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Iranian Women's Networks of Defiance: From Networked Publics to Contentious Publicness

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of the contemporary Iranian women's movement, with a particular focus on the online activism triggered by the 2022 #WomanLifeFreedom movement following Mahsa Amini's death. It examines the blend of offline and online strategies used by Iranian women to contest mandatory dress codes and other discriminatory laws. The analysis highlights the formation of Networked Publics—digital platforms that facilitate the free exchange of support and strategies across borders, enhancing the movement's reach and solidarity. A key finding is the emergence of Contentious Publicness, where Iranian women actively engage in confrontational discourse against state repression and censorship on these platforms, thereby creating spaces for public contestation and resistance. By applying the concepts of Networked Publics and Contentious Publicness to Iranian women's activism, the paper illustrates the significant shift in public discourse dynamics in the digital age. Despite the risks of state surveillance and digital authoritarianism, the innovative use of social media by Iranian women not only amplifies their voices but also marks a transformative phase in digital activism, civil disobedience, and digital resilience.

Keywords: Iranian Women, Networked Publics, Digital Dissent, Civil Disobedience, Digital Repression, Social Media

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Iranian Women's Networks of Defiance: From Networked Publics to Contentious Publicness

Iran, a nation deeply rooted in history, culture, and tradition, has consistently been at the forefront of global socio-political dynamics. The lives of women in Iran are profoundly shaped by multifaceted influences, with their dress code often serving as a symbol of larger ideological battles. Iranian women's appearance has often been manipulated as a tool to further political agendas, with women becoming the symbolic battleground for ideological wars. Throughout

history, Iranian women have faced varying dress code regulations, with each change mirroring the dominant political ideologies and religious interpretations of the ruling regime. That is, the imposition of women dress code in Iran, is less about the dress itself and more about the power dynamics at play.

The emergence of digital activism in recent years has offered Iranian women innovative platforms to express their concerns, a crucial development in a society where freedom is restricted (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). The growth of online communities and the widespread use of social media have opened new paths for speaking out and challenging the status quo, and social media has become a strong platform for women in Iran to resist and speak up. They engaged in online activism to challenge their mandatory dress code rules, and to demand personal freedom, social change, and human rights. The death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 clearly illustrates the severe consequences that Iranian women face when they challenge these mandatory dress codes. Mahsa's arrest by the Iranian Morality Police for her alleged non-compliance with the *Hijab* mandate tragically led to her death, sparked widespread protests, and gained international attention (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This tragic event draw attention to the deep-rooted frustrations many Iranians women feel and highlighted the need for collective action against oppressive mandates (Fassihi, 2022).

The contemporary Iranian women's movement, although deeply rooted in its unique cultural and political context, mirrors global patterns of resistance and advocacy. Movements worldwide are leveraging social media platforms to challenge oppressive structures and discriminating societal norms. Digital space, as argued by Gil de Zúñiga, Inguanzo, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2022), has become a significant arena for these activities, providing new tools for mobilization and protest. These digital platforms play a pivotal role in amplifying marginalized

voices, fostering global alliances, and coordinating digital resistance against various forms of repression. This paper argues that Iranian women's digital activism has redefined public discourse, creating powerful networks of resistance despite significant state repression. By examining Iranian women's digital resistance case, this paper seeks to illuminate the complex interplay of digital activism, the obstacles presented by digital repression, and the resilience characterizing human rights movements in today's digital age.

The Evolution of Women Dress Code in Iran and the Power Dynamics

From the *Hijab* ban of 1928, its subsequent lifting in 1941, to the strict dress codes post the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the narrative around women's dress in Iran has been a reflection of the prevailing political ideologies of the times (Jalaeipour, 2017). During the era of Reza Shah, Iran embarked on a journey of rapid Westernization. This period witnessed the discouragement of traditional clothes, concluding in the bold move to ban the *Hijab* (Abdmolaei, 2013). Women were actively encouraged to adopt Western-style clothing, reflecting the Shah's aspirations to align Iran with Western values. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution dramatically changed the nation's path. Under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, the new Islamic government was determined to restore traditional Islamic values and distancing itself from Western influences. The mandatory *Hijab* became symbolic of this shift, representing not just religious symbol but also a resistance to Westernization. It is worth noting that following these mandatory women dress codes decisions in the seventies, massive demonstrations and protests erupted across the country. Many women expressed their discontent and resistance to the sudden and strict changes (Abdmolaei, 2013; Jalaeipour, 2017). It is also significant to point out that the mandatory nature of the *Hijab* as women dress code, is not universal across all Islamic countries. Many Muslim-majority nations do not impose a strict dress code, reflecting the diversity of interpretations and practices within the

Islamic world (Keddie, 2007). Muslim women inherently possess the right to choose their clothing, be it wearing the *Hijab* or opting against it. The mandatory *Hijab* as a dress code in Iran, therefore, is less about Islamic doctrine and more a reflection of the specific ideological stance of the Iranian regime.

