategic essentialism, highlighting its political dilemma of representing the other without homogenising women's experience and thus perpetuating oppression (Stone, 2004). Following this, Chandra Mohanty (1991) calls for a transnational feminist approach. A transnational feminist perspective recognises the possibility of collective action as the core of any notion and potential for change. Agency is derived from the collective, amplified by the collaborative efforts of many rather than understood in terms of rational choices (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). As Yuval-Davis (2006) has highlighted, this approach focuses on speaking up against and modifying the structures that oppress women from different backgrounds. Fundamentally, the structural approach comprehends empowerment from a collective standpoint, wherein agency emerges through the collective actions of numerous women rather than solely at the individual level. In addition, this approach emphasises the importance of building supportive networks and creating meaningful opportunities for women to come together and work towards shared objectives.

Just as NSMs and feminist theories have increasingly recognised the need to combine the individual and collective, empowerment theory aims to establish itself by merging the individualistic with the structural approach. Sevefjord and Olsson (2000) emphasise that for any change to result in meaningful and lasting empowerment, it must address individual and structural factors. Many have therefore dismissed the dichotomy between these two approaches, viewing structure and agency as closely intertwined and exerting reciprocal influence on each other (Luttrell et al., 2009). In this way, the relationship is two-fold, social structures are capable of shaping human behaviour, while individuals possess the capacity to modify the very structures they occupy (Luttrell et al., 2009).

Importance of intersectionality

Consequently, perhaps the most essential feminist perspective, and one that is compatible with both approaches to empowerment, is intersectionality. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality recognises how different aspects of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, intersect to shape women's experiences. Intersectionality has now been acknowledged as one of the most important contributions to women's studies in the last 20 years (McCall, 2005). They argue that essentialising women as a group can overlook the diversity of women's experiences and identities and can reinforce the idea that women are a homogenous group with shared experiences. Instead, these scholars argue for a more nuanced understanding of women's identity that recognises the diversity of women's experiences and identities through intersectionality. It is widely acknowledged that group identities play a crucial role in mobilising communities to attain rights, resources, and recognition; however, focusing solely on shared characteristics within a group can result in overlooking individual differences and diversity (Chun, Lipsitz and Shin, 2013). Using an intersectional feminist perspective on empowerment theory recognises these differences, emphasising the importance of acknowledging intersecting identities and power structures and highlighting the significance of collective struggle and resistance in achieving empowerment.

Chapter 3: Social Media, Social Movements and Women's Empowerment

Social Media Affordances

As previously mentioned, social media is increasingly seen as a tool to support social movements and potentially empower individuals and communities (Rouach, 2019; Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). Within the realm of social media, numerous scholars adopt an affordance-based perspective to examine a diverse array of platforms (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Wellman, 2001). While scholars such as Treem and Leonardi (2013) provide an overview of the general affordances of social media, other scholars have focused on investigating specific contexts and applications of these affordances. Earl and Kimport (2011), for example, examined the affordances of the Internet and digital media within the realm of contentious politics. Their research revealed that people increasingly use platforms to mobilise protest. Alternatively, Majchrzak et al. (2013) researched the involvement of social media technology enactment in the processes of knowledge-sharing. The lens of affordances can offer valuable insights into the intricate relationship between the social and technical aspects within the context of social media and social movements. This thesis uses Faraj and Azad's (2012) definition to categorise social media affordances as the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action. The term "affordances" describes the range of actions that can be performed with a given technology (Hutchby, 2001; Majchrzak et al., 2013). When viewed through the lens of affordances, it is important to note that social media alone does not inherently enable social movements. Instead, it is the manner in which individuals use it in tandem with their actions that propels such movements forward. Consequently, one can gain a deeper understanding of how the technical features of these platforms shape and influence social interactions, mobilisation efforts, and identities within social movements.

Characteristics of social media

To comprehensively evaluate the potential of social media in facilitating social movements and fostering empowerment, it is crucial, to begin with a concise overview of social media. Carr and Hayes (2015, p.50) provide a comprehensive definition of social media as "Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the

perception of interaction with others". Consequently, the prominent attributes of social media, namely its speed, scale, and accessibility, have been widely recognised and numerous proponents argue for its effectiveness in enabling empowerment and NSMs. In particular, according to Larry Diamond (2010, p.70), social media is a "liberation technology" that allows people to share news, voice their opinions, bring attention to wrongdoing, organise protests, further democracy, increase participation, and create new opportunities for freedom. Building upon the insights provided by Diamond (2010) and other relevant literature, the subsequent section categorises these points into broader themes of communication, mobilisation, and identity. This classification serves as a framework for exploring the various ways social media facilitate social movements and empower women. It is important to note that each of these elements is interconnected and contributes significantly to assisting the other.

Communication

Numerous academics have specifically emphasised the contribution of social media in amplifying collective consciousness through widespread information dissemination within social networks (Shirky, 2011; Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015; Dasgupta, 2019). Through consciousness-raising, Kazemi (2022) suggests that individuals can better understand their social and political rights, enabling them to identify their place within the larger social structure and situate the roots of their oppression. Specifically concerning women's empowerment Caldeira (2021) notes the crucial role of social media in consciousness-raising especially in highly repressive communities. By providing exposure to a wider range of feminine perspectives often absent in mainstream media, Caldeira (2021) states social media platforms play a vital role in expanding the diversity of femininities accessible to women. Other scholars argue that social media transcends its role as a simple information-sharing platform. Instead, it functions as a dynamic public space that actively shapes the discourse surrounding social issues raised by movements (Carney, 2016). Milan (2015) highlights that social media provides a platform for activists to engage in continuous interaction, enabling them to participate in meaningful work. This replaces traditional intermediaries such as alternative and mainstream media and face-to-face interactions.

According to Majchrzak et al. (2013, p.49), metavoicing refers to actively participating in the continuous online knowledge exchange by responding to others' presence, profiles, content, and

activities. In Majchrzak et al.'s (2013, p.49) explanation, metavoicing is an active engagement in the ongoing online knowledge exchange involving responses to others' presence, profiles, content, and activities. The scholars emphasise the distinction of using the term "metavoicing" instead of simple "voicing" to emphasise that individuals contribute not through their opinions but by adding metaknowledge to the existing online content. This can be done by participating in a range of actions, such as reposting, voting on posts, commenting on others' posts, voting on comments, and expressing appreciation through profile "likes," among other forms of engagement. Furthermore, the scholars propose that as more individuals actively participate in metavoicing, it leads to the generation of diverse ideas, ultimately making the collective preference of the group more discernible.

Generative role-taking is another form of comunication afforded my social media. Generative role-taking refers to participating in online knowledge conversations by assuming specific roles and performing consistent actions that contribute to maintaining a productive dialogue among participants. Social media platforms facilitate generative role-taking by making the ongoing dialogue visible (Majchrzak et al., 2013, p.49). Within these interactions, participants openly express arguments, complaints and share frustrations, fostering public engagement and discussion. This largely links to Leong et al. (2019) study examining environmental activism in Malaysia. Assessing communication dynamics within Facebook groups, their findings indicate that social media's distinctive feature, with its overlap between personal and public spaces, means that individuals do not need to exert much effort to maintain connections (for instance, through liking pages and groups and following and receiving notifications from posts). As a result, more individuals are willing to participate, thereby perpetuating the submerged network.

Numerous studies have discovered that social media also serves as a mechanism for interactions, especially for women who actively utilise this platform to share and engage in discussions on various issues. Bala's (2017) discussion of women's empowerment in India suggests that the Internet, websites, and social media platforms have broken down media barriers, allowing people to express their personal opinions, ideas, and thoughts. According to Bala's (2017) study, media can be used as a tool to advance women's empowerment. In the same vein, although centring on blogging instead of social media specifically, Shirazi (2011) discovered that women's digital activities can be a powerful avenue for participating in communication discourse. Shirazi's (2011) study revealed that these digital

platforms not only empowered women by providing them with a public voice but also enabled them to express their concerns and garner support from the wider public. While these interactions enable the fostering of connections, Li's (2016) study highlights an important point. Acknowledging that not all interactions have the same effectiveness in driving social movements and empowerment is crucial. Zongchao Li (2016) examined the relationship between active and passive social media use and psychological empowerment. The findings indicated that active use of social media was positively associated with both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment. On the other hand, passive use was only weakly linked to interactional empowerment. This suggests the importance of active engagement, rather than passive consumption, in leading to empowerment outcomes.

Mobilisation

Communication through information dissemination and interactions plays a pivotal role in the second element of social movements, mobilisation. The exchange of information, discussions, and engagement on social media platforms often contribute to mobilising individuals towards collective action and fostering a sense of unity and solidarity within a movement (Mundt et al., 2018). The effectiveness of SM in mobilising social movements and driving empowerment, particularly for women, has been demonstrated through global campaigns like "#MeToo" (2017) and "#HeForShe," which have successfully raised awareness for gender rights on a global scale. Additionally, nationally oriented campaigns like "#BringBackOurGirls" (2014) and "#FreeHerFace" (2020) have leveraged social media to mobilise supporters and organise in-person campaigns, showcasing the power of online platforms in facilitating offline activism. These examples highlight how social media can catalyse both global and local movements, fostering awareness, mobilisation, and, ultimately, empowerment.

The success of movements often relies on their capacity to achieve substantial scale or size (Mundt et al., 2018). This concept, commonly referred to as 'scaling,' encompasses the process of expanding the size, strength, geographical reach, and overall impact of social movements (Mundt et al., 2018). By attaining a larger following, movements can enhance their influence, visibility, and ability to effect meaningful change. Consequently, scaling is a crucial factor in social movements' effectiveness and long-term sustainability. The most obvious connection between social media and scaling can be seen in its potential ability to mobilise new activists (Mundt et al., 2018). Undoubtedly, the features provided

by social media, as previously mentioned, such as its capacity to generate awareness and facilitate swift and extensive communication, play a pivotal role in the scaling of social movements. As stated earlier, the concept of the "public sphere" is particularly prominent in NSMs and similarly represents a crucial characteristic of social media platforms. Mundt et al. (2018) contend that this characteristic contributes to the creation of participation opportunities that facilitate the expansion of mobilisation within these movements, thereby assisting in scaling their endeavours. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 742) point to the success of social movements utilising social media platforms indicating they often exhibited larger size, rapid scaling, and adaptability in navigating dynamic political landscapes and connecting various issues compared to traditional movements.Similarly, Milan (2015) highlights the benefits of social media in scaling at a global level. By leveraging social media, individuals can mobilise and organise without being physically present in a specific location. This distinctive way of protesting online has emerged as a potent tool for activism and social change, enabling people from across the globe to unite and raise their voices for a shared cause.

