Virtual Voices: How Iranian diaspora communities utilize cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement to form collective identity

Kitamura, Wakana

Virtual Voices: How Iranian diaspora communities utilize cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement to form collective identity.

Research Question: How do Iranian diaspora communities construct identity through cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement?

Name: Wakana Kitamura

Student number: s3071324

Program: International Relations and Organization

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Abstract

The 'Women, Life, Freedom' Movement that started in 2022 in Iran brought another wave of women's rights movement. The involvement of Iranian diaspora communities in cyberspace successfully transformed this movement into the online sphere. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions: How do Iranian diaspora communities construct identity through cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement? The paper aims to explore the effectiveness of cyberfeminism and more importantly, it aims to identity the role of X and diasporic websites in constructing Iranian diaspora's identity through an inductive approach. Frame theory is utilized as a lens to examine how Iranian diasporas frame themselves in the cyberspace and make connections between those inside and outside Iran. This paper finds three framing strategies, namely: identification of common enemies, victimization, and empowerment of women that contribute to forming a collective identity within diasporas.

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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the most tangible symbol of globalization can be argued as the movement of people, both voluntary and involuntary (Roth, 2015). Diaspora communities are the product of this rapid migration movement, in which they retain special connections to their homelands and the host countries (Roth, 2015, p. 290). This is nonetheless the same in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, millions of Iranians resettled themselves outside of Iran, mainly in the USA, Canada, and Europe (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). Despite that, Iranian diaspora communities created a new space for people, especially women, to form a collective identity and a sense of solidarity with women in Iran to advocate for institutional inclusion in the political and social sphere (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). The 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in 2022, triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, soon launched a revolutionary movement in Iran and across the globe (Zarbighalehhammami & Abbasi, 2023). This movement is significant since it was able to connect millions of Iranian diasporas and women in Iran to further empower the movement. Moreover, this contentious political action was taken into a virtual sphere by the diaspora communities, which created an opportunity for diaspora communities to overcome the distance and built cross-border connections (Nasirpour, 2016). This form of cyberfeminism is vital since it allows people to communicate and connect with people virtually, with less state control (George & Leidner, 2019, pp. 4-5).

In the current literature, on contentious political action, the relationship between the Iranian women's movement and how diaspora communities form collective identity through cyberfeminism has not been extensively investigated. Insofar, Nasirpour (2016) analyses that how women's socio-political rights are addressed by diasporic websites. Yet, the author does not focus on specific social movement nor how cyberfeminism strengthens the social movement (Nasirpour, 2016). Additionally, other authors, such as Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi (2023), examine the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in the context of street protests. This analysis lacks the consideration of online activism and its effect on the movement. Hence, due to the lack of analysis on how Iranian diaspora communities deploy cyberfeminism to amplify their voices on the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, the following research question arises: ***How do Iranian diaspora communities construct identity through cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement?*** This study is important in Iranian society since it adds to the knowledge about how Iranian diaspora communities across the world aid the women's movement in their home country. Historically, Iran is known as a patriarchal society, especially after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and there has been an enormous increase in social movements on women's rights such as gender inequality, anti-

hijab law and all other oppositions against other forms of discriminations against women. In recent years, "My Stealthy Freedom" (2014), "White Wednesdays" (2016), and "Girls of Enghelab Street" (2017) are well known examples that illustrate women's resistances and struggles (Sajadi, 2023, p. 2). Therefore, reiteration of women's movement suggests that the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in 2022 would not be the last protests by women fighting for their rights in Iran, yet the international impacts and influence of these movements have been growing even bigger every time. Thus, by investigating its impact and how the Iranian diasporic digital activists enable women's movement in Iran, contain both societal and academic relevance. For instance, this research could be used to study future movements as the effect of digital activism on women's movement will be analysed.