Digital Dissent: Recent Iranian Women Social Movement

The start of the digital age has revolutionized the way advocacy and resistance movements operate, particularly in regions where traditional forms of protest might be suppressed (e.g., Liao & Luqiu, 2022; Tafakori, 2021). Women, as crucial agents of socio-political change around the world, have cleverly utilized these digital tools. From the #MeToo movement in the United States (e.g., Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018), to the anti-sexual harassment campaigns in India (e.g., Basu, Gajjala, Guha, Kumar, Sharma, Subramanian, & Verma, 2022; Dey, 2020;), to the Ni Una Menos movement against gender-based violence in Latin America (e.g., Averis, 2020; Bedrosian, 2022), and the brave voices of women in Afghanistan resisting oppressive regimes (e.g., Hussain & Amin, 2018), women globally are leveraging digital platforms to amplify their voices and advocate for change. In the Middle East, this trend is equally evident. For example, women in the region have been involved in digital campaigns for driving rights and against male guardianship in Saudi Arabia (Khalil & Storie, 2021), efforts against sexual harassment in Egypt (e.g., Skalli, 2014) and in Lebanon (e.g., Farhat & Melki, 2023), legislative changes and political participation in Kuwait (Al-Roomi, 2007), and the push for political rights in Tunisia (Snoussi, Lassoued, & Abidi, 2023).

Consistent with this global momentum, Iranian women have also been at the forefront of the digital revolution against the discriminatory gender norms and state-imposed restrictions. Despite facing difficult barriers, they have effectively utilized social media platforms to voice their

dissent, share their narratives, and gather support. Through their digital activism, they have disseminated countless photos and videos, skillfully bypassed the restrictive narratives of the Iranian state-controlled media and putting their struggles on the global stage.

One main example of Iranian women digital resistance is the #MyStealthyFreedom campaign (My Stealthy Freedom, 2014; Novak & Khazraee, 2014). Initiated in 2014 by the exiled Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad, this movement began as a simple yet powerful act of defiance: Iranian women were encouraged to share pictures of themselves without the *Hijab* in public spaces (My Stealthy Freedom, 2022). Thousands of Iranian women from diverse backgrounds participated, showcasing their desire for personal freedoms, and challenging the state-imposed dress code. The online campaign's success lay not just in its numbers but in its symbolic significance. Each shared image was a testament to the resilience of Iranian women, and a powerful challenge to the clerical Iranian regime. Building on the momentum of #MyStealthyFreedom, the #WhiteWednesdays campaign emerged (Jones, 2017). Iranian women, and even some men, wore white every Wednesday as a symbol of protest against the mandatory *Hijab* and shared their photos and videos on social media. This campaign further confirmed the role of digital platforms in facilitating civil disobedience, adapting tactics traditionally associated with street protests for the online spaces.

The Tragic Death of Mahsa and the Controversy Surrounding the Morality Police

While digital campaigns call attention to the resilience and determination of Iranian women, they also bring to light the terrifying challenges they encounter daily. The tragic death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 serves as testament to the dangers that Iranian women face every day on the ground. Mahsa's death, a direct result of her arrest and subsequent beating by the Iranian Morality Police for not following the strict *Hijab* dress code, deeply affected the public (Amnesty

International, 2022). Mahsa's tragic death became representative of the broader societal issues many women in Iran suffer from.

Amid these circumstances, the controversial role of the Morality Police, or " *Gašt-e Eršâd*," becomes even more significant. The Morality Police is tasked by the Iranian government to enforce Islamic codes, especially concerning women's dress and public behavior. Their control in public spaces, particularly over women's clothing, has made them a subject of contention for many years (Human Rights Watch, 2022). To a large segment of the Iranian people, the Morality Police represents an intrusive state arrangement that controls personal freedoms. Their interventions, ranging from verbal criticisms to detentions, have sparked intense debates about Iranian individual rights, and the intersection of religion and state governance. The tragic incident involving Mahsa further intensified that public's anger towards morality police. In response, the streets in Iran erupted with significant demonstrations across the nation with profound mourning for Mahsa's death (Fassihi, 2022).

Literature Review

Digital Activism and the Evolution of Public Discourse

Nancy Fraser (1990) critically examined the traditional concept of the public sphere as proposed by Jürgen Habermas. Fraser's analysis pointed out the limitations of Habermas's idealized vision of the public sphere. Fraser's argument was grounded in the belief that the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, was not as inclusive as it meant to be. Fraser critiqued the exclusionary nature that often marginalize certain voices, especially those of women and the working class. Instead, she suggested that there existed multiple "subaltern counter-publics" – parallel conversational arenas where marginalized groups could express oppositional narratives and interpretations of their identities and interests (Fraser, 1990).

Manuel Castells' network society framework is instrumental in understanding these evolving dynamics. Castells examines how information and communication technologies have redefined social, economic, and political landscapes, leading to a network society where information flows and networks hold central importance (Castells, 1996). This network society transforms traditional hierarchies, enabling decentralized and flexible forms of organization and interaction. His analysis of power in the digital age emphasizes that power is increasingly exercised through networks of communication, where control over information and the ability to shape public discourse become key tools of influence (Castells, 2009). This framework helps to understand how digital activism leverages these networks to contest dominant narratives and drive change.

