Why Female Voices Matter in Iranian Mediated Debate on Sexual Assault

The Study of Narratives of Sexual Assault in Iran's Media

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May 15th 2017

Abstract

The core purpose of this dissertation is to reflect the voices of Iranian women as they talk about their experiences of sexual assault. The thesis puts its emphasis on the value of voices of individuals in this marginalised group and seeks to show how the possibility of having narratives can lead into their empowerment. For this purpose, the research uses the tweets of the users who participated in a Twitter campaign against sexual assault. The dissertation argues that the tweets are in reaction to the official narrative, as Iran's state has been holding women responsible regarding the issue for almost four decades. The tweets, the research suggests, function as counter narratives against the state's narrative, while the latter is constantly advertised and imposed through the state controlled mass media. The thesis also argues that social media have provided people with a platform and have empowered them to question and resist the state's narrative. It is therefore argued that ordinary women made powerful narratives through recounting their experiences of sexual assault and thus challenged the official narrative that puts the responsibility on them rather than the perpetrators.

Another result of the campaign, the thesis argues, was the empowerment of the victims in the instances of encountering perpetrators of assault, as they described in their tweets that speaking out led them into feeling healed and gave them the mentality of being able to defend themselves against assault. The dissertation also puts its focus on the responses the participants received from other users, suggesting that it shows the campaign's success in raising awareness regarding the issue.

Acknowledgement

To Iranian women, this thesis came to existence to reflect your voices, your courage, and your stories through which an important period of Iran's history was composed.

I would like to thank my family. Without your support and encouragement I would not be able to explore in the realm of knowledge.

Special thanks to my supervisor Prof. Annette Hill, whose expertise and guidance made this journey not only possible, but also enjoyable. I would also like to thank the experts and especially Mr. John Corner, whose insights in books as well as the symposiums have been inspiring and guiding me during the last few months.

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Introduction

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has become a closed society especially when it comes to cultural norms regarding women's rights and issues such as sexual assault. The Iran's state has actively aimed at making women invisible, and wherever it seemed impossible, it has instead put its effort to turn them into homogeneous representatives of an ideology according to which women are best to be covered from head to toe. When it comes to the issue of sexual assault, according to this ideology it is considered to be initiated from the woman's side, as there is a strong emphasis on the role of women's hijab to prevent it. This is while despite of hijab being compulsory in Iran, it is estimated that the rate of street assault, for instance, is five times higher than European countries, and in average, 25% of Iranian women experience assault every day in urban areas regardless of the kind of hijab they wear (Alef 2012). Another research with a sample size of 400 individuals states that 98.25% of the male and female respondents indicated that they have witnessed instances of street harassment for others (Hashemianfar and Golestan 2915). There is no official statistics regarding this matter, as the state shows reluctance as to let the public to be informed about the situation and prevents free discussions on the subject in the mass media. However, people have been discussing the issue since they found access to the internet and particularly social media; the most recent example of such discussions is the Twitter campaign on which the dissertation puts its focus. The campaign was held on Twitter in April 2016 and Iranian women, following women throughout the world, used hashtag When I Was and shared their experiences of sexual assault with other Twitter users.

Research Aims and Questions

The research aims to observe Iranian women's tweets that include When I Was hashtag, in which they depict the issue of sexual assault in today's Iran, and to compare their narratives and depictions with the state's narrative on the same issue. The dissertation is a qualitative research and adopts narrative analysis to study the tweets of participants in the campaign. To obtain a detailed picture and a deeper understanding of the topic, tweets of witnesses to incidents of assault and the readers' reactions to participants' tweets will be studied and discussed as well. In addition, the state's narrative on the issue will be introduced and discussed through visual analysis of a state produced advert installed on a billboard in Tehran. Targeting the issue of sexual assault, the advert seeks to construct a view on it, and thus it provides an example of the "authoritative narrative" on the issue (Griffin and May in Seal

2012:444). The thesis argues that the victims' tweets are "counter narratives" to the authoritative narrative as through their tweets they demonstrate an instance of challenging the state's power and hegemony (Ibid: 444-460). As the participants used social media to voice their narratives on sexual assault, another objective of the research is to depict the role of social media in this event. The research also seeks to observe women's views on their participation in the campaign and the difference it made for them in the offline world as they described in their tweets. The following questions have been composed to help constructing the foundation of the research and addressing its objectives.

- How did Iranian women depict sexual assault through participating in When I Was campaign compared to the depiction of the state of the same issue?
- What did the reactions to the participants' tweets indicate?
- How did social media appear in their role of raising awareness on the issue of sexual assault and giving voice to the victims?
- What were the implications of the victims' tweets regarding their participation in the campaign and the difference it made for them?

Background: Iran's Mass Media, Podium of the Powerful

The twitter campaign started after pieces of a Huffington Post article were translated to Persian and distributed among Iranian tweeter users. The article had introduced a project called Every Day Sexism in which women were encouraged to tweet about their experiences of sexual assault using When I Was hashtag (Vaglanos 2016). Soon Iranian women started tweeting about their experiences among other women throughout the world. In their tweets, women depicted the "sequence of events" in their recounted experience of sexual assault (Griffin and May 2012: 443). In their tweets, they showed that assault can happen in numerous forms, places and situations, and it is not limited to adult women either. Through this twitter protest Iranian women broke their four-decade-long silence, and by doing so, not only did they challenge the state by questioning its narrative on sexual assault, but they also held in front of the society a digital mirror that reflected the bruised and diseased side of the culture and the flaws of today's Iranian society.

This of course is not the only instance of using social media in resisting the state. During the last few decades, Iranian social media users have been rethinking the cultural values mainly produced by the state and advertised through the mass media (see appendix A). The When I Was campaign therefore was one of the instances of people and in particular women reacting

to the state's monologue. One example of mediated state narrative is on the issue of sexual assault, in an image that depicts two pieces of candy, one is wrapped and intact, and the other is unwrapped with flies around it. Figure 1 shows the image described above on a billboard installed in one of the streets of Tehran. Such images are frequently seen in Iran and are permanent components of urban and even the countryside landscape. A single sentence in Persian and English accompanies the image which is similar in more or less all such billboards, and in this case it reads "Hijab is security" (see appendix B).

Figure 1: The state produced billboard on the issue of sexual assault installed in one of the streets of Tehran.

By the means of such images, Iran's state seems to aim to construct certain views that as Corner 2011) describes, "contribute to the 'way things are' in society" and in this case, regarding the issue of sexual assault and exploitation (14).

As it has been evident, advertising this view has not led into improving the situation regarding sexual assault, as it was shown in the researches discussed in the previous section. Therefore it seems that Iran's "culture would be improved" without its mass media, as they seem to be undeniable sources of what Corner (2011) describes as "bad power" (13). Although he (2011) describes this as the "soft power" of the media, as Iran's mass media are in a more overt way connected to the state; therefore the "systemic power" behind the mass media is not well hidden as it might be in other countries (14-19).

Through all said above, it is evident that the When I Was Twitter campaign is an important event in the history of social media in Iran as it shows how people have found an alternative "public space" where they can reflect on the official narrative of what is right and the cultural

values produced and advertised by the state and through the mass media (Dahlgren 2013: 48). Also, during the campaign, the victims of sexual assault found their "voice" through "telling their story" and "providing a narrative" of their experiences of assault which had never happened before in such a scale in Iranian online or offline society (Couldry 2010:7).

In chapter two the academic literature, the concepts and theories that supported the research will be reviewed. In addition what social research can put more focus on, which this dissertation has made effort to put in the centre of its attention will be argued. Chapter three is dedicated to methodological remarks that lay a foundation below the research, as well as methods used in different steps of conducting the research. In the next chapter, the findings will be discussed, starting with visual analysis of the advert, followed by the analysis of the tweets in a series of sections. This will be followed by discussing the key findings and reflecting on them critically as concluding remarks.

Literature Review

In this chapter, the research will have a deeper probing into the theoretical concepts related to the context and the case study, which will offer a vaster view on the case as well as the analysis. For this purpose, the chapter has been divided into six sections, where each concept will be presented. The first section dives into media and power, with the help of Corner's (2011) remarks and observations on the matter. Then come voice and recognition, where we will have a look at concepts described by Couldry and Honneth (in Couldry 2010). Concepts related to narrative and counter narrative will be looked at in the third section, with the help of Corner (2011), Mittell (2015) Couldry (2010), and Griffin and May (in Seale 2012). The fourth section is dedicated to gender relations and media, where Gill's (2007) observations will be discussed. In the same section, the theoretical background related to the context, discussed by different authors and gathered by Semati (2007) will be looked upon. The fifth section is where affect and emotion will be discussed with the help of Wetherell (2012), Berlant (2008) and Papacharissi (2015). The next section is dedicated to media and campaigns/protest, which is divided into two parts; the first part concerns advertisement, where Hall's (1997) observations on the matter will be viewed, and in the second part social media with the help of Mittelle (2015) and Papacharissi (2015) will be discussed.

Media and Power

As Corner (2011) remarks, the mixture of power and media is usually a bad sign, and a notion of (sometimes subtle, and sometimes overt) attempt of authorities to shape the society in the way they desire; therefore, he notes such power as "bad" and "something which our politics and our culture would be improved by having less of," which is then contrasted with "good power," described as the power of individual members of the society when it finds a way to be channelled or "projected" to question and criticise the authorities and their narrative (14-32). In totalitarian societies the control of the state on the media is an overt one, therefore the role of the media as channelling devices or "conduit" for the "source of power external to them" becomes more obvious, especially when an ideology is involved to help "legitimising" the state control and "visibility" in the media (14). This way the media are used to shape the society according to that particular ideology without using "coercive" acts (Ibid: 14). Such presence of "external power" in the media can lead into "distortion of public knowledge" and imposing certain views and "moral values" in order to establish the "elite hegemony" (Ibid: 21-41). In such case the media take part in "strategic reproduction of dominant assumptions and ideas" and representing them as "acceptable and even natural" and thus, the media play a distinct role in projecting narratives that can lead into oppression and marginalisation of certain groups in the society (Ibid:23). It is in contrast to this form of power that Corner (2011) describes "the potentially positive" form of power, which can be described as "empowering" those marginalised groups towards "emancipation, self-definition and social action" (17). For marginalised groups, today, "the web" has appeared to play the role of "an anti-systemic agency of communication," and social media in particular are used largely as a "public communicational platform" where they can express themselves without the prohibition or fear of consequences that applies to the offline world (22). It is therefore not surprising that shortly after the social media became popular, several governments felt their dangerous "libertarian" characteristics, and hastily imported the technologies that helped them block these sites from people's access, which was unsuccessful as proxies and VPNs were also produced and have been used ever since by internet and social media users in those countries (Ibid). Nevertheless, using social media in countries where they are banned is not without risk, and sometimes online activists get prosecuted as "deviant individuals" that were 'employed' or influenced by a foreign state to harm the nation's culture (22).

Voice and Recognition

As Couldry (2010) points out, having "voice" and the ability to "narrate" is "a form of agency" and a factor that makes us human, therefore to deprive individuals from their voice is

to take away their basic element of humanness (1). What Couldry (2010) means by voice, is the ability to give "an account of one's life," and as he quotes Judith Butler, "giving an account of oneself," which then he describes as "providing a narrative," or simply, "telling a story" (7). Being "a basic feature of human action," he (2010) continues, "narrative" is such an essential element of our lives that to take it away from someone is to deprive them from their "basic dimension" of their lives as human beings (7). He (2010) adds that voice, as a "form of reflexive agency," is a factor that we use not only to represent ourselves to the outside world as individuals but also in "exchanging narratives back and forth between our past and present selves" (8). Couldry (2010) emphasises further on voice as a "social process," that is not only constituted of utterance, but it also involves "listening" and appreciating other voices and narratives; therefore, it comprises "external differences between voices" as well as "internal diversity within a particular voice" (9). To Couldry (2010), what is dangerous and undesirable about power and media is what it does to "exclude voice" (10). Though Corner (2011) was worried mostly about what power 'puts into media' or channels through them, Couldry (2010) mostly discusses power as a means of prohibition of individuals from self-expression.

He (2010) then with the help of Honneth's "concept of recognition" explains that an "effective voice" is one that is "socially grounded," and appreciated by others; he also uses this concept to further describe what he means by "the value of voice" (8-106). In addition, according to Couldry (2010), "recognition of individual voice in collective voice" is what makes democracy possible and gives meaning to it (101). As Honneth (in Couldry 2010) points out, "recognition" is the most useful "tool for reforming" the society, as real social reform starts with recognition of the "ability through voice to contribute to concrete decision-making" in each and all members of the society (105-106).