While mobilising new activists is vital, social media also aids in other forms of mobilisation. For instance, Sommerfeldt (2013) demonstrates how activist groups effectively utilise digital media to generate financial contributions for their endeavours. Similarly, Doan and Toledano (2018) highlight the potential of digital crowdfunding campaigns to mobilise funding for various causes. These participation opportunities made possible by social media play a significant role in broadening the mobilisation efforts of movements, ultimately aiding in their scaling and amplifying their impact.

Identity

As Chapter One and Chapter Two have established, identities are pivotal in the success of NSMs and in fostering empowerment for women. Social media has also been considered as successful in enabling identity formation, particularly through self-expression.Lui (2007) emphasises that social networking sites offer a platform to exhibit different aspects of their identity within their network. This allows them to express their uniqueness while staying connected with others. Exploring how college students use Facebook photos to express themselves and create a sense of belonging, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) found that individuals can highlight their unique traits through their clothing, hairstyle, behaviour, and speech. These elements may appear materialistic to some, and online self-

representation, particularly when exhibited by women, has often been criticised in popular media, being trivialised and associated with feminine vanity (Burns, 2015). There is no doubt that social media can negatively affect women; however, it is arguably their affordance through which they offer self-expression opportunities, not the platform itself, that leads to these effects (Meier and Gray, 2014). On the contrary to these negative views, (Rettberg, 2014, p. 40) argues that the very essence of user-generated content allows women to claim agency by choosing how to represent themselves.

One way individuals have leveraged social media for self-expression and empowerment is through taking selfies. Recent research contends that selfies can serve as a medium for self-expression, allowing individuals to control how they wish to be perceived (Murray, 2015). By capturing and sharing self-portraits, individuals can curate their online presence and convey their desired image to the world. This self-presentation through selfies can be empowering, as it grants individuals agency in shaping their online identity and challenging traditional notions of representation and beauty standards (Murray, 2015). As such, the importance of diversity in representations cannot be underestimated. Vivienne (2017) specifically highlights the contribution of gender-diverse and gender-fluid selfies in redefining society's rigid and binary expectations of masculinity and femininity, albeit in a modest yet noteworthy manner.

When many individuals defy traditional gender norms, a sense of collective identity can emerge. This is especially true when a group of people shares similar experiences of non-conformance and can find solidarity in their shared struggles (Vivienne, 2017). Consequently, at the collective identity level, social media platforms possess the power to deconstruct and challenge established societal identities, particularly the conventional notions of femininity enforced by patriarchal structures (Rouach, 2019). By providing a platform for oppressed voices and alternative discourses, social media enables the dissemination of diverse perspectives, experiences, and narratives, social media can disrupt the approved conception of femininity and dismantle the rigid gender norms dictated by the patriarchy (Rouach, 2019). This process of deconstruction can result in consciousness-raising, which in turn promotes socio-cultural empowerment through advocating for positive media representations of women (Rouach, 2019). In their 2018 study, Khazraee and Novak posit that social media platforms have the potential to facilitate the creation of connections and collective identities by simplifying and

categorising various aspects of the world. This process of simplification and categorisation allows individuals to identify and relate to others who share similar interests or beliefs more easily. While this simplification may foster great unity, it is equally crucial to acknowledge the significance of diversity within these modes of expression. If all expressions become homogeneous, it merely establishes another essentialised category (Stone, 2004). Thus, drawing on intersectionality, for full empowerment the images pertaining to identity on social media must show a diverse range of different women.

Limitations

Despite the evidence above indicating the high visibility and success of social media as a tool for facilitating social movements and leading to empowerment, scholars have questioned the extent to which they have been able to shape and influence real-life change. Shirky (2011), for example, provides two reasons why social media is ineffective for facilitating social change, firstly, the tools themselves are ineffective, and secondly, they produce as many negative outcomes as positive outcomes. Regarding the first argument, the flexible, easy engagement and low-cost nature of social media that many have argued in favour of mobilisation also lead to what some have deemed "Slacktivism". Slacktivism entails supporting a political or social cause through social media, which involves significantly little effort or commitment. In particular, Wasik (2009, p.17) takes a critical stance, arguing that social media's viral and transient nature only permits the emergence of short-lived "nanostories" that have a minimal lasting impact. Thus, it has been suggested that activism of this type is short of any useful action. Concerning this, whilst scaling up has been acknowledged as a benefit of utilising social media in the previous section, Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) recognise that it also presents challenges related to information overload. They argue that the abundance of information can be overwhelming and potentially impede the expansion of a campaign to a global level and hinder the reach of new audiences. Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) also highlight that only some have the same levels of access to new technologies. Many women, particularly those in rural areas, face illiteracy and language communication barriers, thus creating a digital divide (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). On a similar note, Mitchell, Schuster and Drennan (2017) also acknowledge a divide, albeit a generational one. The advantages discussed above are only seen by those who use it, often young women. As such, this type of participation conceals many young women's actions from the general public and politically

active women of older generations. In addition, many scholars remain sceptical concerning the amount of weight put on social media and instead emphasise in-person methods. Commenting on the demonstrations at Tahrir Square, Kamel (2014) argues that while social media platforms were instrumental as a tool of communication and even critical to the formation of protests, the Tahrir Square demonstrations resulted from collective human passion.

Considering the second argument, that social media produces as much harm as good, Shirky (2011) acknowledges how states use social media as a method of control. There are numerous examples in which governments have used censorship to control internet freedoms. As Shirky (2011) states, scholars Rebecca Mackinnon and Evgeny Morozov argue that social media is just as likely to strengthen authoritarian regimes as it is to weaken them. Moreover, concerning women particularly, according to a study conducted by Plan International (2020), social media platforms have become a place where women often experience harassment. Furthermore, the report highlights that harassment significantly intensifies when girls freely express their opinions or engage in activism. Consequently, girls are discouraged from voicing their thoughts and participating in online discussions due to the heightened risk of encountering harassment. While social media has offered women a platform to express their grievances and raise their concerns, it also has the potential to become a space where women may encounter further oppression.

So far, this thesis has primarily addressed theories related to NSM and empowerment. Furthermore, it has explored the wider use of social media to promote women's empowerment specifically. In the upcoming section, the specific context of Iran will be examined, with a particular emphasis on the status of women and their acts of resistance.

Chapter Four: Iranian Context

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a profound transformation in the emergence of the digital age. Nevertheless, there remains a substantial debate surrounding the extent to which digital technologies influence societal transformation. The recent events in Iran and its authoritarian context have further amplified these inquiries. This chapter aims to assess the current status of women in Iran and provide a comprehensive overview of how social media can potentially facilitate social movements and contribute to female empowerment. A thorough analysis of the empowerment of Iranian women can only be made by contextualising it in a historical and geopolitical context, as it is this context that shapes their lives (Mortazavi and Poelker, 2017). In particular, religion and Iran's relationship with 'the West' are two crucial aspects that have shaped Iranian nationalism today and, consequently, the status of women in Iran. As such, the terms 'Westernisation' and 'Islamisation' will be defined, and a historical analysis of women's status shall be explored with reference to these terms. Following this, Iranian women's resistance shall be examined, along with the concept of a women's movement and debates surrounding its existence. This shall lead to the use of social media in the fight for gender rights in Iran. Specifically, examples of previous ways in which women's campaigns in Iran have used social media. Finally, limitations to the use of social media, specifically within authoritarian regimes like Iran, shall be investigated.

Westernisation

The complicated geopolitical relationship between Iran, the US and other Western nations is vital to understanding the strong religious influence in the country and, thus, the historical context of Women's rights in Iran. Similarly to religion, the conservative leadership in Iran finds the anti-Western sentiment to be of significant value (to its political aims/agenda) (Akbarzadeh, 2016). As notions of "the West" embody a multitude of concepts which differ based on the circumstance, it is necessary here to clarify precisely what the term means. Within the realm of politics, the term is frequently employed to depict the "undesirable" effects of European or American culture on non-Western societies, as identified by individuals who do not associate with Western culture (Göksel, 2019, p.17). In Iran, the term "West" typically referred to Russia and Britain during the first half of the 20th century but later included the

US in the second half of the century (Göksel, 2019). It is important to note that although they overlap, the terms 'modernisation' and 'Westernisation' are not the same. This is significant because, during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), the modernisation of the state was closely linked to Westernisation.

Islamisation

In addition, due to the unprecedented presence of the Islamic religion in politics in Iran, it is also important to clarify what is meant by 'Islamisation'. In a broad sense, 'Islamisation' refers to the "process of religious and social change which seeks to expand the role of religious institutions and the scope of religious practice" (Hasan, 1985). Regarding Iran, the emphasis of 'Islamisation' was primarily centred on achieving dominance and control of society. The integration of Islamic ideology into the legal system was accomplished through a process known as 'Islamisation' or 'Islamification' of society and is considered primarily responsible for the evolution of Iranian politics and religious beliefs concerning women today (Hasan, 1985).

