

Fighting for Women, Life, Freedom Across Borders: A Content Analysis of Internet Activism Displayed in TikTok Videos and Public Protests Concerning the Iranian Protests

Mayson Dowdeswell

MacEwan University

Abstract

This study examined internet activism displayed in TikTok videos and the sharing forms of public protest using TikTok videos regarding the 2022 Iranian protests. A content analysis of the 50 most liked videos using the advanced search “Iran protest 2022” identified eight general themes, including educational awareness, public marches/gatherings, cutting hair, miscellaneous, sports demonstrations, hacking Iranian media/ technologies, purposeful modesty law violations, and burning hijabs. The most prevalent theme of the eight was educational awareness, accounting for 50% of the total videos used in the sample. All videos included in the sample supported the protests and the symbolism provided, and no videos were found to be pro-Islamic regime.

Introduction

Iranian Protests have erupted across Iran and the world starting September 2022 following the death of Kurdish-Iranian 22-year-old Masha (Zhina) Amini, who was detained by the country’s morality police for not following Iran’s veiling laws (Kristen de Groot., 2022, para.1). Demonstrations and protests have erupted following her death which has led to violent crackdowns organized by police including arrests, beatings, and killings (Kristen de Groot., 2022, para. 2). Reports of internet outages and blockages have also been reported as a means to cut off connection with the outside world for protestors (Kristen de Groot., 2022, para. 2). Activists have reported that Iranian protestors are being arrested and taken to Evin Prison where they are tortured and punished for their acts of protest against the government. In an interview, *Penn Today* spoke with American-Iranian historian Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, to discover what she thinks about the

demonstrations and how she thinks Iran will move forward (Kristen de Groot., 2022, para. 4). From this interview, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet shares, “Although we have seen the strangling of women’s voices in the past, this extraordinary movement has amplified people’s strident cries against political repression, in the face of unspeakable peril. The crime that resulted in the unjust and brutal killing of a young woman who was, in fact, very modestly dressed, is nothing short of unconscionable and horrific” (Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet., 2022, as cited in Kristen de Groot., 2022, para. 4). Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet’s direct quote encapsulates the common responses and feelings amongst many fellow protestors in Iran and those watching from across the world. Following Amini’s death, a funeral was held on September 17 in Saqqez, Iran, where viewers gathered and began chanting “Women, Life, Freedom” (Nazanin Shahrokni., 2022, para. 3). Civil unrest eventually followed, and an outcry for freedom and rights to reclaim political voices unfolded. The commencing

protests surrounded the topic of the mass injustices towards Iranian women, especially through demonstrations of many burning their hijabs and cutting their hair in solidarity (Nazanin Shahrokni., 2022, para. 3). Taken to social media by Iranians, there has been an outpouring of internet activism and a great response to protests and demonstrations that have reached all over the globe. Across borders, activists have joined protests for justice, freedom, and women's rights. Some examples include marches and protests in public spaces, and others have raised awareness using social media platforms such as TikTok to educate the masses through short, impactful videos. The social media platform TikTok is extremely useful for discovering types of internet activism used in certain periods and determining how these posters best get information out to the public. This content analysis contributes to the existing literature by exploring how users of the social media platforms, specifically TikTok, can express varying types of internet activism and forms of awareness surrounding the 2022 Iranian Protests.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 50 Tiktok videos posted concerning the 2022 Iranian Protests. TikTok was selected as the data source as it is an easily accessible, free app where users can upload short videos concerning specific topics. The Tiktok videos explored in this study were found using an advanced search feature on TikTok of "Iran Protest 2022" and filtering the results for the most liked videos of the last three months. Examining the videos shared within the last three months (September 16, 2022, to November 21, 2022) was appropriate as this series of protests began to erupt in September 2022 following the death of Masha Amini. Several videos resulted in this search, but only 50 videos accurately represented the search for Iran Protests 2022 were selected. Of the 50 selected, they had the highest number of interactions by users of TikTok in the forms of likes, comments, and shares at the time of data collection.

