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# "We Must be Their Voices!"

Exploring Danish-Iranian Women's Emotional Engagement
with the Woman Life Freedom Movement on Instagram and Beyond

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We are not afraid
not anymore
we rage because
they murdered our sister
our Mahsa
they thought she was too much
her hair was too much
the life within her lived too much –

They had just forgotten that
we are the exhausted fields, that
we are the muscles of the tidal wave, that
we make the earth crumble, that
we are the lions from the mountain heading towards the city while we roar:
Woman! - Life! - Freedom!

*By Shëkufe Tadayoni Heiberg, Danish-Iranian author. Extract from 'Kvinde Liv Frihed ('Woman Life Freedom'). Published in Weekendavisen, September 30, 2022. Translated from Danish, with the consent of the author.*

# Abstract

The present study explores how Danish-Iranian Women living in Copenhagen witness and take part in the connective Woman Life Freedom movement, online and from afar. It seeks to investigate their emotional engagement with Instagram, their political participation and their sense of belonging in this process. With a media studies perspective, the study works in the intersection between civic engagement and diaspora. It contributes with knowledge about translocality – how local lifeworlds are linked by media. Placing emotions and affect at the centre of a media engagement analysis, the study resonates with a tendency among media studies of civic engagement to pay attention to how people feel. However, by investigating the impact of emotional media engagement on diasporic sense of belonging, it unveils an under-explored area in media research.

This thesis project is carried out from a non-media-centric and digital ethnographic approach. The empirical material is comprised by semi-structured ethnographic interviews with ten Danish-Iranian women. With an affect-theoretical approach, the study identifies how three types of Instagram content pull the Danish-Iranian women towards the Woman Life Freedom movement. It finds that their loyal and passionate media engagement crystalises into online and offline political participation in a Danish context in which they struggle to drive their agenda forward. The thesis argues that the Danish-Iranian women's emotional engagement with Instagram leads to the formation of a civic culture and diasporic community to which they feel a sense of belonging. It makes them relocate in a new local diasporic network that allows for hybridity between a Danish and an Iranian context. The local and offline aspect of this network evokes the emotional experience of feeling at home. This finding is significant as most contemporary media research of diaspora focuses on sense of belonging to an online network. This is nuanced by the present study that underscores the relevance of paying attention to the impact of online connectivity on social ties in local places.

*Key words: civic engagement, diaspora, social media, emotions, affect, politics, sense of belonging, Woman Life Freedom movement*

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# Introduction

*"There is no way back. It must come to a revolution. At some point, we will dance with the Iranians at Azadi Square. No matter if I'm old and grey-haired at that time." – Fatemeh*

The words come from Fatemeh, a 52-year-old Danish-Iranian woman. It is a rainy Friday evening in early February 2023. In a local library with yellowish light in a neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark. Fatemeh is sitting on a small, low scene together with four other panellists, also Danish-Iranian women. They are facing around 30 people. The other panellists nod and smile, listening to her words, then, a moment of silence before the host thanks everyone for coming and dedicates the evening to the protestors who have been arrested or executed. People clapped. An evening with panel discussions where the Danish-Iranian activists and artists have given their personal point of view on the Iranian Woman Life Freedom movement is coming to an end. I follow 30-year-old Roya, who suggested me to join this event, on the way out, and she and the other Danish-Iranians hug each other. Turning towards me she says "you see … all of us have come to know each other".

What I have just described stems from a *participant observation* in the initial phase of the present study (O'Reilly, 2012, pp. 162-166). That evening, I began to get a sense of the impact that the Woman Life Freedom movement has on Fatemeh, Roya and the other women whom I was going to interview for this thesis project. With a digital ethnographic approach (Hine, 2015), the thesis seeks to understand the Danish-Iranian women's emotional experience of witnessing the Woman Life Freedom movement online and from afar.

The Woman Life Freedom movement, also referred to as "WLF" in the thesis, has risen from protests in the aftermath of Jina Masha Amini's death on September 16, 2022. The 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman was arrested in Tehran by the so-called "morality police" because she did not follow the mandatory dress code for women which involves wearing hijab. She died in police custody after lying in coma for three days under suspicious circumstances (Motamedi, 2022). Witnesses expressed that they saw her being beaten by the police (Alshamahi, 2022). Protest broke out in Jina Masha Amini's hometown Saqquez and quickly spread to cities across the whole country (Torkameh, 2023). Since the "Islamic Revolution" in

1979, Iran has been an authoritarian Shi'ite theocracy. It is led by supreme leader Ali Ayatollah Khameini who has the absolute power. The regime exercises censorship (Cohen & Yefet, 2021). Authorities have launched a crackdown on the Woman Life Freedom protests from blocking the internet to shooting at, arresting and executing protesters (Sinaee, 2023). Up until the time of writing, protests are still ongoing (ibid.). Compared to previous uprisings in the time of the Islamic regime, this movement is significant in several ways: First, it was started by women, second, there is diversity among the protestors in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and relation to religion. Third, they carry out protests not only against the legislation on women's dress code, but they demand the fall of the Islamic Republic (Torkameh, 2023).

While spreading internally in Iran, the Woman Life Freedom movement also spread to parts of the Iranian diaspora – diaspora understood as people who have migrated from their country of origin, enforced or by choice, *and* their descendants (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 81). The Iranian diaspora is spread across all continents, and groups are found in the United States, Canada, Europe and the Gulf States (Cohen & Yefet, 2021, p. 689). The largest waves of migration were in the 1980's in the years where the Islamic Republic was built up, and in the 1990's where economic and political conditions deteriorated (ibid.). A recent questionnaire study carried out prior to the outbreak of WLF (Cohen & Yefet, 2021) among diasporic Iranians across the world found that there is a negative view on the current regime in Iran. Through social media, the WLF movement has travelled across national borders with especially the hashtag #mahsaamini which has mobilised the diaspora in especially Europe and the United States. People have gathered on social media and in the streets in their respective countries to protest against the Islamic Republic (Aljazeera, 2022). Also in Denmark, the geographical focus of this study, Danish Iranians have demonstrated in solidarity with WLF (Kjempf, 2022; Therkildsen & Brandt, 2022; Saroneh, 2023).

From a social constructivist perspective, the deep mediatisation of societies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) means that the formation of social protest and travelling movements cannot be separated from the process of media technology and communication. Mediated stories and the messages we share establish connections and networks between people (Papacharissi, 2015; Poell & Van Dijk, 2016; Nikunen, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). The Woman Life Freedom movement is one out of many examples of what Manuel Castells (2015) called a global trend

of networked protest. Especially social media platforms can function as *citizen media* where people create and distribute content, spreading an agenda (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016). Media scholars talk about *connective activism* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2015) where people in different localities or even nations do not need to be physically together to take part in the same agenda.

As Judith Butler, philosopher of political theory, reminds us, an assembly of people in a specific physical place does not only represent the demands of the people who are visible in this urban public space. Connected to an assembly, there will always be people outside the frame who are absent, but who consider themselves a part of the people protesting against the inequality (2015, p. 165). The present study is concerned with a group of people outside the actual physical assembly in Iran – Danish-Iranian women who from afar witness Iranians demanding the fall of the Islamic Republic – and take part in it.

The Iranian diaspora in Denmark is comprised of close to 23,000 ethnic Iranians and their descendants (Statistikbanken, 2022). In both public and political debate in Denmark, segregation and "parallel societies" have been dominant topics, especially when it comes to people originating from "non-western" countries (Hedetoft, 2010, p. 124; Rytter, 2019). However, this thesis tells another story than the dominating story in Denmark and Europe about ethnic minorities living in enclaves (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010); the ten Danish-Iranian women participating in this study have had very limited contact with people sharing the same country of origin, they have never been a part of an "Iranian" community, and they have never sought one. The relationships among the Danish-Iranian women explored in this thesis did not exist prior to the outbreak of WLF. It is an example of how political engagement constructs a diasporic network that did not exist prior to this (Adamson, 2012).

By paying attention to how specifically Danish-Iranian women living in Copenhagen experience and engage in the ongoing Women Life Freedom movement in Iran, this thesis project explores WLF with a translocal lens – the impact of geographically distinct localities being online connected in local life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 122). The thesis has a non-media-centric approach to the women's engagement with Instagram (Krajina, Moores & Morley, 2014): Rather than analysing the Instagram content, it explores the role and impact of it in the

everyday lives of the participants. The importance and relevance of this is that it allows us to understand how this media phenomenon is interwoven with other social phenomena and thus to get a rich and contextual understanding of it. The chosen methodology to research this is digital ethnography, aimed at exploring the intertwinement of online and offline social life (Hine, 2015).

Instagram is not the only, but the primary, platform by which the Danish-Iranian women connect with the WLF movement. Among a wide range of social media cultures and trends, Instagram is also a platform hosting activist cultures of political expressions and protest (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020, p. 240; Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2020). The Danish-Iranian women take part in the WLF mainly by reposting content on Instagram. It is primarily the visual aspects of the content that occupy them, which is not surprising considering the visual aesthetics and affordances of Instagram, where the media cultures and trends are most often anchored in photos and videos (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020, p. 17, pp. 59-60).

The Danish-Iranian women participating in this study have been engaged in WLF, both on Instagram and by arranging or participating in demonstrations, since the outbreak of the first protests in Iran. None of them have previously followed political affairs in Iran in a persistent way. Before social media platforms like Instagram existed, political scientist Sidney Tarrow argued that social mobilisation happens when people experience a threat and, at the same time, hope (1994, p. 33). This thesis explores which emotions mobilise the women and how when they are not present on the ground but *spectators* of WLF through online media.

As media scholars have argued, when people gather publicly to discuss, online as well as offline, the glue between them is not pre-formulated political aims, but emotions. Political participation in online networks is not only about people reasoning and arguing opinions, it is just as much about people feeling (Papacharissi, 2015; Koivunen, Kyrölä, & Ryberg, 2018).

This thesis project is dedicated to exploring *the role of Instagram in the Danish-Iranian women's emotional experience of witnessing the Woman Life Freedom movement online and from afar, while living in Denmark.*

To gain an understanding of this, the thesis is guided by the following three research questions:

- *How do the Danish-Iranian women emotionally and affectively engage with Instagram content concerned with the Woman Life Freedom movement?*
- *What role does recognition play for the way the Danish-Iranian women participate politically in a Danish context?*
- *How do the Danish-Iranian women renegotiate and relocate their sense of belonging through being engaged in the highly mediated movement?*

The thesis is structured around four main sections. In the upcoming section, I present a review of academic literature from a media studies perspective on civic engagement, emotions and diaspora, and how the thesis places itself in relation to this literature. This is followed by a description of and a reflection upon the research design as well as the process of conducting the empirical material with a digital ethnographic approach. Presenting the significant analytical insights, the next section is dedicated to answering the above research questions in three parts. In the conclusion, I sum up the analytical findings and reflect further upon them. Together, these four sections seek to unveil how emotions can travel by online media, shape political action, and build new diasporic networks to belong to.

# Literature Review

In this section, I will map the fields of research relevant to the present study. First, I will review research of civic engagement and the role of media and show the relevance of paying attention to the everyday and translocal aspect of connective activism. Secondly, I will argue for the value of an affective theoretical approach in media research concerned with civic engagement. Thirdly, I will synthesise studies of diaspora carried out from a media perspective and suggest to understand sense of belonging as negotiable and to focus on the translocality of diasporic (political) networks. Lastly, I will present the ways in which this study contributes to underexplored areas of media research.

## Counterpublics and Connectivity

### Politics among Citizens

What is politics? Where is it found? Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) contested a traditional view on politics as merely something that is created by electives and decision-makers. She distinguished between "politics" – connected to formal, electoral, institutionary structures – and "the political" which emerges among civics discussing and continuously contesting power structures in society (ibid). This thesis seeks to pay attention to the political participation primarily taking place in the everyday life of a specific group of citizens since every action, even the smallest one, to change something is political. Political communication is found within and across every corner of civil society – in media, in homes, in various social groups, and every voicing of opinion is a form of political participation (Dean, 2001, pp. 251-254; Dahlgren, 2013, p. 18). In this respect, the present study aims at showing the particularity and plurality of *public sphere*. This term, which was originally presented by Habermas (1962, cited in Fraser 1990, pp. 57-63) as one ideal place where bourgeois and reading people gathered to join "rational discussion", has been criticised in later studies of civic engagement which found this notion of public sphere unitary, hegemonic and exclusive (Fraser, 1990; Dean, 2001). For Fraser (1990) and other political theorists (Dean, 2001; Mouffe, 2005), neutrality and hegemony are neither achievable nor desirable. She called for a rethinking of the notion and suggested an alternative account of the concept that was capable of grasping a plurality of contesting public spheres and all the inequalities within and between these (Fraser,

1990, p. 77). She coins the term *counterpublics* which refers to groups of people who produce counter discourses and thereby participate politically from the periphery, and here, she especially wants us to pay attention to what she calls "subaltern counterpublics", people of colour, women, and lower-class people (p. 67). Because political participation takes place in various ways in various civic groups, this thesis project resonates with Fraser's perspective (1990) and zooms in on the formation of a specific group of counterpublics in a specific locality, Danish-Iranian women in Copenhagen, who, with their minority status, are a part of the population that is at the margins of Danish public debate in the traditional media (Jørndrup, 2022).

## Voices in Virtual Spheres

Ascribing to the view that attention should be paid to politics among citizens, media scholars like Peter Dahlgren (2009, 2013) and Zizi Papacharissi (2015, 2021) have demonstrated how the web makes it more accessible for people to join public discussions and gather around certain political issues, outside political institutions, to take part in "alternative politics" (Dahlgren, 2013, pp. 15-18). People who might not live in the same localities, who might in other cases not have interacted with each other, form virtual contesting spheres. I am aware that social media platforms do not make public discussions equal and accessible to all, especially due to algorithmic structures (Papacharissi, 2021, pp. 18-30, 125-126). Couldry (2010) understands voice as twofold; you can have a voice as a process – you narrate, you express a statement – and a voice as a value – your expressions are heard by others. Couldry (2010) calls for a "sociology of voice" (pp. 113-133), that pays attention to the ones who experience lack of voice. As today's media environment makes it easier to form counterpublic spheres, but not necessary to have a voice, I find this call important, and in my analysis, I will touch upon the Danish-Iranian women's experience of the effect of their civic engagement – or lack of this – in the Danish context in which they participate. Several scholars of media and political participation have argued that the market structure and the architecture of social media platforms lead to echo chambers and filter bubbles that foster polarisation between political and ideological clusters not visible to one another (Pariser, 2011; Bruns, 2019; Tufekci, 2017). However, this argument has also been nuanced by other media scholars (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Bossetta, Segesten & Bonacci, 2023). A group of political communication researchers recently called for a paradigm shift away from echo chambers and argued that research should

grasp the cross-overs between people of different political points of view in virtual networks, arguing that the networks are not only enclaves of likeminded people (Bossetta, Segesten & Bonacci, 2023). In this light, when researching a very specific group of people with a very specific agenda, I find this crucial to bear in mind and not hesitate towards concluding that the women are acting in a political cluster. I wish to pay attention to what Dahlgren calls the "interaction aspect" of publics sphere (2009, p. 73) – both exploring the Danish-Iranian women's use of media in the shaping of political standpoint and, moreover, their approach to and relation to other citizens and politicians in the surrounding civil society.

