'Women, Life, Freedom'

Unveiling Voices: An Empirical Research of Civil Reporting on Instagram in the Iranian Revolution

A Bachelor Thesis in Development Studies

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Abstract

The rise of global social media platforms has offered civilians opportunities to share information through the use of visuals and text independently. The internet and technological advancements have thereby played an essential role in enabling individuals to share their perspectives and contribute their content to broader audiences. As a consequence of the Iranian revolution, triggered by the execution of Mahsa Amini on the 16th of September 2022, affected individuals have increasingly turned to global social media platforms, such as Instagram, to share their narratives internationally. Despite facing limitations on freedom of expression, these people utilize social media to shed light on their stories, raise awareness, garner support, and attract attention from abroad. This research explores the role of civil reporting on Instagram in the ongoing Iranian Revolution, examining the narratives involved and analyzing the situation from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Drawing inspiration from Fairclough's language theory, the study applies discourse analysis to facilitate an in-depth investigation of 16 Instagram accounts regarding the revolution and explore how their content intersects with social synergies.

Keywords: Civil Reporting, Iran, Visuals, Instagram, Gender Apartheid

Words: 8311

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Everything started with the execution of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman accused by the Iranian police of wearing a hijab 'improperly', on the 16th of September 2022. The event in itself did not provoke women to spearhead a political coup, but it triggered what has become known as the most severe revolution ever facing the Islam Republic of Iran (Bayat, 2023: p.19-21; Amidi, 2022). Massive protests broke out across 160 cities and villages, and about 2 million people protested along the streets. The movement per se goes beyond being a solely 'feminist revolution' or a revolution against the mandatory hijab. The uprising protests are instead a collective effort to reclaim life and hit back towards internal colonization to achieve freedom and dignity (Bayat, 2023: p.19). 'Women, Life, Freedom' has been the key words bringing together the protests and signifies a change in Iranian subjectivity, emphasizing that the liberation of women can accelerate the liberation of all other marginalized, dejected, and excluded minorities.

However, even more national and international protests occurred in the virtual world through social media platforms such as Instagram. Civil visuals, in particular photos and videos, of protesters are being shared and reposted in solidarity with the Iranian population. The content covers women dancing in public to rebel against the regime, as women are forbidden to dance openly. Likewise, videos of burning hijabs and women who choose to appear in public surroundings without a veil are spread throughout the internet to encourage people to hazard their lives for collective freedom. Also, women are cutting their hair, inside and outside of Iran, as a symbol of solidarity with Iranian women (Amidi, 2022). Given these circumstances, it is noteworthy to observe the significant presence of extensive civil reporting by protesters on social media platforms aimed to boost awareness and reach international attention.

1.2 Research aim

The research explores the dynamics of civil reporting in a context where freedom of expression is limited, on a platform predominantly developed in the Western context where freedom of speech and making statements are fundamental rights. The study analyzes how

individuals utilize this platform to share their experiences and perspectives through a combination of visuals and text. A diverse range of accounts is studied, including those who choose to express themselves anonymously as well as those who share content through accounts where Instagram verifies their identity or organization, as a company functioning on a macro level. By investigating these dynamics, the research aims to shed light on how Instagram welcomes individuals with varying narratives and unique personal histories, particularly within the context of civil reporting during an Iranian revolution. The chosen research question for the study follows;

What role does civil reporting through Instagram play in the ongoing Iranian revolution?

The purpose of conducting a comprehensive discourse analysis of 16 sampled Instagram accounts is to charge an in-depth study involving complex dynamics. By closely examining selected symbols, exploring content creators' collaboration efforts, and evaluating social media's importance in contexts where traditional media outlets may be limited and/or censored by the regime, further knowledge of this phenomenon can be attained. This paper explicitly aims to maintain a transparent stance regarding the narratives under study, including those presented by the Islamic Republic of Iran's regime and its opposition. Its objective is not to align with or advocate for any particular perspective. Instead, the focus is on neutrally examining and analyzing the various narratives to better understand the complexities and dynamics at play within the accurate Iranian revolution. As a researcher, I also consider my positionality and bias very seriously as a Western female student in development studies and use measures to generate an extensive analysis involving several diverse perspectives based on pre-existing empirics.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Definition of concepts

Before giving a general background on the research context, it is necessary to introduce some critical concepts adopted in the study. The concepts of civil reporting, affective publics, holism, and connective action are well used in earlier empirical articles bringing about a more dynamic and including inquiry.

2.1.1 Civil reporting

Civil reporting is attributed when ordinary citizens circulate information and news, often utilizing digital platforms and social media to share their perspectives on socio-political happenings. Hence, individuals get the opportunity to shape the public discourse and challenge traditional media by providing alternative sources of information (Papacharissi, 2014). The term civil reporting has a central role in the research, as it aims to understand how information targeting civil issues gets shared in societies where the freedom of expression is limited.

2.1.2 Affective Publics

Affective publics in the context of social media refers to the development of published content formed and mobilized after affective statements, emotions, and attitudes. These affective publics form social media platforms into spaces free for expressing opinions, feelings, and individual histories as a response to experiencing certain social, political, or cultural issues (Papacharissi, 2014: p.115-127). The concept of affective publics is well examined and used in the research, which focuses on exploring the dynamics surrounding civil reporting through social media in a revolutionary context.