Social media has further complicated the meaning of public discourse and has led to the new notion of "networked publics." Danah Boyd, 2010, has explored the concept of "networked publics," and discussed the dynamics of digital spaces, emphasizing how the architecture of social networks influences interactions and the formation of publics. This framework is crucial for understanding how digital tools, especially hashtags, have empowered marginalized groups to counter biases in mainstream media and achieve greater visibility (Boyd, 2010). As argued by Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020), digital spaces and hashtag activism have emerged as transformative spaces where activists, often termed "counter-publics," can amplify their voices, and challenge dominant narratives. The concept of "counter-publics," as Jackson et al. (2020) explain, has evolved from being simply alternative spaces of debate to powerful digital forces to contest dominant discourses. These platforms, therefore, have redefined the very nature of activism, allowing for a more dynamic form of public engagement.

Adding another layer to this public discourse, Kavada and Poell (2021) introduced the "Contentious Publicness Framework." This framework shifts the focus from static conceptualizations of publics to a more dynamic understanding of "publicness." They emphasize the dynamic nature of "publicness" as a continuous activity of making things public, moving away from the static notion of "the public". They also explain the interactive processes that outline the rise, merging, and eventual dissolution of contentious publics across both digital and physical spaces. This perspective allows for a more flexible analysis that doesn't restrict public contestation to a specific place or a stable public but views it as a process that spans both digital platforms and physical spaces. Additionally, they shift the focus from the idea of "counter" to "contention", highlighting various forms of contestation that transcend national boundaries and are often disconnected from established political structures. This shift challenges the traditional assumptions of the public sphere model and seeks to understand the democratic implications of contemporary public contestation through social media. Furthermore, Kavada and Poell underscore the importance of understanding how media are integral to contentious publicness along its material, spatial, and temporal dimensions.

The Iranian women digital activism offers a compelling case study that embodies the principles discussed by Fraser (1990), Castells (1996 & 2009), Jackson et al. (2020), and Kavada and Poell (2021). Iranian women, historically marginalized and often silenced by socio-political constraints, have utilized the power of digital platforms to voice their dissent. In this context, Fraser's notion of "subaltern counterpublics" resonates deeply. Digital spaces have become parallel spaces for Iranian women, where they can share oppositional narratives outside the limitations of the Iranian restrictive physical environment. Furthermore, the transformative potential of digital platforms, as highlighted by Jackson et al. (2020) and Kavada and Poell (2021), is evident in the

digital activism of Iranian women. These women have not only utilized the affordances of "networked publics" to amplify their voices but have also navigated the dynamic processes of "publicness" to mobilize support, both nationally and internationally.

In addition, the digital activism of Iranian women offers an important case for examining the dimensions of spatiality, temporality, and materiality within contentious publicness as discussed by Kavada & Poell (2021). *Spatiality*: The digital activism landscape transcends physical boundaries, creating new spaces for mobilization and resistance. For Iranian women, digital spaces have become crucial for navigating the spatial restrictions imposed by the state. This mediated spatial construction blends online and offline activities, expanding the traditional protest action's reach. *Temporality*: Social media has introduced new dynamics to the timing and pace of public engagement, affecting the spread and duration of public contention. Iranian activists use digital platforms for synchronized online and offline actions, ensuring rapid information dissemination and constant engagement. *Materiality*: The material dimension of digital activism involves the interplay between human actors and technologies in shaping contention (Kavada & Poell, 2021).

Digital Authoritarianism, State Repression, and Digital Resilience

The digital age has brought both opportunities for freedom and tools for repression (Asier, 2022). In Iran, young activists, proficient in technology, have used innovative ways to bypass governmental restrictions (De Luce, 2022). Essential tools like Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have become vital, enabling users to access blocked content and communicate without governmental surveillance. International initiatives, such as SpaceX satellite internet, have also provided Iranians with alternative routes to internet access. However, the rapid technological advancements of the past two decades have also equipped states with enhanced tools for repression, deepening human rights concerns. While these tools can reinforce democratic values,

they are increasingly being used by authoritarian regimes to exert control. For example, the Iranian government criminalized the use and sale of VPNs as a clear evidence of state digital repression and restrictions to limit access to information and the ability to organize protests online (Isfahani, 2022). Feldstein (2021) underscores this duality, noting that while digital technologies were once celebrated as instruments of social change, they are now increasingly used by authoritarian regimes for surveillance and control. Techniques of "digital repression" have emerged, with states like China leading in their deployment. Feldstein calls for international attention to ensure the responsible use of these digital tools amidst the war between political freedoms and governmental repression.

Michaelsen (2018) argues that the same technologies that facilitate activism also provide state actors with advanced tools to monitor and react to the activities of these political exiles. Michaelsen's study examines how digital communication technologies enable protesters from authoritarian societies, such as Iran, to pursue political activism from exile. It also discusses how these technologies allow state actors to rapidly monitor and respond to the activities of political exiles. In Southeast Asia, Sinpeng, 2020, explores the relationship between the rise of digital media and its implications for democratization. The study underscores that while digital media has encouraged political activities, authoritarian states have retained stability through a mix of political authoritarianism and growing internet controls.