The concept of recognition, as Couldry (2010) connects this concept to Sen's definition of it, includes recognising the right for individuals to "decide freely what traditions they wish or might not wish to follow," which is only possible if all individuals have a voice (106). This, of course, is only possible if those individuals have a chance to have their own world views, instead of views dictated by the religious or political authorities. If all members of the society have such freedom to choose their world-view and the kind of tradition they wish to follow, they will also, as Couldry (2010) quotes Honneth, "learn to esteem and value themselves" (106). Here, he (2010) continues, that "the intersubjective exchange of narratives" becomes

important, as it makes the existence of "transformative process of mutual esteem" possible (106).

Particularly important for this research is Couldry's (2010) notion of recognition in relation to gender and morality, as "moral responsibility" and "moral agency" of both men and women are concepts which apply to the case study, and the issue that "female view of moral responsibility" has not been viewed and valuated as "an equally valid model" to those of the authorities' or male individuals in this particular context (119). This as Couldry (2010) quotes Gilligan, happens when for a long time women's voices and views are ignored or overshadowed by the religious and male-oriented traditional ones, which leads into women's voice to be misunderstood and often dismissed, for instance, in a society with dominant religious and traditional views, women's demand to have freedom can be easily taken (and re-narrated) as a wish to be wanton or promiscuous and thus immediately dismissed and oppressed (119).

In the recent decades, the web has made possible for people to have a window to other countries and societies, and get to see how norms such as "regulation of sexual difference" are not "natural" but socially "constructed," and therefore can be changed (Butler in Couldry 2010:121). The presence of online world has also given a chance to individuals to show that regardless of being constantly exposed to the dominant narratives, imposed on them for instance by a totalitarian state, they develop their own authentic views and have the ability to be "actively reflexive in adapting to, and making sense of, their living conditions," even after years of being systematically oppressed and restrained (Ibid: 124). It is through challenging the dominant narrative and construction that the online platforms, newly-conquered by ordinary individuals, become "spaces of power" where voice is not merely about "speaking or telling stories," but it nearly always has a political side to it (Ibid:130).

Couldry (2010) then mentions Butler's notion of "the regulation of sexuality" through which "bodies" of women is targeted with "direct discriminations" and eventually their voices lose value (130). In such condition, he (2010) adds, "listening" to undermined voices becomes important as such "narrative hospitality" will not only benefit marginalised groups, but it leads into social reform and democracy (Ibid: 130). He (2010) then points out the importance of achieving "self-reflexivity" through understanding one's own "complexities" with the help of "listening to others' voices" and "registering them as important," which plays a vital role when it comes to cultural reform regarding social issues (131-132). It is particularly in societies that suffer under a totalitarian state especially the ones that continue marginalising groups by the use of certain ideologies that people seek (and often find) recognition in "online

communities" and attempt to participate in cultural and social reform (Ibid: 65). It has become possible through such online communities for members of marginalised groups to receive "respect" and feel accepted in a "social esteem of solidarity," if not by authorities, by individuals and members of the society (Ibid: 67).

What makes Honneth's theory applicable to this dissertation most of all is his notion of recognition as awareness towards the possibility of inducing "*moral* injuries" in other human beings in our interactions, and "the recognition of our status as human agents," and the effort we should make to ensure "the *absence* of such moral injuries" (Ibid: 67).

Narrative and Counter Narrative

The use of "high level of resources" by the authorities to compensate the lack of enthusiastic audience for their narrative is something that people in many societies throughout time and space have been familiar with and resisted (Corner 2011:66). Things get even more complicated when the authorities use "oversimplified dichotomies" to advertise an idea without considering the complex ways people's mind work regardless of how long they are exposed to such "easy dichotomies" of black and white or good and bad (Mittell 2015:126). These are, as Corner (2011) describes them, "narrative structuring" that are aimed to "reduce the possibilities for thoughtful engagement" to bring about people's complete acceptance and obedience, and to dismiss and undermine any narrative that has signs of "critically framed knowledge" as deviant (66).

In such a system the state is usually the one with "narrative authority" and power to use the mass media as the base and channelling device for its narrative (Griffin and May in Seale 2012: 444). This, then leads into a tendency especially in marginalised groups to "resist the narrative told by the powerful" through "counter narratives" (Ibid).

Social media, as discussed above, enable marginalised groups to have their own narratives and tell the stories of their lives, and as each person's experiences are exclusive to that person, there is an authenticity in those narratives which makes them the most important agencies of contradiction to the never-changing monotone of the mass media and the state narrative (Mittell 2015). To resist such monotone, now people can have an "active role" and 'talk back' to the elite; in addition, they can exchange ideas and have debate on each other's narratives (Mittell 2015:51). Being active narrators with agency and mostly clear subject positions, the personal narratives of individuals are empowered by the fact that they are recounted real life experiences, and are received by those who might have lived through similar conditions, as

opposed to the elite narratives that mostly depict impersonal scenarios and constantly repeat the same message (Mittell 2015).

Gender, Violence and Media

Gill (2007) in Gender and the Media argues that there are two views on today's media and feminism, one depicting the media as a base for "retro-sexism," as she quotes Greer (1999), where "representations of women" in degrading, misogynistic ways has become a norm, and the other, regards the media as being "increasingly influenced by feminism" (10). She (2007) believes that both these views have some truth to them, as while "feminist ideas" are known and more or less accepted, "predictable patterns of sexism" still continue to exist (10). As media has an active role in "constructing reality," they shape the views on gender related issues and ideas in the society, though as Gill (2007) quotes Brown (1990), "ordinary people […] can resist" the constructed realities and norms, and "consequently obtain pleasure" (24-29). Alluding to three "types of feminism," Gill (2007) points out that liberal feminists believe "gender stereotypes and restrictive roles" are responsible for "distortion" of women's lives, which need to be resisted in order to help women gain equality; a view doubted by "radical feminists," who believe women are "fundamentally different" from men due to both nature and influences of culture; however, both these views are dismissed by "socialist feminist" view that points at "class-based forms of capitalist societies" as the creator of gender based inequalities, though this "threefold definition" started to fall apart near the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century and is on its path to "reshape itself" roughly since the beginning of the new millennium (43).

Gill (2007), then, points out how "structures of meaning" are constructed by the media to depict "social relations based on domination" and bias as "natural and inevitable," for instance, "through advertising," as many of them depict female body as a "commodity," created to be consumed and create satisfaction for men (80-81). On the other hand, women are more visible than ever in the media in the role of content producers and storytellers, and because they have "different lives," they have "different perspectives" and "observe things" that stay hidden from men's eyes which makes their narratives "far more convincing and subtle" than those of men (Ibid: 178).

Gill (2007) then explores the field of talk shows, which have some similarities with social media campaigns in countries with state controlled mass media; for instance, they both provide a base for "communication in the public space" where "citizens can engage in a

collective conversation" that can lead into shaping and reshaping cultural values out of the range and arrangement of the state (231). In addition, they both can be considered as "an oppositional or feminine public sphere" where marginalised groups can find voice and visibility without the need to be "heard in traditional political forums" (Ibid: 232). Such feminine public spheres collaborate with Berlant's (2008) description of hospitable communities for women where they bond through mutual experiences as a result of living under bias and exploitation. These hospitable environments have the capacity to become spaces for reviewing and revaluation of the cultural values made and advertised in "mainstream political culture" and thus possibly birthplaces for social and cultural reform in the future (Gill 2007: 232).

The Case of Iran

When it comes to Iran, media both inside and outside depict limited and often distorted images of the society, culture and people. Western world's knowledge about contemporary Iran is limited to the political conflicts such as regional issues, and as a result, there is a lack of adequate information about the culture, social situations and people (Semati 2007: 1). There is also plenty of distorted information about Iran's people and culture and even its nature, and the represented image is usually more restrained and limited than Iran really is. For instance, using satellite TV and internet is not uncommon in Iran; therefore, the culture and people's world views are more worldly than people outside Iran often think (Semati 2007:3). When it comes to education, the majority of universities graduates are women, however, there has been only a few social researches on the situation of Iranian women mostly due to the restrictions by the state and the fact that those who go abroad to study usually have limited choices as to go back and do ethnographical research, due to the state's hostility towards these kinds of research and dual citizens. Therefore, as Semati (2007) points out, research in social and "cultural field" seems to have been missing when it comes to Iran (3). An important aspect of today's Iranian society that is for the most part concealed from the rest of the world due to the mass media not reflecting and covering it, is the proportion of new generation of Iranians who are determined to overcome the obstacles put on their path by "tradition" in order to achieve a level of "cultural modernity" based on human rights and equality (Khiabany in Semati 2007: 21).

This is a desire that has not subsided despite the constant operation by the state, and continues to show up in the content produced by the Iranian users in the social media and through

"collective interaction", whether through individual expressions or by participation in different campaigns (Rahimi in Semati 2007: 57). This is while internet access in Iran has been limited by the state and social media in particular are filtered and blocked, and even when people surpass those limits by using VPN and proxies there are many employees of the state who are active in the social media to produce content in the direction of reproduction of "authoritative hegemony" in those sites and networks as well (Rahimi in Semati 2007: 37). Nevertheless, this "new space of communication" and "dissent" has given a platform where they actively resist the authoritative narrative every day (Ibid 37-38). What needs to be mentioned is that these individual internet users are not fighting the state hegemony by any official narrative, but by their "personal individualistic expressions" which is in contrast with the "Islamic selfhood" promoted and imposed by the state since the beginning of revolution in order to break individuals into ingredients of an unvaried, uniform Islamic nation (Ibid: 50). The current state narrative on women and issues such as sexual assault goes back to pre-revolutionary time however, when the clergies who eventually led the revolution started depicting women as inferior and deceitful by "nature," as Sadeghi (in Semati 2007: 212-214) described. Rejecting social "construction of gender," they depicted their views on men and women as being fixed by "biology" and a creation of god (Ibid). In addition, they kept on advising women to be careful not to ignite the "instinct" of "desire" in men, emphasising on the importance of hijab (Ibid).

 After the revolution, those Islamic theorists defined a new version of "private/public" in the form of "a dichotomy of sexual/social" where any "interpersonal contact" between men and women was condemned and seen as to have something to do with "sexuality" and used it to "reduces women to passive sex objects" and at the same time aimed to erase their sexuality with the help of hijab (Sadeghi in Semati 2007: 217). The state however, did not stop there, and it has been conducting practical ways such as "seclusion" of women to limit them to private spaces (by advertising the idea that it is in their best interest to stay at home and give up having a career, for instance) and "segregation" of men and women in the "social spheres;" for instance in city buses the inside space is divided by bars in the middle and men and women sit separately, usually men in the front half and women in the back (Sadeghi in Semati 2007: 207-210).

Despite all this, people and in particular women have been actively challenging the state and resisting its attempts as to turn Iran into an "Islamic Utopia" and dictating "gender relations" and one aspect of such resistance is by participating in online campaigns and expressing their

ideas through personal narratives on different issues and thus opposing the state narrative (Sadeghi in Semati 2007: 207-210).

Affect and Emotions Shaping and Reshaping Events

Affect and emotions make social events complicated; they change the path of events from "simple lines of causation," into unpredictable "shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations;" therefore social researchers need to not only study them but also see beyond their simplified categorisations (Wetherell 2012:4-6). Studying emotions gets even more vital when the research deals with "narrative of unfairness" and bias, as such narratives are likely to "create and intensify emotions" and thus lead into resistance in the form of counter narratives and protests, which get further fuelled and directed by affect and emotions and function as a connective force that keep individuals together in some sort of "emotional community" (Ibid7-8). Women in particular, as Berlant (2008) points out, as the biggest marginalised group in more or less any society and especially in countries with gender bias laws, seek "intimacy" in public spaces, in campaigns and protests where they can feel emotionally close to others due to having mutual experiences of living through bias and empowered by participating and being heard (viii). She (2008) continues, such "intimate public" is created as a result of shared "emotional knowledge" obtained through living a "common historical experience;" therefore it is both "an achievement" and "a place for recognition and reflection" of emotions (Ibid).

However, authoritative narratives also flatten their ways into acceptance "through affect" and use people's emotions to persuade them into acceptance of conveyed values and structures (Wetherell 2012: 8-16). Thus, it is expected that marginalised groups find protesting against the injustice and bias difficult, seeing themselves face to face with those who are influenced by the authoritative narrative and react to their protests by shaming them; this can occur especially when it comes to issues that are considered taboo in a society (Ibid).

