

The Iranian Movement, Women, Life, and Freedom: A Content Analysis of Reactions to the Protests on Facebook

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Abstract

This study looked at public reactions by analyzing comments posted to Facebook regarding the movement for freedom in Iran and the protests that erupted after the death of an Iranian woman. A content analysis of 60 comments revealed that between November 9 to November 16 of 2022, four prevalent themes emerged. These themes included: fear, women, support, and arguments. The most frequently mentioned theme was the arguments category, making up 30% of the sample. Supportive comments were 28 %, while women made up 27%, and the fear category was 15% of the total sum of comments. The results showed overall support for the movement and women. At the same time, a level of concern was expressed, and users engaged in conversation and arguments to indicate their opinions.

Introduction

Iran's revolution of 1979 has kept its people in a state of unrest for over thirty years. Post-revolutionary Iran's history has been said to be driven by politics under the guise of religion. Religion acted as a cover for Iranian leaders and their continuous greed for power and added justification for the behaviour they exert. The revolution led to the implementation of an Islamic government that imposed Islamic laws which many citizens opposed, such as women having to veil themselves in public. The dynamic relationship between Religion and politics has caused civil unrest at multiple points post-revolution and continues to this day. These protests would cause uproar on social media in previous years and have done so again (Tabaar, 2018, p. 2).

On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini, an Iranian woman, died in custody after being shot by the morality police for breaching the dress code. Her death sparked historical protests not only in Iran but all over the world. These protests are being led by the young

generation. These individuals have remained persistent in their solidarity while facing the harshest punishments that come with protesting in Iran. In rebellion, many women on their university campus burnt their headscarves, shaved their heads, and joined the male students in their canteen to challenge the segregation laws between men and women (The Economist, 2022). Although Iran has witnessed numerous protests and riots in the past, this one appears to be different and fueled by built-up suppression. A young woman in Tehran mentioned, "The most important protest they (Iranian women) are doing right now is taking off their scarves and burning them," (Toronto Star, 2022).

Social media has played a critical role in spreading awareness of the situation in Iran. People have posted videos and pictures of the so-called morality police brutally beating, arresting, and killing with no mercy. These posts have been shared across the world, and the voices of the people of Iran are being heard. Ketabchia et al. (2013) conducted a content analysis of tweets following the 2009 Iranian election. Protests were held to express the disapproval of the masses to the election

results. Twitter and Facebook were highly influential in spreading images and posts related to the event. The majority of the protest held were done so by scholars at the University of Tehran. Common words like “University”, “Tehran”, and “Scholar” had been used to express reactions. Persian tweets specifically carried a theme of violent words like “force”, “execution”, and “prison”. English tweets were found to be supportive and sympathetic with words like “free”, “show”, and “help” (Ketabchi et al., 2013, p. 10).

The study mentioned prior links the protests from the election to demonstrations that erupted after Mahsa Amini’s death. The present study will expand on the situation in Iran, women’s rights, and freedom by examining Facebook comments and people’s general reactions.

Method

Sample

Facebook was the chosen data source because the comments can be accessed easily. Additionally, other forms of social media had been banned in Iran, and this created censorship, but Facebook was still accessible. The specific thread selected was from a video posted on Facebook depicting a young woman walking in the street with no headscarf, being cheered on by civilians: <https://www.facebook.com/ninaansary/videos/449781720609167>

Sample selection

The convenience sample was composed of the 60 most recent Facebook comments concerning the demonstrations being held across Iran. The comments analyzed in this study were obtained by searching keywords on Facebook like ‘Iran’ and ‘protests’. The timeline of the comments ranged from November 9 to November 16 of 2022. Examining the most recent comments on this post gives additional insight into how the public reactions are progressing as the situation in Iran advances. The 60 comments varied from expressing fear, overall support, encouraging women, and arguing politics.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In this sample, the first 60 comments were collected in order to better understand the reaction of the masses. Certain comments that contained only gifs and/or

emojis were omitted from the study as a result of being unclear in their response to the post itself, and they did not fit the criteria of themes and phrases. Additionally, 2 comments that were written in a different language were translated via Google Translate and included to gain the perspective of those whose first language isn’t English, but who still have an opinion on the situation. It is important to add that due to the nature of censorship and certain rules and regulations on Facebook, several comments that could have potentially been included in this study were not because they had automatically filtered out of the comment section.

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was the various words and themes present that were relevant to the protests occurring in Iran in the selected 60 comments that were reacting to the video. The pattern of these words gives insight into what most people are discussing in threads like this one.

Setting and Material

The study had been conducted at the home of the researcher, and a Facebook account was required in order to access comments in the thread of the post used in this study.

Coding Procedure

Each comment was analyzed carefully and open-coded for keywords and themes that indicated their opinion on the situation in Iran or anything that is possibly related. The coded comments were then split into 4 groups once recurring themes were identified.

Design

A content analysis was utilized to recognize patterns and themes among the comments reacting to the Iranian movement for women, life, and freedom.