2.1.3 Holism

Holism or wholeness refers to an approach that addresses the entire system more valuable than the summary of its individual parts by highlighting the interconnections and integrations of various components (Heywood, 2013). By adopting a holistic perspective, the analysis recognizes that a thorough understanding of the subject cannot be achieved by solely

examining individual components. Instead, it requires a wider examination of the interrelationships, how elements interact, and contextual factors which shape and influence it.

2.1.4 Connective action

Connective action is used as a term to describe the collective mobilization and engagement among individuals who use social media platforms to interact with like-minded people who share the same interests and/or goals. Connective action uses the power of social media's networking structures to facilitate the spread of information by collaborating collectively and reaching larger scales (Papacharissi et al., 2018).

3.0 Background

The following section presents a brief but essential background of the current political situation in Iran and the fundamental digitalization that has contributed to the light of the ongoing revolution. Moreover, it gives insight into social media as a political platform and the importance of civil reporting in a situation where the freedom of speaking has been limited. Although, studying the Iranian political system is difficult due to language barriers and limited access to transparent political information. However, this background is still highly relevant to understand the current revolution and Iran's view of 'Western' journalism.

3.1 Iranian modern history

The history of Iran has constructed today's hybrid theocracy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has been developed out of many years of destabilizing conflicts since the country's independence in 1979. The trademark 'Neither Eastern nor Western, Islamic Republic' (na sharqi na gharbi, jomhurie eslami) has fronted the entrance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran since its establishment and is a saying that refers to the state's collective background of history (Leandro et al., 2021: p.61). A shift in the country's earlier strategic foreign involvement was portrayed when Iran 2015 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in line with six other world stakeholders, as well as entered a strategic partnership with Russia in the Middle East (Leandro et al., 2021: p.62).

Since the country's independence in 1979, self-determination and autonomy have been the highest priority. One has chosen to stay isolated and, often, in a challenging situation with a goal to seek 'self-reliance', than to be rich and dependent on external powers (Leandro et al., 2021: p.66). However, the intuition for absolute independence matured into some problematic interactions with influential world stakeholders. Firstly, the Iran-Iraq war, also called the 'imposed war', lasted from 1980-1988 and significantly impacted the Iranian economy. It ended up being the bloodiest war in modern Middle Eastern history. The conflict also clarified another truth: Iran needed arms. Sanctions from the United States, settled in line with the 'imposed war', led to expanded Iranian international engagement. The strategic shift was profound, even if the engagement increased gradually and over time. Leandro et al. (2021) described the situation as *"While the Islamic Republic had to prioritize 'national security and territorial integrity (its vital interests)' as its short-term goals, the 'main goal*

became sustainable development with a global approach based on constructive engagement with the world' after the Iran-Iraq war ended." (Leandro et al., 2021: p.69). After all, other foreign challenges primarily affected the country's engagement in international cooperation, e.g., after the deadly protests in 2011 against the controversial presidential election that took place a few years earlier (Dehghan, 2011).

Furthermore, a xenophobic narrative has mirrored the Westernized view of Iran. What is odd, different, and unknown is often likely to be kept at a distance and seen as notably strange. The Western narratives on Iran are based on cultural differences. While people from the West may see the Iranian population as a religiously brainwashed population led by nonacceptance, Iranian people see Westerners as respectless towards how they want to live their lives, which has given rise to a post-colonial opposition. In short, the discourse and various narratives which eat up the relationship between Iran and the West are grounded in oppositions such as disrespectful vs. unreliable and fear vs. admiration (Leandro et al., 2021; Arefian & Moeini, 2016).

3.1.1 Political environment

The development of the political side of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows many intertwined and complex perspectives based on identity (Leandro et al., 2021: p.89). This research defines 'a political system' as the formal and informal schemes of power allocation within a state and how they interact at different levels (Leandro et al., 2021: p.93-94). The Iranian political system is based on theocracy and thus follows religious law prescribed in the Quran. The country's political construction has been described as a hybrid political system, as it seeks to have an Islamic government built on popular sovereignty and democratic decisions (Leandro et al., 2021: p.84). Thus, all exercising public powers must follow the fundamental principles of Islam; the supreme leader acts as the supreme religious sovereign, and the council of experts is qualified to illustrate how to be a good Muslim (Leandro et al., 2021: p.96).

Business managers and employers are acting as a sort of 'police' to indicate that the regulations regarding compulsory veiling are followed by female employees, according to a press release published by OHCHR on the 14th of April, 2023. UN experts have claimed that the current adaptation of Iran's Islamic Penal Code requires women (girls above nine years

old) to wear veils in public, and to act contradictorily would be seen as 'offensive' towards public morality. Furthermore, admitting the empirical evidence Yaghoob Foroutan (2022) brought out in his study, based on 4267 participants, about 2 out of 3 women think that females should have the right to decide whether or not to use the hijab, regardless of the atmosphere (Foroutan, 2022: p.740; OHCHR, 2023).