To answer the research question established above, this paper begins with theoretical framework on diaspora, diaspora's identity construction in online space, cyberfeminism and frame theory. Afterward, the paper will outline the methodology, including the case selection and the plan for data analysis. For the analysis, content analysis will be conducted to understand how diaspora communities empower the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement by forming a collective identity under the hashtag #WomenLifeFreedom, #mahsaamini, and #nocompulsoryhijiab on X and diasporic websites.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Diaspora communities

Diaspora communities have become an increasingly prominent area of study in recent years due to the rapid globalization and the fluidity of people's movement across borders (Shojaee, 2016). Some scholars have defined the concept of diaspora more distinctly and conventionally to differentiate it from migration (Bulter, 2001; Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1999). In the simplest terms, Bulter (2001) defines diaspora as "the dispersal of a people from its original homeland" (p. 189). In addition, Campt and Thomas (2008) assert that finding more socio-politically progressive places to live is the main reason for diasporic relocation. These conceptualizations of diaspora suggest a strong ethnographic approach, focusing on the social dynamics of diasporas and how diasporas interact with culture to find a sense of belonging in the host country (Bulter 2001, pp. 190-205). Whereas earlier studies concentrated on the conventional definition of diaspora communities (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1999), recent research has shifted its focus to diaspora communities' roles and their ability to impact both their homeland and host country (Dufoix, 2008; Mavroudi, 2008).

Throughout history, the Jewish diaspora has been the representation of the word 'diaspora' where it was often associated with negative connotations such as vulnerability and banishment (Bulter, 2001; Clifford, 1994). However, with the re-examination of the role of diaspora communities, scholars have found that the diaspora contains prospective for empowerment based on their ability to galvanize an international audience (Mavroudi, 2008, pp. 57-60). This finding is significant, since it indicates that diasporas are no longer viewed only through an ethnographic lens, yet it suggests a need for further examination of how they form diasporic identities and communities for mobilization. Similarly, these arguments are replicated by Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) and Itzigsohn (2000). They identified that the diaspora communities are powerful resources to the home country when diasporas can organize themselves as political capital (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Itzigsohn, 2000).

Diasporas tend to seek a sense of belonging in their host country with people who have a similar background to have mutual support and solidarity (Mavroudi, 2008, pp. 57-58). When diasporas are looking for a sense of belongingness, an informal political space is the easiest way to form a collective identity (Itzigsohn, 2000). Mavroudi (2008) states that an informal political space is an environment where diasporas can feel empowered through negotiation on politicized topics, such as women's rights and their struggles back in homeland (pp. 60-61). Additionally, political representation and advocacy for their homeland allow diaspora communities to have close ties with the political affairs of their home country (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). Thus, the exchange of discourse and opinions on their homeland's political issues provides them a space for debate, which is a starting point of common identity construction (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003, p. 684). Furthermore, Mavroudi (2008) asserts that when their homelands are authoritarian regimes in nature, it is easier and safer for them to express their discontent through the host countries (pp. 60-65). Similarly, Adamson (2002) and Bulter (2001) argue that this political commitment to their home countries is important since the re-construction of political space would challenge or reinforce the political and societal norm in the home state regime. As a result, the informal political space could contribute and encourage contentious political actions in their homelands (Mavroudi, 2008, pp. 59-65). Therefore, in this paper, the working definition of 'diaspora' would utilize the conceptualization by Bulter (2001), Mavroudi (2008), Campt and Thomas (2008): a spread of people from their homeland who have the potential to empower and mobilize people in both diaspora communities and homelands in a socio-political sphere.

2.2 Cyberfeminism and its strategies

In the rapid development of the digital age, the informal political space has expanded to a virtual sphere by diasporic activists, who wish to vocalize certain political and societal issues in their homelands (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017, p. 50). Recent studies outlined by Gajjala (2010), Wright (2005), Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) suggest that in digital space, diasporic women from authoritarian regimes find greater opportunities for activism and expression. Additionally, Diamandaki (2003) defines cyberspace as a new distanced, and disembodied social world to express socio-political views (p.2). Likewise, Laguerre (2010) asserts that the importance of digital diasporic women is found when social networking becomes operational through their common aims and identity formation (p. 50). This is significant, since women in authoritarian regimes are often neglected in terms of their political participation and engagement in civil society (Donno & Kreft, 2018, pp. 720-725). Thus, when diasporic women are in their host country, they are more likely to organize themselves in the cyber sphere to challenge existing social norms in their homelands. Similarly, Nasirpour (2016) and Keles (2016) state that digital platforms would empower diasporic women by securing a safe space, and the realization of freedom of expression outside their home country is also crucial. In light of these aspects, this paper utilizes the concept of 'cyberfeminism' to fill the gap between diasporic identity formation and the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in Iran.