Women's status

Iran's history is both varied and conflicted. Over the past century, Iran has experienced three significant changes in 1906, 1953 and most recently in 1979 that have shaped its current climate (Aslan, 2022). The first change came with the revolution of 1906, which aimed to achieve political and economic independence by emulating Western models of modernity. Following this, Russia and Britain reached an agreement that divided Iran into separate spheres. The Iranian nationalist movement strongly criticised this decision, seeing it as unacceptable interference and betrayal (Aslan, 2022). In 1953, a significant event occurred with a Coup d'etat to depose nationalist leader Mohammad Mosaddegh from power and reinstate Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as Iran's leader (Aslan, 2022). In an overthrow orchestrated by Britain and the United States, the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, was removed to strengthen the monarchical rule of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Aslan, 2022). It is well-known that their motivation was solely to advance their interests in the oil industry (Göksel, 2019). Collectively these events led to the anti-western sentiments that formed a crucial factor in the most recent Revolution of 1979, with critical observers such as Michel Foucault,

viewing the 1979 Revolution as representing a rebellion against the Western-led international political order (Göksel, 2019). The revolution's primary aim was to attain cultural independence by establishing an authentic Islamic model of modernity and progress for the country (Yeganeh, 1993). Despite differences in objectives, a common connection between all three periods exists. Each has linked women's societal and familial status to the nation's status, and gender policies have been an integral component of their programs for national development and independence building (Yeganeh, 1993; Moghissi, 2008).

Iran's everchanging history has led scholars such as Tohidi (2016, p.76) to characterise the state of women's rights in Iran as "paradoxical and complicated". Conflicting views have emerged in the literature regarding the extent of women's rights in these regimes and which bestowed women with the greatest autonomy. Some maintain that Iran has made positive strides in preserving empowerment in education, economics, policy, and reproductive and sexual rights since the Islamic Revolution (Janghorban et al., 2014). At the same time, others argue that women have been marginalised and experienced a reduction in freedoms since the revolution (Moayer, 2023; Begum, 2022). As such, each period will be examined to provide an overview of women's status in Iran.

Status of women

According to Kendall (2010), our status, which is determined by the different positions we hold in society, plays a significant role in shaping our social identity. Kendall (2010) distinguished between ascribed status as a social position assigned to individuals based on factors outside their control (such as race, age, or gender) and achieved status as a position voluntarily obtained through personal choice, merit, or direct effort. Owing to the multifaceted nature of identity, societies identify a dominant status that takes precedence over all other statuses and determines a person's overall social position, known as a master status (Hughes, 1945). Power dynamics largely influence identity, and those in power often determine the master status (Castells, 2010). The concept of 'master status' is vital to understanding the role of women in Iran; as Kendall (2010) emphasises, historically, the most common master statuses for women have been appertaining to positions in the family, such as daughter, wife, and mother.

Pre-revolution era

Although the era leading up to the revolution can be distinguished into two periods: the first, led by Reza Shah Pahlavi from 1925-41, and the second from 1941-1979, headed by Mohammad Reza Shah, each emphasised the significance of modernisation, and thus, in this case, will be combined and referred to as the 'Pre-Revolution' era. As Abrahamian (1978) notes, this period set out to transform Iran from a seemingly dependent, backward society to a modern independent nation-state (Abrahamian, 1978). A great deal was placed on modernisation, and the portrayal of women played an integral role in this process.

Concept of 'womanhood'

To promote national advancement, women were symbolised as the epitome of 'modern Iran'. Described as the 'White Revolution', from 1963 until 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi made numerous reforms in an attempt to implement modernisation (Abrahamian, 1978). Many of these centred around women and their role in the family, social participation, and individual autonomy (Yeganeh, 1993).

Family

On the surface, the regime favoured women's autonomy concerning the family. In 1967, the first Family Protection Law (FPL) was introduced. This provided women with several rights in areas such as marriage and divorce. Regarding marriage, the minimum age for girls was raised from fifteen to eighteen. In addition, while polygamy remained legal, a husband was required to seek permission to have a second wife and only with the consent of his first wife (Yeganeh, 1993). In divorce, Iranian women were offered considerable legal protection, and the grounds to which women could initiate divorce were extended to a certain point (Georgetown Institute for Women, 2021). Keddie (2000, p.422) asserts that the Family Protection Law of 1967 and 1975 was implemented to regulate the "excess of male power" within the family by creating a family protection court. However, others argue that the impact of these reforms remained limited (Yeganeh, 1993).

Social participation

Under Pahlavi's rule, education and employment policies appeared to benefit women. For instance, from 1935, women were allowed to attend higher education and were promoted to enter the labour force in the late 1930s (Keddie, 2000). As such, the number of women entering significant positions in education and employment increased (Baneinia and Dersan Orhan, 2021). By the 1970s, women were participating in all levels of education and entering most professions, including lawyers and, later, judges (Keddie, 2000). Upon further examination, it becomes apparent that women's opportunities were more restricted than previously thought. Despite being granted access to all spheres of education*,* in 1976, women constituted only 30 per cent of students in higher education (Yeganeh, 1993). In addition, although able to pursue various professions, state policies often pushed women towards 'feminine' jobs (Yeganeh, 1993). This resulted in discrimination and lower wages when they tried to join male-dominated fields.

Individual/bodily autonomy

Individual autonym refers to *following one's own will and motives without being manipulated or distorted by external forces* (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2020) Certain instances question women's individual autonomy during this time, none more so than the compulsory "unveiling". Whilst for some, the veil is perceived as a mere fabric, scholars such as Chotiner (2022) highlight it holds a deeper political significance, particularly over the past century and a half. In 1936, Reza Shah made the first attempt to regulate the use of hijab in legislation by issuing an order that required women to remove their veil in public and enforced wearing Western clothes (Baneinia and Dersan Orhan, 2021). "Unveiling" was considered an essential component of modernisation, and whilst its implementation did not last, it became one of the most controversial laws implemented during this period. These laws were passed with the aim of proving Iran's power on par with that of Western countries. According to Mortazavi and Poelker (2017) Reza Shah's efforts to modernise women's lifestyles demonstrated his ambition to keep up with Western women.

Post Revolution

The collapse of the regime in 1979 was a culmination of deep-rooted grievances, some of which included socioeconomic disparities resulting from the 'White Revolution', anti-western sentiments fuelled by the perception of the Shah as a puppet to Western powers, and a revival of Islam led by soon to be leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Yeganeh, 1993). The state claimed to support women's liberation, but the secular opposition did not offer a different gender policy. As a result, the Islamic opposition took over the gender aspect of the movement to overthrow the Pahlavi state (Yeganeh, 1993). At the same time of the revolution the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Often described as an international bill of rights for women, CEDAW is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women's and girls' equal rights (UN Women, 2009). Upon ratifying the Convention, states are bound by legal obligations to: eradicate all manifestations of gender discrimination across various spheres of life; facilitate the complete growth and progress of women to enable them to exercise and enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms on par with men; and permit the CEDAW Committee to assess their implementation progress by regularly submitting reports (OHCHR, 2022). For nations that have ratified CEDAW, it has proved immensely valuable in combating the impact of gender discrimination and enhancing the well-being of women and girls (OCHCR, 2022). Despite being extended an invitation to sign CEDAW, the new Iranian regime chose to decline the opportunity (Vahdati, 2021). As a result, in the absence of this established legal framework, they have no inherent obligation to enhance women's rights.

The extent of women's status in Iran can be seen through the views of Iranian philosopher and advocate for revolution, Ayatollah Motahhari. He believed that individual rights had Western origins and that Islam placed greater importance on the community over individual rights (Yeganeh, 1993). Consequently, he stated that the Muslim community held a significant influence in determining the appearance and sexual expression of women rather than leaving it to the discretion of individual women's autonomy. Examining his viewpoint provides valuable insight into the prevailing attitudes as they largely reflect the sentiment concerning what it meant to be a woman in Iran at this time.

Concept of 'womanhood'

Following the revolution, the concept of "womanhood" underwent a complete overhaul. The 1979 Revolution emphasised cultural nationalism, emphasising the significance of shared heritage and community (Yeganeh, 1993). To achieve legitimacy, cultural imperialism was problematised, and in its place, a new "revolutionary" and "authentic" Muslim culture was created, with women playing a central role (Yeganeh, 1993, p.12). Commenting on this, Najmabadi (1987) asserts that the regime's emphasis on 'womanhood' in the eyes of Islam was crucial to achieving its legitimacy and set the tone for women's position in the ensuing years. Women were no longer portrayed according to Westernised but instead often depicted in the stereotypical image of Muslim women as submissive, passive, victimised, and veiled (Mortazavi and Poelker, 2017). Driven mainly by anti-western sentiment and enacted under the guise of religion, propaganda was commonly used to portray the "ideal" woman as resembling Fatemeh, the daughter of Prophet Mohammad and the wife of Imam Ali, who exemplified devotion as both a wife and mother (Bazafkan, 2020).

Family

One of Ayatollah Khomeini's first major changes after gaining power was the abolition of the family courts and significant parts of the Family Protection Law. This effectively returned women's legal status within the family to the family laws of the 1930s. Women lost many rights, particularly in areas such as divorce and marriage (Yeganeh, 1993). These changes have restricted a woman's custody rights and given only husbands the ability to initiate divorce unilaterally (Mahmoudi, 2019). It is significant that one of Ayatollah's initial decrees pertained to the role of women in the family as this highlights how vital women, and their image, are to the state.

Social participation

The Islamic Republic formulated several policies concerning women's participation in social life, including politics, education, and employment (Yeganeh, 1993). Women's education, in particular, was viewed as a significant tactic for promoting the Islamisation of society and thus was highly encouraged (Yeganeh, 1993). Post-revolution, women's education increased significantly; according to national census data, the literacy rate among women increased from 17.42% in 1966 to 80.3% by 2006 (Yeganeh, 1993). Nevertheless, education remained segregated. Like the period prior to the revolution,

the emphasis remains on feminine roles. This can be demonstrated through the segregation, the reinforcement of gender division of subjects and restrictive policy towards women's entry to 'non-feminine' fields (Yeganeh, 1993).