Moreover, an extended limitation of involvement within political associations, as well as of the freedom of expression, has been observed during 2022 (Amnesty, 2023). Access to the internet and mobile phone networks has periodically been nonexistent. Iran authorities have censored social media platforms and also banned all kinds of independent civil political organizations. The Islamic Republic of Iran was ranked 178 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. The index is arranged by Reporters Without Borders which, among other things, bases Iran's position on the list due to the country's legal framework by demonstrating *"Article 24 of the constitution guarantees press freedom, but the 1986 press law (amended in 2000 and 2009 to take account of online publications) allows the authorities to ensure that journalists do not "endanger the Islamic Republic", "do not offend the clergy and the Supreme Leader" and do not "spread false information"."*(RSF, 2023).

3.1.2 Digitalisation

The digitalization that has happened in recent decades has had a remarkable impact on a superior number of the world's organizations in the form of their business models as well as how they operate (Saadatmand et al., 2022; p.1). They have both intended to maximize their results based on available opportunities but have also been forced to change significant processes to be able to keep up with a rapidly developing technical environment formed out of 5G, internet, artificial intelligence, social media, and cyber-physical structures (Saadatmand et al., 2022; p.1).

Even though the internet and technology have been massively used in Iran in the last two decades, social media for political purposes flourished during the country's elections in 2009 (Elson et al., 2012: p.11). Access to social media allowed civilians to act anonymously, which led to countless discussions regarding the ongoing political situation, free from concern that their identity would be verified (Elson et al., 2012: p.12-13).

3.2 Social media as a political platform

Human beings are constructed to act after one's fears and hopes. People constantly filter and pass information through their lens based on personal experiences and beliefs. Thus, citizens increasingly construct politically related conscience structures to politics affecting them or which they feel relevant to them due to emotional and intimate identity (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.88-89). Politically involved citizens crave direct democracy, instead of representative governance, with the vision to conduct direct dialogue with political elites. Nevertheless, today's mass societies are not built along the quest to answer those needs. In sequence, the lack of dialogue has led people to seek appraisal and attention on the internet. People organizing through the internet is a generated construction rooted in people sharing their personalized reactions online, which the platform automatically connects with other people of like-minded interests. Hence, no other criteria, such as reasonable geographical distance, goal orientation, or leadership, are needed. In connection with its upswing, social media has served this type of 'connective actions' (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.90-92).

4.0 Theoretical framework

Theory as a concept is generally difficult to define as it means different things to different people in diverse contexts. When using theory in research, it may aim to highlight a specific issue or resolve social misunderstandings by clarifying a topic by developing a theoretical perspective of the issue (Robson & McCartan, 2016: p.66). In this paper, the theoretical framework has the ambition to provide some assurance that the purpose of the study is in line with the approaches of postcolonial feminism and Fairclough's theory about language to get an understanding of the chosen methodology and specific sampling.

4.1 Postcolonial feminism

Postcolonial feminism can not be simply treated as either postcolonialism studies or an alternative form of feminism. On the other hand, this theory changes the disciplines behind both postcolonialism and feminism by investigating the main crossed branches of race-sexuality-gender-empire-nation in varying situations women experience in their everyday life. One can argue that there are three central characteristics of postcolonial feminism; firstly, the theoretical framework seeks to admit the validity as well as the metaphysical strength in the opposing struggle (activism, social resistance, etcetera). Secondly, it has been recovering the fundamentalism of intimate spaces and ordinary life as prominent locations to understand imperial influences deeply. Last but not least, the third distinctiveness within postcolonial feminism is to pay attention to 'the politics of location', which refers to the importance of investigating one's own identity as a production of the intersecting elements; class, race, sexuality, and gender (Piedalue & Rishi, 2017: p.549-552).

4.2 Fairclough's theory

Norman Fairclough critically analyzes text and language out of critical discourse analysis. He evaluates the broader conception of inquiry where text can be spoken, in itself or through dialogue, and written as a whole 'work' in terms of a poem or novel, as well as distinct parts of work such as chapters or certain paragraphs (Fairclough, 1995: p.4). A text has to be analyzed as multi-semiotic when needed, which becomes more and more relevant as language increasingly is combined with other semiotic designs, i.e., television and/or social media. In other words, in situations where language in its most natural form is mixed with

videos, pictures, and sound effects. Fairclough describes texts as social spaces where cognition and portrayals of the world interlink with social synergy. Thus, it is essential to read and hear language with a multifunctional criticizing point of view (Fairclough, 1995).

5.0 Methodology

The following methodology section provides an explanation of how the research has been conducted. The research design refers to Robson & McCartan's (2016) framework for research designs, incorporating the study's purpose, conceptual framework, research question, methodology, and sampling procedures. The methodology is grounded in discourse analysis, focusing on Instagram accounts out of the four categories; non-governmental non-profit organizations, anonymous networks, verified personal accounts, and personal accounts. The data analysis involves qualitative content analysis, identifying themes based on highly prioritized ethical considerations.

5.1 Research design

The research design is based on Robson & McCartan's (2016) five-part framework for research designs. It builds on the study's purpose, conceptual framework, research question(s), methodology, and sampling procedures (Robson & McCartan, 2016: p.72-73).

Firstly, the purpose of this research is to understand the role(s) civil reporting plays in the ongoing revolution in Iran. Moreover, it aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of Instagram's role as a political platform, particularly in contexts where other platforms have limited avenues for expression.