Sample Selection

The Tiktok videos explored in this study were posted by Tiktok creators between September 16, 2022 and November 21, 2022. The video posts were selected because they had the highest number of likes, shares, and general interactions amongst the videos with the same advanced search, exhibiting that the videos were viewed as the most important or impactful from the possible selection. The 50 videos that were chosen feature easily identifiable themes and categories that demonstrate specific forms of protest and internet activism. Many of the videos included captions, subtitles, and highly visual images that could be understood and dissected for further study. The specific videos used for this study can be found in the Appendix.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The content analysis is conducted based on examining the styles of internet activism regarding the Iranian Protests of 2022. Only a selection of TikTok videos was included in the sample, as some lacked overall accuracy that captured what the study addressed. The TikTok videos were directly related to the advanced search of Iran Protests 2022. The videos included in this study were all from public accounts, so a TikTok account is not necessary to access these videos; however, to filter such results, such as the most liked videos in the past three months, an account is necessary.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was the words in the captions, phrases, and visible themes contained in the 50 most liked videos of the past three months found using the advanced search Iran Protests 2022 posted to TikTok.

Setting and Materials

Data collection for the study took place in the principal researcher's home. Internet access was necessary for the study as the videos were posted to the online social media platform TikTok. Since the videos included in this study were publicly posted, a TikTok account was not necessary to access the videos required.

Coding Procedures

Each of the 50 videos was examined individually and open-coded for words in the captions, phrases, and visual themes that encapsulate the meaning or intent of the shared Tiktok videos. Videos containing two or more possible themes were coded as “miscellaneous.” In instances in which a theme could not be discovered due to being too vague or using languages other than English that could not be adequately translated using TikTok’s translation features, further inferences were not made about the video, and that video was not used. Coded videos were then re-examined to ensure the existence of prominent themes such as haircutting.

Design

A content analysis was used to identify recurring themes of internet activism contained in the TikTok videos regarding the 2022 Iranian Protests.

Results

The results display a variety of themes identified in the 50 TikTok videos in reaction to the 2022 Iranian protests. TikTok internet activists from around the world posted short videos that referenced the 2022 Iranian protests to share emotions surrounding the event, education awareness, and information that has not been posted in other forms of media. The internet activists used Tiktok to reflect upon the events during the 2022 Iranian protests and share information with the greater public. Some users expressed concerns about the protest’s events and the harm committed against Iranian citizens, especially women. Eight general themes were evident in the videos, including, in order of prevalence: 1) educational awareness, 2) public marches/gatherings, 3) cutting hair, 4) miscellaneous, 5) sports demonstrations, 6) hacking Iranian media/ technology, 7) purposeful modesty law violations, 8) burning hijabs (see Figure 1). It should be noted that 6) hacking Iranian media/ technology and 7) purposeful modesty law violations are of the same ranking as in Figure 1. Additional information on these groups will be presented in greater detail below.

Educational awareness refers to videos that share information regarding the 2022 Iranian protests to educate the audience or viewers about specific issues and topics of this interest. Educational awareness was the most popular category among the eight and held 50% of the sample (n=50). The videos in this theme category mainly consisted of videos that shared news about Masha Amini; information about the infamous Evin Prison; human and women’s rights; sharing the life stories of others who have been killed due to protesting, and general information about the historical and cultural background context and what is happening in 2022. For example, one user posted stating laws by which women must live: “The Islamic Regime lowered the age of marriage for women from 18 to 13 years old in 1979, and then they brought it even lower to 9 years old in 1982” and “The Islamic Regime mandates headscarves.”

Public marches/gatherings are events where protestors meet to demand changes concerning the Islamic regime. Most often, these protests are done in peaceful manners to counteract the violence used by the Iranian morality police. Around the world, groups assemble to protest, and it is recorded and posted to social media platforms such as TikTok. This theme was the second most prevalent, comprising 16% of the sample. This category consists of such videos with visible assemblies of people, most often chanting the slogan “women, life, freedom” and “death to [the] dictator.” The *cutting hair* theme category refers to women cutting their hair to show solidarity with those fighting against oppression and the rules of compulsory hijab wearing. Women across the globe cut their hair as a political symbol to show their defiance against the Islamic regime and morality police responsible for killing Masha Amini. This theme is the third most prevalent, comprising 10% of the sample. For example, videos of women can be seen cutting their hair, often in large crowds, as a form of protest.