In addition, the importance of studying affect, as Papacharissi (2105) points out, comes from the fact that although there is a lot of emphasis on "rational decision-making," it is affect, or "nonconscious [...] intensity with which we experience emotions" fuels our actions and gives them direction especially in group protests and campaign formations (15-38). Also, we interact with others, especially those with whom we share online platforms, "affectively" and through thoughts and actions, and in hearing the stories of those who are treated violently or with unfairness "we invest our emotion" in their favour, and might "contribute to their

narratives" either by responding to them or by being motivated to tell a story of our own (Ibid: 17). It is by "affectively charged" perception of different narratives that we might feel empathy for some groups or become distanced with others, which can lead into shaping online campaigns through emotional interactions and motivations for producing one's own narrative (Ibid: 20). Therefore, affect and emotions with the "connective affordances of social media" help marginalised groups to reach out to and support each other through online spaces and campaigns, as mutually felt emotions circulate like blood within the veins of the campaigns and give them vitality (Ibid: 22-39). Thus, it is affect that is the source of "power" for marginalised groups in initiating movements that can lead into cultural or political reform which is associated with disturbance to the "order, mainstreaming and hierarchy" by the means of which the authority rule a society, and the base for such movements is today provided by online platforms and most prominently social media, where "affective engagement" within emotionally motivated members of the such marginalised groups have become possible (Ibid: 34-41). So it gets clear that studying affect and emotion is of interest for the current research, as having a deep understanding of social phenomena is not possible by using mere "reason" and thoughts and needs to be engaged with "sense and memory" as well (Ibid: 24).

Media and Campaigns/Protests

Advertisement

It is not unprecedented that the mixture of power and ideology lead into using "representation" with "emphasis on the body," sometimes in the shape of advertisement "to codify and regulate certain sections of society," for instance, by implying views and ideas about women and aiming to control gender relations and lead individuals towards adopting certain behaviours that are aligned with those views and the elite ideology (Hall 1997:186). Thus, advertisement has the capacity to become a tool for "articulation" of the authoritative narrative through "*visibility*" (Ibid: 198). Applying the ideology in the narrative by the state can be in the shape of "reduction" of those certain groups from "human subjects" to objects, or naturalising a certain behaviour to them, for instance, implying that it is men's "innate" characteristic and inevitable 'instinct' to show a certain behaviour (Ibid:199-244). This kind of "naturalisation" is a measure taken in advertisements to not only convey a certain meaning but also make it "permanent," so as Hall (1997) uses Barthes' phrase, a "myth" comes to aid of the producers of such adverts to wash away the "motivation" behind its narrative and

representing the conveyed meaning as a universal law (182). Such representation can appear in the shape of images with "connotation" of a certain "message," though they can also be accompanied with words to minimise the possibility of other interpretations and to lead the viewer towards the producer's "preferred meaning" (Ibid: 228-245). Sometimes such adverts include "[b]inary oppositions," especially when the goal is to "classify" groups of people according to their differences, or to divide them, according to the ideology and narrative of the powerful, into 'good' and 'bad' categories (ibid 236-243). Hall (1997) calls this "stereotyping" which he describes as a "signifying practice," or dividing groups of people into categories through reducing them "to a few essentials," or natural, "simplified characteristics" (249-257). Stereotyping also divides people and behaviours into "the acceptable [...] and the unacceptable," or "the 'normal' and the 'deviant' [...] what 'belongs' and what does not," and draws a distinct line between them by signifying what is "out of place" as "polluted, dangerous, taboo," and what must be "expelled or excluded" (Ibid: 258). As Dyer (in Hall 1997) puts it, stereotyping is what "ruling groups" do to normalise their own "world view, value system, sensibility and ideology" as the norm, "natural and inevitable," the ultimate goal of course, is to "establish their hegemony" (259). The above points occur in the case study this research focuses on, where women are represented in a certain way, and that view and representation is presented as a natural fact and universal law. The details of such representation will be discussed in the coming chapters.

Social media, New Platforms for New Protests

Users of social media benefit from the advantage of having "temporal control" on the contents and can reach them at any time, which facilitates doing research on a case study in such context (Mittell 2015:54). It seems that social media are not only beneficial for researchers, but they have been providing an environment for communities of activists and ordinary people. Now social media are also spaces for participation in different campaigns, having interaction with other participants and getting information and education on subjects that are difficult to have access to through other sources especially in the countries where the contents of books and mass media are under the control of the state (Corner 2011). In such space provided by social media, achieving a sense of having a voice and the ability to making an impact on society is not implausible (Couldry 2011). By providing the possibility and the freedom of looking pass the state produced, limited and sometimes distorted information and views, these online communities also function as bases for the growth of "collective

intelligence" independent from the given view by authorities and the mass media (Mittell 2015:45).

As Papacharissi (2015) also points out, social media have been playing a vital role in reflecting and echoing the "voices frequently marginalised" by power controlled mass media, an issue that exists most prominently in countries with totalitarian regimes and closed, tradition-centred cultures (20). Research has shown that participation of individuals in campaigns and movements has increased in recent years as a result of "feelings of engagement" being strengthened by social media, as Papacharissi (2015) points out (22). People have found through social media their long forgotten connection to each other and have become motivated to get active along those "ties" for achieving social reform and making a difference, and they have also found a chance for "sharing" their "individual" views and "information" that particularly in an "autocratic regime" would never appear through the mass media (Ibid). This also reveals the reason why social media are blocked and out of access in those countries, which of course is an unsuccessful attempt since most internet users use proxies and VPNs and have access to and use social media (Ibid). It should be noted that Twitter in particular seems suitable for campaign activities, as its "storytelling infrastructure" has been proved successful in attracting individuals to participate and the readers to "tune into" the participants' stories through imagination and therefore it makes is easier for the users to see matters and social issues from others' points of view (Ibid: 16).

The High Grounds of Social Science and the Rifts of Humble Observations

With all said above, it seems that there is a gap in the academic world when it comes to the voices of ordinary individuals and what they have to say about social issues, especially women's voices. The situation is even more severe when it comes to countries with totalitarian regimes and closed culture, where women still have to fight for their most fundamental rights, including having voice. Therefore, within the social science field there seems to be a need for research that would reflect the voices of ordinary women and their firsthand stories of what they experience in today's societies and civilisations. Thus, this dissertation puts its effort first to reflect the voices of ordinary women and show the importance of those voices. The research will focus on the victims' narratives by discussing the complex illustration they make through their personal recounted experiences of assault in contrast with the simple, unvaried version depicted by the state. It is the goal of this project to show the power of those personal narratives as they question and challenge the constructed

values and norms. The research also opens a window to gender relations, and gives an account on the violence women experience today regarding sexual assault, and it does so by seeking to study the Twitter campaign as a case study of women protesting and opposing the state's narrative of sexual assault and the abuse they experience in the face of today's Iranian society.

The campaign is perhaps one of the first in contemporary Iran initiated and shaped by ordinary women. The context of contemporary Iran with its autocratic, theocratic regime, where women have been pushed to the farthest corners and margins, has been a challenging environment for such campaigns, and researching such cases also due to the same reasons has not been without difficulty; therefore studies on this subject are not easy to find. The fact that the subject of sexual assault is a taboo in Iranian culture only adds to the difficulty for women to talk about it, which makes women's participation in the campaign significant and valuable.

Social Media, Power and Iranian Women's Voices

The subject of power and media has been written about by many academics; Corner (2011), for instance, illustrates different aspects of power and its connection to media, as it gets channelled through the mass media in the attempt to limit democracy; and in return, when people seek and achieve it in the process of challenging the state, which has become achievable through social media. Power, in Couldry's (2010) notion however, is depicted as voice and another aspect of it as what seeks to limit and prevent voice. He (2010) also discusses recognition as an indication of appreciating the value of voice and one's own responsibility in realising that actions can bring suffering and pain for others.

Voice and power have another component, narrative, and together they make a frame within which different structures can be made and represented or challenged and questioned (Corner 2011 and Couldry 2010). Giving simple narratives that generalise different situations is an attempt of the states to prevent individuals from thinking deep about a situation or an issue, and lead the society away from its heterogeneity towards establishment of the "elite hegemony" (Corner 2011:41 and Mittelle 2015). However, this is not a one-way move, and there is always the possibility that the society fights back and react to the authoritative narrative, for instance through heterogeneous, individual narratives on an issue, or as Griffin and May put it, a resistance through counter narratives (Seale 2012). The role of social media in empowering the members of the society and especially marginalised groups and giving them a platform where they can have a voice, has been discussed by Mittell (2015), Papacharissi (2015), Corner (2011), Couldry (2010) as well as social science researches

whose focus has been the post revolutionary Iran and its social and cultural turbulence. Among them is Semati (2007) who discusses the power social media has given to people of Iran for the first time after the revolution. He (2007) also puts the Islamic state of Iran under observation, describing how the narrative that pictures inferiority and seductiveness of women started before the revolution and continues to exist until today. Semati (2007) continues to explain how women are depicted in the state's narrative as initiators and responsible components in the instances of sexual assault by letting themselves been seen by men and thus are a threat to the society's moral safety and harmony. It is not only in Iran, however, that sexism brings about representation of women in a biased, distorted way, as Gill (2007) informs us. She (2007) discusses the role of media in construction of such views, depicting them as natural and universal laws that lead into gender bias in social relations. To describe the situation in another way, Hall (1990) uses Barthes concept of myth as he explains through historical examples how views are represented as natural facts and how marginalised groups are reduced to certain characteristics and become bricks in the constructed image that is produced by the powerful. Such marginalisation in the communities has always been associated with emotional and affective turbulent in different societies, as Papacharissi (2015) and Wetherell (2012) point out. Wetherell (2012) in particular focuses on emotions and how they can change the course of seemingly predictable events. Berlant (2008) also discusses emotion and affect, though her approach is more towards the power of emotions in bringing marginalised groups, particularly women, together through the closeness they feel towards each other due to having mutual experiences.

Although the views mentioned above seem to be focusing on ordinary members of the societies and marginalised groups, there seem to be a vacuum in the academic world when it comes to actually using firsthand experiences of ordinary people in social research and composing theories. The situation gets worse when a totalitarian regime is involved that systematically censors and eliminates those heterogeneous voices and makes researching on such society possible only from distance and with the help of online ways of communication. To fill this vacuum to an extent, focusing on the voices of ordinary women and their experiences through their participation in social media has been the goal of this dissertation. In doing so, the research will also depict the construction of gender relations and the structure that has brought about bias and violence against women particularly regarding the issue of sexual assault in the context of contemporary Iran.

Methodology and Methods

This chapter is divided into two parts; the first part is allocated to methodological points, and the second part is where different practical steps in conducting the research will be depicted.

Case Study and Feminist Standpoint Theory

A Case Depicting a Unique Point in Contemporary History of Iran

This dissertation is a "case study" research, as Flyvbjerg (2001) describes, where an instance of resisting authoritative narrative by individuals (Iranian women) is being observed and studied (66). The case is a "concrete example" that represents a unique point in Iran's contemporary history where women, this biggest marginalised group in post-revolutionary Iran, are reacting to the state narrative and resisting it through their personal narratives (Flyvbjerg 2001:135). Although it is sometimes argued that case study cannot be generalized to the entire society and therefore it is not suitable for social research, Flyvbjerg (2001) exclaims that concentrating on context oriented issues does not prevent us from "empirical generalizations," and in fact it occurs often in social research (p.136). Besides, as in this particular case individuals from all over the country participate in the campaign, the research seems to provide an extended frame around the issue of sexual assault and how it is viewed in the society.

Women's Concrete Experiences of Sexual Assault

This research is based on firsthand experiences of sexual assault recounted and narrated by ordinary Iranian women who at some point in their life became a victim of it, as well as the tweets of witnesses of this phenomenon and the reactions of the readers to those tweets. What women depict and narrate from their personal experiences and observations is valued in this research because as Brooks (2006) quotes feminist standpoint scholar Patricia Hill Collins, when making "knowledge claims" about women, it is their "concrete experience" that can provide the ultimate "criterion for credibility" of these claims (Brooks 2006:56). The recounted experiences of sexual assault narrated in women's tweets create "the starting point" to understand this phenomenon and move towards a brighter horizon for women and victims of sexual assault (Ibid: 56). As Jagger (in Brooks 2006) argues, "[w]omen's emotional acumen" can provide researchers with a better perspective and deeper understanding,

especially in the contexts where women are systematically and constantly censored and their voices are suppressed (59).

As it was discussed in the previous chapter, the state's representation of women has been in the direction of depicting them as inferior, deceitful individuals, which has been leading into their marginalisation since the beginning of the post-revolution era in Iran (Semati 2007). Therefore, a research with the focus on ordinary women as victims of the systematic marginalisation seems vital, especially regarding a tabooed issue such as sexual assault which is also systematically hushed up. Therefore this dissertation puts its effort on listening to the voices of Iranian women who challenge the state who wants them silenced and invisible.