## Connective Activism

A notion like *slacktivism* (Nikunen, 2019, p. 113) refers to the minimum effort required to take part in activism online – you do not have to leave your home to post a statement. But in exploring how the Danish-Iranian women take part in WLF, I pay attention to the mobilising forces and potentials of networked public spheres. You can participate in discussions on issues specific to a local place geographically far away from you. The "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2015, p. 7) – that social media allows citizens to distribute symbols, stories and statements very fast to potentially large crowds – has shown itself useful in mobilising people from different local sites very quickly. People with whom the opinions resonate. People who find ways to act together – both online and offline, resulting in movements, sometimes transnational (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Here, *hashtag activism*, with the hashtag as a tool connecting people and posts, is central (Williams, 2015). The past years have seen several examples of movements created in online networks travelling across national borders. Examples are the Arab spring, protests against authoritarian regimes in Arab countries in 2010-2012 (Castells, 2015, pp. 95-112), the #metoo movement against sexual harassment of women in 2017 (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 2-3) and the Black Lives Matter movement against racism in 2020 (Helfrich and Machida, 2022).

The notion *networked publics* (Boyd, 2007) or *networked public spheres* (Tufekci, 2017) covers how public discussion and civic engagement are shaped by online interaction. But just because publics are interacting and collaborating in these virtual spheres, protesting online and offline, it does not mean that participants in these networks act as a coherent collective.

These virtual public spheres consist more of selves connected by "an intermediary stage" than of a collective we (Milan, 2015, pp. 66-67). This has been stressed in media studies with the term *connective action* instead of *collective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 87-93). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe connective activism as "a new logic of action" supplanting conventional forms of activism in the sense that it is based on horizontal networks, decentralised decision-making and flexible, personalised participation. Connective activism does not depend on collective identity and "members" ascribing to one ideology or a framework of principles. Instead, it is woven together by "personal action frames" – political messages in personal stories – and communication with individuals as senders via personal profiles on especially social media platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 743-745). This can mobilise people living in different locations who can carry out action in the locality where they live independently of an organisational centre. For this reason, connective activism is crucial to this thesis project. The term allows me to understand the Woman Life Freedom movement as a network of people, across nations, who gather around the same issue though acting in different ways – and in this project, a locality-specific articulation of WLF is subject to scrutiny.

## The Translocality of Technopolitics

But rather than trying to grasp the virtual scope and the size of WLF, travelling across borders, I will study the connective activism from a translocal perspective. In media research, *translocality* refers to how life at local sites is connected to other local sites by media. In this thesis, I want to pay attention to how this movement is articulated online as well as offline in the local place of Copenhagen among Danish-Iranian women – how it is connected to events in Iran. Like all social life, civic engagement is acted out in the intertwinement of online and offline activities (Dahlgren, 2013; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). As shown by scholars such as Castells (2015) and Tufekci (2017), networked protests and activism are anchored into local places, subjects and relations. Having studied social movements around the globe, Castells (2015) has argued that there is a tendency of protest to be "nurtured" online and acted out in "public urban space" (pp. 221-223). This has been demonstrated in case studies, from the American Occupy Wall movement against financial inequality and the occupations of public places (Castells, 2015, pp. 159-219) to the Turkish hashtag campaign "Every Parade of Ours

is a Pride Parade" for LGBTQ+ rights where people assembled physically to re-make local places (Kilic, 2021). What happens in the cloud is entwined with the grounds. Therefore, this thesis project seeks to avoid what Dahlgren described as an "essentialist distinction between on- and offline realities" (2013, p. 64) and pays attention to local experience and local relations.

In this respect, I also approach connective activism as a part of everyday life. Papacharissi (2021) argues that online interaction regarding politics is not separate from everyday life; on the contrary, it is integrated with it. In media studies of the intertwinement of online and offline political expression, some scholars pay attention to daily lives of local citizens. In his examination of the role of the internet during the first protest of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Zayani (2015) dedicated a chapter to how citizens contest censorship in their everyday lives. And Ophélie (2016) studied online and offline vegan activism in France and how this was interwoven with everyday practices, arguing that studies of activism and civic engagement should not exclude everyday life since the two are entangled and mutually sustain each other. In acknowledging the intertwinement of online activities in the cloud and offline activities on local ground, this thesis seeks to treat political discussion, online and offline, not as something extraordinary, but as something which exist in the everyday lives of citizens.

The thesis is developed from the perspective that social life cannot be understood without exploring media, and media cannot be understood without exploring social life. It explores what Couldry and Hepp (2017) describe as *deep mediatisation* of social and political life. It seeks to investigate how ever-present media are constitutive and transformative: Technology, media infrastructure and communicative interaction shape with whom people interact and how. The study takes a translocal approach to grasp how social processes and media processes mutually affect and sustain each other, and I take a micro-perspective on what connective activism and civic engagement in a specific movement looks like in a specific locality. Thus, the present thesis is a non-media centric study in the sense that it explores a media phenomenon, the connective WLF movement, alongside other social phenomena (Krajina, Moores & Morley, 2014. It does not centre around the media content but explores it as part of a social context. This can unveil nuances and complexities of how social life and media are interwoven (ibid.).

This thesis deals with political participation and media by exploring connective activism among citizens in their daily lives as a form of alternative political participation and the interfaces between the Danish-Iranian counterpublics and the surrounding Danish civil society. With a translocal approach, it zooms in at a hyper-local experience of the transnational, connective Woman Life Freedom movement concerning Iran.

# Affect Theory

## The Sociality of Emotions

My intention with this section is to argue for the relevance of an affect-theoretical approach to the Danish-Iranian women's media and civic engagement with the WLF movement. What has been called "the affective turn" in humanities and social science (Clough & Hardt, 2007) also found its way into media research, as I will show. But before turning to media research, I will present feminist scholar and affect theorist Sarah Ahmed's key understanding of emotions and what they do, on which my analysis will be developed.

Ahmed explores emotions as social. She argues that emotions have the power to create communities that include some individuals and exclude others. Therefore, emotions are pertinent as an analytical focal point when exploring civic engagement. When we get in contact with certain objects or other subjects – for instance via social media – we experience an emotion (2014). For Ahmed, emotions neither emerge and reside solely inside people, nor in the objects outside people. Rather, emotions are found in an intermediary stage between people and their meeting with the surrounding world – they emerge in people's reading, interpretation of objects and others (2014, pp. 4-8). Emotions circulate with and *between* objects and subjects; when people feel something, it is a result – an effect – of emotions going round. With this perspective, our attention is drawn to how emotions capture us and make us move with them. They are affective, they make people behave and act in certain ways towards others. In this way, circulation of emotions gives people a certain place within certain social and political structures. In my analysis, I am inspired by the question asked by Ahmed "How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others?" (2004, p. 117). For this purpose, I will draw on Ahmed's notion of *stickiness* of emotions and her idea of emotions sliding sideways and backwards (2014, pp. 89-92, 45-46), which I will describe in my

analysis. It should be noted that since I base my analysis on Ahmed's affect theory, I do not aim to define what emotion *is* and to distinguish it from affect, but to explore what emotions *do*. By paying attention to the emotions in the women's engagement with Instagram content, I want to understand how certain emotions pull them towards a certain political issue and certain other people, and how they become part of an affective community with a certain agenda.

## Emotional Media Engagement

Exploring the relation between emotions, media and civic engagement, attention can be paid to mediated articulation of emotion as well as people's emotional experience when in contact with certain media content (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This thesis is concerned with the latter. Recently, Dahlgren and Hill (2020) presented a core framework for analysing media engagement that pay attention emotions, which I am inspired by. They understand media engagement as a "subjective experience" driven by affect that can dispose us to certain actions (2020, p. 2). Dahlgren and Hill present five parameters (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) among which I will pay attention the *intensities*, *modalities*, *motivations* and *consequences* of the women's engagement with Instagram content – this will be elaborated further in the analysis. What is also interesting about their framework is that it extends beyond the media engagement itself and leaves room for paying attention to the social, political and cultural impacts the media engagement might have (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). I find this crucial for understanding the role of emotions in the Danish-Iranian women's civic engagement since it allows me to explore how they position themselves politically and socially in their process of media engagement.

"No passion, no participation" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 85). Following Dahlgren, to be caught by passion and emotions is essential for a civic culture of agency to emerge. In recent years, several media scholars have found it crucial to pay attention to emotion when exploring what makes people participate politically and come together online and offline – this is not only about reasoning, but also about feeling (Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Nikunen, 2019). Papacharissi (2015) extends the notion *structures of feeling* from Raymond Williams (1961, cited in Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 115-117). She argues that digital technology organises and arranges human emotional experience (2015). She coins the term *affective publics* to grasp how emotional response, experiences and expressions pull us towards, or disconnect us

from, a certain political issue and certain networks of people. In this way, her perspective on emotions resonates with that of Ahmed: Emotions make us move around socially and politically. Several recent case studies demonstrate how emotions online make people occupied with a certain political issue, mobilise them and thus impact on social structures and power dynamics (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018; Christiansen & Heiselberg, 2021; Field et al., 2022). For instance, in their study of Danish fat activists, Christiansen and Heiselberg (2021) showed how joy creates affective solidarity online and takes on political positions raising claims. Another example is Field et al. (2022) who explored the twitter aspect of the Black Lives Matter movement and found that not only hate was mobilising forces of participation, but also pride and hope. Moreover, becoming part of an affective social network around, for instance, the sharing of a political perspective can create a sense of belonging to a community (Dean, 2010; Berlant, 2008). With her conception of *intimate publics*, Berlant (2008) demonstrated in a study of women's consumption of American popular culture how engagement with the same media content can make certain people who do not know each other share emotional experiences, resulting in a political and social intimacy among strangers.

Social media has certainly made witnessing of events around the world as they take place more accessible, and people often participate with rapidity (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 44-49). Specifically concerned with activism and circulation of solidarity expressions on social media, media scholar Kaarina Nikunen (2019) has argued that there is a tendency of *impatient solidarity* – where the context to the specific political issue is demolishing, it is deprioritised in favour of reacting and expressing solidarity and empathy quickly. We can understand *affective witnessing* (Richardson & Schankweiler, 2019) as something else than just being informed about incidents; the incidents have an impact on you, a disposition – it makes you feel and potentially act in a certain way. Witnessing other people's pain has often been explored as a source of emotion and affect, the *distant suffering* (Chouliaraki, 2006) of others, through media. How this affects people is contextual and situational. A suffering subject can be reacted upon (or not) differently depending on the spectator's identification and recognition of the pain (Chouliaraki, 2006; Butler, 2016), which I will explore in the analysis.

Summing up, the value of an affective theoretical approach to media engagement is that it can unveil what kind of emotions make people align with a political issue and become part of a

community and *how*. In paying attention to affectivity, the present study clearly resonates with a tendency among media scholars of contemporary civic engagement to focus on emotional experiences. But unlike the reviewed studies, when I, in this thesis project, pay attention to the impact of the Danish-Iranian women's emotional media engagement on their political and social lives, I pay attention to their diasporic condition as originating from Iran, living in Denmark.

# Dynamic Diaspora

## Hybridity

In humanities and social science, including media studies, there has been a tendency to approach diaspora, as social form, in essentialist ways. This is caused by for instance *methodical nationalism* (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), researching from the perspective of nation states as neutral and its populations as rather ethnic homogenous, and *cultural nationalism* (Athique, 2016) which equates sharing of nationality with sharing a common culture. As argued by Athique (2016), this has had the consequence in media studies that diaspora subjects' media engagement has been understood as a matter of reconnecting with or maintaining a culture specific to the country of origin (pp. 82-83) – leading to homogenous and essentialist views on diaspora identities and communities, allowing very little room for the complexity of originating from another country than the one in which you live. Following Stuart Hall (2013), one of the scholars opposing this tendency, diaspora people's cultural identity is, like other people's cultural identity, particular and processual. While there is a historical aspect to cultural identity, it is not solely tied to a country of origin, and the cultural ties that people of a diaspora might have, are constantly changeable – the identity is always a process of "becoming" (p. 394, 402). Methodical nationalism and cultural nationalism have been challenged by notions of hybridity and transnationalism. Here, we understand dispersed subjects through the multiple cross-border realities which inhabit (Aksoy & Robins, 2000; Vertovec, 2001; Georgiou, 2006). Moreover, some scholars have understood diaspora as socially constructed and comprised by a triadic relationship between; 1. A group of people who might share locality, but define themselves as sharing ethnicity, 2. Their country of residence, 3. Their country of origin (Vertovec, 1999; Safran, 2011). Building on this thought, Athique (2016) called for an understanding of dispersed subjects as *hybrids* rather than minorities in their country of

residence, that is, paying attention to the multiple countries and cultural context to which they are connected. They are "cosmopolitan innovators" who reinterpret, merge and move between cultural contexts (p. 80). The transnationality and hybridity have led some scholars (Soysal, 1994; Saw, 2018) to argue that diasporic belonging is post-national. However, as demonstrated in case studies especially of mediated political engagement and, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, exploring diasporic subjects' connection to the country of origin is highly relevant (Rinnawi, 2012; Guemar, Northey & Boukrami, 2020). As underscored by Mankekar (2008), diasporic people's engagement with the country of origin can be explored without essentialising, if paying attention to the complexity and hybridity of this engagement. This is the aim when I investigate the Danish-Iranian women's engagement with Instagram content about WLF in Iran. I will ensure a hybrid approach by understanding their diasporic sense of belonging as complex and multi-layered, which will be developed in the next section.