Whereas earlier studies focused mainly on the conceptualization of cyberfeminism (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 1999; Plant, 1997), recent studies shifted their attention to the examination of the processes of identity formation and strategies to strengthen social movements (Abbasgholizadeh, 2014; Lamartine & Cerqueira, 2023; Oksala, 1998). Lamartine and Cerqueira (2023) point out that communication is one of the important aspects to consider in cyberspace when female activists form a collective identity (p. 2). The authors argue that this type of communication is horizontal and democratic, making online platforms preferable for women originating from patriarchal societies (Lamartine & Cerqueira, 2023, p. 2). The most illustrated example is the hashtags such as #MeToo, #8M, and #WomenLifeFreedom (p. 4). Clark-Parsons (2021) aids Lamartine and Cerqueira's (2023) argument and states that the use of hashtags has become a core strategy for cyberfeminism, where women can amplify their voices and visibility. The role of hashtags is important since it allows for efficient search using keywords, and the grouping of topics. Therefore, it is easy to form communities with the usage of hashtags. Second, the usage of hashtags started from the virtual sphere, however, the hashtags are quickly transformed into real-life settings, as they are used to promoting social movements (Dahlgreen, 2013). Another way of communication often utilized by

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cyberfeminists is WhatsApp, where they can easily exchange messages, videos, and images and form several group chats (Lamartine & Cerqueira, 2023, p. 6). For instance, one group chat is for activists who decide on what content to share on social media to further mobilize participants both online and offline (pp. 6-7). Another group chat can serve as an announcement space for the virtual community to post possible dates and locations for offline protests, for example (p. 7). Hence, communication strategies are crucial in cyberfeminist activities and this way of communicating with activists in and outside the cyberspace allows them to build a larger community across the globe to empower social movements. However, Lamartine and Cerqueira (2023) lack analysis on the process of identity construction hence, in section 2.3, Downing and Roush (1985), Reger (2002) and D'Enbeau (2011) analyse the notion of feminist identity development to fill this gap.

The concept of cyberfeminism was first introduced by Plant (1997) who was interested in examining new technologies through a feminist lens (p. 28). Building up on this study, Gajjala and Mamidipudi (2010) state that to understand cyberfeminism, it is crucial to break the concept into two parts. First, cyberspace indicates the opportunities for social interaction made possible by an online platform (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2010, p. 8). Second, the concept contains a shared belief that women in the virtual sphere should take control over internet to empower themselves (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2010, p. 8). Hence, from the theoretical information above, this paper would adopt the working definition from Gajjala and Mamidipudi (2010), Castells (2015), Lamartine and Cerqueira (2023) to conceptualize 'cyberfeminism' as follows: cyberfeminism is the spreading of feminist ideals through the sharing of social experiences, expressions of their values and beliefs, criticisms, and thoughts through a virtual organization.

2.3 Feminist identity construction

Downing and Roush (1985), Reger (2002), and D'Enbeau (2011) assert that the process of women's identity development explains certain characteristics of the social movement when activists come together to share their politicized view of the world. Supporting this argument, some scholars also state that the construction of identities does not only reflect their grievances, but it spreads a sense of awareness to politicize everyday life (Melucci, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Furthermore, McAdam (1982) and Tarrow (1994) have analysed collective identities at both the macro and micro levels. They examined on the macro level, the political and social environment is significant in organizing participants, since activists often form solidarity and

identity based on similar political concerns (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1994). On a micro level, the interaction between individuals develops into a 'shared consciousness' and it results in the identification of collective identities (Melucci, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Additionally, it is important to keep in mind the diversity of women since individuals embody more than one status, including intersections of age, race, and religion (Ashcraft, 2000; Buzzanell, 2000; D'Enbeau, 2011, p. 66).