Roberts (2020) investigates the resilience of internet users to online censorship. This research emphasizes the significance of users' awareness of censorship and their ability to bypass it. The study also highlights the evolving strategies of authoritarian regimes to minimize both the awareness of censorship and the demand for uncensored content. Bjola and Papadakis (2020) discuss the challenges of digital propaganda, particularly its intent to limit critical thinking and

truth. Through various case studies, they highlight the increasing targeting of journalists and researchers and emphasize the need for resilience against state digital propaganda's growing influence. As a response to major state digital disruptions, Boh, Constantinides, Padmanabhan, and Viswanathan (2023) introduce the concept of "digital resilience." They emphasize the transformative power of digital tools in fostering resilience. The authors advocate for collaborative public-private ecosystems, and reforms to ensure equitable access to digital resources, emphasizing the urgency of activists' preparation for future shocks.

This global trend stresses the urgent need for robust international measures to counteract digital authoritarianism. For example, and as a response to this growing challenge, the European Union (EU) has been proactive. The EU has revised global legal frameworks and refined its foreign policy instruments against digital authoritarianism, aiming to set standards for digital rights and freedoms. Such initiatives promote a balanced approach that supports innovation while preventing the misuse of technology for repressive purposes (Głowacka, Youngs, Pintea, & Wołosik, 2021). In conclusion, the digital age presents both challenges and opportunities. While technology offers tools for freedom and resilience, it also provides instruments for control and repression. The international community continues to navigate this duality, hoping that the digital platforms remain a space for freedom, innovation, and progress.

Methods

Using a Python script connected to the Twitter API, 4035 tweets related to the Iranian women's movement from September 15 to December 15, 2022, were collected, focusing on hashtags like #MahsaAmini, #WomenLifeFreedom, and #IranianWomen. The hashtags #MahsaAmini, #WomenLifeFreedom, and #IranianWomen were selected due to their widespread use and relevance to the movement. #MahsaAmini gained significant traction following Mahsa

Amini's death, serving as a rallying cry for protests. #WomenLifeFreedom reflect the core demands of the movement, emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender rights, personal freedom, and broader societal change. #IranianWomen highlights the focus on women's rights within the Iranian context. The timeframe from September 15 to December 15, 2022, was chosen to capture the immediate aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death and the subsequent surge in online activism. This period includes the peak of the protests and provides a comprehensive view of the discourse during a critical phase of the movement. The analysis employed both thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to comprehensively examine recurring themes and socio-political implications. Thematic analysis involved multiple readings for familiarization, coding both inductively and deductively to allow themes to emerge directly from the data while incorporating predefined themes based on previous literature to ensure accurate representation of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Visual content accompanying the tweets, including images and videos, was also analyzed to identify symbols and actions critical to understanding the modes of digital resistance and resilience. Following thematic analysis, CDA was conducted to examine the language used in the tweets, focusing on how it related to broader socio-political contexts and power dynamics (Rogers, 2004). The analysis aimed to identify how the language challenged existing power structures and ideologies specific to the Iranian context. It also explored the implications of digital activism and resistance discourse for Iranian women's social and political life. Ethical considerations were paramount given the topic's sensitivity and the risks associated with digital activism in repressive regimes. All personal information was anonymized to protect individuals' identities, and only publicly available data was used.

Results

The analysis of the online discourse surrounding the contemporary Iranian women's movement revealed a series of emergent themes that capture the collective voice of these women, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and aspirations for change. Three main themes were identified: "communicating rage and challenging power," "collective action and mobilization", and "networking and global solidarity".

Communicating Rage & Challenging Power

A salient theme that emerged from the Iranian women's online discourse was the profound sense of rage and challenging power. Iranian activists utilized the platform to voice their anger and challenge the regime's discriminatory practices. The digital space on Twitter/X was saturated with expressions that underscored the collective anger and frustrations of Iranian women and their yearning for societal change. One remarkable tweet shares a video of women protesters boldly waving their scarves while chanting "*Death to the dictator, death to the dictator*," symbolizing a direct challenge to the regime's authority. Another tweet that reinforces this theme with the message: [*Death to the oppressor, whether it's king or supreme leader*": *people chant in Tehran on 19Sep in protests over the death of #MahsaAmini*]. The accompanying video documents the protests, including the powerful audio of the chants, offering a glimpse into the collective defiance and the demand for change. Another example tweet of challenging power stated: [*Women of Iran removed their headscarves in protest against the murder of Mahsa Amini 22 Yr old woman by hijab police and chanting: death to dictator! Removing hijab is a punishable crime in Iran. We call on women and men around the world to show solidarity*]. This tweet shared a video capturing a moment of protest, where women demonstrators are seen waving their scarves in the air.

Another exemplar tweet vividly captures the intense anger and defiance in the Iranian women's movement: [*Unprecedented scenes in Iran: woman sits on top of utility box and cuts her hair in main square in Kerman to protest death of Mahsa Amini after her arrest by the morality police. People clap their hands and chant 'Death to the dictator*]. Accompanying this tweet, the user also shared a video, further intensifying the message's impact. This video depicted the woman as she cut her hair—a powerful symbol of protest—and captured the surrounding crowd's supportive chants, amplifying the act's defiance and the collective anger against oppression.