Primary Method: Collecting the Data

Given the complexity of the situation regarding sexual assault in contemporary Iran, it was clear since the beginning of the research that different narratives on the issue were needed to be gathered and studied carefully. In order to do so, the participants' tweets in When I Was campaign as well as a sample of authoritative narrative on sexual assault had to be collected. Thus an image of one the state's produced adverts (figure 1) was chosen as an example of authoritative narrative, to which, the tweets play the role of counter narratives (Seale 2012). To collect the tweets, '#WhenIWas lang fa' was searched in Twitter search engine, and an archive consisting of roughly 2100 independent tweets (i.e. with an exclusion of direct replies to the tweets) by Persian speaking participants was made. The gathered data then were separately analysed using visual analysis for the image and narrative analysis for the tweets.

Secondary Method: Data Analysis

Two methods of analysis were used in this dissertation. First the image of the advert was analysed using visual analysis and then the tweets were analysed using narrative analysis.

Visual Analysis of the Advert

To analyse the image, I used the guidance of Hansen and Machin (2013) for semiotic analysis of the image, and Rose (2001) and Corner (2011) for deeper probing into the embedding of the image in public visual culture.

In their Media and Communication Research Method, Hanson and Machin (2013) provide the researcher with detailed guide as to how see through an image and reach out to its hidden message. They set visual examples, through "detailed analysis" of which they open the path

towards analysing images and help the reader "see" them in a way that they might have never before (Ibid: 174). With the help of Barthes' semiotics, they invite the reader to pay attention to what an image presents in the first glance, or, what is "denoted" in the image (Ibid: 175). As the next step, they suggest probing into the image as to what meaning it aims to convey, or "the ideas and values [...] communicated through" it; in other words, what an image might "connote" (Ibid: 176-180). In this, they (2013) do not leave out settings and other details such as the colours used in the image, the angles each item makes with the viewers' eyes and the brightness of the image, etc. Therefore, although they (2013) focus on analysing photographs, they give insight for dissecting and studying images and thus provide the dissertation with sufficient tools for analysing the image of the advert and revealing its subsurface layers where the meaning dwells.

Semiotics, however, are not the only aspects in which we need to probe in image analysis. As Rose (2001) points out, it is also important to take heed of the "site(s) of production [...], the site of image itself," and the "site of audiencing" (16-30). She (2001), thus, urges the researcher to take notice of the role that the producer of an image plays in what meaning it conveys, as well as where and by whom the image is seen and perceived; she advises the researcher that without paying close attention to contextual factors in which the image has been produced and viewed, visual analysis cannot be sufficiently done. She (2001), also warns the reader that the world of visual meaning-making is a twisted and complicated one, and there is no magical formula for opening up an image and be certain about what meaning it contains; and therefore, it is not advisable to rely on any "interpretation" too much, as it that needs to be supported by various factors and rationalised (2). Thus, she advises the researchers to pay close attention to the context of an image, and avoid relying too much on their own perception in visual analysis but seek to "support" it using "detailed textual or visual evidence" as well as the "visual details" presented in the image (Ibid: 161).

Corner (2011) also provides valuable points on visual analysis and image as a form of "public communication," emphasising on its importance as he believes visual communication has never been used as much as it is now, and it has never been so politicised (211). He (2011) points out that images aim to lead "private" lives of the viewers through shaping "public visual culture" to the direction favoured by the image producers, a point that applies deeply to the image of the advert discussed in this dissertation (211). Thus, Corner (2011) reminds us that images are "narrated" both by the producer, in this case the state, and then by the viewers (212).

Hall's (1997) discussion on adverts plays a role in the analysis of the image, particularly as it is a product of the state and therefore has everything to do with power and representation. He (1997) provides the research with ways of depicting how an image can be used by authorities to control though constructing certain views. He (1997) describes how adverts can "reduce" people into objects or their instincts (199). He (1997) uses Barthes' concept of "myth" to explain how "motivation" behind producing an images can be concealed by representing its conveyed meaning as a natural universal fact (182).

Narrative Analysis of the Tweets

After the collection of the data was completed, the process of analysing the tweets started. The first step for analysing the tweets was naturally reading them thoroughly followed by separating about 270 of the tweets randomly as "sample" to be analysed; this was due to time limit and the scale of this research, as it is according to Seale (2012) the case in most social researches (150). Before starting the actual analysis, and in order to test the method and my approach, about 15 tweets were chosen and translated to English and analysed as "pilot" (Byrne in Seale 2012: 235-245). This was followed by dividing the samples into different themes, which was done based on their tone, the subjective position of the narrator, characterisation and so on. Some of the themes were further divided into subthemes. Below in figure 2, the themes are illustrated in a "spider diagram" as they surfaced in the early stages of the analysis (Rivas in Seale 2012: 374).

It should be noted that narrative analysis was used mostly for "literary works" before, though it has recently "become increasingly popular within social sciences" as well (Griffin and May in Seale 2012: 442). The increasing popularity of narrative analysis in social science could be due to its use in understanding "how people make sense of their experiences" and "how the context influences them" in recounting that experience; also, through this method the researcher can observe how narratives aim to construct certain meanings and views (Ibid: 442).
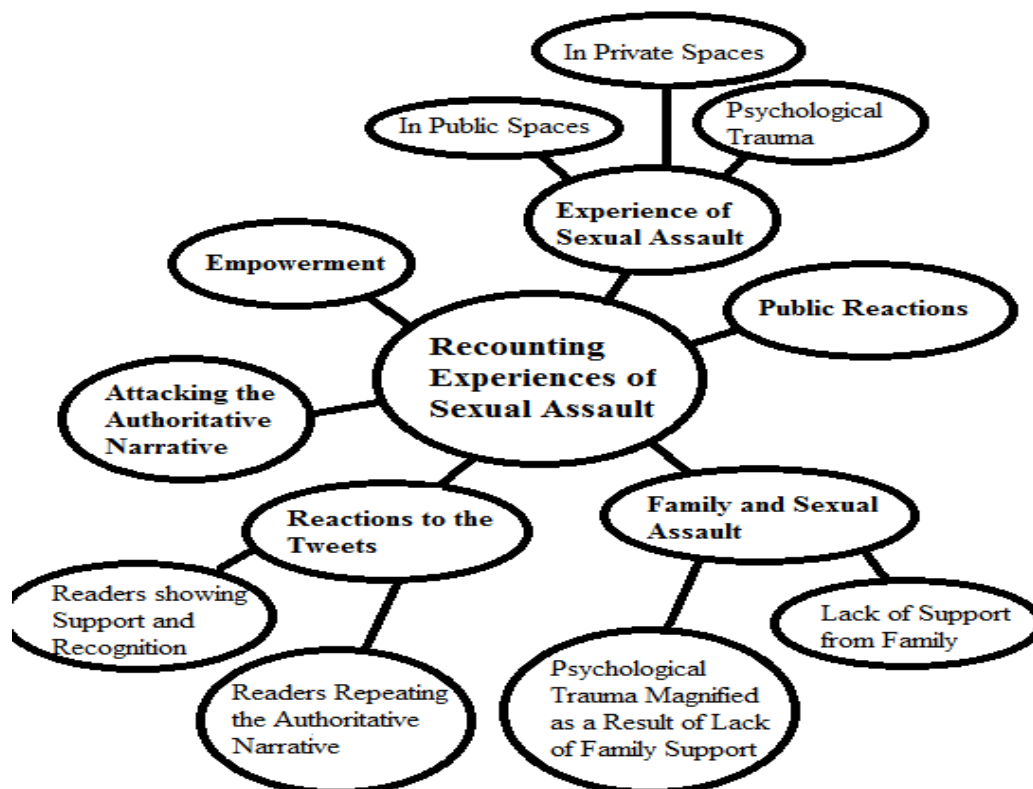
Figure 2: Themes and Subthemes

In narrative analysis of the tweets they were left "intact" as units of storytelling, in contrast to some other methods within qualitative analysis where "texts are broken up into thematic chunks," as Griffin and May explain (Seale 2012: 443-461). This method seemed to be the most useful as the aim of the dissertation was to depict how victims and witnesses of sexual assault "make sense of their experiences" and how they "communicate" their views within the campaign.

To do the analysis on each theme, then, the tweets that belonged to each theme were analysed by paying attention to the subjective positioning of the users who tweeted and the subjective positioning apparent in the tweets, the actions and reactions described in the tweets, characterisations, emotions, setting and location, and the position of the audience. For instance in the subtheme Lack of *Support from Family*, the most prominent features of the tweets were the expressed emotions, so emotion became the starting point for focus in that theme. Also, lack of action from the victim side was evident in this theme, which I interpreted it to be at least partly related to the sense of powerlessness resulted from lack of support from

the family. It was apparent that the experience of assault or abuse was not in the core of the tweets as much as lack of support from the family in this theme; therefore it was apparent that the victims were suffering more from lack of support than the experience of assault. Also, the shape and characteristics of lack of support from the family seemed to be different in different cases. For instance, whenever the perpetrator was a family member, it seemed that emotional complications led into lack of support from the rest of the family; whereas when the perpetrator was a stranger cultural factors and lack of education seemed be behind family's lack of support. The subjective positioning of the tweets and the victims was evident through the emotions, which in this subtheme consisted of deep resentment and anger in the defence of the victim and was pointed at the family members. The strength with which the victims blamed their family members had eclipsed the sexual assault itself, putting it in secondary importance. In the next step, I used related theories to support and conceptualised my analysis of the tweets.

It is hoped that by analysing the tweets the research will show how the participants illustrate the "reality" of sexual assault as well as different aspects of Iranian "culture" around this issue and the way it is "viewed in the society" (Gillian and May in Seale: 442-444). In addition, as "sequence of events" in a narrative is "non-random" it leads into creation of "a logical or meaningful connection" between them and therefore "a sense of causality" which results in "a particular point or meaning" that emerges to the surface passing through everything the narrative illustrates (Ibid: 443). This way, the dissertation sought to depict the heterogeneous narratives the participants build through recounting their personal "storied" experience of sexual assault (Ibid: 443). The individual narratives and themes were compared to the analysis of the image as an example of the authoritative narrative of sexual assault and discussed in the frame of such observation and comparison of the narratives.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the confidentiality of the participants' identities, the Twitter usernames that constituted of two parts were represented by their initials. This was due to the possibility of the participants having their real name as Twitter username. Also, in order to reflect their thoughts in the tweets, I tried to translate their tweets to English almost word by word, and whenever it was not possible, phrases and words closest to the original text were chosen.

Analysis

Counter Narratives Challenging the Narrative of the Powerful and its Guardians

This chapter has been divided into two parts. The first part consists of visual analysis of the image in the state produced advert installed on a billboard in one of the streets of Tehran as an example of authoritative narrative on the issue of sexual assault. In the next part the tweets of the campaign participants as direct or indirect reactions to the authoritative narrative will be studied. The tweets depict the situation of Iranian women and their views in regard with the issue of sexual assault, and their narratives of it. The tweets of witnesses of sexual assault and the reactions of the readers to the tweets of participants also will be discussed in the second section.

The image and the tweets together build a bigger picture that reveals the ideology coming from the state and its reflection on the society, which brings to light how the contemporary Iranian society is shaped regarding the issue of sexual assault. It should also be noted that as women in Iran have been systematically and constantly marginalised for decades, perhaps their mere participation in the campaign that discusses a tabooed subject can be considered as a sign of resistance against the state.

The Advert

Images among other varieties of visual "forms of representation" produce "social power relations" and bring about "construction" of social realities as Rose (2001) points out; therefore it is important to study and understand them (9-10). The image demonstrated in figure 1 that appeared in one of the streets of Tehran is not an exception, as it is an illustration of the core ideology that was shaped even before Iran's Islamic revolution by its leaders, as discussed in the previous chapters (Semati 2007). Before probing into the meaning that the image aims to convey however, it should be noted that it is constructed in "three sites" as Rose (2001) explains, and those are "the site of production," or where the image has been created; "the site of image" or what meaning the image conveys as well as the public domains where the billboard is installed, and finally, "the site of audience" which is the people who live near or pass by the billboard everyday (16). As to site of production, billboards, including the one we are discussing, among other mass media are under direct control of the state (Rose

2001: 187). As to "the site of audiencing," it will be studied in the next section using tweets as samples of audiences' reflections of the advert (Ibid). The first part of the site of image, or the meaning that the image conveys, however, will be discussed in this section.