2.4 Context in Iran

In an authoritarian regime where Islamic principles are governed by theocracy, Iranian women face additional hardship to exercise their basic rights, due to restrictive laws and societal beliefs (Mehan, 2024; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). Iran's women's movement has long focused on protest against gender inequality, unequal treatment by the police forces, and greater political participation in civil society (Sajadi, 2023). Hence, in Iran, women's movements illustrate additional significance, since women in and outside of Iran are challenging Iran's systematic gender inequality on discriminatory laws and social – cultural norms (Mehan, 2024; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). To further analyse Iran's women's movement, Sorce and Delia (2022), Nasirpour (2016), Shojaee (2016), Batmanghelichi and Mouri (2017) have explored cyberfeminism and social movement on women's rights. Cyberspace enhances its significance for Iranian diasporic women who hope to utilize media for vocalizing their rights for women in Iran, who face strict media censorship by the regime (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017, p. 50). To investigate the relationship between cyberfeminism and social movements, some scholars have utilized diasporic websites, created by Iranian activists in exile, to investigate how it can empower women in their homeland (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017; Nasirpour, 2016). During the analysis, the authors first focused on languages used on the websites (2016, p. 82). The author finds that Farsi is the main language used on the websites and this finding is important, as it indicates that diasporic websites can act as a bridge to connect information between these inside and outside of Iran (pp. 82-84). Moreover, Batmanghelichi and Mouri (2017) assert that the information transferred by activists in exile status is crucial, since it provides new ideas and values on gender where women in Iran have difficult time accessing. Second, Nasirpour (2016) has found certain themes from the diasporic websites by conducting qualitative analysis. According to Nasirpour (2016), gender equality and forced hijab are the main two topics that are discussed in the websites. Consequently, these two topics are also reflected in the women's movements in 'real space', such as "No to compulsory hijab" in 2013, "My Stealthy Freedom"

in 2015 and "White Wednesday" in 2017 as evidence (Yaghoobi, 2021, p. 233). However, the existing literatures have not extensively reviewed the 'Women Life Freedom' movement in 2022 and how diasporic websites can empower collective identity in contentious political action. Thus, this paper would identify this as a gap to explore the topic further.

2.5 Frame theory

Frame theory is often utilized to analyse contentious political action, and it is a useful theory, especially when scholars want to focus their research on the individual level of actors (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). Additionally, it also examines how activists engage in identity construction to shape public perception through framing their messages and value (p. 613). When analysing how Iranian diasporic women frame themselves, to mobilize and empower the social movement, frame theory would play an essential role to identify their strategies. For instance, women often utilize victimization strategies to frame themselves to further strengthen their sense of collectivism (Best, 1997; McCaffrey, 1998, pp. 263-270). Victimization is a powerful tool since it can draw widespread attention to social and political problems (Best, 1997, p. 11). Especially for women, victimization contributes to identity construction when women are imposed on a patriarchal model of society, and their socio-political activities are often restricted in terms of education, political participation, and freedom of speech in civil society (Mehan, 2024). In this environment, their victim–framing creates bonds with individuals who have experienced similar oppression (Best, 1997; McCaffrey, 1998, p. 263-270). Thus, by finding similar individuals within the feminist community, they gain greater psychological validation of their activities, and as a result, it would promote them to act and express their rights through social movement (Best, 1997; McCaffrey, 1998). Therefore, by exploring the diasporic identity construction through the lens of frame theory, it is possible to gain find different types of framing strategies that are used by diasporas in digital space. Taking the literatures above into considerations, this paper adopts Benford and Snow's (2000) definition "make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change" (p. 615) as a working definition for frame theory.

2.6 Concluding remark on theoretical framework

As an overall concluding remark on the theoretical framework, there are three main points that can be used for the later research. First, diaspora communities are crucial concepts

in terms of understanding the process of identity formation as well as self and group empowerment in contentious political action (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). Second, the digital space is a vital environment for diasporic cyberfeminists to construct identity by looking for people who share similar experience and values and socio-political sphere (Laguerre, 2010). Finally, frame theory will be utilized to analyse the different types of framing strategies that diaspora communities use during the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. Hence, by taking these three points in mind, this paper will answer the following research question: *How do Iranian diaspora communities construct identity through cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement?*

3. Research method

3.1 Research design and case selection

The primary goal of this paper is to contribute with the empirical knowledge on how Iranian diasporic activists use both websites and X to form a collective identity with the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in 2022. Hence, a single-N case study on Iran will be employed. A case study design allows in-depth knowledge and comprehensive exploration, which are important to gain understanding on the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement in this case (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 17). Additionally, considering the interconnected factors such as human rights, limited political and civic participation for women, and societal and cultural norms that are established in a patriarchal manner, it indicates the complexity of the movement (Roth, 2015). Therefore, the case of 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement is strategically selected, as it utilizes both online platforms and 'real space' contentious political action, which further increases its contemporary relevance on women's movement.