## Sense of Belonging – Multi-Layered, Mediated and Ever-Evolving

Resonating with a hybrid approach to diaspora, I will base my analysis of the Danish-Iranian women's sense of belonging on sociologist Yuval-Davis' (2006) multi-layered understanding of this notion. Yuval-Davis defines sense of belonging as a subjective, emotional experience of feeling home. And this involves comfortable as well as uncomfortable feelings. Sense of belonging, feeling home, is comprised by complex and intersecting components (ibid.). First, there are "social locations" like that of nationality (ibid., pp. 199-201) which is especially relevant for this study since it pays attention to diasporic, hyphenated subjects' engagement with media concerned with the country of origin. Many diaspora studies have referred to the country of origin as "the home country" or "homeland" (Vertovec, 2001; Mankekar, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Saw, 2018), but since there are many components and complexities to an emotional experience of feeling home (Yuval-Davis, 2006), we cannot essentially assume that what is referred to as home country is experienced as a home, nor that the country of residence cannot be experienced as home (Tsagarousianou, 2019). This has been demonstrated in research of diaspora and media use. For instance, a case study among Greek and South Asian diaspora showed how they, in heterogenous ways, felt national belonging to both countries to some extent, and how they felt home when they could be connected by media to both countries (Tsagarousianou, 2001). Another example is a case study showing how Iranian Australians

had an ambivalent relation to Iranian media and did not feel belonging to Iran when consuming it – they felt stronger belonging to Australia, which was still not homely to them (Budarick, 2013). This bears witness of the complex relation between nationalities and belongingness.

But social markers like nationality do not alone compose an experience of feeling home (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Secondly, there is the layer of social grouping with people who you identify with and feel an emotional connection to, and thirdly, your ethical and political orientations (ibid., pp. 202-204). This adds more nuances to how, where and why a person feels home. Paying attention in my analysis to all three layers of the Danish-Iranian women's sense of belonging allows me to understand how their social location of nationality, their new social ties and their values are intersecting and intertwined in the process of being mediated and civically engaged in the Woman Life Freedom movement.

Following Yuval-Davis (2006), people's sense of belonging is shaped by identification with social groups and places, both the self-identification and the one made by others. She understands identification as stories about the self and others. In this way, echoing Hall's account of identity: People's sense of who they are and what they belong to is a sense that is produced in the meeting with the world, by sameness and otherness – also media representations (Hall, 2013). And, since we constantly meet the world, this perspective on identity allows us to think of the sense of belonging as negotiable, ever-evolving and ever-changing.

This means that by dealing with sense of belonging, this thesis deals with an aspect of identity. But while the broad concept of identity is concerned with the individual, the self (Hall, 2013), sense of belonging as a lens allows to look specifically at the self's orientation towards, and position in relation to, geographical and social places, and in this way, it can unveil processes of formation of social groups and communities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). For this reason, I find sense of belonging crucial in a study of the Danish-Iranian women's mediated engagement with their country of origin in their country of residence, and the seemingly social activities emerging in relation to this.

In the upcoming section, I will describe how we can understand the role that media plays in defining with whom and to where diasporic people negotiate and develop sense of belonging.

## Mediated Spaces of Belonging – Towards a Translocal Approach

In media studies, there is a tendency to focus on spatiality when exploring how media impacts diasporic senses of belonging, identity and community – this includes case studies from older studies of TV (Aksoy & Robins, 2000; Gillespie, 1995) and more recent studies of online diasporic networks (Everett, 2009; Kang, 2011; Nedelcu, 2019), often referred to as "digital diasporas" (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019). This implies non-physical movement across geographical space – be it imagined, communicative or virtual (Elliott & Urry, 2010) – which makes possible the "doubling of place", being present other places than the physical locality (Moores, 2012). Media scholars have applied terms such as *re-embedding* (Fong, Cao & Chan, 2010) and re-location (Hepp, Bozdag & Suna, 2011) to describe what happens after dis-embedding or dis-location from the country of origin, and "where they settle" socially. Some scholars (Skop, 2014; Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019; Trivedi, 2020) have described online diasporic networks with Bhabha's notion of third space (Bhabha, 1994). Paying attention to space outside culture, third space is a hybrid. It is the third meeting point between the context of the country of residence and the one of country of origin. Here, these two are negotiated rather than negated (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37-38). In my analysis, I will draw on Bhabha's ideas on third space. But I will nuance the idea of digital diaspora as a third space by adding an awareness of the offline aspect of it.

Several media studies of diasporic belonging have argued that the media not only enables non-physical movement, but also enhances sense of belonging to an *imagined community*, a term originally coined by Anderson (1991) which refers to the bond between strangers sharing nationality who might never see each other's faces. The is a tendency in media research to build on this notion when studying diaspora (Schein, 2002; Georgiou 2006; Keles, 2019). An example is Myria Georgiou's study of Greek-Cypriot diasporic populations in London and New York who, she argued, took part in a hybrid imagined community, "decentralised" from nations (2006, p. 21).

While not dismantling these studies, I intend to nuance this with a translocal approach to diasporic sense of belonging. Transnational communicative networks and diasporic identities have a local face, they are anchored in everyday life in a local place (Conradson and McKay, 2007; Hepp, 2009). My understanding of translocality in this respect is based on Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), more specifically the chapter *The production of Locality.* He argues that we must remember that diaspora populations and ethnoscapes – people who consider themselves to share ethnicity living across the world – they take part in building everyday life in the physical locality where they live (1996, p. 199). A translocal perspective means to pay attention to how diasporic life in a local place is linked to transnational movement and communication (Conradson and McKay, 2007; Hepp, 2009). This point has been demonstrated in some case studies of media and diaspora (Tsagarousianou, 2001; Straubhaar et al., 2019). A recent example is Straubhaar et al. (2019) who showed the multi-layered belonging of diasporic populations – from Latin American and Asian countries – living in Texas. In their local everyday lives, they "scaled up" to a national level, experiencing "bi-national" sense of belonging to both America and a country of origin, enabled by media use. In his recent work on the Lebanese diaspora, Hage (2021) coins the term *the lenticular condition* by which he counters the tendency to focus on imagined communities rather that non-imagined ones. With this concept, he refers to a condition where the subject inhabits a multiplicity of realities at the place they live and pay attention to local social ties and communications.

A translocal approach to diasporic belonging then means to not (only) pay attention to the online diasporic network and the possibility of an imagined communities emerging from these, but how these online networks are anchored and articulated in local everyday life. I have earlier argued for a translocal approach to the Danish-Iranian women's engagement in WLF, and doing this, I also seek to demonstrate how a diasporic online network is anchored in the local place of Copenhagen.

## Diasporic Politics, Belonging and Community

Political issues in the country of origin can trigger people and form new diasporic meeting points between those living afar, from where they can participate in the issues, which can evoke a sense of belonging among the diaspora (Cohen, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Adamson,

2012). As explored earlier, enhanced connectivity has made creation of public spheres more accessible. This also applies to diasporic public spheres. It has been, and continues to be, demonstrated in media studies how people living away from their country of origin follow events in this country online and form diasporic networks around political issues (Everett, 2009; Sun, 2019; Mpofo, Asak & Salawu, 2022). The political diasporic spheres show how national belongings intersect with political orientations (Yuval-Davis, 2011), and they can function as mobilising virtual spaces (Nedelcu, 2019). It has been argued that diaspora people are capable of mediating and bridging politically (Cohen, 2008; Adamson 2012). Living afar and being able to navigate between two contexts, diaspora subjects can point towards deficiencies in the country of residence and in the country of origin, be it concrete actions or values. Adamson (2012) coins the term *political entrepreneurs* to describe this navigation between the political contexts of the country of origin and the country of residence, and in this process, they can come to experience a feeling of diasporic community – "community" understood as people experiencing commonality due to sharing of certain elements of their identity (p. 41). In this thesis, I am inspired by Adamson's perspective that diasporic communities emerge *from* political engagement online and offline – rather than the political engagement emerging from pre-existing diasporic community. This view resonates with the understanding of diasporic subjects as hybrids and sense of belonging as negotiable.

## Contributions to Media Research of Diasporas

From a media studies perspective, this thesis explores the diasporic aspect of an Iranian, transnational and online movement as it takes place. This is done by zooming in on the local case of Copenhagen-based Danish-Iranian women's engagement in this movement. Thus, the study contributes with empirical knowledge about an unexplored case.

But besides contributing with new empirical knowledge, the study of Danish-Iranian women's media and civic engagement addresses two underexplored areas in existing media research of diaspora. Firstly, among the many studies of the role of the internet for sense of belonging, there is a tendency to focus on sense of belonging to an imagined community, enhanced by online connectivity. While not dismantling the diasporic public sphere around WLF, I will pay

attention to the translocal aspect of it and demonstrate how *the sense of belonging emerges from local ties* in the everyday life in the local place of Copenhagen.

Secondly, while the chosen affect-theoretical approach resonates with a tendency within studies of media and civic engagement, the thesis contributes to media studies of diaspora with a new angle. When I explore how the Danish-Iranian women as affective publics "feel their way into politics" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 118) and "where" this places them socially and politically, I ask what this means for their sense of belonging *as diasporic subjects*. Outside media studies, there are examples of case studies that show how emotional experiences impact diasporic sense of belonging (Brown, 2011; Clayton and Manyena, 2022). For instance, in a recent study of Zimbabwean diaspora, Clayton and Manyena (2022) argue for a "diasporic reorientation" due to affect. Within media research there are few examples of an affect-theoretical approach to diasporic sense of belonging (Mankekar, 2008; Stanfill & Valdivia, 2017; Lee, 2020), and an affect-theoretical approach to diasporic political participation seems extremely limited. Thus, the relations between diasporic political participation, affect and belonging remain underexplored in media studies. I seek to address this specific gap and show how the Danish-Iranian women's emotional engagement with Instagram leads to the formation of a civic culture and sense of community, to which they feel a belonging. In doing this, I will demonstrate the relevance of an affect-theoretical approach to mediated political engagement among diasporas.

# Methodology and Methods

The present research is qualitative case study (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4) of Danish-Iranian women in the context of the Woman Life Freedom movement. It is designed on the basis of what Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) formulated as "phronetic social science" (ibid., p. 140) which aims at generating value-based and concrete knowledge about a certain case in its context (ibid., p. 71-72). Rather than ascribing to universal theories and predictions, knowledge is generated by analysing the particular (ibid., p. 140). In this section, I will describe the research design and its epistemological and methodological foundations as well as the process of collecting the empirical material.

## A Feminist Standpoint Approach

Epistemologically and methodologically, the study is also guided by *feminist standpoint theory* as described by feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding (2008), which is developed from feminist and post-colonial ideas. She argues that "Western" science and academia favour Western and male perspectives, and she calls for nuancing and democratising academia by generating knowledge "from below" (ibid.). That is, studying and valuing the perspective of women, people of colour and other marginalised groups in both the Global North and the Global South – people who are at the outskirts of the societal power centres. The Danish-Iranian women at the centre of the present study are underrepresented in public discussion in the realm of Danish politics as well as news media (Institut for Menneskerettigheder, 2021; Jørndrup, 2022). Thus, by paying attention to Danish-Iranian women in a diasporic political media culture at the margins this thesis explores perspectives "from below". Rather than understanding objectivity as neutrality, the thesis ascribes to what Harding calls "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1992) striving to value partiality, moving towards a social science representing multiple viewpoints.

The present study is also a feminist research project in the sense that it takes the Danish-Iranian women's emotional experiences seriously when studying their engagement with the WLF Movement. Following Harding (2008) there is a traditional dichotomy in academia (and beyond) of emotions as oppositional to rationality – in which white and male people have been associated with rationality, and non-white and female people have been associated with feelings, and thus with irrationality (pp. 209-210). This thesis seeks to break with this dichotomy by treating feeling and reasoning as not mutually exclusive, and by placing emotion at the centre when exploring Danish-Iranian women's political participation.

The study is approached from a feminist standpoint without paying attention to gender analytically (Harding, 2008, p. 123). As argued by feminist political scientist Iris Marion Young (1997), the coming together of women around a political issue, and their experience of this engagement, should not be automatically reduced to a matter of their female gender identity since various "social conditions" can drive the political engagement. Research must be open to multiple conditions (Young, 1997, p. 21, 35). The open and non-reductionist approach was

my ambition when I analysed the empirical material – which did not point in the direction of an analysis of gender.

## Sampling

The Danish-Iranian women participating in this study (Appendix 1) are aged between 30 and 59, live in Copenhagen and hold Danish citizenship. The majority of them came to Denmark as children with their family for political reasons, with the migration waves in 1980's and 1990's after the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Cohen & Yefet, 2021, p. 689)

I began the sampling purposively of finding participants who had expressed themselves about WLF on social media or in traditional media (Bazeley, 2013, p. 49). This was the only criteria throughout the sampling process, and the reason for this was that I knew about the censorship in Iran and the consequences of criticising the regime, for this reason, I wanted to ask people who were already active. I started out by contacting three of them who had all spoken about WLF to media (podcast and online magazines) with their full name, and they all agreed to participate. From there, the snowball sampling began (O'Reilly, 2012, pp. 74-75) where participants sent me in the direction of other participants. Prior to the sampling process, I had not decided to only have female participants, but as I was sent in the direction of female Danish Iranians, I made this decision along the way, anchoring the project in the standpoint epistemology outlined earlier.

Overall, despite age differences and differences between number of years in Denmark, the snowball method made the sample of participants a fairly homogenous group. They are all women, they, or their parents, all left Iran because of the regime, and the group of participants are acquaintances and friends in all directions. The snowball method does not sample people outside the network or at the outskirts of it (Seale, 2018, p. 365) and therefore, the study is not representative of all Danish-Iranian women. In accordance with the ethnographic approach, which will soon be outlined, the value of this sample is that it generates in-depth and particular knowledge of a small and very specific network of women who are invested in WLF (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 71).

## A Digital Ethnography

The empirical material is collected with a digital ethnographic approach. The crux of ethnographic methodology is that the researcher meets the participants in their everyday life context and interpret their practices and perceptions (O'Reilly, 2012). This requires *reflexivity*, that the researcher aims to understand the perspective of the participants (ibid., p. 13). Resonating with the aims of phronetic research and standpoint theory, ethnographic practice does not aim for representing an objective truth (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), but for doing "thick description" (Geertz, 1973 in Hine, 2015, p. 1), collecting detailed and in-depth empirical material about people's lifeworld. For these reasons, the research design of this particular study is, like most ethnographic research, open-ended, small-scale and in-depth (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 3).