Secondly, the conceptual framework for the study is postcolonial feminism and Fairclough's theory. By adopting a postcolonial feminism lens, the analysis seeks to unpack the intersectionality of power, colonial legacies, and gender within the revolution. The framework allows an in-depth understanding of Iranian women's experiences, agency, and dedication to the revolution, emphasizing the interconnections of gender roles, nationalism, and decolonization. The choice to further adapt Fairclough's theory as a conceptual framework for discourse analysis is based on its ability to evaluate the relationship between language, power, and social structures, providing an understanding of how discourses mirror and influence social realities.

Thirdly, the research question is 'What role does civil reporting through Instagram play in the ongoing Iranian revolution?' with an ambition to understand why civil reporting is used within the particular situation and what the civilians try to achieve.

Fourthly, the methodology used is a discourse analysis to in-depth evaluate Instagram accounts sharing civil reported content, out of the language used, existing power relations, and social impacts.

Last but not least, the sampling procedures are made to understand civil reporting shared through different Instagram platforms out of the four categories; non-profit non-governmental organizations, anonymous social networks, verified personal accounts, and personal accounts. The chosen sampling had the ambition to provide enough data to analyze the chosen research question, given the timeframe and resources for the study.

Furthermore, due to the sensitive topic, the research pays serious attention to ethical considerations throughout the whole research process. Thus, no details or outstanding communicated commitments which can disclose involved people's identities will be reported in this paper. The ethical applications are described more in detail under *5.3.1 Ethical considerations* on p.18-19.

5.2 Research method

The research methodology employed in this study is rooted in discourse analysis and is specifically designed to evaluate visual content posted on Instagram, including videos, photos, and text. The primary objective of this approach is to conduct detailed data provided to analyze civil reporting on Instagram, with a particular focus on the chosen content, in form of language and visuals, used in relation to the social context in Iran.

When conducting data for a flexible research design, making a statistical generalization out of the found results may be incompatible. For example, the sample may be too small for the researcher to be confident about making preconditions when complex relationships exist among the chosen group of participants. Moreover, the people who have chosen to open up about their situation may accommodate data of unaccounted bias because one does not know what the unheard people would have said. Thus, an alternative sampling technique has been used for the data collection aimed at the discourse analysis; snowball sampling combined with keywords (Robson & McCartan, 2016: p.167).

Keywords as a sampling strategy have been used when finding relevant Instagram accounts in the absolute first phase of the research. Snowball sampling has been used so that sources, founded out of keywords at the beginning, have expanded the number of like-minded

accounts to provide a larger amount of data, both through Instagram's algorithms and by the researcher's exploring through comment sections and list of followers. With an awareness that this method has an increasing bias by limiting representativeness, the discourse analysis based on information found through Instagram has been evaluated out of two perspectives (postcolonial feminism and Fairclough's theory), and hence a sort of theory triangulation, in order to enhance the rigor of the research (Robson & McCartan, 2016:p.167-171).

In addition, the researcher has maintained a strict policy of non-interference with the sources under study. Instead, observations have been made of the sources and their communication via an anonymous Instagram account, with no direct engagement or interaction.

5.3 Data collection

The research is based on a sample of 16 Instagram accounts and eight leading analytical questions with inspiration taken from Christine S. Davis' book *"Focus Groups"* (2017), aimed to put a ground for discourse analysis. The eight questions are;

1. Systemic Levels: Which systemic levels affect the account's entire platform?
2. Concept of Holism: How is the concept of holism reflected, and how can it be observed in the account's attitudes?
3. Accounts influencing one another: In what ways are the Instagram accounts influencing one another and their followers?
4. Social Network: How does the account's social network influence the account's public content?
5. Hashtags and Symbols: What hashtags and symbols are the account communicating through?
6. Organizing content: How is the account organizing the content to make sense of it?
7. Use of conversation: How is the account using conversation as sensemaking content?
8. Discourse: How does the discourse construct the content's meanings?

The sample is divided into four categories to be easier able to analyze similarities and differences among the data and identify the accounts' various roles within civil reporting. The four categories are; non-profit, non-governmental organizations, anonymous social networks, verified personal accounts, and personal accounts. Firstly, the category of non-profit, non-governmental organizations refers to institutional Instagram accounts driven by civilians

who frequently share informing and explaining content about the Iranian revolution. Secondly, the category of anonymous social networks cites accounts driven by unofficial groups of individuals who share the same interest in spreading relevant announcements in line with the Iranian opposition's approach. Thirdly, verified personal accounts indicate accounts that Instagram has verified, intending to clarify a confirmation of the authentic presence of that person on the application (Instagram, 2023). In other words, the verification is a sort of proof that the identity is verified. Fourthly, personal accounts assign accounts that state themselves as a specific individual's platforms but whose identity is not proven.

Table 1. Final Data Distribution

Media outlet	total	Non-profit non-governmental organizations	Anonymous social networks	Verified personal accounts	Personal accounts
Accounts per category	16	4	4	4	4

5.3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical guidelines are seriously considered during the whole research process due to the sensitive topic and nature, as well as the potential harm that could be inflicted upon vulnerable participants. Not to mention the ethical considerations that have been fundamental when analyzing the empirical data to ensure that no personal details or outstanding communicative commitments get exposed. Therefore, all the sources referenced in this research have been anonymized to protect their privacy. As a result, this paper refrains from presenting any visual content or analytical coding protocol to maintain the anonymity of the sources. Despite the fact that the sources in question may have been published publicly online with the intention of being shared, their participation in this research study cannot be assumed or taken for granted. As a result, every effort has been made to protect the identities of the sources and ensure that they cannot be detected or identified. This is in line with the ethical principles of academic research, which require that researchers obtain informed consent from their studied participants. Given the anonymous nature and the republished secondary data studied in this research, obtaining such consent is impossible. Hence the

utmost care has been taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the sources (American Psychological Association, 2017; Gorup, 2019).