Employment

A similar situation can be seen around employment, arguably the most problematic area for the Islamic Republic concerning women's freedoms. Whilst the number of women in the workforce appears to have almost doubled since the revolution, in 2011, their unemployment was still twice that of men (Mahmoudi, 2020). Moreover, like the education sector, discrimination remains rife. In the summer of 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini called for an 'Administrative Revolution' that entailed a cleansing operation involving segregating male and female workers and silencing or sacking non-Islamic employees (Yeganeh, 1993). In addition, women were removed and banned as judges. At the core of these policies was the emphasis on aligning women's employment with the requirements of the Islamic family (Najmabadi, 1991). Family values are further emphasised in the Civil Code, where a husband is the only one who can choose where they live and prevent his wife from working if they appear to violate 'family values' (Begum, 2022). Consequently, this has meant many women have been removed from many public spheres, confined to private areas such as the home.

Individual autonomy

Women's individual autonomy was impacted by the revolution in several areas. Abortion laws in Iran have fluctuated based on the ruling government, with women having limited, yet to some degree, autonomy on the matter even before the 1979 revolution. Since then, abortion has been prohibited in Iran, with a law passed in 2021 aimed at boosting the country's population, further tightening restrictions on abortion (Esfandiari, 2022). The new law bans sterilisation and free contraceptives in public health care systems unless pregnant women face health risks, and access to safe abortion has been further restricted (Begum, 2022). Meanwhile, the state has offered incentives for early marriage, comprising interest-free loans for those under twenty-five (Begum, 2022). The OHCHR (2021) emphasises the importance of access to safe and legal abortion is crucial to ensure women's

fundamental rights to life, autonomy, agency, and physical and mental health. Thus, the introduction of these laws severely undermines Iranian women's rights.

Compulsory hijab

The requirement for women to wear the hijab has been one of the most noticeable effects of the revolution on women's personal freedom and independence. Shortly after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini began to encourage veiling, first making it compulsory in areas of government and public employment until it was finally made compulsory for all women in 1983 (Baker, 1997). Over the years, the Islamic government has increased legal measures and social restrictions to enforce mandatory hijab laws. Those who violate the law may face criminal punishment, including fines and imprisonment, which were introduced in the 1990s (Baker, 1997). Since 2005, the police have expanded their role to include moral policing through a branch called "The Morality Patrol" or "Morality Police", with its primary responsibility to uphold prevailing moral standards through (often excessive) enforcement (Golkar, 2018).

Patriarchal culture

Appearing on the surface as marked by distinct differences, examples from each of these periods demonstrate Iranian women being used for nationalistic purposes. Although there is a common belief that women in Iran only became political symbols during/after the Islamic revolution, despite being portrayed as 'modern' in appearance, women before the revolution were equally not free. Before the revolution, despite being granted rights in theory, women were severely hindered from fully exercising them (Shahidian, 1994). For instance, as noted by Yeganeh (1993), despite some advancements in women's rights through the Family Protection Laws, women were still regarded as the property of men. Koolaee (2009, p.403) points to the façade created through these reforms concerning women during this time as "artificial" and implemented for "publicity".

After analysing the circumstances for women in both periods, it becomes evident that women have faced a similar situation and pattern, the only difference being how it was portrayed. In both instances, women's agency is and has been taken away from them, with the state controlling and depicting their identity for its own purposes. It is also important to note that during the latest Universal Periodic

Review of Iran in 2020, the country rejected a majority of the recommendations concerning the ratification of essential human rights treaties (HRW, 2020). Notably, Iran declined to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention against Torture. This underscores the persistent extreme position of Iran regarding women's rights.

By examining what society represses, we can identify oppressive aspects of society and work towards necessary changes (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). Comparing these regimes has shown the extent to which patriarchy is deeply rooted in Iranian society and which areas must be the focus. Despite decades of oppression, there have been numerous examples in which women in Iran have continued to fight for their rights. The recent emergence of social media may be a useful way to help empower them. Consequently the upcoming section will explore women's movements in Iran and how, in recent years social media has played a vital role in their campaigns. Additionally, it will explore the advantages and disadvantages of social media in an authoritarian regime like Iran.

Women's resistance

Women have long played a role in social movements within Iran, yet the very notion of a "women's movement" in Iran is still a contested subject (Tohidi, 2016). Despite many Islamic reformers advocating for women's rights and speaking out against the government's actions, some still refuse to acknowledge the existence of a women's movement in Iran, instead asserting that there are only feminist activists (Tohini, 2016). By referring to them as 'feminist activists' undermines the collective agency of Iranian women and thus implies that change is not near. Nevertheless, scholars are increasingly writing enthusiastically about the recent development of feminism and the women's movement in Iran, describing it as constituting a 'true social movement'.

Disagreement persists not only regarding the Iranian women's movement but also regarding conflicting feminist perspectives in Iran. Due to past context/history, a divide has existed between Islamic and secular feminists. After the Islamic Revolution, two types of feminists emerged that appeared to be in direct conflict with one another. One calls for a feminist perspective within the bounds of religion (Islamic feminism), whilst the other considers religion as a patriarchal tool that justifies the oppression of women (Secular feminism). However, according to Ahmadi (2016, p.35), in the last two decades, a

"new generation of feminists has emerged," in which Iranian women of different backgrounds (religious, economic, cultural) have joined together to regain the ground lost because of the Iran re-Islamisation policies. Moreover, Ahmadi (2016) has emphasised globalisation and new communication method's role in bringing about this influence.

Social media usage in Iran

Iran has a convoluted relationship with social media. According to a 2017 study from the government-funded Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI), at least 73 per cent of Iranian households have Internet access—80 per cent of urban households have Internet, as do 57 per cent of rural ones. The majority of internet use is to access social media (70.5 per cent). Despite its wide use, the country has implemented strict regulations on many international social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube (Dagres, 2021). Consequently, Instagram is among the most popular platforms, with 45.3 per cent of Iranians using it (Dagres, 2021).

Cai (2023) notes the features of social media such as disintermediation, replicability, and diverse participation, have proven particularly effective for feminist campaigns in the Global South, where women have long faced systematic marginalisation. Regarding Iranian women specifically, Rouach (2019) presents a compelling case for their empowerment through the effective utilisation of social media. She particularly underscores the pivotal role of social media in providing women with a platform that allows them to express their subjectivity and individuality, unite in their causes, and amplify their protests. Moreover, Rouach (2019) further asserts that social media networks have become indispensable platforms for communication and mobilization among Iranian women. They utilise these platforms to document their struggles and highlight the injustices they face, often overlooked by traditional media channels. Evidence of these can be seen in Iran over the last decade and a half, with social media being employed in numerous high-profile gendered campaigns.

My Stealthy Freedom

One of the most prominent is 'My Stealthy Freedom' (MSF). In 2014, Masih Alinejad initiated the MSF campaign to offer Iranian women a platform (Facebook) to speak out against the mandatory hijab

laws (MyStealthyFreedom, 2019) As a result, many women were inspired to participate, and by 2017, the Facebook page had amassed over 3,000 photos and videos of women not wearing head coverings (Lamensch, 2022).

Commenting on the campaign, Khazraee and Novak (2018) emphasise how the online campaign pages on Facebook contributed to forming a collective identity and constructing a campaign narrative. After analysing the data, the authors indicate how photo-biographic campaigns represent two important features of social media that contribute to the formation of shared identity: the ability to engage in meaningful conversations and showcase one's values through personal stories and photos.

White Wednesdays

In May 2017, 'White Wednesdays' was initiated as part of the MSF campaign. Using #WhiteWednesdays, women within Iran and globally wore white and discarded their hijabs as a symbol of protest against forced veiling (Hatam, 2017). Similarly to MSF, thousands of women participated on a global scale.

Both campaigns demonstrate the effectiveness of social media especially for women's movements in Iran.

Challenges and Limitations of Using Social Media for Women's Movements Specifically in Iran

In the previous chapter, the overall limitations of social media as a tool for facilitating social movements and achieving female empowerment were discussed, with many of these limitations also applicable to the context of Iran. However, it is essential to recognise the distinctive constraints that exist in Iran due to its authoritarian nature. Building on Shirky's (2011) previously mentioned limitation that social media can do as much harm as good, he also emphasises that governments with authoritarian rule often resort to cutting off communication networks to impede activists from communicating in real-time and sharing evidence of incidents. This restriction hampers the ability of activists to utilise social media for mobilisation effectively and to spread awareness in such contexts. Furthermore, Shirky (2015, p.22) indicates that using social media in extreme cases can result in "a matter of life and death". The Iranian government has taken severe measures to deter the political use of social media, with the

use of executions a frequent tactic. Disturbingly, a plethora of evidence supports this assertion (HRW, 2022)

Moreover, Morozov (2011) raises important questions about who makes the tools, controls the tools, and has the most access to the tools. He highlights that the Internet provides authoritarian governments, even those who claim to be democratic, with effective means to monitor, infiltrate, and weaken political opposition movements. Authorities in Iran have been blocking access to websites and slowing down the internet to stop Iranian citizen journalists from documenting rights abuses and prevent social media and messaging apps from mobilising people. As has already been indicated, in Iran, many international social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have been banned, and as Dagres (2021) mentions, this has been happening for some time. Vega (2022, p.12) clearly demonstrates this regarding the situation in Iran, describing the use of social media there as a 'double-edged sword'. The Iranian government frequently uses social media to spread false information and track down dissidents. Several scholars note that the regime has successfully taken advantage of social media platforms and adopted tactics similar to those used by opposition groups to achieve its own objectives (Poell, 2015; Vega,2022). They have done so by using fake accounts to post about non-existent demonstrations, meetings, and gatherings and monitoring which profiles engage with these posts and use that information to locate and arrest dissidents (Vega, 2022). Through the implementation of legal and technological measures, the government has succeeded in regulating the utilisation of technology. These limitations cast doubt on the effectiveness of social media in facilitating social movements and, thus, women's empowerment in authoritarian regimes. The inherent restrictions and constraints posed by these regimes can hinder the effectiveness of social media in bringing about positive change, thereby impeding the progress of feminist movements in these contexts. Therefore, it is imperative to explore potential tactics being used within the example of Iran.