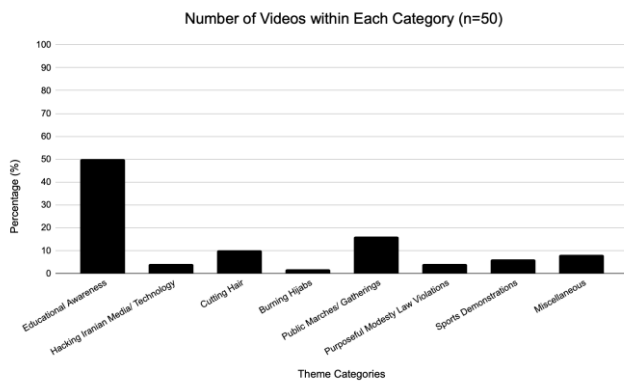


Figure 1. Percentage of Video by Theme Category

The *miscellaneous* theme category consists of two or more general themes represented in Figure 1. The videos generalized by this theme contain ideas that could not be encapsulated into one sole idea. This theme consisted of 8% of all videos in the sample. For instance, one video consisted of public marches/gatherings, educational awareness, and other general themes in a series of short clips.

Sports demonstrations resulted in being 6% of the total sample. Iranian athletes competing in events worldwide are expected to follow the laws set by the Islamic regime even while visiting different countries. Athletes are supposed to act how they would while in Iran. For example, an Iranian rock climber competed without her hijab in protest of restrictive modesty laws. Further, soccer players stayed silent while the Iranian national anthem played at the World Cup to protest the Islamic regime.

4% of the total sample is the *hacking Iranian media/technology* category. This category consists of instances in which hacking groups took over and accessed Iranian media stations and technology centers as a form of protest. These forms of protests were evident in videos where broadcasted media by the Islamic regime was hacked and displayed messages of “Women, Life, Freedom!” Other visual messages were displayed, such as Iranian clerics engulfed in flame visual effects.

Purposeful modesty law violations refer to people purposely dressing outside or against the modesty laws set in place that are mandatory to follow. Acts of defiance such as not wearing hijabs, not correctly covering their body, or wearing traditional men’s

clothing are one way in which women are protesting the Islamic Regime and morality police. For example, one video displayed an older woman removing her compulsory hijab in public.

Lastly, *burning hijabs* refers to any videos where a woman or man burns a hijab in protest of the modesty laws in place and their violent enforcement. The sample of this theme accounts for 2% of all TikTok videos included in this sample. Women are seen removing their hijabs in protest and lighting them on fire to symbolize the expression of solidarity over the death of Masha Amini, who was taken away and beaten by morality police for not wearing her hijab following the government laws. Additional examples of general themes are supplied in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of TikTok Videos by Theme

Themes Present	Video Examples (quotes, captions and visual descriptions)
Educational Awareness	"Iran's Parliament just voted to [execute] all 14,000 of their political prisoners— innocent people who were criminalized for speaking out against a severely corrupt regime."
Public Marches/ Gatherings	Captioned: "For freedom." Protestor seen with graphic makeup replicating wounds and another protestor seen holding a sign with Masha Amini portrait surrounded by others at a gathering.
Cutting Hair	Captioned: "Rallies are being held in Saskatchewan in a show of support for women in Iran following the death of Masha Amini. Protests have been held in Saskatoon and Regina this week with women stepping forward to publicly cut their hair."
Miscellaneous	Visual description: Images and videos of various forms of protest and awareness from different events, such as hair cutting, gatherings, demonstrations.
Sports Demonstrations	"Iranian rock climbing athlete who competed in South Korea without wearing her hijab."
Hacking Iranian Media/ Technology	Captioned: "A group calling itself "Adalat Ali," or "Ali's Justice" briefly took over state-run TV in Iran in a... hack."
Purposeful Modesty Law Violations	"Tonight... in Rasht, Iran: This courageous, old lady took off her hijab and chanted ["death to dictator"]".
Burning Hijabs	Visual description: Women removing and burning hijabs in form of protest.

Discussion

Most of the TikTok videos concerning the 2022 Iranian Protests were created to bring educational awareness to the public and bring light to topics not shown in popular national media. A vast majority of the posts under the advanced search 2022 Iranian Protest supported Iranian human and women’s rights and were of the stance against the Islamic regime in Iran. The present study explored the essence of styles of internet activism taken to TikTok to encapsulate the overall