This study deals with the use of social media for online political expression. Christine Hine (2015) argues that for people who have access to the internet, the internet is an embedded and embodied part of mundane everyday life, and she suggests *digital ethnography* as a way to grasp this (p. 36). An ethnographic approach to (digital) media aims at exploring how people use media in their daily lives, and the role it plays for their sense-making (Schrøder et al., 2003; Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016) – rather than exploring the media product or content in itself. Thus, in the words of Pink et al. (2016), digital ethnography is "unorthodox" (p. 14). It resonates with a non-media-centric approach and studying mediatisation from below as described in the literature review section since it collects empirical material about media alongside other social phenomena. Corresponding the translocal approach outlined in the literature review, the kind of digital ethnography carried out is one that is interested in "localisation of the internet in a specific geographical place", specifically the Woman Life Freedom movement on Instagram among Danish-Iranians in Copenhagen, Denmark (Hine, p. 65, pp. 90-91). In this way, the thesis aims at exploring "mediatisation from below", as Anderson (2017) explains as the effort to grasp and concretise online and offline intertwinement of social life by ethnography as methodology.

## Initial Participant Observations

The present study relies primarily on face-to-face semi-structured ethnographic interviews during which I – in a local, offline context – have communicated with the participants *about* their online engagement (Pink et al., 2016, p. 3). Before describing the semi-structured ethnographic interviews, which is the primary method on which I base my analysis, I will explain how initial *participant observation* worked as a way of preparing for the interviews (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 166). I did participant observation of three events prior to the interviews: an information event about WLF hosted by two of the participants at a small culture house; a debate event about WLF at a local library where five of the participants was present – three of them as panellists, one as moderator, one among the audience – and finally a demonstration in front of the Iranian embassy in Copenhagen at which five of the participants were present. As for the nature of this method, I both took part in the events alongside other people who participated and stepped back to observe what was said and done (ibid., pp. 162-163). I mostly took an observing role. The value of the participant observations was firstly that, having met and talked casually with most of the participants prior to the interviews, a relation was already established (ibid., p. 155), and this secured openness and a relaxed atmosphere when meeting them again for the interviews. Secondly, the participant observation prepared for the developing of the interview guide (ibid., p. 193). During the initial participant observations, I took an inductive and open approach and was open for the research project to go in any possible direction. (ibid., pp. 53-57). I took rapid notes at the events and expanded them when I came home (Hine, 2015, p. 74). These notes indicated certain themes and main questions that would be relevant to ask, giving depth to the interviews.

## Semi-Structured Ethnographic Interviews

As for the nature of semi-structured interviews, I prepared a loose interview guide (Appendix 3) with broad main questions to open up the themes that seemed relevant to cover (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 182). I asked questions about their migration story, their everyday life in Denmark, their perspective on WLF and their online and offline engagement in it. A few sub questions and cues were developed as suggestions for certain aspects to be covered (ibid., p. 221). The loose structure left room for interview to go in many directions and for asking follow-up

questions, which lead to concrete in-depth understandings (ibid.), thus, resonating with the phronetic research aims.

What gave the semi-structured interviews an ethnographic nature was, first, that the questions were formulated in an open-ended way that encouraged long and reflective answers, and I asked questions about their personal experiences, perceptions and values – aimed at understanding each woman's lifeworld (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 186; Boyd, 2015, p. 80). Second, I met the interviewees in an everyday life setting prior to the interview, and based the interview questions on insights from these meetings (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 193). Third, I paid attention to the non-verbal expressions like facial expressions and tone of voice (Boyd, 2015, p. 93). And lastly, the interview had an informal and conversational character (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 193). During the interviews, I took the role of an interested and friendly fellow citizen, and I adapted my way of approaching the interviewees to their mood and had short reactionary comments. (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 220). This allowed me to leave room for their emotions. As underscored by anthropologist Elisabeth Hsu (2010), it is important to grasp and stay in the emotions as a researcher and "translate" them into analytical knowledge when researching a politically fraught topic and people who more or less experience a crisis – even if anchored to Iran geographically far away. In such a "field" dense with emotions, knowledge (especially) is generated in "heartfelt mutual interaction" (Hsu, 2010, p. 168). Common to the interviews was that all participants were open and talkative, passionate about WLF and eager to talk about it. Moreover, they responded detailed to questions about their personal views, feelings and experiences. This made it easy for me to ask specific follow-up questions, and it also made it possible to share the emotional moments just mentioned. This secured a rich collection of empirical data to analyse.

As for the non-media-centric and digital ethnographic approach, the participants' online engagement with WLF was explored among other themes to understand it in its context (Hine, 2015, p. 135). To make sure to get a deep and specific understanding of their online engagement, I asked, inspired by Jørgensen (2016), the participants if they wanted to show me their phones – specifically their Instagram account as it turned out that they primarily used this app for engaging with WLF. Moreover, I asked them if we could scroll back through their posts (Robards & Lincoln, 2017). Most often, we did not look at their phones for a long time – the

visual material made them recall situations of posting and worked as a starting point for a more detailed conversation about their engagement with WLF-related content.

The interviews (Appendix 3) took place in everyday-life settings of the participants to make it convenient and informal (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 221). Three interviews took place at the informant's workplace, three at local libraries or community houses, one at the informant's favourite café, and two in the participants' home.

I recorded all the interviews, with consent, to be transcribed and coded. This was a way to make sure that I could focus on the face-to-face meeting with the participants while still getting all the details and nuances in their answers, but also a way of including their emotional expressions like tone of voice, long pauses, laughs, sobs, sighs (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 231). Moreover, I noted down what I initially found significant and interesting on my phone immediately after each interview in order to get some guidance on what to pay attention to when coding the transcripts (Boyd, 2015, p. 94).

## Coding Process

I did qualitative text analysis of the interview transcriptions based on Udo Kuckartz' methodology of a circular coding process (2014, pp. 58-61). First, I did a round of inductive open coding of all the interviews, letting descriptive codes emerge from the empirical data – both conceptual ones and in-vivo codes (ibid., p. 23). I coded in Nvivo as this software makes it possible to view all the coded interview quotes marked with a specific code at the same time (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). By visiting the content of each code, more thematic and analytical codes emerged, and the empirical material was revisited for another round of coding with these in mind. This circular process (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 47-48) continued until deeper insights and thus analytical codes emerged, while renaming codes and making hierarchies, until I ended up with a code book (Appendix 4) of three themes; emotional engagement with Instagram content, political participation from afar and negotiating sense of belonging, all entailing categories and codes. Opening the data by marking it with specific codes, and by revisiting it several times, allowed me to let analytical insights and theories emerge from the empirical material, being true to the phronetic and ethnographic research approach.

## Ethical Reflections

First, I aimed at being transparent about the research (O'Reilly, 2012, pp. 310-311). I shared a content form (Ali & Kelly, 2018, pp. 132-135) with the participants, informing about the project, the interview, as well as anonymity. Second, I aimed at establishing a safe space. The Danish-Iranian women can be considered a vulnerable group of participants (ibid., p. 139). Due to the censorship practiced by the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Danish-Iranian women can potentially face consequences of criticising the Islamic Republic if they want to enter Iran or are in contact with Iranian authorities. For this reason, it was even more important that they themselves are in control of when and how their statements are accessible to others. The participants' anonymity was secured by pseudonyms and the avoidance of detailed descriptions of localities and Instagram content. Moreover, I stored the data offline and coded it with the offline software Nvivo. In the consent form, I also added a box in which the participants could write if there were any specific considerations I should take. Thirdly, I aimed at being considerate. The participants are vulnerable in the sense that they have difficult feelings and experiences connected to Iran. In the vast majority of the interviews, the participant cried at one point. In these situations, I reacted with empathy and patience, allowing room for the emotions. Moreover, I aimed at taking care of the emotions that were triggered by my questions by leaving room at the end of each interview to ask how it had been to talk about WLF with me, to check in and make sure I did not leave them in a state of distress.

## Reflexivity and Positionality

The research, which is based on my interpretations of their expressions, requires *reflexivity* (Schrøder et al., 2003, p. 78; O'Reilly, 2012, p. 13), the effort to take on the perspective of the participants, which I especially aimed at during the interviews, and moreover, a flexible mind aware of my own position in relation to the participants. While I share being a female Danish citizen living in Copenhagen with the participants, I do not share their experience of having roots in Iran. Following post-colonial feminism's criticisms, this difference requires reflection. I am inspired by Ahmed's way to think of positionality of the researcher:" We learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 22). She argues that it is in the place where the researcher does not "pass", but tries to understand and bridge, that

valuable knowledge and ethical research is generated. She suggests articulating the differences (Ahmed, 2016). I aimed at being reflective and aware of my own position by articulating the difference to the participants, asking them what they think explaining about their personal involvement in WLF to a person who does not have a relation to Iran. It appeared that due to the Danish-Iranian women's experience of a lack of interest and attention to Woman Life Freedom, they appreciated the thesis project, and they were eager to share personal stories and perspectives with me.

Summing up, it is important to note that since this is a small scale, in-depth study of a particular group of Danish-Iranian women and their engagement with the WLF movement in a specific geographical place, it can neither grasp the size of the online aspect of the connective movement, nor can it represent Iranian diaspora in Denmark, and this is also not the ambition. The value of this research design is the *selective-complexity* (Schrøder et al., 2003, p. 85). Digital ethnography can grasp the complex role of Women Life Freedom-related Instagram content in the lives of the 10 women and provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and emotional experiences, adding new nuances to the role of social media in diasporic political participation.

# Analysis

The analytical aim of this thesis project is to investigate the role of Instagram in the Danish-Iranian women's emotional experience of witnessing the events in Iran online and from afar. I will present my analytical conclusions in three parts, exploring the three research questions one by one. I seek to cover crucial dimensions of Dahlgren & Hill's framework for analysing media engagement as driven by affect and, moreover, as stretching beyond the moments of engagement itself, having social, cultural and political impact (2020). The first part asks the question; *how do the Danish-Iranian women emotionally and affectively engage with Instagram content concerned with WLF?* I begin by exploring the *intensities* of their engagement with Instagram content in their daily lives (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) including Papacharissi's concept of *instantaneity* (2015, pp. 44-49). The rest and the majority of part I pays attention to the *modalities*, the sensory experiences of engaging with certain types of content (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). I analyse three types of content and the emotion they evoke and how by relying

on Ahmed's affect theorical ideas about *stickiness* of emotion, *sideways* and *backwards* movement, and *affective economies* (2014; 2004). Part II is concerned the Danish-Iranian women's *motivation* behind ways of engaging with Instagram content, and the *consequences* of the engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). It explores *what role recognition plays for the way the Danish-Iranian women participate politically in a Danish context.* Here, I draw on Butler's work on how subjects react upon mediated representations of suffering people, specifically the notions of *recognisability* and *grievability* (2016). Moreover, I will make use of Dahlgren's notion of civic culture (2009). In part III, I will explore *how the Danish-Iranian women renegotiate and relocate their sense of belonging through being engaged in the highly mediated movement.* I draw on Yuval-Davis' (2006) account of sense of belonging as an emotional experience of feeling home, complex and comprised by multiple layers. I build on concepts from Bhabha; that of *unhomely* and that of *third space* (1992; 1994). Paying attention to sense of belonging, this last part of the analysis seeks to dive further into the consequence dimension (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) – the social outcomes – of the women's media engagement with WLF.

# I. Emotional Engagement in WLF

## Rapidity and Loyalty

To begin with, I will outline the intensities of the Danish-Iranian women's engagement with the Woman Life Freedom movement on Instagram. This is the parameter in Dahlgren & Hill's framework for exploring affective media engagement that pays attention to time and temporality such as concentration, the duration and the maintenance of engagement with specific content (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). The Danish-Iranian women have a very news-oriented way of engaging with WLF content on Instagram. They use recurring hashtags like #iranrevolution #mahsaamini, #womanlifefreedom and #freeiran to stay updated and update others. They follow profiles of Iranian activist and protestors living inside Iran who document what happens "on ground". The women also follow activist and independent Iranian news media based outside Iran passing on this information – this also involves profiles specifically concerned with updating and mobilising Iranians living outside Iran. The Danish-Iranian women express that they value these profiles because the profiles can update them about the situation and show "what happens inside Iran" in the words of the 37-year-old artist, Mina. Thus, the women

engage with content characterised by an *instantaneity,* a concept coined by Papacharissi (2015, p. 45) referring to the immediate documentation, distribution and sharing in online space of events unfolding.

They repost content from the profiles that document Iranians' fight in Iran, both as direct re-posting of Posts and Reels (short videos on Instagram) in their stories and as reposting by screenshotting a Post, Story or Reel, from which they then re-create a permanent post on their profiles. They do this immediately after watching, without reflecting that much upon it. Fatemeh, the 52-year-old doctor, says:

*"It is intuitive. It is feelings. It is per default." – Fatemeh*

The Instagram content has a mobilising effect, at micro level, on each of the women who instantly repost. It can be described as a form of "impatient solidarity" on social media (Nikunen, 2019, p. 154) since they seek to take part in the documentations of the Iranians' struggle in news-oriented urgency instead of dwelling at the context around each content. In this way, they take part in the instantaneity. This is a rapid engagement with each piece of content – a reel, a story, a post – but when it comes to their overall engagement with WLF, their engagement is very persistent. It has become an integrated part of their daily life. 41-year-old Asma explained that during her workday as a legal assistant, she often gets anxious about what updates she might have missed and checks her phone immediately after work. 35-year-old Sogol brings up an example of how she kept an eye on her phone while renovating her cosmetologist clinic. Nabi, who works as a stylist, says:

*"To be the voice of the Iranians, I must keep up." – Nabi*

She checks her phone as the first thing when she wakes up. In their daily life, the women have continuously engaged with WLF content since September 2022. Their engagement is thus characterised by rapidity as well loyalty. Now, we are left with the question of what makes them occupied with the WLF movement through Instagram. The rest of this analysis is dedicated to understanding the emotional mechanisms of the content in their feeds.