Collective Action & Mobilization

Digital platforms, particularly Twitter/X, have played a crucial role in amplifying calls for "collective action and mobilization". The platform facilitated the dissemination of powerful messages that highlighted shared grievances and called for unity against the oppressive regimes. Several tweets exemplify this theme, demonstrating the significant role of digital communication in mobilizing public sentiment and action. One example is a tweet stating, [*Iran: "Don't let fear in, we are all united": chant women, who as always, are on the front line of protests.*] This tweet was accompanied by a video, which shows Iranian women in the streets protesting and chanting in unity, embodying the message of solidarity and collective resilience. Similarly, another tweet echoes the sentiment of the first, [*"Don't let fear in, we are all together", a young girl in wheelchair leads the chants at tonight's protest in Iran*]. This message is reinforced by a video for protesters, including an Iranian woman in a wheelchair, actively participating and chanting together, further highlighting a moment of solidarity and collective engagement. Another tweet, originally written in Persian and translated into English as [*I did not think that I would see such pictures of my beloved Iran so soon in my life*] reflects a mixture of surprise and solidarity, capturing the emotional turmoil stirred by the events in Iran. Accompanying this tweet, the user

shared a video that reveals a crowd gathered around a fire set in the middle of the street, with several women walking through the scene, symbolically burning their scarves. The crowd's chants, supporting these acts of defiance, underscore a collective yearning for change and a profound sense of unity in the face of adversity. By sharing messages of unity and resilience, Iranian women were able to foster a sense of community and shared purpose among participants. The visual and textual narratives provided by these tweets not only illustrate the dynamics of collective action but also demonstrate the inclusive nature of the protests.

Networking and Global Solidarity

This theme underscores the vital role of social media in broadening the reach of the narratives of Iranian women, allowing them to share their stories and connect with a global community. This digital networking bypasses the restrictive silence imposed by government and state-controlled media, offering a platform for unrestricted expression and international solidarity. The Iranian women's online discourse carries the messages of resistance and calls for freedom beyond geographical borders, as demonstrated by tweets that gained visibility through widespread shares and engagement. International celebrity endorsements, such as those from figures like Angelina Jolie, who publicly voiced support for Iranian women, exemplify the vast network of solidarity. Jolie's tweet, "*To the women of Iran, we see you*" (Independent Lifestyle, 2022), demonstrates the influential role celebrities can play in advocating for human rights. These endorsements brought substantial attention to the Iranian women's movement on the international stage. Moreover, the movement's global resonance is further demonstrated through the circulation of symbolic images, such as the impactful Time Magazine cover featuring Iranian women as heroes of the year to honor their bravery and raise their trouble to a global audience. This cover was

widely shared on Twitter, symbolizing solidarity and bringing further international attention to their cause (Time Magazine, 2022).

Furthermore, artistic tributes from around the globe, shared through tweets and online galleries, revealed the support of the artistic global community. These artworks that transcended linguistic barriers, delivered a visual advocacy that speaks to the collective human spirit. Such diverse array of artworks inspired by the Iranian women protests highlight the global artistic community's response to the activism of Iranian women (Alex Shams, 2022). Through these shared images and stories, the movement gains momentum and created an expansive global network of support and dialogue.

In addition to the thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis was conducted to examine how the language- and visuals within the tweets related to broader socio-political contexts and power dynamics in Iran. The following section discusses how this online discourse functioned as a form of resistance and a tool to demand social and political change in Iran. Three major patterns were identified from the online discourse: "symbolic protest and civil disobedience*", "visual narrative of dissent and artistic expressions*", and *"tech-savvy resistance"*.

Symbolic Protest and Civil Disobedience

The #WomenLifeFreedom movement has demonstrated remarkable resilience through its strategic employment of symbolic protest and civil disobedience. These tactics are not only methods of resistance but also powerful tools for challenging state control. One prominent form of symbolic protest has been the cutting of hair by female demonstrators, a deliberate act that defies the strictly enforced dress codes for women in Iran. This form of protest carries significant historical weight, echoing a legacy of resistance movements where personal sacrifice symbolizes broader political discontent (e.g., Jasko, Szastok, Grzymala-Moszczynska, & Maj, 2019). For

example, a tweet illustrates a protester cutting her hair in defiance, a symbolic act of resistance that has become emblematic of the broader movement. Additionally, the graphic illustration "*Say Her Name! Mahsa Amini*" portrays a woman cutting her hair, further highlighting the symbol of resistance (Moradi, 2022).

In addition to these individual acts of protest, there has been a collective embrace of civil disobedience, most notably through the public burning of *Hijab*. This act, while simple, is profoundly rebellious in the Iranian society where the *Hijab* is mandated by law. The burning of the *Hijab* is not merely a rejection of a piece of cloth but a rejection of the ideologies and laws that it represents. A strong example is a tweet by Ashok Swain, which shows a woman engaging in the public burning of *Hijab* during a night protest, a powerful act of defiance witnessed by a surrounding crowd, exemplifying also the widespread solidarity (Swain, 2022).

These tactics of civil disobedience, such as public performances where activists cut their hair or burn *Hijab*, serve as powerful metaphors for liberation from the oppressive norms enforced by the Iranian state. This form of protest not only challenges the status quo but also transforming personal acts of defiance into collective symbols of resistance. Iranian women who participated in the #WomenLifeFreedom movement have found ways to challenge the tools of their oppression and turn them into symbols of resistance. By adopting these methods, they not only protest against specific laws but also assert their rights to bodily autonomy and personal freedom.