themes that the sample (n=50) displayed. The most prominent theme category identified was educational awareness, as half of the videos displayed this theme. TikTok users posted educational awareness videos to educate audiences on what was happening in Iran at the time of this study. They also addressed why it was happening; many of the videos made exclusive references to Masha Amini, Evin prison, stories of those who have been killed due to protesting, and more. These findings indicate the importance of relevant information that TikTok posters believe needs to be shared, and the videos reflect that information. Some videos reported information surrounding the death of Masha Amini and how her death led to the events of the 2022 Iran protests. However, other videos share information regarding Iran's historical and cultural context and how the protests seen in the year of this study were likely to occur. While this study focused on the prominent themes of Iranian protest and internet activism, the use of internet activism further demonstrates that online communications play a significant role in facilitating activism across varying mediums and spreading information across borders (Tatiana Tatarchevskiy., 2022, para. 4). On the other side of the spectrum to the minor prevalent themes, hijab burning is especially a general theme that has been significantly analyzed in other literature. The sample of this study displayed that hijab burning was 2% of the overall makeup of the 50 videos that had the most interaction by users of TikTok. Building upon the topic of hijabs being a means of modesty and a Muslim woman's relationship with their god, the symbolism of burning hijabs comes from a place of anger and hatred toward the morality police. The decree "hijab and chastity" was issued in which women must adequately cover themselves according to the law (Ziabari., 2022, para. 12). The laws in place hold restrictive laws over women, which some do not agree with and view as a violation of human rights. When these are not followed, women, such as Masha Amini, morality police become involved to enforce the law and take women to prison or "re-education" centers (Ziabari., 2022, para. 2). Across all displays of protest and shown through internet activism, it is apparent that people across the globe use different forms of protest that all represent similar symbolic meanings. The symbolic meaning of the protests is to show solidarity with Masha Amini and all others who have lost their

lives due to the oppressive rules and violence perpetrated by the Islamic Regime. The strand of protests while this study was conducted has been regarded as the "Second Iranian Revolution," referring to previous protests that occurred in 1979 (Ray Takeyh., 2022, para. 1). Many general themes categorized in the protests of this study are similar to those of the 1970s such as public marches and gatherings and other forms of demonstrations. For example, looking at the historical and cultural context, the events during the study and Masha Amini's death provoked similar national and global outrage (Ray Takeyh., 2022, para. 21). For this study's purpose, multiple limitations need to be considered when examining the research findings. Notably, the sample size consisted of narrowly 50 Tiktok videos constituting only a tiny portion of all videos using the specific advanced search "Iran Protest 2022." This study also did not include videos that lacked the accuracy to ensure the focus of the study remained on topic. Many of the videos also did not report on information in a neutral manner. Bias was reflected in most videos, as the protesters represent a specific side of protesting various rights and ideas surrounding the Islamic Regime. Lastly, this content analysis examined only 50 TikTok video social media posts. Although there are limitations to the conduction of this study, preceding literature and studies suggest that most individuals largely support the 2022 Iranian protests and that the Islamic Regime's laws have detrimental effects on women. Consequently, further research should be conducted to investigate the means of protest and internet activism regarding the 2022 Iranian protests and the repercussions that will emerge.

References

- de Groot Writer, K. (1970, November 29). *Iran Protests, Explained*. Penn Today. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/iran-protests-explained>
- Shahrokni, N. (2022). Women, Life, Freedom. *History Today*, 72(11), 12–16. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/women-life-freedom>
- Takeyh, R. (2022). *American Jewish Committee*. A Second Iranian Revolution? <https://www.commentary.org/articles-ray-takeyh/second-iranian-revolution/>

Tatarchevskiy, T. (2010). *Sage Journals*. The 'Popular' Culture of Internet Activism.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444810372785?journalCode=nmsa>

Ziabari, K. (2022, October 10). *Iran's Hijab Protests are of Raisi's Own Making*. Foreign Policy. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/10/iran-protests-hijab-mahsa-amini-morality-police-ebrahim-raisi/>

Appendix

50 TikTok Videos (in no particular order)

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQF9Ak2/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYgD5J/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYdMqG/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYC2jh/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYyyBQ/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYqHGf/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYNMMr/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYHpwP/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYLwvM/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYasDU/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYSdCj/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYnfH2/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYydbK/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYny76/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYdBfG/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYQw74/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYBNX8/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYAo1J/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYermc/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYF9XF/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYSkhX/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYEs8P/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYdBQx/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYfyhS/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYrP7Y/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQY8fae/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQY6gMg/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYy8pA/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYeyhc/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYFT66/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYYt1b/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYDVMm/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYLqUy/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYY4th/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYjUCt/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYsogB/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYJjKy/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYgopF/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYusA4/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQY3exB/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQY714r/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYu5Jq/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQYggD3/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQY9TAG/>