## Sticky Content and Emotions at Work

*"You watch a clip. You see a person. You hear a voice ... and it just haunts you." – Roya*

Here, Roya, a 30-year-old podcaster, talks about her experience of following WLF online. The quote indicates that the witnessing of WLF online is not just about scrolling to stay updated, pieces of information about Iran passing by. It indicates that there is a connection between the women and the content. The content can "haunt" you. Thus, the quote shows the importance of paying attention to why and how the content *affect* the Danish-Iranian women. I have already described how Ahmed understands emotions social, not private, emerging in the interfaces between a subject's meeting with the world (2014). Ahmed coins the term *affective economies* to describe that emotions are not entailed inside subjects, they are distributed between them, and it is from this movement that the affective value, the social effects, emerges (2004). When we are confronted with other people, be it in the media portrayals or face to face, we read these other subjects, we interpret them, and in doing this, they can become a sign of an emotion like disgust or happiness (2014, p. 30). Ahmed has specific ideas about how emotions come around: through "sideways" motions as well as "backwards" motions. When a certain emotion moves sideways, it means that the emotion spills over from subject to subject, moving across and through people. An emotion moving backwards, or reaching backwards, refers to the situation where we associate a subject with the past stories or experiences (2014, pp. 45-46). Ahmed uses the notion *stickiness* to describe how certain emotions can come to cling to subjects (ibid., pp. 89-92).

I will now identify and explore three types of "sticky content" documenting Iranians in Iran that recur in the Danish-Iranian women's Instagram feeds: 1. The death of Jina Mahsa Amini, 2. Iranians protesting in public, and 3. Suffering Iranians. The aim is to gain an insight into the affectivity of this content. This involves asking what emotions *stick* to these digital subjects, and what emotional experiences and reactions do they evoke in the Danish-Iranian women. Ahmed argues that emotions can become *embodied*, meaning that what people get into contact with is sensed in their bodies (Ahmed, 2014, p. 26). Emotions also show themselves in language and stories, including words we use to describe emotion (ibid., p. 13, 15).

The upcoming analysis pays attention to both elements when unveiling what emotional experiences exist between the women and the content in their Instagram feeds.

***The Death of Jina Mahsa Amini: A Familiar Sadness and Hopelessness***

Through Instagram, the Danish-Iranian women became aware of the death of Jina Mahsa Amini on the day of or the day after her death. Especially a close-up picture of her, prior to her death, circulated on Instagram and on other social media, accompanied by descriptions of how she died. Moreover, videos of her being beaten by the morality police and photos of her in the hospital were shared. In different ways, the Danish-Iranian women describe a reaction of sadness, but unsurprise, to this content. For instance, Asma explains during our interview at her office:

> *"I know this might sound cynical, but I just thought 'well, at least it was documented this time'. Don't get me wrong, but she is definitely not the first woman to die this way. At least she will not be forgotten like most of the others." – Asma*

When saying these words, Asma's voice breaks, her eyes moist with tears. What Asma says and the way she is moved when saying it, insinuates how the Danish-Iranian women experience a familiar sadness, a familiar grief. When watching the content about Jina Mahsa, they did not only receive the news about a young woman's death during an arrest; they also received the past. Their emotional experience points back in time. When talking about the content about the death of Jina Mahsa, 37-year-old Edris says that since the Islamic Republic came to power, women have been "second-class citizens". The Danish-Iranian women brought up personal stories about themselves or female family members experiencing gendered oppression, for instance, being arrested because of their clothes or behaviour, or being oppressed by other laws. Alongside the unsurprise and familiar sadness reaching backwards, hopelessness is also sticking to Jina Mahsa and transferred to the women – what Ahmed calls sideways motion (2014, pp. 45-46). This is seen when the women talk about the situation where they noticed the social media content about Jina Mahsa for the first time – for instance, the artist painter Mina says:

> *"I felt like 'well, nothing has changed in Iran'." – Mina*

or the rapper and comedian Shadi says:

*"I just slowly collapsed inside" – Shadi*

This indicates a sense of powerlessness among the women – a sense that the situation is not possible to change, which for some of the women can become embedded as a bodily sensation, as the quote by Shadi shows. What we see is an affective economy of hopelessness where the subject Jina Mahsa becomes a sign of familiar sadness and hopelessness, moving backwards, reactivating past wounds from personal and societal experience of gender oppression. These emotions also move sideways; the gloomy powerlessness sticking to Jina Mahsa is also distributed across national boundaries to be felt by the Danish-Iranian women.

As a sign of hopelessness, Jina Mahsa did not trigger the women's online participation when landing in their feeds in September 2022. But this changed when they saw pictures and videos of Iranians protesting in the streets in the aftermath of her death.

***Iranians Protesting in Public: Hope and Courage***

In different ways, the Danish-Iranian women describe witnessing Iranians protesting in the streets in the aftermath of Jina Mahsa's death as empowering and energising. For instance, Mina describes the moment when she saw videos of Iranians:

*"Suddenly, I felt this … big stream. And because I felt this big stream, it made me think 'okay, maybe this is our opportunity'." – Mina*

The language that Mina uses here indicates that Iranians protesting in public after the death of Jina Mahsa was a sign of hope. This is underscored by words for emotion (Ahmed, 2014, p. 13) that the women use to describe this type of content; here, the words "hope" and "proud" reoccur. Hope was floating sideways with the digital "stream", Mina's word, of empowering content, floating through the Danish-Iranian women, giving them a sense that change in Iran might be possible. The sight of Iranians protesting on the screen was surprising to the women. The day after the death of Jina Mahsa, Azita, who came to Denmark at the age of 18 and works as a doctor, came home from work and checked her Instagram. Here, she found videos of Iranians protesting in the streets. "Wow … it was so big. No one would have dreamt about

this", she says during our interview and takes a deep breath to continue talking, but holds it. Her mouth trembles a bit. In a tearful voice, she continues:

> *"I remember, in the following days, every morning I woke up and thought, 'now it is over, now they have arrested all of them, now they have executed them, and it will be over, once again'. And then ... when I checked my phone, I saw that it was not over. It really was not over." – Azita*

This encapsulates the incredibility of witnessing Iranians protesting in the streets. When Azita says "once again", she refers to previous protests that have died out in Iran. I invite, again, to reflect on the backwards motions and the past. Most of the women came to Denmark as political refugees with their parents when they were children. Regardless of migration time and reason, all the women carry family stories of political oppression and censorship, which they shared during the interviews. For instance, Hawa, film editor at the age of 38, told how her father's movies were burned by regime authorities, and Azita's cousin was executed because she protested against the regime. During the interviews, they said that protests have taken place in the time of the rule of the Islamic Republic, but never continuously and never started by women, and never have the protesters been both men and women, religious and non-religious, and never have they demanded a total transfer of power. Thus, hopeful content about Iranians protesting opens a window to the past that the women carry, but the content breaks with the past.

Content that in one way or another shows Iranian people protesting publicly continues to catch the women's attention, and they often repost this type of content instantly after watching it. Here, the emotion of courage plays a role. For instance, Roya explains how she watched a reel of young women cutting their hair in public while the protest song *Baraye* plays, and she immediately shared it.

> *"I just had to share it. It gave me goosebumps. They go to the streets, and they know the risk ... Sorry [tear running down]; they are so bad ass. I really mean it." – Roya*

Iranians protesting publicly becomes a sign of courage, and we see here how Roya both admires and worries about what they do; the goosebumps are both evoked by apprehension and

excitement. Another example is Asma who explains that she immediately reposted a video of a young woman who wrote anti-regime slogans on paper when the internet in Iran was down and then distributed them in the streets. Asma called her "fearless" and said that "things like this move me".

Moreover, both Roya and Hawa were touched by a video of Iranian women dancing in public, which is forbidden, without hijab in the city of Ektaban, and they were immediately arrested (Iran International Newsroom, 2023). As a protest of their arrest, Roya and Hawa did a re-making of the dance at a square in Copenhagen to be posted online, wearing gasmasks as a protest of the gas attacks carried out by the regime against girls' schools in Iran, too. These examples of the Danish-Iranian women's reposting or remaking after watching the Iranians defying the risk of protesting in public shows how the courage is contagious. It "spills over" to the women themselves, making them defy the risks, too. The interviewees all mentioned that regime spies are present in Denmark and online. Prior to the protests breaking out, many of the women have avoided criticising the Iranian regime on social media, fearing the risk of being arrested if visiting Iran. But WLF changed their perspectives. During our interview in her home, Hawa says that when people are risking their lives "… we cannot sit here and be afraid. Then you must fight". If it would come to an arrest one day, Nabi says that she is "willing to take a bullet for my country". What we see here is that the women are not only spectators of courage; the courage is also moving *sideways* (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 45-46). It is transferred to them from the Iranian subjects through the screen, and it makes them defy the potential future risk of reposting regime-critical content online. This might very well be summed up by Hawa, talking about watching and reposting content showing Iranians protesting in public:

*"In these moments, you feel the hope, the courage and the strength. That fire." – Hawa*

They take part in *social imaginary* (Taylor, 2004) of the Woman Life Freedom movement, meaning that they take part in the expectations and the belief in the possibility of change in Iran. The type of Instagram content about Iranians protesting in public facilitates an affective economy of hope and courage, travelling across borders, where the Danish-Iranian women internalise the hope and courage they witness among the Iranians, and it also becomes

embodied as a sensation of "fire" or a "big stream", which were the words of Mina and Hawa. Through the screen, they become affectively aligned with Iranians protesting.

However, empowering content is not the only thing present in the women's Instagram feeds.

***Iranians Suffering and Struggling: Pain and Grief***

"You see death and despair all over. We call it death scrolling," Hawa says, talking about her and other Danish Iranians' Instagram feeds since the start of the WLF movement. During the interviews, I found another sticky sign, a type of content I will refer to as "The suffering Iranians" to which certain emotions stick. It is content showing Iranians in pain, being harassed or being oppressed by the regime authorities, and, like the Iranians protesting in public, this is content that the women repost instantly, too. The women witness *distant suffering* (Chouliaraki, 2006), meaning that through media, specifically the social media Instagram, they can witness Iranians struggling and suffering though the women live geographically far away. Inspired by Chouliaraki's work on distant suffering (2006), I will pay attention to the spectators' relation to the sufferer(s) and the degree of pity (p. 46) to gain an understanding of the emotions in play when the women engage with this type of content. Let us turn to a few empirical examples.

During our interview, Nabi, who came to Denmark at the age of 22 with her child, shows a video of a school under chemical attack by the regime – children screaming – that she immediately reposted after watching:

> *"Look, you can see a father there, he is trying to get in to get his daughter out [her voice becomes tearful] Imagine this, your child is in there?"*
> *– Nabi*

Nabi looks at me with wet, wide eyes. The Danish-Iranian women also repost pictures and names of people who have been arrested, sentenced to death or executed. For instance, Roya closely followed content hashtagged with #don'ttellmom. It was about a young man who called his father to say that he was sentenced to death – and she often reposted this content immediately. Roya, who was born in Denmark, says the story has become "fixated inside" her. The words and the bodily sensations present in these explanations reveal that the pain and

grief sticking to the suffering Iranians are floating to the women and become embedded in them. As spectators, they express despair and pity for the suffering Iranians. The Iranians' pain evokes grief and despair as well as a pity and sympathy among the women, and moreover, a need for reposting their struggle – bringing across the message. For Ahmed, this is how we see that pain is social. Interfering with someone's pain, in this case through the screen, can evoke uncomfortable emotions and empathy, and in this way, the Danish-Iranian women take part in the pain of the Iranians by becoming emotionally invested in it – they have an emotional connection to the Iranians.

The interviews also point towards a high degree of identification. The Danish-Iranian women see themselves in the place of the distant sufferers, and this was especially pronounced during the interviews. The sentence "it could have been me" was said by several of the women, thinking about if they had not ended up living in Denmark. For instance, Fatemeh, who lived in Iran until she was 13, says about content of Iranians fighting, getting injured or arrested by the authorities:

*"That picture, I mirror myself in it. It is me. It is me in another story."*
*– Fatemeh*

Or Hawa, explaining how names and pictures of young women who have died or been injured circulate:

*"It is all women who look like me. It could have been me, right? It feels like an open wound." – Hawa*

What is unveiled here is that the women, as spectators, are reflecting upon and relating to the suffering. As Chouliaraki underscores, this happens when the spectator potentially can, or could have, faced the same risks (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 186). As mentioned earlier, the women carry stories – stories from the past about systematic, gendered and political oppression. The emotional experiences of the pain and the grief also point backwards to these past stories and to a past point in the Danish-Iranian women's or their parents' lives that has become decisive for them as they are not living the stories that Iranians in Iran do today.

As already noted, the suffering Iranian is content that the women often repost immediately.

Chouliaraki argues that being *mentally* close to distant suffering is a trigger of a need to spread the story about the ones in pain publicly (ibid.). As I have shown, witnessing the distant suffering online comes to occupy the Danish-Iranian women's minds and bodies. Pain and grief move sideways, from the content to the women, and also move backwards, pointing towards the past that the women carry with them. This makes it seem as if the incidents were happening right where the women are. In different ways, the women express that they feel that what happens in Iran seems very nearby. For instance, during our interview in her clinic, Sogol said:

> *"I know it is happening there, but it is also happening right here. And I feel powerless" – Sogol*

I allow myself to borrow Chouliaraki's words to describe what happens when the women are confronted with content about the suffering Iranians and repost it: a "psycho-geography of action" (ibid.). Enabled by Instagram, they witness a pain that has its roots geographically far away. And they become invested in it. We can understand their instant reposting of the suffering Iranians as triggered by the women feeling grief and sympathy and thus mentally and emotionally close to the distant suffering.

## Emotional Closeness at Distance

What has been unveiled are the *structures of feelings* evident in the Danish-Iranian women's engagement (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 115-117). Emotions are ordered and distributed by clinging to three types of digitised sticky signs. Firstly, the death of Jina Mahsa Amini signifying a familiar sadness and hopelessness circulating in September 2022. Secondly, Iranians protesting in public, signifying hope and courage. Thirdly, Iranians struggling and suffering. The two last types of content continuously circulate in time of writing. When the women get into contact with this content, it brings up these emotional experiences – the affective value emerges in the meeting. The women are a part of affective economies – one of hope and courage, and one of pain and grief – that dominate the online aspect of the Woman Life Freedom movement. As phrased by Ahmed, emotions "mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (2004, p. 119). Individually, through their screen, the Danish-Iranian women share sensory experiences with each other without

being together, and they share emotions with Iranians while being geographically far away. Emotions distributed by digital material make the Danish-Iranian women align with the Iranians and their struggle. This is what Papacharissi calls *affective attunement* – the affectivity of the Instagram content makes the women "tune in" (2015, p. 118) to WLF and become affective publics engaged in this movement.