As the relationship between "systemic power" (the state) and the mass media in Iran is an overt one, therefore it is apparent that the message of the billboard (the meaning that the image conveys) comes directly from the state (Corner 2011: 16). Such billboards are spread all over the country, contributing to the "public visual culture" in the direction of structuring the "relations" between individuals according to the elite's ideology, using the mass media's "symbolic power" and the vast site of visibility where the number of audiences is as big as the commuters who pass them by every day (Corner 2011:43-211).

The first thing that comes to the view upon looking at the image is that it is divided into two parts. What the image "denotes" at each side are candy bars, the one on the left is open with flies around it, and the one on the right is unwrapped and intact (Hanson and Machin 20013:175). Those are the only items shown in the advert as if the items are suspended against an empty background. The only thing that can be labelled as setting is the "colour" of the background, which is different in the left and the right half of the image (Ibid 187-189). At the left, where the flies are around the open candy, we have orange in the background, and on the right side, where the candy is wrapped and the flies are absent, the colour green appears in the background. The flies are shown in close up and the details of their anatomies are completely visible, while they hover above the open candy. Their dark bodies make a contrast with the orange background, which becomes dense in the above of the image and paler as it comes to the bottom. The colour green in the background of the right half of the image is also dense in the above and becomes paler in the middle and the bottom. In the right half, the intact, wrapped candy is the only object and in it situated in the centre surrounded by the green background.

What the candy bars connote are women, on the left side without proper hijab as open candy, and on the right side women with proper hijab as unwrapped candy. The left side of the image therefore depicts a particular problem, sexual assault and exploitation initiated by women's insufficient hijab, and at the right half it depicts the solution to that problem as having proper hijab. Thus, without illustrating any human figure, the image connotes individuals of the whole nation, women as candies and men as flies. Moreover, as the candies are depicted in a way that they make no "horizontal angle" with the viewers' eyes, it can be an indication that

the image addresses the female viewers, and calls for their "involvement" (Hanson and Machin 2013: 191). On the other hand, the perpetrators depicted as flies seem to not being addressed as they are depicted above the candy making an obvious angle with the viewers eyes; instead, they seem to be indicated as "out of control" agents whose sight should induce fear in viewers, and as they are not responsible for their behaviour just as flies get attracted to a source of sugar by instinct, the only hope is to keep them away by the use of hijab (Ibid: 190). This way, the advert "contributes to concealing responsibilities" of the perpetrators in committing sexual assault as well as the responsibility of the government in providing a safe space for women by prosecuting the assaulters or through other strategies. Also, the fact that although women are addressed by the advert though they are "not represented" directly but implied through images of objects, can be a further indication, as Hansen and Machin (2013) point out, to "ideological motivators" behind the image (194).

The colours of the background are the only components that could be identified as the setting. The orange background on the left half connotes an alarming situation, danger and destruction, and the green background on the right side implies safety, calm and well-being (Hansen and Machin 2013). As these colours surround the two situations with the candies, it could be an indication that women can pose a threat if they are visible and they bring safety and security to the society if they are hidden under hijab. Therefore, evidently the image aims to reduce the issue of sexual assault to a simple dichotomy and "problem-solution formula" where women are depicted as the only responsible agents, though at the same time they are reduced to objects that imply their sexuality (Ibid: 171). It is half full of pessimism on the left, where it depicts a dark view in the horizon for women and the society as a whole, aiming for persuasion out of fear, and on the right half in contrast it depicts an "optimistic" view with the promise of dignity for women and safety for them as well as the society (Ibid: 187-201). Also, as the "setting" is not "identifiable" it "serves to decontextualise" the presented "connotative meanings," or as Barthes points out "myth," as if it is a universal law (Ibid: 176-186). Hall (1997) also with the help of Barthes explains how "myth" comes to the producer's aid, aiming to hide the "motivation" behind the image by representing its message as a natural law; thus the advert not only "reduces" women from "human subjects" to objects and defines men by their instincts, it also aims to "naturalise" the constructed meaning as a universal, "permanent" fact (182-244). Evidently, the image aims to control and "regulate" women first and foremost by constructing certain self-views and world-views (Ibid: 186).

In addition, it seemingly seeks to construct "the relations between men and women," offering a myth in the shape of "knowledge" and warning women with a fearful fate in case they did not follow the given advise (Hansen and Machin 2013: 12-183). In addition, although it depicts women as the only responsible components regarding the issue of sexual assault, and thus seemingly emphasises on their "agency," by depicting them as objects with no power and agency and reducing them to their "sexuality" it contradicts the first part of its message (Ibid: 183-185). Also as it implies that women's sexuality, to which the entire being of women has been outlined, is the very thing that can bring about their downfall, it constructs the "relation of women to themselves" as them being their own biggest enemy (Ibid: 12).

It should be noted that the power of image is being used for meaning construction more than any other age as Corner (2011) points out and it is extended to the "contentious realms of culture and of politics" (210). Images though promise "knowledge to viewers," can reveal a different "agenda" when looked at with a questioning gaze (Ibid: 210). Thus, the connection of visual communication with the world of politics and culture becomes apparent, as it turns into a "social practice" revealing the presence of a political motivation behind what it depicts (Ibid: 212). The image of the advert discussed above is not an exception, as it is "thickly narrated" by the state and re-narrated by the audiences (Ibid: 212). Through studying the tweets in the next section, it will be revealed how individual narratives depict the situation of today's Iran regarding the issue of sexual assault, and how such depictions can also reveal the position of Iranian Twitter users towards the authoritative narrative.

The Tweets

As it was discussed in the previous section, the state actively imposes a simple scenario for sexual assault which is based on leaving all the responsibility regarding the issue with women. Therefore, it is possible to argue that by mere recounting their authentic stories of sexual assault, this mutual experience of many Iranian women, the participants provide "counter-hegemonic" narratives and thus challenge the "mono-construction of the women" depicted by the authorities (Ozer and Azzi 2009: 7). In this section the participants' tweets, divided into themes and subthemes, will be analysed using narrative analysis. Also there will be examples of tweets in each theme or subtheme and for each example, the number of retweets and like will be mentioned as they could be a representation of the recognition they received.

Experience of Sexual Assault

In this theme the tweets that depict the experience of sexual assault in general, those that recount a particular memory are gathered. They are divided into different subthemes according to whether they occurred in public or private spaces. This theme gives the reader the chance as to see the situation as a whole, and how and in what situations assault can happen. In addition, sometimes the tweets also depict the narrators' reactions to assault, and the way they felt about it, which consist usually of a mixture of intense emotions such as fear, anger, humiliation, sadness and the sense of victimhood. Farther in the chapter, it will be revealed that the emotional reactions/expressions of the victims intensify when witnesses or family members blame them or refuse to support them.

Experiencing Sexual Assault in Public Spaces

Many tweets indicated sexual assault happening every day in public spaces. They are of different variations and ranges; nevertheless there are some similar features within them. The theme can indicate the freedom the perpetrators feel in committing sexual assault in the public spaces. In contrast, the victims seem to not having many choices as to how to react to it, which could be due to factors such as their own fear and stress or the social pressures linked to gender politics in Iran. The tweets below show examples of tweets that belong to this theme.

V. W. (female): "When I was studying as a bachelor student in Ahvaz University, walking through Chaharshir road near the station was a stressful journey because it was full of men who always tried to flash their privates at you." (0 retweets4 likes)

SeeMore (female): "Whenever I am touched in the street, I turn and hit the assaulter. Once I hit the guy in the eye with my book then ran away, thinking he might get blind and they charge me for it." (0 retweets, 5 likes)

Abnormal (male): "Once in the taxi I curled myself to the corner and glued myself to the door so much that the girl who sat beside me said sit comfortably, brother." (0 retweets11 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis, the first tweet by V.W. depicts the location of the event which is a particular street in one of the smaller cities of south west Iran with a more traditional texture compared to the big cities, plus the internal state of the narrator and how she feels about that situation, which is described as "stressed". Although the assault happens frequently in her way, the narrator does not seem to have any strategy for defending herself or show any sort of reaction to it. Therefore she appears as a passive victim who despite all that happens on her path, she attends the university where she is expected to be. Her fear and stress becomes more apparent as the situation is depicted to be inescapable with the men who harass her being many, the street being "full of" them.

On the other hand SeeMore, the narrator in the next example, appears as an active character who does not lose her spirit despite experiencing sexual assault, which as she shows us through using the adverb "whenever" is a regularly experienced event for her. Even though the tweet starts with her being objected to assault, the core of the narrative is her aggressive reaction to defend herself against it, which shows her subjective position to be far from the view that blames the victims. Still, as she knows that the establishment and/or witnesses are unlikely to support her, she gets frightened in the end and runs away, but even then, she does not seem powerless.

In the next example of this cluster by Abnormal, who appears as a conscious, knowledgeable witness, the setting is inside a taxi where he also confirms that many instances of assault occur. The narrator, being aware of this, aims to give more space to the female passenger which in turn is appreciated by her, as by calling her "brother," she perhaps aims to show that she is aware of his good intentions.

In the above examples, the tweets show the complexity of the issue of sexual assault through revealing details of real life experiences of the victims, which challenge the "oversimplified dichotomy" narrated by the state through the mass media such as the billboards with the images discussed in the beginning of this chapter (Mittell 2015:126).

As it was seen in one of the examples, there were instances of reflecting on the issue of sexual assault by narrators who appeared as witnesses. What they showed Honneth describes as "recognition" through acknowledging the occurrence of sexual assault for women in public spaces (Couldry 2010: 67). The witnesses' acknowledgments are important especially since there are tweets that call the victims frauds and question their honesty. The narrator in such tweets appear as morally conscious agents who are aware of the "injuries" resulting from

sexual assault and how frequently it happens to women, and as it was revealed in the last example above, such knowledge and recognition can influence the witnesses' actions, which in return can lead into mutual respect and "esteem of solidarity" between individuals (Ibid: 67).

Experiencing Sexual Assault in Private Spaces

Experiencing sexual assault is not exclusively a street phenomenon, as a number of tweets show. The tweets of this subtheme show how assault can happen also in private spaces and inside homes, how the range and type of assault can differ and how vulnerable victims, among them children, can be against this phenomenon. Below are some examples of tweets that belong to this theme.

M.Z (female): "Believe it or not, sexual assault is not always for the neighbour; it can happen inside our own home. The environment should be in a way that the victim can talk about it." (0 retweets, 18 likes)

R.R. (male), a medical doctor: "My years of experience show that children are most vulnerable at homes, even from aunt, uncle, cousin, etc." (0 retweets, 5 likes)

S.A. (female): "We stayed over at night at a family friend's, I woke up in the morning seeing her fifty year old husband is in the room, looking at me and masturbating." (1 retweet25 likes)

In a more detailed analysis, the narratives in the first and second examples in this theme seem to be more of general statements by concerned witnesses, and they address the readers inviting their attention to the situation regarding sexual assault and abuse. The tweet by R.R., in particular, is narrated by a knowledgeable witness who has direct contact with the victims due to his profession. The narrator does not specify the time when he came to the conclusion other than mentioning "years of experience" which suggests that the encounters with vulnerable children is an ongoing situation. He also aims to be more informative on the reality of private spaces and the risk that await children rather than expressing his own emotions.

The last example by S.A. however depicts a personal experience of a victim who woke up to an unpleasant scene. Her mentioning the perpetrator's age could be an indication of unexpectedness of the situation, showing her shock to see such behaviour from an elderly person. It is possible detect her horror and shock as a young girl who has been taken

advantage of at a family friend's place, though her descriptive tweet does not reveal any direct expression of emotions.

The examples of this subtheme, like those of the previous one, show that the situation is more complicated than depicted by the advert, and it requires equally sophisticated representation and depiction. The situation evidently gets even more complicated when the assault is done behind closed doors and in private spaces, as the presence of witnesses is limited there. It therefore shows the difference the social media make by providing the online space where the victims have found the chance of having a "narrative of themselves" (Couldry 2010:7). By recounting their experiences of assault, the victims connected their private lives to the public through the "social process" of finding their "voice" and "listening" to each other, feeling heard in return; showing that indeed, as Couldry (2010) points out, voice is not a "practice of an individual in isolation" but it is "socially grounded" (7-10).

Psychological Trauma

In this subtheme tweets that depict psychological trauma resulted from having the experience of sexual assault are gathered. Some of the tweets in this subtheme indicate the lack of willingness to open up about the experience that leads the victims into silence and suffering in private. Nevertheless, the fact that they admit they have experienced assault could be an indication of seeking a way to break their silence and be heard through participation in the campaign. Below come some examples.