Even if a researcher's narrative while doing research is to get an in-depth understanding of a particular situation, every participant within a research (even the researcher) acts after an underlying narrative inquiry. As a Western female student in development studies, I believe in the fundamental principles of human rights and that every individual, regardless of religion and /or gender, should have the freedom to exercise their own beliefs peacefully. As a researcher, I also acknowledge that my socialistic-liberal upbringing has provided me with certain privileges and opportunities that have saved me from experiencing fear or persecution, even when my actions may have caused trouble or controversy. Taking this into account, proactive measures have been implemented to ensure the research's intended focus. Specifically, steps have been taken to reduce any potential influences arising from the objectives of the studied sources or any political or ideological agendas associated with the Iranian Revolution (Gorup, 2019).

5.3.2 Limitations

Considering that the Iranian population is overwhelmingly affected to the greatest extent by the Iranian revolution, a big part of the civil reporting is communicated in Persian (Farsi). Due to limitations in time and resources, as well as my lack of proficiency in the Farsi language, the accounts selected for this study were chosen based on the criterion that they included at least some English-language content. Thus, the research has been affected by language barriers which may have had an impact on the research outcome.

Apart from language barriers, the Iranian regime's limited transparency of official documents, regulations, public judgments, and other information constitute a significant challenge for conducting in-depth analyses of the revolution and the effects of civil reporting at the state level. Moreover, the narrow transparency of how the civilians are treated as a consequence of making statements towards the regime limits the chance to get a deeper understanding of the analyzed situation.

5.4 Data analysis

The qualitative content analysis mainly focuses on the accounts' diverse discourses and involves recognizing thematic concepts. The analysis relies on content published by the sampled accounts, both in form of visuals and text. The evaluation of the data has involved a coding procedure to uncover similarities and differences between the accounts' shared content by investigating themes, symbols, and language among the four categories of data. Generating a coding protocol when studying data allows the researcher to indicate themes among the sources and more clearly constitute narratives (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

5.4.1 Reflexivity

As a researcher, I genuinely believe in civil reporting, particularly in contexts with limited freedom of expression. I recognize the serious risks undertaken by individuals in such environments, who bravely share their voices and experiences regardless of potential effects. Considering the ethical applications and respecting the concerns of the individuals associated with the accounts, this research refrains from direct engagement with any sources. Consequently, the detailed protocol outlining the data analysis procedures is excluded from the paper to avoid exposure of any possible personal details that can identify the individuals behind the sources.

The ongoing revolution in the context under study significantly impacts the sampled accounts in the research. The dynamic nature of the revolution shapes the content shared by these accounts, emphasizing the evolving circumstances and happenings on the ground. It is also important to note that due to the contemporary nature of the Iranian revolution and the limited transparency of information, there is small availability of academic literature and scholarly analyses that provide complete insights into the situation.

6.0 Analysis

The analysis section consists of several subsections that explore different perspectives and aspects of the research. The first section focus on civil reporting for human rights in an undemocratic setting by discussing the role of social media platforms as a tool that brings attention to marginalized issues and makes it possible for individuals to have a degree of influence. Moreover, it discusses the Iranian regime's view of civil reporting, particularly related to women's rights and choices. The second section examines visuals as affective publics and draws on the increased use of image-based methodologies and the subjective nature of the visual representation of real events. The third section focuses on Instagram as a Western platform used in a non-Western context, emphasizing the situation in Iran. The fourth section explores the postcolonial era and how activists on Instagram use the term 'gender apartheid' to advocate for gender equality for Iran's women.

6.1 Civil reporting for human rights in an undemocratic setting

Technology has given politicians, and civilians hope that the circulating information will somehow encourage democracy and fulfill the goals signified in revolutions in non-democratic societies. However, technology is seldom created with the purpose of serving political targets but rather to support capitalist purposes and generate faster schemes, as well as reach more potential customers based on less and cheaper resources (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.87; Veltmeyer & Bowles, 2018; Saadatmand et al., 2022). However, technologically raised online media platforms have a crucial role in bringing attention to issues that are often marginalized by traditional media narratives. Over the past few decades, movements have increased that apply digital tools to engage with broader audiences and articulate their points of view. Thus, civil reporting shared on social media has the capacity to provide means for symbolic impacts. Due to the availability to enable discursive forms of agency and provide individuals access to certain degrees of influence, and collectively, even more impact can be amplified through social media's dynamics and connective actions. However, existing research indicates that while the internet may diversify viewpoints, it does not inherently ensure democratic outcomes (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.90). The senior researcher Mahsa Alimardani (2022) uses the term 'techno utopianism' when referring to the exaggerated framing of social media as the dominant tool that would form democracy and freedom. She rather describes the role of social media in the Iranian revolution as very multi-faced and not

necessarily the tool that is going to mobilize people and bring change (Alimardani &
Alterman, 2022: p.2-3).