Visual Narrative of Dissent and Artistic Expressions

Artistic expressions within the #WomenLifeFreedom movement have produced a powerful visual narrative of dissent. The digital space of Twitter/X has become a gallery for resistance, where art is used as declaration of defiance. For example, graphic illustrations, such as the impactful depiction of a woman cutting through chains with scissors, convey a message of

liberation against repression. This image, with its strong symbolism, has been widely shared and has become a rallying icon for the movement, illustrating the Iranian women's longing for freedom. Another example is the work of Iranian artists, such as Farah Ossouli, where traditional art forms meet contemporary protest, has been disseminated on Twitter/X and other digital spaces (Art in Embassies, 2022). These works, utilizing the aesthetic of Persian miniatures to portray the chaos of current struggles and the pressing narratives of today, while engaging an international audience in the process.

A tweet by Alex Shams showcases various artistic responses to the protests, reflecting global artistic solidarity and the diverse interpretations of the movement's themes (Shams, 2022). Similarly, a tweet by Nazanin Ashouri highlights satirical artwork that portrays a woman assertively cutting her exaggeratedly long hair, which trails down to a tiny person below (Ashouri, 2022). This person, representing authority, grasps the end of the hair, symbolizing the oppressive control intended to be imposed upon her. This artwork resonates with symbolic significance within the movement's discourse. The act of cutting the hair is a metaphor for autonomy, a separating of the chains of an overreaching power. The contrast between the woman's large, dominant posture and the small, almost insignificant depiction of the authority character serves to visually invert the power dynamic, emphasizing the empowerment of Iranian women.

The merger of protest art and iconic photography with the digital spaces has significantly amplified the message of the #WomenLifeFreedom movement. The digital dissemination of these artistic and photographic expressions on Twitter/X space transforms them from individual statements into a unified narrative of defiance. They do more than document; they engage, incite action, and call for global solidarity.

Tech-Savvy Resistance

In response to the technological barriers imposed by the Iranian government, the movement's participants have demonstrated remarkable creativity through a "Tech-Savvy Resistance." This resistance is characterized by the strategic utilization of technologies to bypass censorship and promote the free flow of information. A significant surge in the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) within Iran is one such example (e.g., Katebi, 2022). VPNs allow users to conceal their IP addresses, enabling them to access the global internet beyond the reach of government surveillance and restrictions. Statistics highlight the exponential increase in VPN usage in Iran during that time (e.g., Statista, 2022), reflecting a nationwide trend towards these privacy tools amidst widespread protests and conflicts. The international community has also supported this tech-savvy approach. For instance, Secretary Antony Blinken tweeted about the U.S. government's commitment to ensuring that the Iranian people can freely access information online. Blinken's tweet stated proactive measures to enhance internet freedom, such as the issuance of a General License that facilitates tech firms in offering broader digital communications tools and services (Blinken, 2022). Furthermore, the deployment of satellite internet services, such as SpaceX's Starlink, has been highlighted as a game-changing initiative. Despite the logistical challenges and costs associated with Starlink, its activation in Iran during that time represents a significant advancement in ensuring internet access during government-imposed shutdowns. This effort was particularly crucial for activists and journalists, with around 100 Starlinks being activated in Iran (Reuters, 2022).

Campaigns and hashtags like #Internet4Iran have gained visibility on Twitter/X as they signify the struggle for internet access within the country. These digital efforts underline the importance of connectivity as a tool for resistance and the global effort to support Iranians in their

pursuit of uncensored information and freedom of expression. Collectively, these examples demonstrate how the strategic use of technology has become integral to overcoming state-imposed censorship and digital suppression.

Discussion and Conclusion

The emergence of social media has restructured the landscape of public discourse, offering new spaces for the formation of 'counter-publics,' activism, and the articulation of alternative narratives. For Iranian women, digital platforms, like Twitter/X, have become vital arena for activism and the demands of women's rights. These digital spaces allow Iranian women to voice their perspectives, challenge oppressive norms, and mobilize support both within Iran and globally. Iranian women have used Twitter/X as a critical tool for advocating for gender equality and highlighting their struggles and resilience in their fight for social change. The concept of "subaltern counter-publics," as articulated by Fraser (1990), was evident in the digital activism of these women, who utilized online platforms to create parallel discursive arenas.

These digital spaces have also become crucial for challenging the dominant narratives that have historically marginalized their voices. They provided a stage for Iranian women's oppositional narratives and allowing them to avoid the exclusionary nature of the traditional public sphere controlled by the state. As Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) elaborated, digital spaces enable activists to amplify their voices and mobilize support to form connected publics. Iranian women have benefited from his transformative potential and used Twitter/X to build "connected networked publics" and extended their reach beyond national boarders, engaging a global community in their struggle. The "Contentious Publicness Framework" by Kavada and Poell (2021) as well offers a lens through which to view the dynamic interplay of digital activism and public discourse in the Iranian women's case. This framework captures the fluid nature of

public contestation in the digital age, recognizing the continuous activity of making issues public across both digital and physical spaces. Iranian women online discourse illuminates such non-static, evolving nature of their public engagement, which was evident in their use of diverse and creative digital forms of contestation.