3.2 Data collection

In this research, two types of data; X and diasporic websites will be utilized as outlined in the introduction. Firstly, the paper will illustrate the rationale behind the selection of X as a data source. The most apparent point lies in the fact that the paper analyses how identity is formed through cyberfeminism by Iranian diaspora. Hence, as indicated in section two, cyberfeminism requires an in-depth analysis of digital participation for activists to share experiences and express their values and beliefs on women's rights (Castells, 2015; Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 1999; Lamartine & Cerqueira, 2023). From this point, it is possible to state that X is a valuable data source, since it allows the researcher to observe the exchange of discourse

at an individual level from different demographics, geographical locations, and backgrounds. This is crucial, since Iran often limits the exchange of discourse on social media, resulting in more difficulties for people in Iran to express their voices due to fear of punishment, while diasporas can amplify their voices in the international sphere (Nasirpour, 2016). Moreover, the utilization of hashtags allows a faster and more efficient way of categorizing themes and trends over time. To conduct this analysis, this paper will be limited to three hashtags: #WomenLifeFreedom, #mahsaamini, and #nocompulsoryhijiab to investigate in total sixty posts on how cyberfeminists frame their identity during the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. Those three hashtags were chosen since Mahsa Amini died due to 'improper' hijab clothing deemed by the morality police, and her death triggered the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement (Zarbighalehhammami & Abbasi, 2023). The hashtags were limited to these three, as these were the most popular hashtags for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, as well as to limit the overflow of the information gathering. For the efficiency of this research, X's 'advanced search' option was utilized to filter the three hashtags and a time span of one year, which will be from the 1st of September 2022 to the 1st of September 2023. Moreover, to ensure that the activists are Iranian diasporas, this paper has checked the profile of all activists, such that these activists are away from their homeland and are trying to make a difference in the socio-political sphere. Afterwards, the 'top' category in X will be examined, since the contents contain the most relevant tweets based on the popularity and the hashtags that this paper is looking for. By acknowledging the fact that this movement is still ongoing, the period would be limited to one year to maintain the internal validity of this research. This is crucial since this investigation involves human participation, thus, limiting the time frame can minimize any potential changes would occur. Additionally, this will provide up-to-date information for the research, which is an important aspect when it comes to contentious political action.

The second data source is diasporic websites created by Iranian diaspora communities. Compared to X, diasporic websites contain longer content on each text that this paper will analyse, which would allow researchers to conduct a richer analysis in the virtual space. Additionally, as websites are made by diasporas, this platform allows freedom of expression which is a key aspect for the process of identity construction (Nasirpour, 2016). By acknowledging the greater length of the data set, fifteen data was collected and analysed on how diasporas frame themselves during the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement to form a collective identity. This results in a similar amount of coding and analysis done for both the diasporic websites and X. While during data collection on X, hashtags were used, for the websites data collection, a similar approach from Nasirpour (2016) was used. For this research,

diasporic websites from 'www.parstimes/women' were utilized to collect data. Taking into account the large number of websites contained in 'www.parstimes/women', in this research, websites that contain topics of women's rights, gender equality, and the issue of hijab were employed from the 1st of September 2022 to the 1st of September 2023. Within these topics, this research focuses on content containing: personal narratives, experiences, and self-empowerment, to conduct a qualitative content analysis.

Finally, criteria for the selection of the posts and websites are established based on the conceptualization of diaspora and cyberfeminism in the previous section: posts and websites must be created by people who are away from their homeland (Iran) and have the potential to empower and mobilize people, by spreading feminist ideals through the sharing of social experiences, expressions of their values and beliefs, criticisms, and thoughts through a virtual sphere.

3.3 Method of analysis

As mentioned in section 3.2, a qualitative content analysis will be employed to analyse this case. Qualitative content analysis produces data by analysing what is written and observed such as documents, reports, and social media contents (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 174). Halperin and Heath (2020) state that content analysis provides evidence about subjectivity in what the actors believe and their own narratives (p. 175). Therefore, by adopting qualitative content analysis, it gives researcher opportunity to explore diasporic activists' identity formation process in detail. Furthermore, this study has adopted an inductive approach to research and respond to the research question, thus, the data that was gathered will not be placed into response categories that are pre-defined. In other words, inductive content analysis builds up from close readings of the texts to produce meanings of the content of the data set (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 112). Therefore, this paper will be open to any new findings when it emerges, chosen to increase the rate of finding all relevant frames in the data for identity construction in cybersphere. To do this, the conceptualization of the frame theory written above will serve as a lens through which the contents of the websites and X will be analysed. Some example tweets will be given in the paper to indicate the finding themes.