Summing up, these sticky signs in online space cross national geographic borders. With their affectivity, they land in the everyday lives of the women where they become embedded as loyal and rapid media engagement in the women's everyday lives and embedded in the women's emotional experiences. They also become embodied; residing in goosebumps, tears, sleepless nights and senses of a "fire" or a "stream" inside the body. The Danish-Iranian women not only witness, they *sense*, the Woman Life Freedom movement as it was close. As Roya said during our interview:

*"It is happening here. Right here." – Roya*

The women's continuum of emotional engagement characterised by *instantaneity* and the three sticky signs in this affective public sphere breaks with time and space. It establishes a closeness to and an intimacy with the events in the women's country of origin as if the events were taking place "here", in the women's country of residence.

This is a breeding ground for civic agency and political participation to grow (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 85). This is to be explored in part II. Emotions, also the ones organised and distributed by technology, have the power to make certain people place and position themselves socially and politically (Papacharissi, p. 116; Ahmed, 2014, pp. 194-195).

# II. From Recognition to Participation

The aim of this second part of the analysis is to explore what role recognition plays for the way the Danish-Iranian women participate politically in a Danish context. It seeks to unveil how their engagement with Instagram triggers alternative political participation.

## Acting upon the Grievable

What people perceive as politically and ethically correct actions is determined by what Butler calls *recognisability* and *grievability* (Butler, 2016). I will start out by revisiting the women's emotional engagement with the Instagram content through the lens of these notions. Butler unfolds the terms in *Frames of War* while exploring how people act upon others' pain, precariousness and injuries. Whether a subject and this subject's suffering can be *recognised* – more than just apprehended – by other subjects has to do with *frames*. Frames refer to how subjects are socially "crafted" and portrayed, and how they appear (pp. 29-39). Frames can be online and offline acts of mediation – for instance, videos and pictures on Instagram, which are the frame through which Iranians appear to the Danish-Iranian women. Frames, the appearance, decide what we find recognisable. But this window into a suffering subject is determined by norms and historicity – both in the way it is produced and perceived (ibid.).

In part I of the analysis, I argued that the Danish-Iranian women related themselves to, and some of them even saw themselves in, the sticky content because of the stories they carry. In this way, the frame in which the Iranians appear is recognisable to them. Their ability to know of the norms and past histories of oppression in Iran. This can further be understood by *grievability*, which Butler sees as a form of recognisability. This notion refers to how subjects can appear, be framed, as grievable – as someone whose life situation is mourned. As it was evident in the first part of the analysis, this is exactly what happens when the Danish-Iranian women engage with the sticky content about the suffering Iranians. It evokes the emotional experience of despair, and they identify with and take part in the pain of the distant sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006). Thus, the frame in which the Iranians appear to the women through their screens is mournable, it is sensed as grief.

Butler understands grief as closely linked to ethical and political action. When we find someone's situation grievable, it triggers the "affective disposition" of political and ethical orientations – and potential for public expression and action of these (2016, p. 48). In this way, grievability can unveil how groups of people come to publicly support people who suffer (ibid., p. 62). Now, I intend to explore how the grievability of the Iranians triggers political action among the Danish-Iranian women.

If we understand political participation as concrete acts in a practical sense whereby participants have a sense that they can help forward a certain agenda (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 81), then the Danish-Iranian women take political action in several ways. They act in the domain of what Dahlgren would call alternative politics, primarily having their activities outside the formal institutions (2013, pp. 16-18).

Firstly, they raise what they continuously refer to as "awareness", spreading stories about and documentation online among non-Iranian Danes so they become aware of what is happening in Iran. As Asma says, "we Iranians know what is going on". They do this primarily on Instagram by reposting visual material of protests and oppressions of Iranians as already mentioned. The artist Mina, who has lived in Denmark most of her life, explains that in contrast to before WLF, she now finds it "cowardly" not to repost regime-critical content. The women also try to spread awareness through offline communication at local sites in Copenhagen where they participate in, and sometimes arrange, demonstrations or events with talks, debates and performances. At one of these events hosted by Nabi, she says "we want you guys to know about the Iranians' fight for freedom". When talking about their motivation behind these awareness activities, the women in different ways express it as a responsibility to share documentation about what the regime is doing to the Iranians – an "information obligation", says Fatemeh.

Secondly, they take action by expressing specific demands for Danish politicians:

> *"Iranians have made it very clear. So, we want the Iranian embassy in Denmark to be closed and the revolutionary guard on the terror list." – Asma*

By "revolutionary guard", Asma refers to the Iranian military, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Cohen & Yefet, 2021). As the quote by Asma implies, the Danish-Iranian women listen to concrete demands expressed on social media by Iranians: They encourage countries to close their embassy in Iran and the Iranian embassy in their country, and they encourage EU to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. The Danish-Iranian women express these demands in the Danish context in which they live.

They express that they want the Danish politicians to close the Iranian embassy in Copenhagen and to put pressure on EU. They do this on social media, using the hashtag #irgcterrorists, and at demonstrations in Copenhagen. Several of my informants went to demonstrate in front of the Iranian embassy in Copenhagen. Moreover, Nabi facilitated writing a debate piece in a Danish newspaper about the demands – co-signed by more than 300 Danish Iranians. Some of my informants also started a "citizen's initiative" to close the Iranian embassy (Folketinget, 2018; 2022). Some of the women have also spoken to Danish newspapers and news channels. Thus, we see how the grievability of the Iranians' situation makes the women participate in connective transnational action and do transmedia political expression (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 37) where they communicate the same demands across different online and offline forms of mediation.

We see how the "affective disposition" (Butler, 2016, p. 48) of the grievable is political orientation and political action, both in terms of spreading "awareness" and expressing concrete demands. Moreover, the Danish-Iranian women also express a moral and ethical orientation. During the interviews, they expressed in different ways that it is as a must to communicate on behalf of the Iranians in Iran. For instance, Asma, who has lived in Denmark most of her life, says:

*"We Iranians outside Iran have an obligation to be their mouthpiece."*
*– Asma*

Or Nabi:

*"We must be their voices" – Nabi*

It is clear that the Iranians' struggle and suffering, which appears as grievable to the women, triggers their moral and political orientations and an obligation to make the Iranians' case their case. Emotional reaction to the Iranians' situation is just not "there", they align themselves with the Iranians. The Iranians' demands become their demands. What is evident here is a sense of *media solidarity* (Nikunen, 2019) characterised by what Nikunen calls an "usness" (ibid., p. 119) – aligning with the ones who suffer. This can be seen as a form of diaspora politics. The Danish-Iranian women act as what Adamson (2012) calls *political*

*entrepreneurs*. They try to bring forward a political agenda concerned with the future of their country of origin in the country in which they reside.

## Navigating in a Danish Context

*"It has been a traumatic time. I navigate in this life that normally has nothing to do with Iran." – Fatemeh*

This quote from Fatemeh, who works as a doctor in Copenhagen, indicates a dissonance. What is an embedded and embodied part of *their* everyday lives, as argued in part I, seems invisible when they look at the Danish context in which they live. This will be explored in the present section. As I noted earlier, whether a suffering subject appears as recognisable depends on the norms and historicity among the people where it "lands". In this way, the same suffering subject can be received differently in different contexts (Butler, 2016, pp. 30-31). Living in Denmark, the Danish-Iranian women experience that the distant Iranians' struggle is received differently among non-Iranian Danes. They are disappointed with the indifferent reaction they see. As regards the Danish politicians, the women are frustrated that the politicians do not listen to the demands communicated to them by the Danish-Iranian women. Also, several of the women told how they are frustrated about Islam-critical politicians who have referred to WLF as a matter of the hijab being oppressing. When the Danish prime minister did this in her opening speech (Statsministeriet, 2022), Shadi reposted a picture and wrote that this was not about hijabs being oppressive, but the rules of an oppressing regime that "uses religion as an excuse", says 43-year-old Shadi, who has lived in Denmark since she was four. In the point of view of the interviewees, the struggle to achieve revolution is not, and should not, be anti-Islamic, and therefore, they experience this as a misrecognition, a wrong *framing*, of the Iranians' struggle. Moreover, they find the media coverage of what happens to Iranians lacking in Danish traditional media. Many of them refer to the war in Ukraine and find it unfair that this has been covered widely – an issue of representation that is often experienced by non-white ethnic minorities in European countries (Thomas, Kruse & Stehling, 2019).

*"Our news media have the responsibility to cover it, but since they don't, we must take on that responsibility." – Roya*

Here, the podcaster Roya stresses the importance of social media as an alternative news source. The Danish-Iranian women try to make up for the lack of representation of the suffering Iranians by taking part in making it visible elsewhere. But they are not just disappointed with the Danish institutions. Non-Iranian fellow citizens, including their friends and acquaintances, also appear indifferent to them. In the interviews, many of the participants explain that few non-Iranian Danes repost, like or comment on the content they share on social media and, as put by Sogol, who left Iran when she was seven:

*"I know that they know what is going on … because I can see that they are watching my stories on Insta." – Sogol*

They are also frustrated that few non-Iranian Danes show up at events and demonstrations, especially when they can gather for other purposes, for instance to protest against the abolition of a Danish public holiday, "Store bededag" as Mina stresses (Dam & Friis, 2023). All this leads to the point that they experience that citizens, politicians and media in Denmark are not affected by WLF – they do not share their emotional experience. They are outside the affective economies, the socially shared emotions (Ahmed, 2004) that the women have become involved in. What the Danish-Iranian women find grievable and recognisable, and a political and ethical obligation for them to act upon, does not evoke the same response in the majority of Danish civil society.

*"Honestly, I think they just don't care that much. Sorry but ... [pauses for a moment] it just seems like Middle Eastern lives matter less than Western lives." – Asma*

The words come from Asma, followed by a deep sigh. The quote here underscores that this is experienced as a non-recognition of people who suffer, people for whom the women feel responsible, people whose fight is a personal passion for them.

However, the Danish-Iranian women continuously try to adapt the way they represent the events in Iran. In the terminology of Butler, they try to recraft the frame so the Iranians become recognisable, grievable. They have different strategies to make the knowledge spreading more effective and digestible for non-Iranian Danes. One strategy is to make sure that the

content they repost has English or Danish subtitles and captions or to add it themselves. Another one is to avoid posting "too much" to make sure that non-Iranian followers do not get annoyed. Moreover, they curate in the sense that they try to avoid reposting dead bodies and very injured people in order not "to scare off" people, as Hawa says. About her separate Instagram profile dedicated to WLF, she says:

> *"I share information wrapped in more shareable material … something that is not, for example, a girl who has been shot in her head. I think it works better for ethnic Danes." – Hawa*

Thus, the women try to readjust the "frame," to a Danish context. In different ways, they express the importance of the support from non-Iranian Danes so they can help put pressure on the Danish politicians – as 35-year-old Azita says, "gather the support that Iranians need". As political entrepreneurs, they try to make use of their political potential as hyphenated subjects, as mediators. Their political action in Denmark is rooted in a wish to reframe what they witness to secure recognisability of Iranians among non-Iranian Danes. However, the women continue to experience that they lack support from non-Iranian Danes. "It's like we are just shouting in our own echo chamber", Hawa says.

## A Civic Counterculture

What has been proved so far is that the affectivity of the Iranians' struggle appearing in the women's Instagram feeds motivates their civic engagement. A picture of a what Dahlgren terms a *civic culture* is painted (2009, p. 101). By culture, Dahlgren means a dynamic pattern of ways to perceive and act upon things. In a civic culture, people identify as citizens and engage and participate politically. Civic culture is created from interconnected components (ibid., pp. 112-119). I argue that all these components are present in the women's civic engagement: They have certain *strategies to acquire knowledge* on Instagram, driven by affect and passion, as pointed out in part I, but they are also reasoning about which profiles provide them with news from "the streets". They have *spaces for communication* – online on Instagram and beyond and offline in localities in Copenhagen. Their civic engagement is built on *values.* The media engagement evokes their freedom values: They want women's rights, equal rights for all, freedom of expression, and a democratic future in Iran. It also evokes a moral

value in form of responsibility to support the Iranians who do not have these freedom values. It also triggers reoccurring practices acted out both online and offline and individual and together with others. Moreover, we see a form of *sceptical trust* (ibid., p. 114) which is also present in civic culture according to Dahlgren. It is seen in the sense that the women act in the belief that the Danish political institutions could "work for" them and their agenda if they listened to their demands. However, they do not expect it – it is not what they have experienced so far – so they are dedicated to making the struggle recognisable to non-Iranian Danes who can put pressure on the politicians. Thus, their ambivalent relation to intuitions is driving a certain civic engagement (ibid.). Together, these components indicate another one, namely acting as citizen in a society, expressing opinions and passion. The women form a civic culture. It is translocal – anchored to Copenhagen and to transnational connective activism. Moreover, it is a civic *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990) – not only contesting the Iranian regime from a distance, but also the Danish society and regime by *alternative politics* (Dahlgren, 2013, pp. 16-18). They act in the realm of *counter-democracy* (Rosanvallon, 2008, in Dahlgren, 2013, p. 16) since they experience that what they seek to put forward in the Danish democracy is not on the agenda among non-Iranian citizens, in the media nor among politicians. As expressed by Hawa, who has lived in Denmark since she was four, "We do not feel seen or heard". The non-recognition of the Iranians whose fight they align with is experienced as a non-recognition of them. We might call it a civic *counter*culture – of political entrepreneurs, participating from the periphery.

What began as an emotional engagement with Instagram content evolved into a group of citizens participating politically. In the next section, I will explore how this media and civic engagement makes the Danish-Iranian women re-manoeuvre socially and a re-negotiate and relocate their senses of belonging.

## III. Belonging and Unbelonging

Until now, I have argued that the affect of sticky content reoccurring on Instagram makes the Danish-Iranian women align with the WLF movement. The emotional media engagement crystalises into action from afar and into a civic counterculture; the women navigate as political entrepreneurs in their country of residence on behalf of Iranians in their country of origin.

Here, they experience a dissonance; what they recognise as grievable and as politically and ethically right to act upon, is not recognised and does not foster reactions among non-Iranian fellow citizens In this third and final part of the analysis, I will expand my investigation of the consequential dimension of media engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) and explore how the Danish-Iranian women renegotiate and relocate their sense of belonging. I will touch upon the multiple and interconnected layers comprising the interviewees' sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006): social locations (here, ethnicity and especially nationality is in focus), identification and emotional connection with groups, and political and ethical values. Ascribing to Yuval-Davis' account of the notion, I explore sense of belonging as the emotional experience of feeling home (ibid.). As underscored by Yuval-Davis, feeling home is not always solely loaded with positive feelings (2011, p. 10). Both part I and II showed that the interviewees experience alienation to certain aspects of both an Iranian and a Danish context. Thus, I will begin by exploring what might seem the opposite of feeling home, namely the *unhomely* (Bhabha, 1992).