Neli (female): "I neither want to read about sexual assault nor want to talk about it. Opening a wound for those who do not have the ability to heal it is even more dangerous than being hurt in the first place." (0 retweets13 likes)

Narges (female): "When you are still too scared to sleep at night..." (0 retweets3 likes)

Rfe (female): "What happened to me in that dark alley made me never walk near the walls. Better to walk in the middle of the streets and alleys which are safer than pavements where you can be cornered." (0 retweets3 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis of the above tweets it becomes revealed that they depict former victims with deep wounds that staid with them long after their experiences. In the first tweet by Neli, although there is no deliberately expressed emotion, the language of the tweet connotes a volcano ready to erupt at any moment. Her strategy is therefore to take no action,

and let the wound 'be', as long as it does not hurt even more. Yet by admitting to have something to say, she reveals her need to be heard. In the next example by Narges, her being "scared" that leads into her sleeplessness can be an indication of the continuous presence of the abuser, and therefore, being a close relative. One can guess that she has not talk about her experience with her family and is not benefitting from a professional help either, therefore she appears as a helpless victim who refuses to take any action to defend/protect herself or ask for help. She also does not show any hint of hope or motivation as to helping herself get over the trauma. In the next example, Rfe depicts herself also as a former victim who tries to protect herself against future experiences of assault mostly passively and by avoiding the possible assaulters. The location and setting indicate her strategy as to having enough space where she can avoid the perpetrators by escaping them. Her action shows the memory of assault is constantly with her when she walks in the streets; therefore it is perhaps also an indication of constantly enduring anxiety and stress.

The subject positions of all the narrators above seem to be of defending the victims of sexual assault. Also, they indicate that the memory of assault seemed to have stayed with them, and that it continues to influence their everyday life and their choices. The fact that the victims refuse to seek help, whether during or after the experience, could be either due to fear or the thought of uselessness of those actions. The emphasis on the emotional trauma rather than the experience itself indicates the pressure they must endure, which makes it easier to understand how those emotions influence the course of future events and the behaviour of the victims. In fact, the tweets in this cluster show how emotions bring about complexity into the scene and make the path of events unpredictable and complicated, unlike what is depicted in the authoritative narrative (Wetherell 2012). As Papacharissi (2015) also points out, the above examples indicate that "the intensity" of experiencing an emotion associated with a particular event or encounter is a factor that plays a vital role in how individuals respond in future similar situations (30). Also, by illustrating their struggle with emotional trauma, the victims can persuade the readers to "contribute to their narrative" through sympathising and supportive responses and inspire others to share their own stories, making such campaigns and protests more powerful and their impacts more significant (ibid: 17). By showing the will as to share their memories of assault or mere flashes of the trauma they struggle with as a result of such experiences, the victims found themselves in the "intimate public" of embracing audiences and in return, persuaded other victims to share their stories as well (Berlant 2008: viii).

Public Reactions to Sexual Assault: the Victim Blaming/Shaming Mentality

In the depiction of their experiences of assault in this theme, women narrate the situations where they are blamed by the witnesses. The tweets indicated that when such witness has the power to do something about the situation, it is in the direction of punishing the victims. This is a factor that seems to be an important reason as to why victims try to avoid assaulters (as it was discussed in the previous themes) instead of showing a direct reaction to them. Below are some examples.

P.G. (female): "Once when I was sitting in the back seat [of a taxi] the guy put his hand on my leg. When I told to the driver about it, he kicked me out instead of him. It still makes a lump in my throat when I remember it." (7 retweets103 likes)

Satin (female): "Mother finds out her five year old boy is raped by a 16 year old. As she goes to their door to object, they say 'miss, you are a whore and your cub has taken your example.'" (0 retweets4 likes)

Emi (female): "They brought villager girl for virginity test, it turned out she is pregnant from her brother. Her mother started beating her saying I told you a hundred times to wear a skirt on your trousers!" (26 retweets, 199 likes)

F.E. (female): "I told a friend about a married man who was harassing me, the friend said in a compassionate tone, if you don't think of your own reputation think of the good name of his family." (3 retweets32 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis of the above tweets the witnesses appear as accusers of the victims and thus, as voices that echo the authoritative narrative. The subject position of the witnesses in those depicted situations seem to be that the victim is the one who should be blamed, though the defensive tone of the narrators of these tweets indicates an opposition towards such attitude. The first tweet (by P.G.) depicts an outraged victim. The setting in the tweet is illustrated to be inside a taxi, which depicts a situation where the victim cannot run away or avoid the perpetrator. In such situations, how the witnesses react to the assault becomes even more important, because they, particularly the driver, have the power to stop the assault from going on. In such situations, the victim's lack of serious reaction against the perpetrator could be due to fear of having to endure harsh consequences such as the one described in P.G.'s tweet. It should be noted that P.G.'s tweet received relatively high amounts of retweets and likes which could be due to awakening anger and sense of demand

for justice in the readers. While tweets of participants in the campaign rarely had high numbers of retweets and likes, perhaps due to readers being cautious as to not repel followers by retweeting sensitive and saddening contents.

In the next tweet by Satin, a situation is depicted where the mentality of blaming the victim of assault is used as a strategy to shake the responsibility off the perpetrator's shoulder. In what is illustrated in this tweet, there is a similarity between the perpetrator's family and the elite narrative, where all the responsibility in avoiding sexual assault is on the victim's shoulders.

 In the next tweet (by Emi) the narrator is a witness to one of the saddest cases of a young girl who gets punished by her mother for being raped. The shocking scenario is illustrated without clear expression of emotion by the witness/narrator, who uses the limited space of the tweet to describe the situation. There is no mention of taking any action to support the victim either, which is probably due to witness' lack of power as to intervene in the situation.

In the next tweet by F.E. (female), the narrator appears as a former victim who seeks to be heard. She shows no hint of being ashamed or believing that she is the one to blame. However, she does not receive support and approval from the friend with whom she speaks about it, as her friend seems to be more concerned about what other people think. Nevertheless, her worrisome about the victim's reputation, which is divided between her and the perpetrator's family, seems to have been initiated by good intentions.

The above examples show how people can sometimes distance themselves from "thoughtful engagement" with the events especially when there is a simplified version (provided by the state) to lead them in perceiving the event in a certain way, especially when it comes to a tabooed issue such as sexual assault (Corner 2011: 66). It is possible to see how the state's attempt as to construct a certain point of view has been successful to some extent as it was reflected by witnesses' behaviours shown in this theme (Corner 2011). Nevertheless, the participants choosing as to having an "active role" in putting a mirror in front of the society and showing how it sometimes echoes the narrative of the state by painting all victims with a single brush, indicates the inevitability of an awareness that has started in the online space and its movement in the direction of the growth of the society (Mittell 2015: 51).

Family and Lack of Support for the Victims

Through tweets that are emotionally loaded, this theme discusses the situation of victims who are deprived of support from their families, which seems to be the result of lack of education in this field. As it was mentioned in the previous chapters, the issue of sexual assault is a taboo in Iran, and therefore hushed up and kept secret. The lack of support appears in different shapes, for instance by refusing to believe the victims or even accusing them to have initiated the assault in some way. Below are some examples.

Mahi (female): "After [being sexually abused] I never told my father or any other male member of the family what had happened to me, because eventually they would say it was my own fault." (0 retweet, 7 likes).

R.D. (female): "I woke up with my uncle's penis on my body. I knew my mother would not believe me but I told her years later anyway. She said that I lie to cover my own gilts. I hate her. I want them both to die." (0 retweet, 12 likes)

Z.E. (female): "I was eighteen, and I did not dare to tell my family. I was afraid of being accused myself or something bad to happen. I still have nightmares about it." (0 retweets2 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis of the above tweets it becomes apparent that the narrators see themselves as ultimate victims. Their helplessness is prominent, though in the second tweet it seems to also be associated with anger and hatred. Both victims in the first and second examples show lack of action towards their abusers, which could be due to the feeling of powerlessness as a result of lack of support from the family. In the first example, Mahi's anticipation for lack of support is most probably due to cultural reasons and lack of education on the family's side. In the second example however, having emotional bond with the perpetrator, her brother, could be the reason behind the choice of victim's mother as to refuse to believe her daughter, which victimises R.D. even more.

In the next tweet by Z.E., she depicts herself as a hopeless victim who takes no action and suffers in secret without seeking help. Although the only emotion expressed in the tweet is fear, she shows no hint of feeling guilty or inclination to blame herself for the experience either, which shows her subjective positioning to be supportive towards herself.

The tweets of this theme show the importance of an "intimate" audience whose members communicate by means of their common "emotional knowledge," gained and developed through their mutual "experience" and emotional turbulence (Berlant 2008: viii). What

Berlant (2008) calls marginalisation of women seems to have been intensified when it comes to the above victims, as their families also have deprived them from support. Therefore the victims' need of an online public space where they can seek healing through talking about their experiences and be heard seems to be even deeper. The above example also show that as Wetherell (2012) describes quoting Freud, the "repressed" emotions "linked to the memory" of assault can reveal themselves in different forms but they come more or less from similar situations (132). This point presses further on the importance of an accepting, supportive public, as it shows how suppressed emotions can lead into more serious psychological problems if not released (Berlant 2008). It is therefore a positive event that this deeply "marginalised group," found the "intimacy" of the online public space which gave them a chance to release their repressed emotions through talking about their experiences (Berlant 2008: viii). It was through this online "intimate public" that the emotional energy piled up in women through their "common historical experience" of enduring decades of sexual assault as well as the systematic oppression was released in the form of detailed memories and heard and recognised by audiences and witnesses as well as the perpetrators (viii).

Reactions to the tweets

The theme is divided into two subthemes. In the first subtheme, the tweets that show recognition towards the phenomenon of assault and sympathising with the victims will be discussed, and in the second subtheme, the tweets that repeat the authoritative narrative and shame the victims will be represented.

Readers Showing Support and Recognition

Readers participated in the campaign by showing reaction to the tweets of other participants. Their tweets indicate the emotional reactions that indicate supportive of the victims. Most examples of this subtheme are from male users who reacted to the victims' tweets through emotionally loaded responses. The emotions they show consist of anger and shock, sadness and astonishment. Below come some examples.

B.K. (male): "No kidding, I had no idea sexual assault is so common. I became really ashamed of being a man when I read them." (4 retweets23 likes)

Z.K. (male): "Defending humanity knows no gender! Supporting women is not a threat to anyone's manhood!" (0 retweets6 likes).

R.K. (male): "Why shouldn't we have an emergency department in our country like the one on the U.S. for supporting women that women can have access to through phone?" (1 retweet19 likes)

S.S. (male): "The common feature of the tweets on assault is the silence out of fear of being blamed by acquaintances, relatives and family. This silence encourages the perpetrators." (2 retweets22 likes)

L.P. (male): I touched her without asking for permission (three sad emojis)." (0 retweets7 likes).

In return, M.K. (female) shows her appreciation to the supportive readers: "The good thing is that guys are helping us pour out the filth piled up in our hearts as a result of enduring sexual assault for years. Thanks guys." (5 retweets49 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis of the above tweets the narrators appear as highly conscious readers, who became self-reflexive in a painful way, for instance B.K. who expressed his emotional reaction in the shape of shame of his gender, a part of his identity he has no power to change. In the next example, Z.K. appears as outraged audience/witness, who strongly opposes the attitude of being indifferent towards the victims. Though these two examples show strong and emotionally loaded support towards the victims, they also indicate that their narrators have been more or less oblivious as to the situation or the sufferings of the victims before reading their tweets. Thus, they reveal the lack of enough (official and statistic) information regarding the rate of sexual assault and abuse in Iran. They also show the campaign has been successful in raising awareness towards the issue of sexual assault.

On the other hand, R.K. in the next example appears as a conscious witness with awareness towards the distortion of the culture and shortcomings of the establishment. He shows less emotional reaction to the stories of assault, and mostly focuses on solutions and strategies, which could be an indication of his level of engagement with the victims' narratives to be deeper than mere emotional impulse shown in the previous example of this theme. Like the first two examples however, his subjective position seems to be strongly against victim blaming.

In the next tweet S.S. appears as a subjective witness who favours empowering victims through their own voices. Though as S.S. suggests, the victims' silence is also due to the lack of support from others. He receives considerable recognition through retweets and likes,

which could be due to having comparatively big number of followers (he has 3500 followers) as well as the fact that his tweet lacks the mentioning of harsh and saddening details.

L.P. in the next example appears as a remorseful former perpetrator confessing. His sadness (shown through sad emojis) indicates that he understands his previous action to be wrong.

In the last example, M.K. demonstrates the appreciation of a victim in return, who seems to have been encouraged by the positive reactions of the readers, which she points out led into empowerment of the victims as they realised they were heard.