Moreover, Alimardani analyzes civil reporting through social media as a game changer in the
Iranian setting due to the country's strict control of traditional media. Neither international
nor local journalists have access to share independent information without being censored by
the state. International journalists also have delimited chances to actually observe the
revolution on the ground because of restricted entrance regulations to the country during
these times. Alimardani means that the documentation and news coverage of the protests
during the revolution heavily relies on digital evidence, mainly sourced from social media
platforms such as Instagram. Footage shared on these platforms and information provided by
citizens who manage to transmit videos and photos to external sources through the internet,
serves as the primary means of broadcasting information about the situation (Alimardani &
Alterman, 2022). Connecting her thoughts to the conducted research data, one can argue that
several sources among all four sampling categories use their platforms for activism by
sharing videos and photos provided by Iranian citizens. With that being said, civil reporting is
significant for spreading awareness, support and enhancing opportunities to witness what is
happening in a situation penetrated by censored settings and limited freedom of expression.
Furthermore, this can be linked to the positions made by Fairclough (1995), which claim that
language always are inherently dependent and reinforces the existing political and economic
interests of its specific societal surroundings. By emphasizing the influence of language as a
social fashion and its role in featuring power relations, one can argue that civil reporting is
valuable in restrictive environments where freedom of expression is limited. In such contexts,
the dissemination of information through external sources becomes crucial. It allows
individuals to publicly share content that mirrors their narrative without fear of censorship or
punishment. Additionally, these external companions, entitled with free hands to articulate
their viewpoints without constraint, are well esteemed for their willingness to support
marginalized groups.

6.1.1 The state's perspective

While analyzing the Iranian state's perspective of the civil reporting on Instagram, it is
essential to understand that governmental power is injured into policy subsystems such as
legislators, bureaucrats, and interest groups. How the involved subsystems choose to

prioritize, formulate and modify policies is influenced by individuals' preferences and interests within the existing subsystem. Consequently, the actions taken by insiders tend to take the lead over external civilians' interests, as decision-makers involved in the process share similar values (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.94). When the Iranian regime interprets the civil reporting for women's rights, and a woman's decision to choose whether to wear a veil or not, they see it as a secular Westernized way of exposing women's bodies for potential exploitation (Abu-Lughod, 1998: p.228). One can argue that this approach to examining Western beliefs is deeply rooted in the historically significant relationship between secular Western nations and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Western individuals, while respecting Iran's profound beliefs regarding the Shia revelation and its political implications, may not necessarily defend Iran's self-proclaimed monopoly on virtue, particularly when it comes to the country's international actions and the imprinted connection between religion, education, and justice (Leandro et al., 2021: p.88). Along these lines, Iranian politicians clearly see Western beliefs as provocative as the country's political thoughts are embodied in the history of a religious minority's struggle to survive in a secular world (Leandro et al., 2021: p.64).

6.2 Visuals as affective publics

In coordination with the rapid increase of technology in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the usage of image-based methodologies within collaborative research aimed at involving 'seldom heard' and 'marginalized' groups. This trend has been accompanied by the development of an expanding range of techniques specifically designed to reach these groups in situations where they are less common to be heard and seen due to different reasons (Lomax, 2020: p.4; Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.90). However, visuals do not precisely describe what is happening in a situation. Images and videos reflect the photographer's point of view and vision, by the photographer's selected choice of scene at a particular moment. The visuals are also reflected out of the context it is published within, as well as the viewer's individual and sociological 'ways of seeing' the visual. In other words, one can argue that visuals do not prove or contextualize any reality. Visuals do rather invite the viewer to bring their interpretations to analyze what is going on out of the viewer's own biographical, ethical, historical, and social filters (Lomax, 2020: p.4).

Seven out of 16 sources analyzed in the study share videos and photos of women who choose not to wear hijabs in public settings. Such content can be seen as a symbolic representation of

the revolution, advocating for women's autonomy and their right to decide whether or not to wear the hijab. The symbols reflect the broader discourse surrounding women when they challenge the traditional expectations imposed upon them in the form of religious dress codes. Other symbols are also reflected in the shared content among the sources. Three (one organization and two anonymous networks) out of 16 accounts studied share content of women cutting their hair off. As a tool to show solidarity with Iranian women, women cut off their hair as the hair is a sign of beauty intended to be hidden in the Islamic Republic (Alkhaldi & Ebrahim, 2022). Another prominent symbol found in the shared content is the depiction of individuals with only one eye, referring to those who have lost their other eye as a consequence of being shot by Iranian security forces during protests (Ghorbani, 2023). One organization and one anonymous network, out of the 16 sources, use the symbol as it serves as a powerful reminder of the repression faced by protesters and emphasizes the human rights violations carried out by the Iranian authorities. On the other hand, Iran authorities have defended themselves in Iranian media by rejecting such allegations and describing such content as 'propaganda' (Ghorbani, 2023). These sorts of symbols can be analyzed as affective publics. Papacharissi et al. (2018) argue that there are five underscoring characteristics and consequences of affective publics, referring to their potential to develop political discourses and challenge existing power structures. These five characteristics are;

1. Affective publics manifest in certain ways and leave unique digital footprints.
2. Affective publics open up for connective action, although not necessarily collective action.
3. Affective publics are generated by emotionally charged statements that combine facts and opinions. The statements later on lead to continuous, ever-present feeds that promote many forms of expression in both non-democratic and democratic contexts.
4. Affective publics usually challenge dominant political narratives due to their presentation of marginalized viewpoints and perspectives.
5. Surrounding streams sustain publics that come together due to affective commonalities: the symbolic impact, its agency through semantic means, and liminal power dynamics (Papacharissi et al., 2018: p.92-93).