## Unhomely Homes

As part of Homi Bhabha's extensive postcolonial work on hybrid identities, he introduced the notion *unhomely* which describes a paradoxical sense of *not* belonging to the place(s) you consider home (1992, p. 141). That is, you feel like a stranger to it. The Danish-Iranian women have an ambivalent relation to their country of origin. Several of the women express that prior to WLF, they often introduced themselves as Persian rather than Iranian – Persia referring to the historical region before the nation state Iran – because they did not want to be associated with the regime. As the film editor Hawa says:

*"Persian was just a way to say 'I'm not the Islamic Republic, I'm not the Iran that you see today." – Hawa*

But, as already explored, WLF makes them feel a strong emotional connection to Iranians protesting in Iran. The women identify with them and their struggle and with the political and ethical values. Moreover, WLF has made them identify themselves more as "Iranian" than prior to the protests. For example, Sogol, the 35-year-old cosmetologist says,

*"It is my people" – Sogol*

And Roya, the 30-year-old podcaster:

*"I have never felt so Iranian as I do at the moment." – Roya*

It is clear that what makes them identify themselves as Iranian is the people, not the regime. They detest the Islamic regime. Not because they detest Islam, but because of the oppression of the freedom of Iranians. Azita, the 35-year-old doctor, says.

*"It is a machine of oppression. It is disgusting." – Azita*

This alignment with the people and the detestation towards the authorities is summed up by Fatemeh, who has also often introduced herself as Persian: "They can take my Iranian passport. They can do whatever they want. I don't care. I don't want to be a part of their story. I am 100% Iranian".

While the women identify themselves with the Iranian people, they also stress the difference between the life of the Iranians and their own life in Denmark. Many of them have highlighted the privileges of being safe in Denmark where they hold rights as freedom of expression and women's rights. As shown in Part I, they take part in the pain of the Iranians. But while they are emotionally connected to their pain, they are not in the Iranians' shoes, which Ahmed refers to as an "aboutness" (2014, p. 21). Also, during the interviews, the women continuously shifted between saying "we" and "they" when referring to Iranians protesting. Moreover, many of them express that it is not legitimate for them to have an opinion about what should come after a potential revolution. Thus, they do not fully identify themselves with the Iranian people. When also considering the detestation they feel towards the regime, it is clear that the Danish-Iranian women's relation to Iran is full of complexity. There is a coexistence of a sense of belonging and of unbelonging – Iran is an unhomely home.

The Danish-Iranian women also have an ambivalent attachment to Denmark. The Danish-Iranian women explain how they consider themselves Danes and underscores how they value and appreciate their democratic rights and rights as women to dress, speak and act freely. But the women also express an uncomfortableness. This is for example expressed by Mina:

*"I am so incredibly happy that I ended up growing up here, but I'm so unhappy not to feel home right now." – Mina*

The women feel marginalised as an ethnic minority when trying to put their agenda forward. As Hawa describes, she feels that they "have to perform harder" than ethnic Danes to attract attention to their political agenda. In Part II, I argued that they experience an indifference and lack of support from non-Iranian Danes – among citizens, among politicians and in the media. This makes them feel hurt. Nabi says that it makes her feel "worthless". Moreover, they explain that few of their non-Iranian acquaintances and friends ask how they are feeling. For instance, Hawa, who primarily spent time with non-Iranian friends prior to WLF, says,

*"No one is asking; hey, your home country is burning – are you alright?" – Hawa*

Fatemeh says that one of her ethnic-Danish friends found her online engagement too much and reminded Fatemeh that she is living in Denmark and that other things are happening around her. This made Fatemeh pull away from the relationship. With the terminology of Butler, the women's grief and struggle on behalf of the Iranians and their wounds from the past brought into the present might be apprehended, but it is not grieved and acted upon – thus not recognised. In this way, they not only feel belonging but also unbelonging to Denmark. They live in and identify themselves with Denmark, and they feel Danish, but they experience a non-recognition of their emotional and political dedication to WLF from other Danes. In this way, Denmark is unhomely.

I will not argue that the women have never experienced ambivalence or unhomeliness due to their hyphenated identities as both Iranian and Danish prior to WLF. The interviews I had with the women indicate that they most certainly have. But what I have sought to argue here is that in their engagement with WLF, senses of belonging *and* unbelonging to aspects of *both* Iran and Denmark are found; the women are navigating between two unhomely homes.

However, the Danish-Iranian women are not just standing in the streets looking at two unhomely homes:

## A Third Space to Belong

*"In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible"*
*– Homi Bhabha (1992, p. 141)*

Enabled by online media, the Danish-Iranian women move mentally across geographical borders. This, Aksoy and Robins (2000) call "thinking across spaces". In part I, I argued that their emotional engagement with WLF content transgressed time and space dimensions, and that Iran was embedded in their everyday lives in Denmark. In their flexible "mental geographies" (p. 22), both national contexts coexist, which was also seen in their political navigation in part II. The mental movement deconstructs the boundary between Iran "there" and Denmark "here". Yet, I will extend this argument of Aksoy and Robins and show how this mental plasticity and reflexivity form a new space to belong.

As people living outside their country of origin, the Danish-Iranian women inhabit what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms a third space. That is, an "in-between space" (p. 7) that allows for hybridity, identifying and (un)belonging to two (or more) contexts at the same time. The third space established among the Danish-Iranian women is both online and offline, transnational and local. It is online and transnational in the sense that the women take part in a *digital diaspora* (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019). They take part in connective activism around WLF, and they follow and repost from profiles of Iranians in the USA, Canada and European countries. Many of the women even follow diaspora-oriented profiles posting updates about WLF called Diaspora for Iran, Iranian Diaspora Collective, Iranian Diaspora Europe and Iranian Diaspora Nordic, just to mention some. They also participate in a digital diaspora at a Danish national level or even at a local level focusing on Copenhagen given the fact that they follow certain profiles like Events for Iran DK, CPH human chain for Iran or Justice for Women of Iran CPH. Here, the women pass on news about WLF, political demands and demonstrations taking place in Denmark. These digital activities give the women a sense of being a part of a diaspora, an Iranian community. "It is like we in the diaspora have awakened together" says the social worker Edris during our interview in her home. Or Fatemeh: "For the first time in many years, the diaspora is united". The quotes here indicate that the women are not just a part of a civic counterculture in Copenhagen – they also take part in a diasporic public sphere and community concerned with the Woman Life Freedom movement. Thus, there is

a third space that allows for hybridity, for being invested in the Iranians' fight while living a life somewhere else.

This is a third space that is also anchored in offline actives. And in these offline realities, an emotional experience of feeling home is articulated (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Firstly, the women experience a sense of belonging when participating in events and demonstrations. Sogol says "I feel a solidarity. I stand together with people with whom I feel home". Some of the interviewees also went to demonstrations in European capitals; one of them is 59-year-old Nabi, who went to Brussels:

> *"I had goosebumps. There was a storm of people, with our flag. The protest songs. I could not hold back my tears. Just to be a part of a community where everyone speaks your mother tongue." – Nabi*

But it is important to stress that this sense of belonging does not emerge at any WLF-related offline event. As I pointed out earlier, the women whom I interviewed stress that they are not anti-Islamic. They detach themselves from groups of Danish Iranians, also arranging political activities, who want to reinstall the anti-Islamic monarchy in Iran (Parvaz, 2014). Thus, their sense of belonging is experienced not only because they share a social location of being connected to two nations, but also because they share values and perspectives of the WLF movement.

Secondly, they have established new local ties to other Danish Iranians. To a smaller or larger extend, all the interviewees have experienced a change in their social circle. Prior to WLF, three of the women had one or two friends with Iranian roots with whom they met up. Apart from this, all the women's social circle consisted of non-Iranian friends – primarily ethnic Danes. But in the process of engaging with WLF, they found new friends and acquaintances with Iranian roots, primarily – but not solely – women. Most of the relationships began as online connections on Instagram and other ones began after attending the same offline events which they had heard about online. Many of the women have chatgroups with other Danish-Iranian women, hang out informally and participate in, and sometimes even arrange, events or demonstrations together. At my participant observations, it was also clear to me that the

participants knew other Danish-Iranians who showed up, and a lot of hugs were given. Many of the participants express a mutual understanding between them and their new Danish-Iranian relations. For instance, as Fatemeh expresses:

> *It has indeed been the place where we took a breather, where we were able to "just be", where we went from sitting behind our little mobile phone and crying day and night to feeling the sense of community with people who experience this just the same way as we do. And it has also been the place where we encountered one another. I have gained friendships and acquaintances, as you probably have heard from others too, that I never would have expected. It's because we reflect ourselves in one another. We recognise the pain, we recognise the sorrow, we recognise the commitment. And it gives us a sense of community that we wouldn't have created if it weren't for this."*
> *– Fatemeh*

The quote here grasps how a new local network between Danish-Iranian women in CPH emerges – a network that functions as a third space where they can feel in the right place and to which they feel a belonging – because people in this community share their experience of living in Denmark and being emotionally and politically aligned with the Woman Life Freedom movement in Iran. Describing a situation where she danced with her new Iranian friends, Roya says "It hit me; these people are my family. This is home." Hawa describes it as a sense that "We are in this together". The local diasporic community evokes a strong sense of belonging.

In conclusion, in the process of being emotionally engaged with WLF on Instagram and taking part in a civic counterculture in Denmark, the Danish-Iranian women renegotiate their sense of belonging as hyphenated subjects. They experience a double detachment from aspects of Denmark and Iran, the two unhomely homes. This gives room for a third space to emerge. The diasporic public sphere concerned with WLF, transnational and translocal, online and offline, becomes a third space for them that allows for feeling Iranian, gathering against the regime, at geographical distance. The local network emerging from this and the offline gatherings and local relations evoke the emotional experience of feeling home in a new

community for the women. This new sense of belonging is multi-layered (Yuval-Davis, 2006) in the sense that the women share social locations as ethnic Iranians and as Danish Iranians. Secondly, they identify and have emotional connections to each other, and they share political and ethical orientation – the obligation to "be the voice" of Iranians.

The third space (Bhabha, 1994) can offer a homely feeling that crosses national boundaries – here they can belong and unbelong to both Denmark and Iran in a complex way. The third space embraces their *lenticular condition* (Hage, 2021), that is, it allows them to exist in multiple but inseparable realities at the same time – online, offline, Danish, Iranian, transnational – woven together by emotions, media and politics … all the realities that their everyday lives as Danish-Iranian women witnessing WLF consist of. The translocal third space, the communal network, is not a concrete fixated place where they reside. Rather, it is embodied, an emotional state of feeling home while sensing the pulse of the Woman Life Freedom movement in the daily life in Copenhagen.

# Conclusion

> *"What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies."*
> *(Ahmed, 2014, p. 11)*

Emotions evoked by media content have the power to give people a place within social and political structures. To build bonds between some, and boundaries between others. This is what happens when the Danish-Iranian women engage with the Woman Life Freedom movement. The aim of this study was to explore the role of Instagram in Danish-Iranian women's emotional experience of witnessing the WLF movement. What has been unveiled is that emotional experience with Instagram content shapes a civic culture among diaspora subjects and a new communal space to which they feel a sense of belonging.

The non-media-centric and digital ethnographic approach to the women's media engagement has allowed me to study the translocal aspect of this connective movement and to understand the digital content in its social context.

The ten semi-structured ethnographic interviews provided me with rich data to analyse the emotional role of WLF-related Instagram content and what social impacts it brings along. In the following, I will summarise my analytical findings, guided by the three research questions, and reflect further upon the insights.

## Sensing the Pulse of Woman Life Freedom at Distance – Together

In part I, I explored *how the Danish-Iranian women emotionally and affectively engage with Instagram content concerned with the Woman Life Freedom movement*. Initially, I paid attention to the intensities of their engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) which I found to be rapid because of the news-oriented use and the instant reposting in solidarity, but also loyal due to their long-term commitment of following WLF online. To understand what underlies this intensity, I explored the modalities of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) by analysing their emotional experience with the Instagram content. With Ahmed's idea of stickiness (2014) and affective economies (2004), I explored the sociality of emotions and how emotions travel with Instagram content and bring the women into a certain emotional experience when they are confronted with this content. In this way, emotions constitute the linkage between the Danish-Iranian women and WLF on Instagram. I identified three types of sticky content: First, content about the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, circulating in the very beginning of the protests, was an affective economy of hopelessness – it re-opened a well-known wound, evoked a gloomy sadness among the women and discouraged them. In contrast, the second type of content documenting Iranians protesting in public breaks with the past and continues to empower women by distributing hope and courage. Third, alongside this, circulates content showing Iranians suffering. Witnessing this distant suffering, the Danish-Iranian women identify and sympathise with the struggle, taking part in the pain and grief distributed via this type of content. Iranians protesting and Iranians suffering are types of content that continues to circulate in the women's feeds, and thus hope and courage circulate alongside pain and grief. Perhaps the coexistence of these two different affective economies of emotions is what keeps the spark alive, what keeps them engaged: Simultaneously, their Instagram feeds give them the sense that changes in Iran are possible, but also the sense that changes have not taken place yet. What is clear is that it is emotional experiences, organised and evoked by digital content, that

makes the Danish-Iranian women "tune in" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 118) at the WLF movement. The smartphone and the Instagram app, make it possible for the women in Denmark to emotionally witness and engage with WLF as it happens in Iran, and this demolishes the geographic distance to the events in Iran – WLF becomes emotionally embedded and embodied. A continuum of closeness.

In part II, I explored how the women's emotional media engagement evolves into civic engagement. By exploring the question, *what role does recognition play for the way they participate politically in a Danish context?* The women experience that their perception of the digital visualisation of Iranians suffering is different than that of their non-Iranian fellow citizens. Considering the motivation dimension (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) of the women's media engagement, the driving force is found in the *recognisability* and *grievability* (Butler, 2016) of the Iranians' situation. The Instagram content of the suffering Iranian is the frame and the pane of glass of a digital window to the Iranians suffering, – the "battlefield" is right in front of them, and this is recognisable to them. Sometimes, they see their own reflection in that pane of glass. In the eyes of the Danish-Iranian women, the sufferings of the Iranians are grievable, and this brings forward their values about freedom and equality and an ethical and moral responsibility to act. It is their emotional experience of grieving for the Iranians that triggers them into alternative political action – by online, offline and transmedia political expression – and both in form of "awareness" spreading and expression of concrete demands. They act as counterpublics (Fraser, 1990) not only to the Islamic Republic of Iran, but to elected politicians, traditional media and to Danish citizens. Among those, they experience indifference towards the situation which they find grievable. They seek to drive forward the agenda of the Iranians and of the transnational connective movement and adapt this to the Danish context. In terms of the online aspect, they try to recraft the *frame* in which the Iranians' suffering and struggling appear by making it understandable and digestible – in an effort to enhance its *recognisability* (Butler, 2016) among other Danes, but they experience very limited reactions. The Danish-Iranian women come together in a political network where compassion for the Iranians and reasoning about how to move their agenda forward coexist. As *political entrepreneurs*, they act out their political potential as hyphenated, dispersed subjects and act on behalf of people in their country of origin. The *consequence* dimension of

their media engagement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2020) therefore becomes the formation of what I, based on Dahlgren's *civic culture* (2009), call a civic counterculture.