The reactions of the readers demonstrate the moment that people gather through their online public space to practice listening to each other's stories and valuing each other's voices (Couldry 2010). The shock and sadness of readers/audiences show how deeply women's voices had been silent and their suffering overlooked, in a way that dismissing female victims and blaming them for experiencing sexual assault has turned into some sort of second nature for many people. As Gilligan (in Couldry 2010) points out, religious and male-centred points of views can replace women's voices and lead into neglecting the value of their voices and views (119). Therefore, the campaign brought about the awareness towards "moral injuries" which manifested in the shape of emotional demonstrations, confessions and expressions of sympathy and suggestions of practical ways as to solve the problem (Ibid: 67). The confessions of the regretful perpetrators, in particular, showed they also recognise their own "agency" and therefore their role and part in the current situation regarding the phenomenon of sexual assault, which was another spot where the authoritative narrative were (indirectly) opposed (Ibid: 8-106). Moreover, it was shown how former perpetrators and victims through "exchange of narratives" could create an environment of "mutual esteem," respect and understanding (Ibid: 106). The power of the campaign therefore is situated in the participants' stories, in making others "see" from their point of view. It should be noted that although the affect and emotions of the victims against the authoritative narrative acted initially as the fuel for the campaign, the second wave of fuel and means of empowerment occurred as they received recognition and support from the readers and it was then that more victims broke their silence (Berlant 2008).

Readers Repeating the Authoritative Narrative

In this subtheme the reactions of the readers who started questioning the participants' honesty shortly after the beginning of the campaign will be discussed. Their reactions ranged from

calling the recounted experiences of assault fiction to insulting the participants. It is important to note therefore, that reactions to the tweets were as diverse as the stories of assault. Below are some examples of this kind of reaction.

Sahand (male): "Some are so easily assaulted. Once I was lost and asked a girl for time. She said 'shame on you, fool' and left." (1 retweet7 likes)

H.K. (male): "The hardship of wearing chador is worth not experiencing sexual assault with devastating memories that haunt you a lifetime." (7 retweets, 35 likes)

Imperfect Perfectionist (male): "-I was raped in a party. -What were you doing in a party, whore?" (0 retweets7 likes)

Mamanam (female): "You are doing a good job of damaging yourself." (1 retweet46 likes).

In a more detailed narrative analysis of the above tweets, they appear with narratives similar to the simple dichotomy represented in the advert, indicating the "myth" that it claims to apply to any situation where sexual assault occurs (Barthes in Hall 1997: 182 and Hanson and Machin 2013: 176-185). For instance, in his sarcastic tweet, Sahand, expresses himself by doubting the honesty and truthfulness of the victims and their recounted experiences of assault.

In the next two examples, H.K. (see appendix A) and Imperfect Perfectionist appear to have adapted the official narrative in a more literal manner, and with more aggression and accusatory tone. They seem to link sexual assault to instinct and make it appear as inevitable for women who have not become invisible, and thus they put all the responsibility of protecting their own safety and the virtue of men.

In the next example, Mamanam, who appears as a non-supportive reader points an accusatory finger at the participants shaming them for sharing their experiences of assault. Her response among other examples of this subtheme can perhaps explain why many victims indicated that they rather remain silent about their experience due to the fact that it could lead into them being shamed or blamed.

The above examples are, therefore, in different ways re-articulations of the narrative that represents women as threats to the society, and wants them invisible. Soon after the campaign started, such reactions to the participations also started, aiming to reconstruct the state's illustration of world view within the online community through accusing and shaming the

victims (Corner 2011). They appeared as the guardians of the state's narrative that, as Semati (2007) points out, imposes the constructed image of women as inferior and deceitful as fact, fixed by "nature" and created by god (212-214). Their views seems to have the mutual root in the view that appears on the billboards in the shape of good women and bad women dichotomy; those who avoid sexual assault (and avoid deceiving men) by covering themselves, and those who initiate being sexually exploited and thus endanger the society's moral security (Ibid). Also, their narratives seem to seek the usage of "primary emotions" such as "shame, humiliation" and "fear" similar to the official narrative, therefore indicating the use of the same strategy as the authoritative narrative as to aiming to pierce the message into the minds of the readers/audiences by fear tactics (Wetherell 2012; 37).

Attacking the Authoritative Narrative

Although mere participation in the campaign and recounting individual narratives on sexual assault is by its own an act of opposition to the official narrative, the tweets of this cluster demonstrate a more straight forward manner in doing so. In this theme, those tweets are gathered, whether they address other tweets or appeared independently. Below are some examples; the first two are in direct response to H.K. whose tweet in favour of the elite narrative on sexual assault was discussed in the previous theme.

Zlou (female): **"**Even though I wear chador, it has happened that I was chased by another car when I was driving back home at night. My friends accompanied me home for a long time after that." (0 retweets8 likes)

A.G. (male): "Tell this Mullah I knew someone who seriously believed "all the sexy ones are under chador" and his hobby was touching women in chador." (3 retweets85 likes)

A.H. (male): In Canada in the summer people wear about 20 cm of fabric. No one looks. Do not put the victim on the criminal's seat." (0 retweets2 likes)

Ozee (male): "They say she was drunk or was wearing inappropriate clothes so she was raped. I find this offensive; it means guys lose control as soon as they see something. (6 retweets66 likes)

The tweets of this theme show deliberate flow of emotion, usually rage, whether the narrator is admittedly a victim of assault or a witness. Zlou, for instance, who portraits herself as a double victim, appears not only assaulted but also betrayed by the ideology that promised her

safety if she chooses to wear chador. The mentioning of chador is also a reaction to the authoritative narrative that assumes a relation between women's clothing and the risk of receiving sexual assault and harassment. In addition, the fact that the narrator mentions she was escorted by her friends after the experience indicates her fear of driving alone that stayed with her for a long time. The next example by A.G. showed a similar narrative by a disgruntled witness, who dismissed the Mullah's claim and, indirectly, opposed the authoritative narrative.

A.H. in the next tweet dismisses the myth that depicts a relation between hijab and safety against sexual assault, showing that it is not a fixed or universal fact and depending on one's location the situation can be completely different.

In the last example, Ozee (male) finds himself a (side) victim of the authoritative narrative as he believes it reduces men to their instinct, representing them as not having any will of their own or intelligence to choose how to behave.

This theme shows that even though the authorities benefit from having access to "high level of" different types of "resources" such as budget and nearly unlimited space (the streets and roads, or the site of image), their narrative is still incapable of influencing people's world view completely (Corner 2011:66). In the first section of this chapter it was argued that the message of the poster was presented as a natural and "universal" law while in fact it represents a constructed meaning. It was discussed that as Barthes (in Hall 1997) explains, a "myth" is represented in the image as an "innocent" fact, and it aims for the "purification" of the "motivation" behind the message, aiming to cover it under "a natural and eternal justification" (182). Therefore as Gill (2007) points out, by "representation of women" in the dichotomy of good (with hijab) and bad (without hijab), the image depicts a certain "reality" in which women have the responsibility of preventing assault and thus can bring security and harmony to the whole society or be a threat to it (10-24). Thus they are depicted as not only a threat to themselves, but if visible too much, they also are a danger to the society.

However, the counter narratives of the participants as well as the responses appeared to be individualistic, authentic and personal stories saturated and empowered by emotion and affect, and therefore they attracted the attention of users in a short period of time. Furthermore, the campaign showed there are individuals within the society that do not get convinced by the myth that the image presents, as they engaged in a deep conversation with each other on the tabooed topic and questioned the "narrative structuring" by the state even after being exposed

to it for decades (Corner 2011:66). Even though the state seem to have been partially successful in shaping "the way things are" as was apparent in the tweets of those who appeared as guardians of the state's narrative in the previous theme, the tweets in this theme show that diverse views exist, and they are far more complex than the state constructed, black and white reality (Ibid: 14).

Empowerment

The tweets of this theme represent participants who have the feeling of being healed and empowered during and after participating in the campaign or being its readers, with a sense of being in control of the situation in which they previously felt victimised and defenceless. Below are some examples.

Parisa (female): "Today in the taxi a guy was sitting in a bad way, I remembered #WhenIWas campaign, looked him confidently in the eye and said calmly and firmly: behave yourself!" (0 retweets12 likes)

Digikido (female): "Once one of the green grocers in our street made a remark, I kicked him in the leg. The next day I walked passed him he looked down and walked away." (0 retweets, 12 likes)

In a more detailed narrative analysis, the tweets of this theme illustrate former victims and now empowered women who stand up for themselves and do not remain silent towards assault. The first example by Parisa demonstrates empowered yet calculated, careful reaction that stay in the realm of verbal territory marking against the perpetrator.

In the next example, however, Digikido appears as an active and aggressively defensive character determined not to let anyone assault her without having to bear the consequences. She mentions the location in her tweet, which is important as had her reaction backfired, she had to endure the consequences of it for a long time since the event happened near her residency. This theme shows that the campaign has worked in giving women voice, and they are not willing to forget how it feels. It also indicates that the participants take the sensation with them to the streets and use the power and confidence to fight back and provide themselves with the safety that hijab could never bring for them.

What Corner (2011) describes as "good power," therefore, can be seen through the demonstration of personal narratives and particularly in questioning the authoritative narrative

as well as the defensive attitudes of the empowered, former victims (14-32). Furthermore, the campaign revealed that despite of state having complete control of mass media, it has not been entirely successful in shaping "public knowledge" and the way women choose to behave or avoid being assaulted (Ibid: 21-41). The campaign also demonstrated the empowerment of one the biggest marginalised group, women and in particular victims of sexual assault by giving them a chance to have a voice and use social media as an "anti systemic agency of communication" and challenge the official narrative and give new, multiple points of views to the nation and a chance to see the issue of sexual assault differently (Ibid: 17-22).

The Power of Underrepresented Views

Overall, the participations in When I Was campaign show how complex the issue of assault is as opposed to what simplified narrative of the state indicated. The authoritative narrative depicts women as objects and at the same time represents them as responsible agents for experiencing sexual assault, as it was seen in the analysis of the advert (Hanson and Machin 2013). The advert represents this view, or as Barthes puts it myth, as a natural, universal fact, warning women of a frightening future and accuses them to be threats to the society's harmony in case they refuse to have hijab (Hall 1997 and Hanson and Machin 2013). The tweets of the victims however indicate that sexual assault and abuse can happen in numerous forms, places and situations, and it is not restricted to adult women either, thus they challenge the state and question its narrative particularly regarding causality of sexual assault (Seale 2012). The personal, emotionally loaded narratives of assault by women and readers demonstrated the state's shortcoming regarding dealing with the issue of assault and giving people awareness and education about it. In particular families of both perpetrators and victims the tweets indicate to need education as to how to encounter the issue and support the victims.

The reactions of the readers giving recognition to the victims of assault show that the campaign has been successful in giving awareness about the issue of assault. In addition, both positive and supportive responses as well as the negative and opposing ones show that the campaign had indeed an impact, which is another indication of the power of the victims' personal stories in depicting viewpoints that make contrast with the authoritative simple dichotomy through their complexity.

All said above are demonstrations of the empowerment of a marginalised group, women and in particular victims of sexual assault through participating in the campaign, which was made

possible by social media. It shows the social media's capacity as a platform that marginalised groups can use as an alternative space to speak out and have interaction with each other; therefore, it is possible to argue that social media, at least in countries such as Iran with totalitarian regimes, have the potential of being the birthplace and channelling device for "good power" initiated from and circulating within ordinary citizens to debate and question the elite ideology (Corner 2011: 13-22).

Conclusions

The dissertation aimed to study and observe Iranian women's depiction of the issue of sexual assault by participating in When I Was campaign, a process through which they found their voice through social media and demonstrated an instance of resistance against the authorities and their narrative on the same issue. To give a picture of the authoritative narrative then the thesis observed a state produced advert in which the issue of sexual assault was addressed by representing women as responsible components regarding the issue of assault. The objective of the thesis was to study the voices of Iranian women and their positions on the issue compared to state's narrative of victim blaming. In addition the thesis sought to put focus on the role of social media in providing a space for women and other participants to express their narratives and giving them a chance to have a community where they could have voice and interaction with each other. Observing women's views on the campaign and their own participation was another focus point of the dissertation.

It was discussed in the thesis how participation in When I Was campaign led into the empowerment of women and victims of sexual assault in particular, who form one of the most underrepresented marginalised groups today in Iran, the value of their voices undermined in a system that constantly advertises their inferiority and puts them responsible for initiating sexual assault and disturbing the society's harmony and moral security. To address and discuss the research objectives, the following questions were developed.

- How did Iranian women depict sexual assault through participating in When I Was campaign compared to the depiction of the state of the same issue?
- What did the reactions to the participants' tweets indicate?
- How did social media appear in their role of raising awareness on the issue of sexual assault and giving voice to the victims?