Hashtags are another form of tool used within social media that provide the viewer snapshots of these affective publics and have the ability to organize the connective actions into themes

(Papacharissi et al., 2018). All of the analyzed sources in the study use hashtags, more or less, by hashtagging highlights or posts with i.e. #MahsaAmini, #WomenLifeFreedom, #IranProtests, and #IranRevolution, with the ambition to reach a broader audience. People not following the accounts can thereby discover the content by visiting the specific pages associated with these hashtags. In doing so, they become informed about the particular theme that the hashtag is associated with. Hashtags can also be used due to other purposes. Out of 16 accounts analyzed, five employ hashtags to establish connections with other accounts that share similar content. The strategy intends to create a sense of belonging to a more massive collective working toward a common goal. By using hashtags such as; #saveiranianschoolgirls, #hungerstrike, and #Saytheirnametosavetheirlives, the accounts seek recognition and aspire to amplify their impact by joining connective forces with a larger number of like-minded individuals.

6.3 Western platform used in non-Western contexts

Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger originated Instagram as a platform in San Francisco, United States. The application was designed for people to share photos via their smartphone devices (History Computer, 2022). Instagram has come to be one of the most popular platforms since it was founded in 2011, and notably increased its users in line with the use of smartphones, mainly in the Western world. The app serves businesses' marketing needs in the form of advertisement and influencer marketing, as well as private persons' needs in the form of social networking. Furthermore, Instagram became the leading social media platform in Iran in conjunction with that the previously most used platform (Telegram) was cut in 2018 (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022: p.6). Due to Iran's historical pattern of censoring and prohibiting media content outside the state's control, a pertinent question arises concerning the manner and extent to which regulations regarding Instagram will be enforced. However, an Iranian research institute presented statistics showing the revenue of Instagram and similar platforms in Iran to be between 700 million to 1 billion dollars (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022: p.6). With that being said, Instagram plays a significant role in Iranian employment and the economy. While Instagram also contributes to the civilian opposition in terms of communication and documentation throughout the revolution. This makes the relationship between Instagram and the Iranian regime both infected and complicated when considering the pros and cons.

One can argue that Instagram as a platform fits the opposition against the Iranian regime due to the fact that their narrative goes hand in hand with Western values. As long as those opposing the Iranian state strive for human rights, including non-violence and women's autonomy in decision-making regarding their bodies, they will continue to find like-minded individuals on the application who support their interests and goals. Notwithstanding that Instagram has been banned during various times of the protest, the platform has still been used for civil reporting thanks to the Iranians' social network outside the country (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022). Based on the data studied in this research, all the sources lean back on their social network. Many of the creators behind the studied accounts have dual identities as both Western and Iranian. They are based in Western societies but maintain a solid connection to their Iranian heritage, which includes having friends and family members directly affected by the revolution. Based on the analyzed material, these accounts possess the ability to share informative news and make statements due to their social networks in Iran and that they are being provided with material. Moreover, these accounts mutually influence each other and encourage other accounts to share the content further to reach a broader audience.

Among the data analyzed in this research, it is observed that ten out of 16 accounts (mainly verified and unverified personal accounts, but also anonymous networks) make statements when sharing content about the revolution. They do so through various means, such as recording self-made monologues, participating in interviews with traditional media that they later repost on their account, or commenting on news and information using their chosen language. Six out of these ten accounts clearly show that they live outside Iran, in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Lila Abu-Lughod has written a book called *"Do Muslim Women Need Saving?"* (2013), where the author analyzes external people getting involved with actions to 'save' Muslim women. The author means that plenty of humans want to do something about the violation of women's rights and, among all, Muslim women's rights. Within the discourse surrounding Muslim women, Abu-Lughod identifies various perspectives. Some people view Muslim women as distant and different, aiming to save them. There are also people who have capitalized on exploiting the international political climate and individual women's traumatic stories by publishing memoirs focused on abuse and stories of women fleeing violence. On the contrary, there are also dedicated activists working hard to reach a gender-equal society by either using language

referring to universal rights or specific language rooted in the Muslim discursive tradition (Abu-Lughod, 2013: p.201).

6.4 A postcolonial era

One anonymous network and one verified personal account in the studied data refer to the term 'gender apartheid' when craving freedom for Iranian women. The term gained attention in connection with International Women's Day 2023 and refers to the fact that prevailing international laws on discrimination are disregarded in societies in Afghanistan and Iran, where women do not experience equal civil status as men. Apartheid as a word comes from the Afrikaans' "apart" and assigns the imperial constructions in South Africa from 1948 to the 1990s when a white minority consistently discriminated black people systemically. During recent decades, apartheid has been a crime under international law, yet it only attributes racial hierarchies and not human ranking based on gender. Activists seek to extend the international laws referring to the broader legal systems in Iran and Afghanistan, which pursue to maintain enslavement of women under the man and the state. Moreover, as the violation of these laws generates executions, imprisonment, and violence towards people standing up for gender equality, certain activists on Instagram choose to point out the ongoing 'gender apartheid' as an international cry for help (Wintour, 2023).