But more than a civic culture, the network emerging is also a new space to belong to. In part III, I explored *how the Danish-Iranian women renegotiate and relocate their sense of belonging through being engaged in the highly mediated movement.* The analytical insights I found on this question were, first, that in the process of their media and civic engagement, both Iran and Denmark appear as *unhomely* (Bhabha, 1992). They have a complex and paradoxical relation to both Iran and Denmark since they consider themselves to both belong and unbelong in these country contexts. We see that they are reflexive and flexible and move mentally across geographical spaces. Secondly, in the fissures of this detachment from both Iran and Denmark, this unhomeliness, a third space grows (Bhabha, 1994). It is made of relations and interaction, online and offline, between hyphenated Iranians. It is connected to a transnational digital diaspora, but for the women, it is also anchored to local sites and new social relations in Copenhagen. Thus, we see how online and offline political engagement forms a local diasporic network that did not exist before – it is an outcome rather than predefined. The third space allows for the experience of being in between, neither nor, belonging and unbelonging in two national contexts – in fact, the third space is built on this complexity. It allows for a lenticular condition (Hage, 2021) – it allows for the women to co-exist in the multiple realities that their lifeworld consists of. The Danish-Iranian women experience splinters, but also their splinters being put into place again in this third space, a diasporic network. Their engagement with WLF makes them renegotiate and relocate to a social space where they feel belonging. But the emotional experience of feeling home, of being in place, is anchored in physical meetings and in local social ties.

Zooming out, the aim of this thesis was to explore the role of *Instagram in the Danish-Iranian women's emotional experience of witnessing the Woman Life Freedom movement online and from afar, living in Denmark.* The Instagram content about the WLF movement evokes emotional experiences, making the women sense the pulse of the movement through their screens, which mobilises them in a civic culture, making them relocate socially in a diasporic local community. In this way, this thesis shows how emotions have the power to make people reposition socially, distancing themselves from some and moving closer to others, to shape

communities. And the role of online media like Instagram is crucial here because they ensure this power of emotions – they ensure emotional investment in events geographically far away.

With the role of Instagram content as an emotional driving force for political engagement from which a homely diasporic community emerges, the thesis also resonates with media studies that contest essentialist views on diasporic engagement with media concerning the country of origin as being a matter of maintaining a culture of origin. Moreover, the Instagram content has been the seed of this network of Danish-Iranian women – the network might not have existed without the online media content to bring each of the Danish-Iranian women emotionally close to and invested in the political issue. However, their emotional experience of feeling home, the strong sense of belonging to this network, is fostered by offline gatherings, face-to-face meetings and new local relationships. Whereas studies of online diaspora public spheres have a tendency to "stay in the virtual clouds" with arguments about diasporic belonging to an imagined community, this thesis suggests going beyond the virtual space, stay on the ground and take offline and local ties into consideration when studying the role of media for diasporic belonging.

## Thinking Further

The present study gives rise to further reflections on the role of social media like Instagram for civic engagement of diaspora. On the one hand, the thesis shows the potential of social media to connect the diaspora to the events in the country of origin, mobilise them, and supporting people in the country of origin in their agenda. Moreover, it has the potential to create a diasporic community in the country of residence giving people a feeling of being together and standing together. In these ways, a third space, the diasporic network, has a transformative potential (Bhabha, 1994, p. 28). The women navigate as political entrepreneurs, counter-democratically, putting forward demands on behalf of distant others. Precisely contestation, what Mouffe calls radical democracy (2005), has also been underscored by scholars of media and civic engagement as crucial to make power structures visible and secure dynamic democracies with diverse voices – and social media help people come together around alternative views (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2021). This is the study of Danish-Iranian women an example of. However, there is a risk of romanticising the Danish-Iranian women's online and offline engagement in the Women Life Freedom movement. Their experience of lack of voice

makes too much noise for this to be a case of civic engagement with only possibilities and no limitations. The Danish-Iranian women's ambition is to spread "awareness" among other Danes, but they do not experience this as successful. With a dual conception of *voice,* as coined by Couldry (2010, pp. 7-9), we might say that they do have *voice as process*: They draw on digital materiality and their digital literacy to express themselves – to speak up – online, and also offline. But they lack *voice as value* since they experience misrecognition – and an absence of reactions. Here, it is important to stress that I do not argue that the Danish-Iranian women act in a political cluster, in an echo chamber. Bearing in mind recent questionings of the notion of echo chamber in media research (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Bossetta, Segesten & Bonacci, 2023), the Danish-Iranian women are connected both online and offline with non-Iranian Danes who watch and hear their statements, but without acting upon it. It is a source of frustration and distress for the women. The thesis shows that in the experience of not feeling home, a new community to which they feel belonging emerges. But what will the experience of non-recognition in a Danish context mean to their future civic engagement in Iranian agendas in Denmark? And their experience of having a voice? These are relevant questions to ask in further research of Danish-Iranian women's political participation.

This study sheds light on the ambivalence of the social media. This thesis project on the specific case of Danish-Iranian women's participation in the connective Woman Life Freedom movement can both be read as a disempowering story about how online media might provide a space for speaking but not improving voice, and simultaneously an empowering story about how social media enable affective, connective networks for political action by diasporas and new spaces to belong. A story still ongoing at the time of writing these final words.

As for now, I hope this thesis can inspire the existing rich media research of political participation and the power of emotional media engagement to shape new networks, both online and offline, to use this research frame to pay attention to diasporic participants and what this means for their sense of belonging. And, moreover, that this study has proved the importance of paying attention to the local and offline aspect of diaspora networks. This can nuance our understanding of connective activism and its complex possibilities and limitations for the diasporic participants.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Participant Overview

| Pseudonym | Age | Occupation | Migration |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asma | 41 | Legal assistant | Came to Denmark at the age of 3 in 1985<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |
| Azita | 35 | Doctor | Came to Denmark at the age of 18 in 2006<br>Migrated with family. |
| Edris | 37 | Personal care worker | Came to Denmark at the age of 2 in 1988.<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |
| Fatemeh | 52 | Doctor | Came to Denmark at the age of 13 in 1984.<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |
| Hawa | 38 | Film editor | Came to Denmark at the age of 4 in 1989.<br>Fled with family. |
| Mina | 37 | Artist | Came to Denmark at the age of 2 in 1988<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |
| Nabi | 59 | Stylist | Came to Denmark in 1985 at the age of 22.<br>Fled with her child. Political refugees. |
| Roya | 30 | Podcaster | Born in Denmark.<br>Parents fled in 1988 because of forced military service. |
| Sogol | 35 | Cosmetologist | Came to Denmark at the age of 7 in 1995.<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |
| Shadi | 43 | Comedian and rapper | Came to Denmark at the age of 4 in 1984.<br>Fled with family. Political refugees. |

# Appendix 2: Interview Overview

| Pseudonym | Date of interview | Place | Duration |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asma | 15.03.23 | Her workplace | 1 hour 51minutes |
| Azita | 26.03.23 | Community house | 1 hour 41 minutes |
| Edris | 03.04.23 | Her home | 1 hour 36 minutes |
| Fatemeh | 27.03.23 | Library | 1 hour 23 minutes |
| Hawa | 15.03.23 | Her home | 1 hour 24 minutes |
| Mina | 08.03.23 | Her home | 1 hour 28 minutes |
| Nabi | 08.03.23 | Café | 1 hour 45 minutes |
| Roya | 09.03.23 | Community house | 1 hour 27 minutes |
| Sogol | 31.03.23 | Her workplace | 1 hour 39 minutes |
| Shadi | 29.03.23 | Her workplace | 1 hour 43 minutes |

# Appendix 3: Interview Guide

**From Iran to Denmark**

***Can you tell me about how you/your family came to Denmark?***

- *When? Why? Citizenship in both Iran and Denmark? Been to Iran since leaving?*

***How did you grow up?***

- *Denmark/Iran? Religion? Discussion of Iranian politics? Media consumption?*

***What do you do in your everyday life?***

- *Occupation? Interests? Media consumption?*

***Can you tell me about your social circle?***

- *Closets friends? Activities?*

***How do you feel about living in Denmark?***

**Perspective on the Woman Life Freedom movement**

***How would you describe what is happening in Iran right now?***

- *Whose fight? What is the goal?*

***How is it witnessing WLF at distance?***

- *How did you hear about the events in Iran at first?*

***What do you think of the media coverage of the protests?***

- *In Denmark? In Iran? In international media?*

***What do you think of the reactions of people in Denmark?***

- *Ethnic Danes? Ethnic Iranians?*

**Online engagement with WLF**

***How do you follow WLF online?***

- *On which media platforms? In what situations? How often? Who do you follow?*

***What kind of content do you pay attention to?***

- *Why? If you post; What? How? In what kind of situations?*

***Would you like to show me the platform(s) you use?***

- *What have you posted recently? Does some content occupy your mind more than other?*

- *Can we scroll back and see your previous posts?*
- For conversation about a specific post; *Why did you post this one? Do you remember the situation? What did you feel or think?*

***What is the purpose of being engaged online for you?***

- If posting herself*; who are you addressing and why?*

***What is your prior experience with Iranian affairs?***

**Offline engagement with WLF**

***What do you think about the demonstrations and events that have been held in Copenhagen?***

***If you have participated in any; what is your experience of it?***

- *Have you been in charge of arranging an event? Who showed up? How do you feel about it? Any moments you remember clearly?*

**Closing the interview (leave 10 minutes)**

- *Anything you would like to add?*
- *How has it been for you to talk about Iran?*

# Appendix 4: Code Book

| Theme 1: Emotional engagement with Instagram content | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Codes** |
| The death of Jina Masha Amini | Hopelessness |
| | Stories of gender oppression |
| | Unsurprise |
| Iranians protesting publicly | Hope |
| | Pride |
| | Courage |
| | Amazement |
| | Stories about absence of freedom of speech in Iran |
| | "This is a revolution!" |
| | Defying potential risk of online political expression |
| Iranians suffering | Grief |
| | Pain |
| | Despair |
| | Crying |
| | Identification |
| Intensity of engagement | "I must keep up" |
| | Instant reposting |
| | Value documentation "from inside Iran" |
| | Persistent part of daily life |
| | A form of engagement that is new to them |

| **Theme 2: Political participation from afar** | |
|---|---|
| **Categories** | **Codes** |
| Recognition leading to mobilisation | "We must be their voices" |
| | Sense of responsibility |
| | Freedom values |
| "Awareness" | Demanding action from Danish politicians |
| | Knowledge spreading among ethnic Danes and non-Iranians |
| | Physical events and demonstrations |
| | Adapting the content to a Danish context |
| Non-recognised by other Danes | Lack of media coverage |
| | "Our politicians do nothing" |
| | Lack of support from ethnic Danish fellow citizens |
| | Ethnic Danish acquaintances don't understand |
| **Theme 3: Negotiating sense of belonging** | |
| **Categories** | **Codes** |
| Unbelonging and belonging to Iran | Iranian regime as repulsive |
| | Identifying as Iranian |
| | Only Iranians in Iran should decide what comes after the revolution (not the diaspora) |
| | Anti-Islamic republic, but not anti-Islam |
| Unbelonging and belonging to Denmark | Identifying as a Dane |
| | Feeling unimportant |
| | Feeling safe |
| | Freedom as women |
| | Freedom of speech and democracy |

| | |
|---|---|
| A new space to belong | Change in social circle |
| | Diaspora network |
| | New Iranian local relations |
| | Offline events |
| | Togetherness |
| | Being hyphenated |

# Appendix 5: Consent Form

[Translated from Danish]

*Consent form*

Interview participation

Researcher: Therese Thim

Contact info: 20916697 / Therese.thim@hotmail.com

**The study**

The purpose of my research project is to investigate what women with Iranian roots living in Copenhagen think of the Woman Life Freedom movement and if and how they engage in it online and/or offline. The study is conducted as part of the completion of my master's degree in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. Approximately ten Danish-Iranian women will participate.

**The interview**

The interview will take place in March in a quiet place (private or public) that would work for you.

The duration is approximately 1 hour to 1 hour and 45 minutes.

I will ask you questions about your personal perspective on and engagement with the Woman Life Freedom movement as well as your relationship to both Iran and Denmark. Part of the interview also focuses on your media usage and consumption. Therefore, I will also ask you if you want to show the platform(s) you use for the purpose of Woman Life Freedom (this is not a requirement). The interview is generally free form and informal. I do not search for a particular kind of answers, and the research project is completely open to your personal thoughts.

**Anonymity**

I guarantee your anonymity. In my material and in my paper, you will be given a pseudonym, and I will neither include any pictures nor any personally sensitive information. Moreover, I will store the material offline. Anonymisation is in place to ensure a safe, open and comfortable conversation.

**Your consent**

The thesis will be read in a university and academic context and will be available in an open, online database. If I wish to use the material in another context, I commit to specifically requesting your permission to do so.

If you wish to participate in an interview for my research project, I am seeking your consent to:

- Record and transcribe our interview to be stored offline. The recording will only be used for transcription purposes and will be deleted afterwards.
- Analyse our interview, together with the other interviews I conduct, to be presented in the thesis and potentially use direct quotes from you.
- Include expressions from our conversation in case we talk during demonstrations or events.

**Your rights and limits**

I am aware that we will potentially touch upon sensitive topics during the interview. At any time during the interview, you are free to let me know if there is something you would like me not to ask questions about. Furthermore, you are welcome to look over the quotes of you that I include in the thesis prior to my submission. Lastly, you can of course withdraw your consent at any time prior to my submission in case you feel the need to.

Are there any specific personal or security considerations I should take? Feel free to write them below:

If you wish to participate in the project on these conditions, please sign below.

Date:

Participant

Researcher