The concept of 'we-ness' refers to the collective identity and shared sense of belonging among individuals within a group (Singh, 2016). The Iranian women's online 'we-ness' fosters a sense of solidarity and connectedness which is crucial for continuing their activism. Iranian women have demonstrated this 'we-ness' through their interactions on Twitter/X, where they shared personal experiences, offered mutual support, and united around their common suffering. This collective identity has empowered them to amplify their voices, challenge oppressive societal norms, and draw international attention to their struggles. The thematic and discourse analysis indicates that this digital solidarity built a resilient community who was able to face external pressures and continuing their fight for social justice despite numerous obstacles and state repression.

Despite the challenges posed by digital repression tactics such as surveillance and censorship, the skillful and persistent use of communication technology by Iranian activists demonstrates their digital resilience. The case of Iranian women exemplifies how marginalized groups can leverage technology to counteract political repression and construct new spaces for civil resistance. Their case challenges traditional power structures and forges new paths for resistance and transformation, showcasing the critical role of digital platforms in their continuous struggle for social change (Kavada & Poell, 2021).

Significant advancements and opportunities presented by digital activism are evident, yet several limitations remain for Iranian women. Despite their courageous use of digital platforms to

advocate for rights and amplify their voices, they continue to face severe government censorship, internet shutdowns, and the constant threat of surveillance and revenge. One of the primary challenges is the persistent and evolving nature of state censorship and digital surveillance, which disrupt their communication channels. The reliance on digital platforms also exposes Iranian activists to cybersecurity threats, including hacking and data breaches, which can compromise their safety and privacy. Additionally, the digital divide remains a critical barrier; not all Iranian women have equal access to the internet or the necessary technological resources, leading to unequal participation and representation within the movement. Furthermore, the algorithms of digital platforms can sometimes suppress or fail to adequately amplify marginalized voices, and the platforms themselves may enforce policies that could hinder activism visibility.

Several limitations are worth noting in this study. The reliance on Twitter/X may not represent the views of all Iranian women, especially those without access to digital platforms or those using other social media. Future research could incorporate data from multiple social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook to provide a more holistic view. Furthermore, the Iranian government's internet restrictions pose significant challenges. These limitations highlight areas that future research could address by using a broader range of digital platforms and incorporating alternative methods to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of Iranian women's digital activism. Additionally, tweets in Persian were translated to English, which may have resulted in some meaning being lost in translation. To address this, future research might use translations were cross verified with native Persian speakers to ensure accuracy. Finally, the selected time frame might not have captured the long-term evolution of the movement. Extending the study to include subsequent months could provide insights into the movement's progression and sustainability.

In conclusion, the examination of Iranian women's digital activism reveals a complex case of resistance, resilience, opportunities, and challenges. The Iranian women's movement highlights how digital spaces such as X (formerly Twitter) have become battlegrounds for the redefinition of power dynamics. The intersection of "networked publics" and "contentious publicness" has allowed these women to maintain a resilient online presence, amplifying their voices and connecting their local struggles to the global movement for human rights. However, the movement also faces considerable challenges, including state censorship, digital repression, cybersecurity threats, and the digital divide that restricts equal access to technology. These challenges underscore the importance of a multifaceted activism approach that combines both digital and traditional methods to effectively counteract state repression and drive social change. Despite these challenges, the unwavering determination and bravery of Iranian women continue to inspire and forge new paths for resistance and struggle for social justice and human rights. Their fight is not just for themselves but for the empowerment of women and other marginalized voices worldwide.

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Review of "*The Digital Double Bind*" by Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil

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Overview

In *The Digital Double Bind*, Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil offer an in-depth analysis of the digital transformation within the Middle East, a region where rapid technological adoption exists in tension with entrenched social, political, and economic structures. Published by Oxford University Press as part of the Oxford Studies in Digital Politics series, the book explores the intersection of politics and digital media through the lens of the "digital double bind." This concept describes the contradictory demands and constraints that characterize the region's digital landscape, where advancements simultaneously catalyze progress and reinforce traditional hierarchies and power dynamics.

The authors situate their analysis within five thematic areas: government-led digital modernization projects like Dubai's *One Million Arab Coders* and Saudi Arabia's *Neom* (Conjunctures and Disjunctures), the uneven accessibility of digital infrastructure across regions (Aspirations and Hindrances), the duality of digital media as a tool for expression and state control (Expression and Suppression), the rise of startups like *Careem* and *Anghami* (Imitation and Innovation), and the cultural tensions created by digital connectivity (Connectivity and Collectivity). By combining historical context, theoretical insights, and concrete examples, Zayani and Khalil illustrate how digital transformation in the Middle East cannot be fully understood

through Western-centric models but must account for the region's unique sociopolitical and cultural landscapes.

The result is a Middle East locked in a "double bind," where the forces of progress and stasis are in continual tension. This dynamic is not merely a clash between modernity and tradition but a structural issue that shapes political, economic, and cultural domains.

Key Themes and Chapters

The book is divided into five main sections, each addressing a different dimension of the Middle East's digital transformation. These themes collectively illustrate the paradoxical nature of the region's technological advancements, framed through the "digital double bind."

1. **Conjunctures and Disjunctures**

   This section examines how government-led modernization projects, like Dubai's *One Million Arab Coders* and Saudi Arabia's *Neom*, symbolize the Middle East's aspirations to align itself with the global digital economy. These initiatives reflect an ambitious drive to modernize and compete globally, yet they also reveal contradictions. While these projects are technologically advanced, they coexist with unequal access to digital resources, limited digital literacy, and state-imposed restrictions that inhibit broader societal integration. The authors highlight how these gaps underscore the uneven nature of the region's digital transformation.