Chapter 5: Methodology

It has been established that the rise of the internet and the emergence of social media has led to new ways of creating social movements and achieving social change, particularly for the most marginalised women. Due to social media being a recent phenomenon, research in this area is still in its early stages (Young, Selander and Vaast, 2019). Given that this movement is ongoing, the aim of this research is to offer insights into social media's role in facilitating social movements and driving social change, specifically focusing on its impact as an empowering tool for women. Moreover, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the future trajectory of the movement. To do so, a qualitative approach was deemed the most effective for this investigation. The study involved content analysis of Instagram posts associated with the hashtag #womenlifefreedom. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Instagram was chosen as the platform for analysis based on several factors. One of these factors relates to the research gap in analysing visual-based social media platforms. As noted by Highfield and Leaver (2016), there has been a significant lag in research on the visual aspect of online communication compared to the analysis of popular social media platforms that primarily rely on text-based content such as Twitter and Facebook. Therefore, this thesis opted to investigate alternative platforms that are more focused on visual content. Perhaps a more significant reason is the Iranian context, where several social media platforms are prohibited, making Instagram one of the few exceptions that is accessible and widely used (Dagres, 2021). Regarding the selection of the #womenlifefreedom hashtag, this was motivated by its extensive recognition and the crucial role its slogan plays in driving the campaign.

Content analysis is a useful tool for understanding how individuals perceive and approach various issues, including social movements, recruitment strategies, campaign effectiveness, information sharing, and the use of the Internet by activists (Chon and Park, 2020). Moreover, as Kleinheksel, et al. (2020) state, it can provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by systematically interpreting large amounts of data. Therefore, content analysis was deemed the most appropriate method.

Previous research methods

The progression of social media has fostered a new approach to activism, one which takes place online (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). As part of this section, the methods used by researchers analysing similar phenomena will be described. Previous studies on social media as a platform for activism have

typically used qualitative analysis, primarily utilising surveys or interviews. These studies tend to concentrate on text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). Considering the extent of state repression that has been highlighted in Iran, there are obvious difficulties associated with this method. Due to state repression and violent tactics, gathering information via reaching out to interview subjects could put them at risk. While these platforms appear limited in this context, it is imperative to highlight that one of the defining characteristics of social media is the vast array of methods available for generating and disseminating content. Social media platforms offer users a plethora of options for creating and sharing content with their audience. These can range from written language in the form of texts, to the use of hashtags to categorise and connect users with similar interests, to the visual representation of ideas through images and videos (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). As this study analyses Instagram, a primarily visual-based platform, focus shall be placed on previous research using visual methods.

<u>Visually</u>

Advancements in technology and platform capabilities have facilitated the prevalence of visual content in social media and its everyday usage. Consequently this has led to others to advocate for its facilitation of social movements (Casas and Williams, 2018; Cornet et al., 2017; Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Kazemi, 2022; Poell, 2014). Kazemi (2022) emphasises the importance of visuals in engaging audiences and sustaining interest in social mobilisation, as well as helping to enhance public perception of such initiatives.

As such, the digital image seemingly holds "great social and political power" (Highfield and Leaver, 2016, p.5). This power, particularly through the medium of social media has been examined by several scholars. Cornet et al. (2017), for instance, collected images and videos posted using hashtags and commonalities concerning the types of images within each of the social movements. Several themes emerged: Photographs taken on the ground, Infographics created by organisations, User-created art and photography, and Repurposed media. Their findings indicated a possible underlying pattern in social movement content posted on Instagram and they concluded that due to their visual culture photographs and other visual artifacts can have a significant impact on activism. Similarly, Stewart and Schultze's (2019) study emphasises the use of social media images for mobilisation. Using visual analysis, the researchers examined the impact of protestors who published hijab-less photos on MyStealthyFreedom

Facebook pages in protest against compulsory hijabs. Their findings suggest that the aggregate number of photos contributed to the escalation of movement activities and contributed to the forward movement.

The importance of emotions in mobilising NSMs has been previously highlighted in Chapter One, with scholars like Melucci (1980) and Polletta and Jasper (2001) affirming their influential role. In relation to this Bradley et al. (2001) assert that the significance of images lies in their ability to evoke powerful physiological and emotional reactions from viewers. Similarly Corrigall-Brown (2012) advocates for the effectiveness of visuals in eliciting emotional responses, asserting that emotions evoked by images have the potential to capture the attention of readers and motivate their engagement with a particular issue.

Together, these studies stress the significance of visual imagery, specifically in evoking emotions, which, as Chapter One has indicated, plays a crucial role in forming NSMs.

Overview of Instagram

As previously discussed, this thesis examines social media from the perspective of affordances. In this regard, Niederer (2018, p. 46) emphasises that each platform possesses its distinct "formatting, prioritizing, and recommending content" mechanisms, thereby having its own unique set of affordances. Consequently, before proceeding, it is crucial to assess the platform under analysis, Instagram. Established in 2010, Instagram originally emerged as a platform primarily focused on enhancing aesthetics through users' ability to share photos and videos (Manovich, 2017). Instagram now has over one billion users worldwide (Constine, 2018), with young women among the majority of active users (WeAreSocial, 2019). As Caldeira (2021) notes, the platform is now a significant part of many people's daily routines. The act of 'Scrolling' is particularly important to mention and refers to *the act* of browsing through the posts, stories on your 'feed' (homepage). By engaging in scrolling, you can view all the posts shared by the accounts you follow. Consequently, Caldeira (2021, p.5) states that the combination of these affordances has meant "Instagram carries an underlying gendered political potential". Instagram was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, as indicated, previous research

has mostly examined social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which mainly involve text-based content. However, Instagram places greater importance on photography-based content. As such, this study intends to provide insight into social movement research on social media using a platform different from Twitter or Facebook in its use of social media. Secondly, as the focus of this study is Iran, it is important to take into consideration the context. As established, Iran has a complex relationship with social media, with most international platforms banned, apart from Instagram (Dagres, 2021). Consequently, Instagram is the second most used platform after WhatsApp, with a report by Iranian Students Polling Agency indicating 45.3 percent of total social media users in Iran use it (Dagres, 2021). For these reasons, Instagram was considered the most accessible platform and, thus, the best for analysis.

Current protests

Furthermore, it is also essential to present a summary of the case study. After being arrested by the morality police several days earlier for wearing an "improper" hijab, on the 16th of September 2022, 22-year-old Iranian, Mahsa Amini died in police custody. Her death sparked outrage and resulted in some of the most significant protests the country has ever seen (Askew, 2023). Since then, the protests have expanded both nationally and internationally, with people from diverse backgrounds participating. Several individuals have observed that these protests seem distinct from the ones that occurred in the past. For instance, these protests are centred around women's concerns, such as the mandatory wearing of the hijab, something that has not been the subject of attention previously (Chotiner, 2022). In addition, these protests appear to be far more unified than others have been in Iran, involving people from different generations, ethnicities, classes and faiths (Askew, 2023). There is a strong case being made by experts that the current protests signify a call for a revolution rather than mere incremental adjustments, posing a significant threat to the governing authority (Moayer, 2023; Askew, 2023). As such, some suggest that change is on the horizon. Others, however, disagree, arguing that although there is significant media attention and criticism of Iran, it is highly unlikely that the protests will result in the removal of the Ayatollahs (Bob, 2022). Further, Bob (2022) points to a combination of the absence of a prominent protest leader, a unifying message to bring together various groups, and the harsh response of the regime as reasons behind this. Perhaps Vega (2022) is right that "we can only wait for time to show how these ongoing events will end up"; however, this study aims to provide some insight.

Research design

Data collection:

When designing data collection protocols, Pearce et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of considering the affordances of the research tools. Thus, several tools were considered before choosing Phantom as the appropriate method of collection. Phantom is an application that enables media to be searched by hashtag and downloaded in bulk. Due to the huge number of posts associated with the hashtag (over 181,000) and the inability to date specific searches on Instagram, using this application enabled an exhaustive means of collection. To gather the posts, the hashtag #womenlifefreedom was inputted into the search bar, and the application scraped data from 500 associated posts. Only open and public posts were considered, following the privacy policy of Facebook and Instagram in force in October 2019. The dates of publication from these posts spanned a two-month period ranging from 23rd April 2023 – 23rd June 2023. Phantom utilises an open API to extract data from social media platforms, which includes information such as the date and time when public posts are shared, usernames, comment counts, like count, captions, geographic location, and hyperlinks to each individual post. To manage the data obtained, it was stored using Excel in a systematic and secure manner to facilitate analysis.

Out of the overall data set of 500 posts collected using Phantom, irrelevant posts were weeded out. Posts that were not related to the campaign, such as advertisements, fashion, and references to causes unrelated to the protests in Iran, were considered irrelevant and therefore classified as spam. As a result, they were not included in the final sample. After excluding these posts, the sample size was reduced to 346, and this became the data set.

Analysis

Since Instagram emphasises photographic content, the primary method of analysis was visual. Concerning this type of analysis, Diakopoulos, Naaman, and Kivran-Swaine (2010) indicate that researchers should exercise particular vigilance when examining visual content shared on social media, paying attention to various patterns within the images. These patterns may include elements such as location/environment, lighting, cropping, non-verbal expressions, dress styles, figures, and layout. However, several scholars have suggested that both textual and visual analysis are crucial in social media research (Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Hochman, 2014; Highfield and Leaver, 2016).

Hochman (2014) for instance argues that the networked nature of online images signifies a conceptual shift wherein the textual and numerical elements are not seen as mere additions to the visual component but are recognised as integral parts of the social media image itself. In other words, the combination of text, numbers, and visuals forms a cohesive entity within the realm of social media imagery, emphasising their interconnectedness and interdependenceHighfield and Leaver (2016) reinforce this view by asserting that as our social media communication becomes more visually oriented, it is crucial for social media research to equally emphasise the inclusion of visual and mixed content and cultures in the realm of social media. Acknowledging the importance of text as highlighted by the scholars above, while visual analysis remained the primary method, textual analysis in the form of post descriptions was also referred to provide further clarification for the context of the visuals. To overcome language barriers, Google Translate was utilised for cases where text appeared in descriptions and images with text. In addition, other tools such as Yandex (reverse image searching) were used to help clarify the context.