Results

A diverse number of comments were posted under the thread of the video, with comments that were written not only in English but in other languages as well. Findings indicated that 4 prevalent themes were present within those 60 comments in reaction to the demonstrations in Iran. These themes were simplified

by being divided into the following categories: Fear, women, support and politics and arguments.

Fear consisted of commenters expressing their concerns for the welfare of individuals. Approximately 15% of commenters feared for the safety of the young woman in the post and conveyed their fear for the well-being of Iranian women. A user expressed how they are “terrified for her” (the woman in the video) they continued by stating how walking around like that is against “the idiotic law.” Other comments stressed their concern for and wished for everyone's safety. Out of the sample of 60 comments, 15% equated to 9 comments. This category contained the least number of comments compared to the rest.

Women included all comments that used the word *women* or *woman*. The majority of the comments for this category exhibited words of support for women such as referring to the individual in the video as “superwoman”. Another user mentioned ‘woman, life, freedom’ which has become a popular slogan among protesters. The comments regarding women mainly consisted of support for the woman in the post, women and general while also wishing for their safety. Out of the 60 comments, this group was composed of 16, which equals out to about 27% of the sample.

Support was the second most prevalent theme out of the four. This category consisted of comments that were generally supportive of the movement and women. Some recurring words that had been identified were courage, freedom, and support. A user commented “Stay safe, we all support you” expressing their concern and support for the individual in the main post. Another comment reads “Such courage!” which drives the movement further. A third user commented “we all stand together with her for human rights and social justice” this clearly displays their passion for solidarity. This category contained approximately 17 comments, which was 28% of the 60 comments.

Arguments had the most prevalent theme among all categories. This group consisted of various topics that ranged from the politics of Iran to questioning religion and the motives behind governments and legislation. A commenter states civilians are fighting to “Remove them” (the current government of Iran) they continue by adding, “1 party rules they decide everything corruption creeps in”. This comment captures the

frustrations many Iranians must be feeling with their government. In a different instance, user A commented, “During this time, in Western Europe, many women wear their hijab ‘proudly’...”. User B then responded to this by implying that the hijab would suit user A. User A replied to this by stating, “I’m against the hidjab and can’t stand with women (born french or not) who wear it”. This small interaction gives a perspective of people from around the world. In the case of this French woman, she conveys her disapproval of the headscarf, the reason is unknown. In a separate comment, user C comments, “the law should not dictate how we dress,” which indicates the dissatisfaction with Iran's current rules and regulations that impact women's bodies. User D expresses that the “anti Iran propaganda is awful.” this comment seems to side with the status quo and alongside the government. User E responds to the comment by stating, “What propaganda against Iran?” and continues by adding how they “hate the awful, psychotic Islamic dictatorship,” clearly expressing their resentment for the government. Out of the total sample, this group was composed of about 18 comments which were 30% of the 60 comments.

Discussion

The present study examined Facebook comments and ultimately concluded that they exhibited 4 main themes, which indicated the public reactions to the demonstrations in Iran. Users are responding in ways that have expressed concern, support, and fear, and engaged in arguments and conversations. Individuals have called the government a dictatorship, challenging the status quo while others are defending it. Most of the comments have conveyed support for women and the movement itself, this support continues to grow as days pass. Similarly, the previous study about social media's influence on Iran post-election such as when Ketabchi et al. (2013) found that the tweets they analyzed had carried specific themes. When examining tweets, the most notable themes they discovered were words like “university”, “Tehran” and “scholar” as mentioned prior. The English tweets had recurring words like “support”, “show”, “free”, and “help” (Ketabchi et al., 2013, p. 10). The present study shared a resemblance with this in which common words like ‘courage’, ‘freedom’, and ‘brave’ were recognized. The Persian tweets (Ketabchi et al., 2013, p. 10) studied indicated harsher themes like “arrest”, “prison”, and “force”.

Similarly, this study also found within the theme of fear the use of harsh words like ‘terrified’, ‘awful’ ‘murder’, and ‘corruption’.

In regard to the limitations of this study, there were a number of them. One limitation to consider is the exclusion of emojis and gifs which still expresses a user's opinion of the protests, but due to some of them being indecipherable, they had to be excluded entirely from the study. Additionally, Facebook automatically filters out comments that are considered ‘irrelevant’ to the post, this impacted the study in a way in which comments that could have been informative or had an opinion on Iran did not have the same chance as other users. Because this was a small sample, some non-English comments were not included due to them being too far down in the thread. A second chance at conducting further research regarding this topic could allow this study to analyze Persian comments in order to gain a different perspective. Additionally, expanding the areas of research by examining comments on multiple social media platforms could be insightful.

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Table 1. Prevalent Themes and Examples

Prevalent themes	Examples
Fear	<p>“please god keep them safe”</p> <p>“hope she is safe very brave young woman god bless”</p>
Women	<p>“very brave women”</p> <p>“The entire world are proud of this woman’s from Iran”</p>
Support	<p>“I hope they are successful”</p> <p>“STAND LOUD AND PROUD XXX”</p>
Arguments	<p>“Down with the damned mullah’s regime...The victory for free Iranian girls and boys and women and women and all free Iranian people..”</p> <p>“Against god blasphemers”</p>