2. **Aspirations and Hindrances**

   The development of digital infrastructure is essential for fostering e-commerce and knowledge-based economies in the Middle East. While cities like Dubai serve as digital hubs with cutting-edge infrastructure, rural and less affluent areas remain underserved. Zayani and Khalil emphasize the stark disparities in access to technology across the

region, noting how these disparities hinder collective progress. Additionally, this section explores the tension between government aspirations for technological leadership and the structural challenges that prevent inclusive growth.

3. **Expression and Suppression**

Digital media platforms are powerful tools for political expression and social mobilization. The Arab uprisings demonstrated how social media could empower citizens to organize and challenge authority. However, these same platforms are also leveraged by governments for surveillance, censorship, and propaganda. This duality highlights the "digital double bind": tools that enable freedom and agency simultaneously become instruments of control. The authors provide specific examples of how regimes monitor online activities to suppress dissent while maintaining the façade of modernization.

4. **Imitation and Innovation**

This section explores the rise of digital economies and creative industries, focusing on local startups like *Careem* and *Anghami*. These ventures symbolize the entrepreneurial spirit emerging in parts of the Middle East, often supported by state-driven investments and venture capital. However, regulatory challenges, political instability, and the concentration of resources in a few wealthy states limit the broader success of these innovations. The authors underscore how the region's fragmented regulatory landscape stifles cross-border collaboration, further highlighting the contradictions of digital transformation.

5. **Connectivity and Collectivity**

The final section delves into how digital technologies reshape individual identities and collective cultural values. Social media platforms promote individualism and self-promotion, a trend that often conflicts with the Middle East's traditionally collective,

family-oriented values. This tension illustrates how digital connectivity disrupts established social norms, creating friction between modernizing forces and entrenched cultural practices. The authors explore how these shifts influence identity negotiation and social cohesion in the region.

The Digital Double Bind

In *The Digital Double Bind*, Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil provide a compelling analysis of how the Middle East's digital transformation is shaped by a tension between technological innovation and state control. This tension is encapsulated in the concept of the "digital double bind," which originates from Gregory Bateson's theory of contradictory demands. The authors argue that these digital contradictions are not merely a clash between modernity and tradition but reflect deeply embedded structural issues in the region. Governments drive technological advancements while simultaneously implementing strict controls over digital content and expression.

The concept of the double bind captures the conflicting forces at play: the drive for economic growth through digital innovation and the state's desire to maintain power and control. The authors illustrate how projects like Dubai's *One Million Arab Coders* and Saudi Arabia's *Neom* exemplify a push for modernization but coexist with authoritarian policies that limit digital freedoms. These contradictions create a complex environment in which progress is often constrained by existing power structures, leading to what the authors describe as perpetual complexity in the region's digital landscape.

Moreover, the "digital double bind" is not unique to the Middle East; it is part of a global pattern. Zayani and Khalil expand on how this tension also manifests in the Global North, where

digital technologies are similarly used for surveillance, data mining, and capitalist agendas. The authors critique the Western-centric view of digital transformation, suggesting that the Middle East's digital situation challenges conventional understandings shaped by global digital capitalism.

Evaluation of the Book

Zayani and Khalil's *The Digital Double Bind* offers a nuanced and insightful analysis of the contradictions inherent in the digital transformation of the Middle East. One of the book's strengths is its ability to highlight the uneven nature of this transformation. The authors detail how digital advancements occur at different speeds across the region, with affluent areas like Dubai and Saudi Arabia embracing cutting-edge technologies while conflict-ridden states struggle to keep pace. This division between wealthier and less stable regions underscores how the digital double bind plays out in various socio-political contexts.

The book also broadens its analysis by comparing the Middle East's digital paradox to broader global trends. Zayani and Khalil argue that the Middle East's digital challenges are not isolated but are part of larger global dynamics where digital capitalism, surveillance technologies, and network society are reshaping power structures worldwide. The critique of digital capitalism is particularly relevant, as the authors point out how these forces complicate the understanding of technology in non-Western contexts. In contrast to the dominant Western narratives, the Middle East's experience with digital media is shaped by local political structures and historical conditions, offering a more complex and critical view of how technology influences society.

Conclusion

The Digital Double Bind concludes by reinforcing the idea that the digital transformation of the Middle East is not just about embracing modern technologies but navigating multiple,

competing temporalities of change. The authors explain that digital advances in regions like Dubai may seem to reflect rapid progress, but they are often contrasted by regions where conflict, instability, and digital underdevelopment hinder technological integration. The Middle East, in this regard, presents a patchwork of digital experiences, where the "double bind" operates in distinct ways depending on local socio-political contexts.

The authors assert that the digital double bind is a structural issue, deeply ingrained in the region's politics, economics, and culture. While technological advancements offer opportunities for growth and empowerment, they simultaneously reinforce existing power structures, making true digital transformation difficult to achieve. Zayani and Khalil's analysis provides readers with a critical lens through which to view the role of technology in societies balancing modernity with traditional power dynamics, offering important insights not only for the Middle East but for the global discourse on digital politics.