Coding

It's important to code or categorise information, as Kleinheksel et al. (2020, p.129) explained, "codes are the currency of content analysis." Codes are brief labels that accurately describe the various meanings found within a piece of text, according to Saldana (2009). As previously mentioned, coding was based on framing by Benford and Snow (1988), involving core elements of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. In addition, the work of Gamson (1992) was also used specifically in relation to the latter frame. Additional open coding was conducted to identify themes within these main elements. This involved searching for patterns, similarities, and differences. It is crucial to acknowledge that due to the intricate nature of the research area, there is often overlap and intersection among the identified categories. Therefore, when assigning a category to a post, the approach followed was to select the most prevalent category observed within the content of the post.

Methodological and ethical considerations:

Regarding the tools themselves, currently, most of the available tools are designed for marketing purposes, and there are no specialised tools for conducting social media research. Thus, although Phantom successfully obtained data from posts, it is not designed for research. It is important to note

that regarding the selected time frame (23rd April – 23rd June), it would have been preferable if a timeframe could be selected during the early stages of the protests. Unfortunately, accessing historical data was not feasible due to the revised privacy policy and the inability of the scraping tools scope. Moreover, within the realm of social media research, issues pertaining to self-representation, authenticity, and performance are frequently brought up. Using social media in times of breaking news, unrest, and crises, certain individuals purposefully generate false information that can unjustly hold innocent groups accountable, misrepresent them, or disseminate deceptive reports about occurrences that are not factual. Consequently, another important factor to consider is the legitimacy of the posts, which cannot be fully determined.

In concert with methodological concerns, several ethical questions exist around analysing social media platforms. As established, past research concerning women's empowerment has utilised primary data as the main method of analysis, such as surveys and interviews. However, due to several reasons pertaining to language barriers and the current circumstances concerning the extent of state oppression, it was decided that this would not be an appropriate method. Furthermore, to maintain privacy, this study does not share any identifying features of members, such as usernames, images, or locations within the transcript. Instead, anonymising codes in the form of 'PostID' shall be used in areas of analysis in which features are critical. If necessary, the dataset can be provided upon request.

Chapter 6: Findings and Analysis

The affordances granted through Instagram provide a space where individuals can share visual content through the #womenlifefreedom aiding in forming a social movement. Using Benford and Snow's (1988) popular framework involving diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames to decipher posts associated with the #womenlifefreedom several findings emerged. The following section highlights and addresses several themes that emerged within each category.

Diagnostic

Diagnostic frames concern posts that identify who or what is to blame for the current situation. In addition, these frames also serve to identify and clarify the nature of the "situation" or problem at hand.

On the surface, the protests in Iran in September 2022 appear to have been sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini and Iran's strict enforcement of the hijab. The findings indicate that the issue of control surrounding the enforced hijab remains a prominent focus of the protests, as evidenced by several posts explicitly addressing this issue (PostID: 3127918655295900333 and PostID: 3129206137601827533).

However, through a meticulous analysis of the diagnostic frames, several other broader themes emerged, suggesting that the motivations behind the protests are not limited to a singular aspect. Instead, they encompass broader issues related to the regime, including oppression and economic challenges.

Regime oppression

The first and most common theme to surface revolved around the oppression inflicted by the Iranian regime. While posts within this specific theme did touch upon the issue of enforced hijab as a means of controlling bodily autonomy, a more prevalent focus was placed on references to regime violence more generally, particularly in the form of executions and imprisonment.

These were expressed in several ways. The dominant method of conveying regime oppression was through the visual representation of individuals who had suffered under the regime, either through death or arbitrary arrests. This was accomplished through various means, including through visual and textual depictions and a combination of both. The most prevalent method of conveying regime oppression was through the use of photographs showcasing the victims themselves, accompanied by detailed captions of the individuals with an emphasis on the actions perpetrated by the state. Several of these provided more detailed information by linking to news articles (PostID: 3129168797642104959).

Although less frequent, artwork was another method within this frame that served to express instances of violence, both by sharing pieces created by artists who had been imprisoned and by depicting scenes of enforcement (PostID: 3128140253529273781).

A notable observation is the amount of posts that shed light on victims of the regime's oppressive tactics focusing on men. While the victimisation of women was also expressed, this is a somewhat surprising finding owing to the movement being women-led and the hashtag itself referring specifically to women.

Economic problems

Another theme that emerged revolved around the economic challenges in Iran. Aspects such as poverty and inflation were highlighted by several posts. These occurred in the form of descriptive texts and diagrams (PostID: 3128592967350485047). Although these images occurred far less than those revolving around regime oppression, it suggests that the movement encompasses a range of diverse issues.

Who is considered to blame?

Indications of who was to blame appeared to be leaders, specifically Ayatollah Ali Khamenini, the police and the Islamic Republic more generally.

Prognostic

Prognostic frames concerned posts that indicated any plans or desires for the future, including potential actions to be taken (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Concerning posts indicating future desires, freedom and hope emerged as common themes. The majority of these were expressed by women and contained captions such as "*... thirty-four years old! Free Iran is my dream*" (PostID: 3128473976925259264), "*If you choose the "hope" Everything will be possible*" (PostID: 3128503081619332400) and *"For freedom"* (PostID: 3127335509131795182). Notably, women were prominent in expressing this sentiment through portraits without wearing a hijab.

Along with posts expressing hopes for the future, there were also posts outlining the solutions that would enable those hopes to be reached.

Revolution

A recurring theme that surfaced, albeit possibly subtly, was the symbolism of the word "No", which seemed to allude to a rejection of the current regime. "No" was commonly used and depicted in the form of bold letters. One post that stands out shows the word "No" in bold red across Ayatollah Ali Khomeini's face (PostID: 3128833970246200882). As the supreme leader of Iran, Khomeini represents the whole regime. Consequently, the depiction of "No" across his face may not only signify a rejection of injustices but also potentially the entire regime. As such, it is potentially suggesting that a more drastic and transformative solution is necessary rather than seeking gradual reforms.

Achieving Gender Equality is Imperative

Several posts have suggested that gender equality is a solution to achieving freedom, emphasising the importance of women's roles. One post (PostID:3128892816886420950) expressed this solution quite blatantly, stating that *"my hope for Iran's future lies with women first and foremost."* In addition, another post referenced in detail the need for awareness of gender divisions in order for change to occur, stating *"This is part of Revolution because the divide of masculine and feminine not only applies to the superiority of man and woman but also to man and nature. And this needs to be brought to awareness for things to shift in the way people view their surroundings."*(PostID: 3127799448435984343). Subsequently, the user posted a portrait that represented their unique identity

and appeared in defiance of conventional gender norms and binaries. This was evident from their clothing and hairstyles not falling under the stereotypical depiction of a Muslim women.

Other posts expressed similar sentiments relying on imagery to convey the importance of women's freedom for overall freedom in Iran. This particular post (PostID: 3127192452233815098) shows two women engaging in a light-hearted interaction. Notably, they are seen wearing dresses with their hair uncovered, signifying a departure from Iran's traditional norms and expectations.

The need for global solidarity

Based on the available data, it appears that implementing concerted efforts as a united global community is deemed a potential solution. One particular post (PostID: 3128826939568392418) alluded to the use of diplomatic pressure on the Iranian government in addition to global solidarity with the protestors. In association with this, an image of in-person activism was presented, showing a display of unity between a woman wearing a hijab and another woman without a hijab holding hands. Another post expressed this by necessitating the need for intensifying global pressure on the Islamic Republic, showing protests outside the Swedish parliament (Post ID: 3130805963651602027).

Motivational

Motivational frames refer to posts that aim to influence individuals to engage and take meaningful steps to address the issue actively (Snow and Benford, 1988). Based on Gamson's (1992) assertion that motivational frames consist of three elements, injustice, identity, and agency, the findings shall be discussed in relation to each.

Injustice

It is important to note that injustice frames resonate closely with diagnostic frames (Khazraee and Novak, 2019). Similarly to the theme of oppression within diagnostic frames, many posts within the motivational frame referenced instances of regime violence. However, unlike diagnostic frames, the posts emphasised the individuals rather than the actions of the regime.

Numerous images were shared showing the victim combined in the captions with the hashtag #For followed by the name of the person who lost their life, implying that their death is being used as a source of inspiration. These references encompassed both individuals who lost their lives in the ongoing protests and included mentions of those who were killed in previous instances of protest.

In addition, an intriguing finding emerged concerning the manner in which these images were exhibited. The findings revealed that many posts mentioned young victims, and artwork was the preferred medium for portraying them. Drawings were commonly used, with several depicting the victim with their family members. Furthermore, the images had multiple references to birthdays, which were represented by the inclusion of cakes and candles (PostID: 3127090863967107749; PostID: 3127174810480138391; PostID: 3127811224800531099)

Depicting victims in this way, using references to birthdays and family, undeniably elicits strong emotion. Particularly the depiction of birthday cakes and candles, especially concerning young victims, suggests what could and should have been. In addition to shedding light on the heinous acts perpetrated by the regime, this approach effectively appeals to emotions, serving as a compelling catalyst for mobilising action. In this sense, by employing motivational framing, victims of the regime are arguably transformed into symbols that inspire and motivate action. The utilisation of symbolism as a means of motivation was evident in other posts as well.

Agency

According to Gamson (1992), agency is the second component of motivational frames and pertains to recognising the potential for altering the current situation through collective action.

The symbol of " نه" (No) also appeared to be a common theme within the motivational frame. The symbol was used in several ways within the theme of Agency. This was evident through various visual representations, the most common being the use of artwork that included bold graphics, drawings, and sculptures containing the word 'No' in the Farsi language.

On many occasions, this symbol was accompanied by text either within the caption or incorporated into the image itself: " نه : کلمه یک الا نداریم شما با حرفی هیچ" (translation: "We have nothing to say to you except one word! No") (PostID: 3129829773865860934 and PostID: 3128375259382864069). From this perspective, combining the visual of " نه" (No) with textual elements appears to evoke an emotional response, indicating a sense of outrage, dissatisfaction, or defiance among like-minded individuals and potentially leading to mobilisation.