- What were the implications of the victims' tweets regarding their participation in the campaign and the difference it made for them?

The research questions aimed to accentuate the power of Iranian women's voices and the complex picture they illustrated from a complicated issue of today's Iranian society using the platform provided by social media. Thus the dissertation put its focus on the biggest marginalised group in contemporary Iran, women, and in particular their experiences regarding the issue of sexual assault. This would not be possible without comparing the picture women illustrated through their personal stories and narratives to the over simplified, black and white narrative of the authorities of the same issue. Indeed, before studying the counter narratives, a view to the narrative of the state needed to be presented. This was provided by visual analysis of an advert produced by the state as an example of authoritative narrative on the issue of sexual assault. By reviewing and discussing the state's attempts as to construct an inferior, deceitful image of women since even before the revolution (with the help of Semati 2007), the background of such representation was also revealed. It was evident that the reactions the participants received from readers as responses to the personal narratives of experiencing assault also needed to be paid attention to as evidences for the powerfulness of their voices and their impact on the society. The role of social media and the campaign in particular as the platform where they found their voice was another thing that the questions pointed their arrow towards. The research tried to show that particularly in communities where the mass media are being exclusively controlled by the state, the comparatively newly accessed online platform is revealed to play a vital role in giving voice to marginalised groups.

The focus of the research was also on the victims as they described themselves to become more active in defending themselves in similar situations that in the past had ended in their victimhood. Thus it was shown how victims of assault found the possibility of having interaction with other members of the society and a chance to persuade others to see the issue from their point of view, in other words, as Honneth (in Couldry 2010) describes, the found a chance to receive "recognition" through participating in the campaign (6-108). Also, the research sought to engage with questions that portrayed the current situation in Iranian society regarding marginalisation of women, and the kind of gender relations that has been established as a result of state's constructed reality, and a glimpse of the difference it could make if women could have the possibility of having a voice, and as it was shown, it entailed

the sense of being healed and empowered as a result of being heard in what Berlant (2008) describes as "intimate public" (viii).

The victims' tweets illustrated a complex picture of the issue of assault, and showed how it can happen regardless of the woman's clothing, as opposed to what the image of the state produced advert implied. It was apparent from the victims' tweet that the depiction of their experiences of sexual assault involved revealing emotions. The tweets of victims and witnesses of assault consisted of recounted personal experiences, as opposed to the advert image and its impersonal, simplified narrative and depiction of assault (Mittell 2015). The recounted experiences of sexual assault revealed a complex image of today's Iranian society in regard to sexual assault issue as well, which revealed the shortcoming of the state's narrative and its black and white dichotomy even further (Ibid). As it was evident in the tweets, the recounted stories of experiencing or witnessing sexual assault despite having similarities showed also diversity that emphasised on their feeling of authenticity. The active characterisations and the subjective positioning depicted in the tweets of victims made contrast with the passive image the advert depicted of women, representing them as objects (Ibid). The advert also put the responsibility regarding sexual assault and the moral security of the society on women's shoulders, which was opposed in women's counter narratives through the subjective positioning depicted in them, which added to the empowering spirit of their counter narratives. It was also shown that the counter narratives depicted situations to which the official narrative could not give an explanation, such as the examples where the assault had occurred despite the victim having what the state describes as sufficient hijab. Thus it was discussed that the advert offered a myth and aimed to represent it as a universal fact or law, though the counter narratives showed in several instances that it indeed was a myth (Barthes in Hall 1997 and Hanson and Machin 2013).

An aspect of the participants' narratives on sexual assault was their depiction of the experience regarding its causality, which as evidently did not collaborate with the authoritative narrative with its emphasis on women's responsibility as to inducing assault by attracting the assaulters. Therefore the state's narrative also revealed to offer a certain world view in which women were represented as threats to themselves as well as the harmony and moral security of the society, depending on the degree of their visibility (Gill 2007). By showing how sexual assault can happen in many circumstances regardless of the victims' clothing or age, and how safe the perpetrators felt committing assault even in crowded places and various public spaces, the victims and witnesses of assault indicated the shortcoming of

the system and insufficiency of the state's narrative in facing the issue and bringing safety and harmony to the society. This was further emphasised by the tweets that showed sexual assault and abuse can occur in private spaces and behind closed doors and for children as well, where hijab cannot be a solution and the lack of it cannot be the cause. Thus it seemed that nearly four decades representing women as solely responsible individuals for inducing sexual assault has not led into dignified gender relations, safety for women or harmony for the society.

Another prominent feature of the campaign and therefore a focus point for the research was the reactions of the readers. The readers' emotionally loaded responses and their indications as to lack of knowledge regarding the situation of sexual assault indicated the deficiency of (official) information in Iran on the issue. The fact that the victims' participation in the campaign brought shock to readers also showed how systematic marginalising of women and neglecting their voices might have led into society's numbness in regard to what happens to women (Couldry 2010). Nevertheless the supportive responses showed the power of the counter narratives in raising awareness and stimulating the attention of the audiences/readers towards the issue (Ibid). Among the responses were remorseful confessions of perpetrators that further indicated the impact of the victims' narratives on the audience and in bringing about the engagement of the readers. Also, the supportive and emotional reactions demonstrated an instance of recognising how one's action can harm others, which as Honneth points out, can be an indication of small steps towards cultural and social reform (Ibid). Even the negative non-supportive reactions to the recounted experiences of the victims showed that the impact of the campaign must have been significant; otherwise it would not stimulate the guardians of the authoritative narrative to react. The fact that they did so, could be an indication of feeling threatened by the power of the formerly silenced voices and the impact of their counter narratives on other internet users.

The research also showed an instance of social media functioning as an alternative space used by women as a platform where their mere presence, due to the state having blocked access to social media, was an act of resistance (Corner 2011, and Dahlgren 2009). It also showed the capacity of the social media in providing a space for a hospitable community where victims of sexual assault can be heard and start the process of being healed (Berlant 2008). The research showed the capacity of these online platforms as relatively safe environments for discussing tabooed issues such as sexual assault which has been hushed up by the state systematically and buried under the state produced narrative represented through its nearly limitless resources and space; thus it was revealed that social media could be used as a tool in the hand

of individuals to challenge and question the authorities and resist them (Corner 2011). The role of social media was depicted to be vital as they appeared to be the only platform available for people in today's Iran, as the mass media are under the grasp of the state and overtly controlled by the authorities (Papacharissi 2015). The lack of support from families of victims of assault which was discussed through the analysis of the tweets pressed even further on the importance of having a community where the issue could be discussed and the victims could receive support and the chance to speak out (Berlant 2008). Therefore it was the attempt of this research to picture the online community where Iranian women felt (perhaps for the first time after the revolution) engaged and connected to the rest of the society and found the hope of having the possibility of making a difference towards achieving equality and dignity in the society (Ibid). It was also discussed that the fact that social media have been out of access in Iran could be an indication of the state, having discovered the empowering characteristic of them, sought to push back people behind the boundaries of communication and interaction as before the existence of the online communities (Corner 2010).

What the victims of assault depicted their participation in the campaign had entailed was the sense of healing and empowerment. The active defensive attitude that the participants described themselves to adopt during and after participation in the campaign, as opposed to their previous passiveness in facing perpetrators, was perhaps an indication of the campaign's success in bringing change in the direction of social reform regarding the issue of sexual assault and the empowerment of the victims. It was indicated that participants took the sensation and spirit of the campaign with them to the streets and used it to fight back and to provide themselves with the safety that hijab could never bring them. The encouragement of the readers through their supportive responses was also evidently helpful in pouring out the negative feelings that experience of sexual assault had put in victims' hearts. This could be an indication of a healing process being started for them, as a result of participating in the campaign. The research also showed that the campaign might have led into attitude change in perpetrators as well as the victims which can perhaps be considered as a step towards cultural reform regarding the issue of sexual assault in contemporary Iranian society. Perhaps it is not implausible then to argue that an extendable reform in cultural norms might have started in the online community. Although the findings of the dissertation did not suggest an immediate change in the overall culture regarding sexual assault, they demonstrated the power of women's voice in disturbing the lassitude of the society and stimulating people into adopting "thoughtful engagement" (Corner 2010: 66). Thus the vital role of social media as providers

of the space for such engagement in a society such as Iran where the mass media do not reflect the diversity of points of views was made evident.

The research showed how in a society where there is no hope of immediate political change, people can start moving towards cultural and social reform regardless of being exposed to an ideology that sought to lead them towards the opposite direction and away from such reform. It was however shown that due to complexity of the issue of sexual assault, which is still a restricted subject in Iran, seeking reform and solution for it is not without difficulty, and even more so without the support from the government and its negligence as to providing people with information and education regarding the issue. Equally, such lack of support from the state made researching on the matter difficult. The path for conducting in-depth research was proved to be not without obstacles as the regime has been making effort to keep the issue hushed up and to push the victims of sexual assault and women out of visibility and back into silence. What added to complications in researching such context was that the participants appeared through their user names, and it was not possible to know any information about them other than what they shared through the limited space of their tweets, and their personal background, identity and the area where they came from and lived remained hidden from the researcher.

Nevertheless the research sought to show the difference that the voices of women could make when they found a device to channel it towards the society, and by stimulating the rest of the population into engaging with their narratives, how such channelling could disturb and challenge the flow of the state's monotone and its power. The thesis also made effort to show that where there is the possibility to have communication and interaction through social media, even despite the lack of information and education for people regarding sexual assault, it is possible to raise awareness through such campaigns. Through observing the readers' interactions and their responses to the recounted stories of assault it was revealed that the campaign has been successful in raising awareness regarding the issue and stimulating the will in people as to give support to the victims. It was revealed that such awareness was also induced in perpetrators who expressed their remorse regarding their previous actions.

Therefore it is perhaps possible to argue that giving voice and reflecting the voices of marginalised groups in the academic world might also be an important step towards social and cultural reforms by further supporting invisible and silenced victims as they cannot always find such support through political systems especially when it comes to totalitarian regimes

and prohibited, restrained subjects (Haraway 1988). The attempt of the social science researchers in reflecting the voices of neglected individuals can bring them under the attention of the society as well, leading into awakening of the collective consciousness and awareness as to their sufferings, which can ultimately lead into cultural and social reform regarding the issue of sexual assault (Ibid). This of course cannot happen if the academic world refuses mingling and mixing with the rest of the population and sharing its findings with the non-academic world through representation methods suitable for ordinary people (Ibid). What political systems do, as we saw an example in this research, is to use public spaces and visual communication methods for reaching out to people and influence their world views. By attempting to investigate the experiences of individuals and communicating and reflecting the findings back to the them, social science will be able to smooth the path towards social and cultural reform in a way that political systems have seemed unable (or unwilling) to bring about.

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Appendices:

Apendix A: Main Features of Media in Iran

The Structure of Mass Media in Iran as the Centre of Broadcasting for the State

All the mass media, most importantly television, are under direct control of the state. Every employee from the highest to the lowest level is chosen carefully by the state. The head of organisation is chosen directly by the supreme leader, who is the highest authority in the country.

The State's aim to Control the Online World and Social Media

Soon after the introducing Iranian society to the online world the state decided that it needs to be under control, as it has become a space where challenging voices of individuals could be heard. The first action by the state was to block every site and page they considered to be problematic. Soon, however, internet users found access to proxies and then VPNs, by the use of which they could access the sites that were blocked by the state without being tracked. Soon the state decided they need to use social media themselves, and thus echo the voice of the authorities in the social media as well. This was done by users who pretended to use social media like other ordinary users, through some were also transparent in their mission. An example is the user H.K., a Muslim clergy who supports the conservative wing and voices the authoritative narrative on Twitter. Others use disguise, by hiding behind profile pictures that suggest they are ordinary users, though they also repeat the official narrative. In case of the latter, there is no definite way to determine whether they are employed by the state or they actually reflect their own ideas and beliefs.

Appendix B: Ethical Considerations and Translations

The Participants' Confidentiality

To protect the participants' privacy, whenever the Twitter username seemed to be their real name, it was used in the thesis by initiations. In other instances that the username was clearly a nick name, but for instance when a famous author was used as user name, the initials were also used instead of the complete username.

Translation of the Tweets

Effort was taken to translate the tweets thoroughly and with integrity. However, word by word translation was practically impossible. Therefore, it was decided to do the translation as close as possible to the Persian version.

Translation of the Billboard's Caption

In the billboards caption, there is a Persian sentence that says "Hijab is security," however below that in English translation of the billboard the word hijab has been substituted with veil. It was decided to use the original word, hijab, in the dissertation as it is believed by the researcher that it conveys the meaning better.