One can argue that conservative Islamists interpret feminism as a Western invention to maintain global power (Abu-Lughod, 1998: p.243; Foroutan, 2022: p.744). On the contrary, the earlier mentioned author Lila Abu-Lughod brings up a quote by Leila Ahmed in the book *"Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East"* (1998) where she analyzes the East/West way of securing the hijab as a marker that symbolizes a woman's downgraded cultural status in contemporary Muslim societies. She argues that *"colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and under-mine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies that taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests."* (Abu-Lughod, 1998: p.243). Piedalue & Rishi (2017) also brings up the significance of the role of gender and sexuality in racialized imperialist and nationalist aims. External spectators analyze geographic areas, localities, and homes linked to Islam, as well as portray Muslim men as frightful 'others' who do everything in their power to be able to use violence, sexually assault women and carry out terrorism

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(Piedalue & Rishi, 2017: p.557). Nevertheless, diverse Muslim politicians and imams within populous Muslim states criticize authorities which do not give women the same opportunities in education and employment as men. The stakeholders involved mean that there are no provisions in the Qur'an or Muslim religious teaching justifying restrictions on women in such a way (Wintour, 2023).

In order to understand Islamic nationalism and fundamentalism in Iran, one needs to examine how Iranian modernity is expressed and how it has positioned Iran within today's global capitalist systems driven by secular forms of governance. By investigating Iran's modernity, the mechanisms of control that shape Iranian governance, and its integration into the outside world's economic structures, one will better understand the components that shape Islamic nationalism in Iran (Moallem, 2005: p.31). One can argue that modern Iranian narratives often are based on Orientalist and nationalist rhetorics but fail to confront the postcolonial context on concerns of identity. Thus, these narratives do not succeed to address the humiliating impacts of the racial discourse, nor the role of gender in construction and reinvention of the Islamic nation. Therefore, the veil has become a symbol, in both global and local settings, for identity and resistance among postcolonial generations (Moallem, 2005: p.32).

7.0 Conclusion

This research highlights the complexities of the Iranian revolution, the role of Instagram, and the intersecting factors of gender, religion, and global power dynamics. Moreover, it features various interpretations of feminism and the challenges posed by Orientalist and nationalist narratives to understand Iranian Islamic nationalism better. The research is based on discourse analysis as a methodology to examine 16 Instagram accounts in-depth, focusing on their shared content and their relation to the social context in Iran.

Civil reporting through Instagram plays a crucial but multi-faced role in the ongoing Iranian revolution. Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms globally, generating substantial revenue for the Iranian economy. Moreover, the platform provides opportunities for individuals to share their experiences and perspectives. With its narrative aligning with Western values, the platform serves as a natural choice for people opposing the Iranian regime. It offers a space for people with like-minded interests and an environment where individuals can connect and support each other when it comes to topics related to human rights, women's autonomy, and non-violence. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, also enable the circulation of marginalized information traditionally hidden by conventional media narratives. The technology, thus, allows individuals to engage and articulate their thoughts to broader audiences. In other words, they can establish connective actions which later on lead to collective movements. However, it is necessary to recognize the internet and social media platforms as a place to diversify political thoughts and viewpoints, but not as guarantees for any democratic outcomes. Hence, the platforms should not be exaggerated as the sole tool for mobilization and political change.

In line with the rapid development of technology, significant visual-based methodologies have become more utilized. Visuals, such as photos and videos, serve as a way to document happenings that can easily be shared among other owners of smartphones. With that being said, it is important to acknowledge that visuals do not provide an objective portrayal of reality. A visual reflects the photographer's perspective and invites viewers to make interpretations based on their filters out of the individual's experiences and background. One can argue that civil reporting through social platforms, such as Instagram, possesses an exclusive ability to generate a symbolic representation of a situation.

However, in terms of the strict control of traditional media and limited access for international journalists, civil reporting through Instagram serves as a game changer in the context of the Iranian revolution. The platform becomes a great source of independent information by offering people an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives. The circulation of information contributes to spreading awareness, garnering support, and arranging a chance to witness some reality of the ongoing Iranian strikes, empowering individuals to share their stories to attract international attention. In addition, Iranians based outside Iran play a role in the civil reporting. By leveraging their social networks in Iran to share informative news, reflections, and visuals, they spread the information further to raise awareness and mobilize supportive settlements backing the civilian population within Iran. These individuals also influence each other and encourage further sharing by their followers to reach wider circles.

Civil reporting on Instagram can be emphasized as actions that develop affective publics. The emotionally charged statements combine facts and personal opinions with the purpose of challenging dominant political narratives. Later on, the affective publics constitute opportunities for connective action grounded in shared emotions and commonalities. Hashtags work as a tool within civil reporting and affective publics to organize content, connect broader communities, and establish links for connective actions to work towards common goals. For example, to end gender apartheid and advocate for women's rights.

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