The use of symbolism concerning " نه" (No) was also used specifically in relation to women. In cases where it incorporated depictions of women, it appeared as a symbol for setting boundaries or asserting limits and asserting personal rights and autonomy. An example of this can be seen in this image (PostID: 3129780230846238325), which appears to address bodily autonomy in the form of abortion rights. Through the medium of drawing, one post presented a group of women collectively vocalising their dissent towards a figure resembling a doctor, accompanied by an arrow in the shape of a hand pointing towards him, bearing the word " نه" (No). In addition to revealing emotions of anger, the image indicated a sense of power and solidarity among the women, communicating a clear message of asserting one's own agency.

A further noteworthy observation pertaining to the symbol of " نه" (No) is that several were written in various languages. This appears to highlight global solidarity, emphasising the concept of worldwide unity and mutual support.

The mention of asserting one's own agency, particularly regarding bodily rights, leads to a further symbol identified, hair. An intriguing observation that surfaced regarding the symbolism of hair was the prevalence of uncovered hair in nearly every portrayal of women across various mediums. In numerous instances, the focus on women's hair stood out prominently and was used as a direct form of defiance of the regime's compulsory hijab policies (PostID: 3127386057214426538 and PostID: 3127143120885321115). In other instances, although still emphasised, its depiction was far more subtle (PostID: 3130776699322638173).

Another prevalent symbol that arose was that of a clenched fist. The clenched fist is a well-known symbol associated with activism. Although found less frequently in the data, similarly to the use of " نه" (No), it can serve as a visual representation of solidarity, determination, and collective action. In several instances, the fist appears to be used as an attempt to mobilise by evoking feelings of empowerment and resilience (Example: PostID: 3128493828239388073; PostID: 3130455284043147034; Post ID: 3130126547465675605).

One interesting finding concerns reference to women's mobilisation and empowerment specifically. Several images reveal this, with subtle indications such as red-painted nails on a clenched fist or a fist grasping a woman's hair (Example: PostID: 3130455284043147034). This supports the theme of gender issues mentioned in the diagnostic frame above and alludes to the vital role women are playing in the protests.

Other ways in which visual depictions of the clenched fist were used were to call for direct action in the form of fundraisers (PostID: 3129926192466908264). As the literature indicates, although vital, collective action does not just concern mobilising new activists; digital media is also used to generate financial contributions for their endeavours (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Doan and Toledano, 2018). This also helps in scaling up social movements adding to their success.

Identity

Identity is the final aspect of motivational framing identified by Gamson (1992). Previous Chapters have highlighted the significance of individual and collective identity in driving successful social change. In the case of #womenlifefreedom, the analysis of associated posts reveals numerous instances that reflect subjective and collective expressions of identity.

Unsurprisingly, a common theme that emerged revolved around women's identity. The capabilities provided by visual platforms like Instagram enable the clear portrayal of one's identity by images. The

findings exhibited a significant proportion of posts showcasing women, predominantly depicted without their hijabs, predominantly conveying emotions of either joy or introspection. As alluded to in Chapter Three, substantial research indicates that selfies serve as a widespread medium for self-expression, granting individuals the ability to control and shape their desired perception. However, perhaps surprisingly the findings showed only a handful were taken in the form of a 'selfie'. Instead many of the photographs of women were taken by someone else. Interestingly further analysis revealed that, in many instances, their faces were not entirely visible. Women often looked away from the camera or used props such as facemasks and sunglasses to cover themselves (Examples: PostID: 3125164679500175211 and PostID: 3131404562925531977).

Many of the posts characterised by artistic expressions were created by female Iranian artists. Some used photographs, others used paintings such as this one named 'Transformation', where half of the image portrays silenced, grey women while the other half depicts a butterfly (PostID: 3127942801156302181). Whilst others exhibited artistic expression through dance (PostD: 3127558215792963790) or music (PostID: 3128683186493932855). Irrespective of the specific form of artistic expression adopted, the act itself provided a means for women to express themselves individually. Moreover, posting it on Instagram evidently transforms the private-public distinction, allowing for issues to be raised and others to become aware, a particular characteristic of NSMs.

Another facet of identity that emerged highlighted subjectivity and the intersectional aspects within the movement. Several posts conveyed identity through a merging of women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights. A particularly striking image is one in which two women are depicted engaging in a kiss while not wearing hijabs, both of which are acts that are strictly prohibited and illegal in Iran (PostID: 3127407810509831030).

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

With the aim of delineating the role of social media in facilitating social movements that drive social change, particularly in relation to women's empowerment and women-led movements, the final chapter shall situate the findings outlined above and discuss them in reference to the research questions proposed. This section will be grounded in the first research question, which explores the potential strategies employed through social media while integrating the second research question that centres explicitly on women's empowerment. Furthermore, this chapter acknowledges the limitations of the study and offers suggestions for future research to enhance our understanding of the subject matter. The findings of this study indicate that the affordances granted by social media, particularly Instagram, seem to reinforce its function as what Diamond (2010, p.70) deems, a "liberation technology" for Iranians in general and, more specifically, for women. Henceforth, while the movement in Iran is still in progress, social media appears to have thus far played a crucial role in facilitating the ongoing movement in the country. As previously established, the current movement has been identified as being led by women. Notably, this marks the first-ever women-led movement in Iran, making it even more significant. Empowerment is at the core of social change (Drury & Reicher, 2009). Therefore, in analysing this movement and its facilitation through social media, women's empowerment emerges as a fundamental component. The literature has established empowerment as a multidimensional process depending on its context, thus, this thesis has conceptualised empowerment as encompassing both individual and collective dimensions, integrating socio-cultural and psychological elements as outlined by Malhotra et al. (2002) in Chapter Two. Furthermore, when contemplating empowerment, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique experiences of each individual and appreciate these disparities. Consequently, intersectionality has also been regarded as an essential element of complete empowerment, especially in emphasising the importance of collective efforts and opposition in attaining empowerment. Based on this conceptualisation, the findings of this study reveal multiple instances that demonstrate the empowerment of Iranian women through the effective use of social media.

Amplifying voices

One way in which social media has been strategised is by providing a powerful means for individuals, in particularly women, to amplify their voices and share their perspectives. As Rouach (2019) has stated, social media empowers individuals to challenge dominant narratives about femininity by providing a platform for alternative discourses and oppressed voices.

This has been done using a variety of techniques, the first of which pertains to the frequent use of symbols. Cultural factors, including symbols, are widely recognised in the literature as pivotal catalysts for the emergence of social movements (Melucci, 1980). As Milan (2015) indicates, social media has revolutionised the process of giving symbols significance in the age of digital technology. In the context of Instagram, its affordances, specifically, its emphasis on visual content, create an environment where symbols can flourish.

The symbol " نه" (No) was the most common, found in prognostic and motivational frames. Although the word may seem simple, its meaning can hold significant weight when placed within a specific context and employed in conjunction with other elements. As the findings showed, " نه" (No) was used as a symbol in various ways. The first concerns its use in reference to regime opposition. As demonstrated in the findings and supported by the literature, the Iranian regime employs various means, including stringent laws and the utilisation of violence, to exert control over its citizens. Consequently, activists are compelled to exercise caution in their actions. Through the use of visual representations of the word "نه" (No) on social media platforms like Instagram, individuals are able to convey a message of defiance and intolerance towards the regime without directly expressing dissent. This method of communication allows individuals to remain engaged and connected while also providing a certain level of protection and anonymity. By utilising this perhaps subtler form of expression, individuals can maintain a sense of control and agency despite the oppressive political climate. While this appears to be a successful tactic, Poell (2014) raises a significant argument, suggesting that activists might engage in self-censorship by employing symbols, pseudonyms, and specific language choices. This behaviour could be perceived as a consequence of state influence, leading users to avoid expressing direct political criticism and challenging the authorities at the centre.

Nevertheless, despite the validity of this argument, it can be contended that the mere act of sharing content initially leads to a certain degree of empowerment.

These findings corroborate the assertions made by both Shirazi (2011) and Roauch (2019) regarding the capacity of social media to offer a public platform for marginalised voices. As such, visual symbols representing women can be considered a potentially effective strategy in amplifying women's voices by conveying a message within the #womenlifefreedom social media campaign.

Consciousness-raising

Connected to the concept of amplification is the role of social media in raising awareness and fostering consciousness. The results indicate that by serving as a platform for women to express their voices social media also functions as a tool to promote consciousness-raising. The process of consciousness-raising, identified as a crucial aspect of empowerment by Maholtra et al. (2002), involves fostering collective awareness of injustice. Through raising awareness, individuals become capable of recognising their position within the broader social framework and discerning the root causes of their oppression (Kazemi, 2022). In Chapter Three, the significance of social media for consciousness-raising in promoting women's empowerment, especially in highly repressive communities, has already been indicated. Through the predominantly symbolic expression of dissent towards the regime, women draw attention to their circumstances and present condition, creating an awareness of the intense oppression they face. Attaining this awareness is a crucial stage in the empowerment process, and once achieved, it has the potential to unlock additional elements that are vital for empowerment and the facilitation of NSMs.

Identity

Identity formation is an additional crucial aspect that contributes to the facilitation of NSM and empowerment and is evident in the research findings. As previously acknowledged, the concept of

identity encompasses both individual and collective aspects. Specifically in relation to individual aspects, factors like self-esteem and self-efficacy, which contribute to psychological empowerment, hold significance. In terms of the research outcomes, the platform seemed to enable various avenues for expressing identity.

One way in which women's identity was formulated was through photographs. As indicated by the research findings, the majority of photographs featuring women portrayed them without their hijabs, predominantly expressing emotions of either joy or introspection. The manifestation of joy, specifically, signifies a notable level of self-esteem, a crucial aspect of empowerment emphasized by Malhotra (2002). Nevertheless, the findings also revealed that in several of the photographs, the women's faces were partially obscured or not fully visible. Taking the context into account, these visual patterns could suggest that women are cautious about sharing images that could be easily recognised as their own. As such, most women preferred to obscure their faces and remove other identifying features to protect their identity while participating in the campaign. The observation made by Poell (2014) mentioned above regarding activists potentially resorting to self-censorship through several method could potentially be relevant in this context as well. Nevertheless, despite employing such methods, it is important to acknowledge that the act of sharing these images by the women themselves, especially within the context of Iran, remains highly significant.

Within the Iranian context, oppression is not solely limited to women; individuals within the LGBTQ+ community also face significant challenges (HRW, 2010). As Caldeira (2021), has stated, social media platforms play a crucial role in expanding the accessibility of diverse femininities by providing exposure to a broader range of feminine perspectives that are often absent in mainstream media. The findings consistently demonstrate the intersectionality between women and individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ through various posts. These posts depict women challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity and showcasing LGBTQ+ relationships. Recognising and expressing these diverse and intersecting identities has been firmly established as crucial in avoiding the homogenisation of women and promoting complete empowerment (Stone, 2004). Moreover, the presence of diversity united by a shared goal is a distinctive characteristic of NSMs and contributes to the success of the movement (Weldon, 2011).

In addition, although past research has shown the use of selfies as a common medium for self-expression, as indicated by the findings, the photographs featured in the study were generally captured by individuals other than the women depicted in the images. The absence of selfies signifies that the activists are not acting alone; at least one other person in their immediate surroundings supports the respective protester and is complicit in her act of resistance. This also implies the presence of aspects such as solidarity and collective action, which are fundamental to both empowerment and NSMs.

Symbols also acted as a form of identity formation, particularly collectively. When the symbolisation of "نه" (No) was combined with references to women it held an even more explicit meaning. This was also evident in the use of the clenched fist as a symbol, particularly in reference to women. The patriarchal culture deeply ingrained in Iranian society, as discussed in Chapter Four, emphasise that women in Iran have been perpetually made into political symbols. Whether during the post-revolution period, where they were seen as symbols of 'modernity,' or in the current era, where they are expected to embody the "ideal" Muslim women (Mortazavi and Poelker, 2017). In any sense, these symbolisations contribute to what Kendall (2010) refers to as an 'ascribed status' imposed upon Iranian women by the state. Consequently, as this status is predetermined, it diminishes women's autonomy and agency.

However through the symbolisations of "نه" (No) and the clenched fist women appear to be asserting their agency and regaining their autonym. This was particularly demonstrated in the image of a group of women shouting at a doctor, seemingly referring to abortion rights (PostID: 3129780230846238325). As Chapter Four has shown, in 2021 a law was passed, further tightening restrictions on abortion and leading women to lose even more of their bodily autonomy. However, by sharing images such of these this creates a sense of power and solidarity among the women, communicating a clear message of asserting one's own agency and redefining their identity.

Not only did the images contribute to indicating identity, but the content creators themselves and their creative expressions also played a significant role in showcasing identity. As Polletta and Jasper (2001)

have highlighted, symbolic visual performances are also essential in constructing identities within social movements. In particular, within NSMs, participants actively engage in enacted processes that employ cultural expressions to convey their collective identity (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995). This is apparent in the findings, particularly through the form of cultural expression, using mediums such as paintings, drawings and photography. Art is regularly used for self-expression, with its purpose to evoke emotion it is a successful medium for mobilisation. In particular by sharing more personal forms of art it suggested a blur of the private to public distinction (Melucci, 1980).

These expressions of identity (NO', fist, identity photographs) collectively contribute to the formation of what Kendall (2010) suggests as a shift from the ascribed status imposed on women by the state to an achieved status voluntarily attained through personal choice, merit, or direct effort. In this regard, the capabilities of social media provide Iranian women, who have been marginalised from numerous public spaces in society, with a virtual public sphere where they have autonomy over self-expression and engagement.

Limitations

In the interest of transparency, this paragraph sheds light on various limitations inherent to this particular study conducted within the context of Iran. The primary limitation pertains to the analysis being conducted within the context of Iran, while the researcher originates from the Western region. Attempts were made to address this limitation by providing comprehensive contextual background on Iran, however some challenges could not be overcome. The inherent cultural differences between the researcher and the study area posed challenges in conducting a comprehensive analysis of all the posts. Posts containing textual elements proved particularly trying due to the researcher's inability to speak the native language, Farsi. As previously stated, incorporating textual elements was considered essential to provide the necessary context for the images. Consequently the researcher resorted to utilising tools like Google Translate to assist in handling the textual component of the analysis. Whilst this provided some assistance with language barriers, it was not the same as having fluency in Farsi. Therefore, it is possible that these limitations resulted in potential underlying themes being overlooked.

The second limitation relates to the data scraping tool employed. Since social media research is a relatively new field, there are currently no specialised tools designed specifically for research purposes to scrape data. Consequently, the lack of ability to specify elements such as the time-frame resulted in a relatively restricted period available for analysis. With the growing focus on research in this field, there is potential for the development of future tools that could address and overcome this limitation.

Conclusion

The past decade has witnessed rapid technological advancements, leading to the designation of the present era as the age of digitisation. As a result, this transformation has brought about a profound shift, fundamentally changing the way we communicate and engage with one another. These advancements have had far-reaching implications, particularly in terms of facilitating empowerment and empowering individuals as well as fostering the growth of NSMs, particularly in the most oppressive societies. The purpose of this study was to offer insights into the role of social media in facilitating social movements and driving social change specifically within the authoritarian context of Iran. Furthermore, considering the acknowledged leadership of women in the ongoing movement in Iran, this study aimed to assesses how new social media technologies are affecting the situation for women in Iran.

In order to address these challenges, this thesis initially delved into the contemporary landscape of social movements, identifying NSMs as the most suitable type in light of the digitisation phenomenon their emphasis on cultural elements. Within this, framing was highlighted as the most appropriate method in understanding NSMs and thus provided the framework for later analysis.

Subsequently, an examination of feminism and theories of empowerment was conducted to conceptualise the process of empowerment. Based on the literature, empowerment was comprehended as a multidimensional process that encompasses socio-cultural and psychological elements. Through this combination of socio-cultural and psychological elements, this provided key areas to look for in the

analysis relating to areas such as self-esteem, collective awareness of injustice and visibility. In addition, the importance of intersectionality was highlighted as a crucial element to examine in the empowerment process.

Given that social media's role as a facilitator of NSMs and empowerment is the central focus of this study, the subsequent chapter delved into a detailed examination of these interconnected concepts. Analysis of previous studies indicated that social media plays a crucial role in both empowerment and NSMs, specifically as a catalyst for communication, mobilisation, and the formation of identities. Despite these strengths, this section also acknowledged the potential limitations to social media, several of which pertain to the platforms themselves.

Considering that this thesis is centred on Iran, it proceeded to delve into the Iranian context, specifically focusing on the status of women and the distinct oppressive tactics implemented against them. Drawing on insights from multiple scholars, the mechanisms employed by the Iranian state, both prior to and following the revolution, to exert control over women were highlighted. Following this, it explored historical instances of women's resistance, particularly within the realm of social media. This demonstrated several recent campaigns such as MSF and their reliance on social media for their success.

Subsequently, the methodology involved conducting a visual content analysis of posts utilising the hashtag #womenlifefreedom. This approach was chosen to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the topic and extract valuable insights that could contribute to further analysis and interpretation. As emphasised when discussing NSMs, each post was categorised into diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames through the utilisation of frame analysis. Then this thesis presented the findings within each category and proceeded to discuss them.

It appears Caldeira (2021) was right in her assertion of Instagram's underlying gendered political potential. As revealed in the findings and discussions, the affordances of social media, specifically Instagram, has significantly enabled Iranian women to play a pivotal role as agents of change, creators

of online content, and active participants in their ongoing struggle for liberation. Instagram has evidently facilitated empowerment in three key areas: amplification of voices, raising consciousness, and fostering identity formation. Each of these elements has been established as equally vital in NSMs. Thus, the findings appear to suggest that platforms like Instagram are significant in facilitating them. Moreover, the visual nature of Instagram has demonstrated its particular efficacy in enabling diverse cultural expressions as a facilitator within NSMs, thus enhancing its role in fostering activism.

This study has brought forth significant inquiries regarding the potential role of social media as a catalyst for social change. Specifically, it has underscored its function as an accessible platform for women in authoritarian regimes, like Iran, to freely express themselves and make their voices heard. As has been indicated, most of the research exploring the impact of social media and social movements has predominantly concentrated on text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter, leaving limited scope for investigations into visually based platforms such as Instagram (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). Moreover, there have been very few attempts at analysing the influence of social media on social change in regions such as Iran, which fall outside the conventional Western context, let alone from a gendered perspective. Thus, the insights gained from this study will prove useful in expanding the research in these, often limited areas. Furthermore, this research can serve as a framework for investigating other contexts where women face significant oppression, potentially contributing to the discovery of solutions for their empowerment.

Whilst this study has provided several interesting findings, to gain even more insight to social media's role, particularly in the case of this ongoing movement, considerably more work will need to be done. A further study could assess the movement using a more comprehensive timeline, for instance examining posts from the beginning of the movement and throughout. By doing so, this could offer a more profound comprehension of how women utilise social media as an initial tool for mobilisation and as an ongoing instrument in their pursuit of empowerment.

The literature and findings unequivocally showcase the tangible manifestation of regime oppression within physical contexts. However, what remains undisclosed in the findings is the degree to which the Iranian regime has sought to exert its oppressive influence in the virtual realm. As such, it is important to acknowledge that these findings may not fully capture the effectiveness of social media, as they did do not delve into the ways in which the Iranian regime exploit social media platforms to implement oppressive tactics. To gain a deeper understanding of this dynamic, researchers could conduct

interviews with activists. Such an approach would provide valuable insights into the specific strategies employed by the regime to suppress dissent, manipulate online narratives, and control information flow. Additionally, it could shed light on the nuanced aspects of women's empowerment within this context, highlighting the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome these.

In conclusion, this thesis advocates for the effective use of social media as a tool to empower women in Iran and elevate their social standing. It argues that social media has played and continues to play a pivotal role in facilitating the ongoing women's-led movement.

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