3.4 Concept measurement

To measure the concept in a more clear and detailed manner, this section breaks down the identity construction into different types that this paper will be based on throughout the data

collection. Different types of identity construction are based on micro level identity framing, such as the interaction between individuals which creates 'shared consciousness' as outlined in the theoretical framework (Melucci 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). The paper adopts frame theory, to explore how individual activists construct their identities to shape collective identity within contentious political actions, explaining the rationale behind this approach. Thus, some key features such as personal narratives, self-empowerment, victimization, exchange of discourse, right to determine their own physical being, and shared belief in the socio-political sphere will be examined.

3.5 Positionality

Before I present my analysis, I acknowledge my standpoint as a bachelor student with a Japanese background. Additionally, I acknowledge that with my female identity, my analysis of women's rights might be biased to some extent. Finally, as a researcher without an Iranian background, there is a language barrier when analysing Persian sources. Therefore, this paper will only analyse English-based sources produced by the Iranian diaspora. To minimize the bias that I would have as a female researcher, I have tried to keep an open mind during the analysis, attempting to analyse all the data objectively. By being aware of my position, I can try to mitigate the influence of my bias on my research. Apart from this, by using a recognized theory to analyse the data, it ensures the validity of my analysis. Finally, despite the Persian language barrier, there are enough English sources available for this research. Persian posts from diasporic websites and tweets are not translated to English during this research, to eliminate other factors such as translation errors.

4. Results and data analysis

After conducting data analysis, three observable themes emerged from coding the data. These three themes are constructed using frame theory and are the following: identification of common enemies, victimization, and empowerment of women. These three framing themes are used by diaspora communities to construct a common identity.

4.1 Criteria of the themes

Due to overlapping themes in the data, certain criteria have been established to assign each piece of data to one theme. Common keywords and phrases from the data in the same theme were utilized to create these criteria. The coding process with the created criteria works

as follows. Firstly, if the content revolves around an individual's unjust treatment, such as beautiful or innocent women being killed, the data would be coded as victimization. Second, if the opposite parties such as Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Morality Police, Islamic regime, and their leaders are framed in a negative narrative, it would be coded as identification of common enemies. The negative narrative includes the use of violent force, framing them as murderers, and framing them as terrorists. Finally, when female activists are put in a positive narrative with words such as 'brave', 'freedom', and 'won't give up', to indicate their resilience, it would be coded as empowerment of women.

4.2 Identification of common enemies

This theme can be broken down into two parts to analyse how identity is formed by identifying common enemies. Firstly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and morality police are often framed as enemies, due to the brutal imposition of violence on Iranian women who oppose wearing a hijab. The 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement started due to Mahsa Amini's 'improper' wearing of hijab in public, as a result, she was beaten to death by the morality police (Zarbighalehhammami & Abbasi, 2023). Therefore, from observing the data, it is possible to identify that the hijab is used as a symbol of repression against Iranian women. Thus, by creating discourse on cyberspace to illustrate the cruel reality of compulsory hijab, it first creates an accumulation of frustration within diaspora communities. Second, blaming the IRGC and morality police for the suppression of Iranian women, successfully establishes a common enemy, resulting in a sense of unity for diasporas. This is a crucial element in diagnostic framing, which would further accumulate emotional grievances that develop into a common narrative (Snow, Vliegenthart & Ketelaars, 2019, p. 396). For instance, the tweet from Figure 1 depicts an urgent narrative from Sadr (2023) where she asserts "The Morality Police is back to the streets in Iran". This is significant, since the motivation frame is used in this narrative to indicate the cruelties of the morality police towards women, who wish for freedom of choice in their clothing. Moreover, Figure 2 illustrates the discursive process when they put out a communication statement. In this example, it is clear that diasporas frame IRGC as 'terrorists', which establishes a perception of danger. Thus, the combination of fear and anger further forms a united identity.
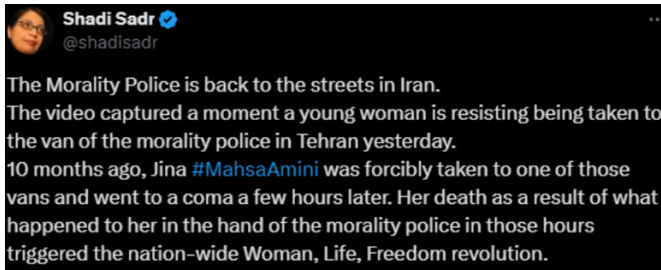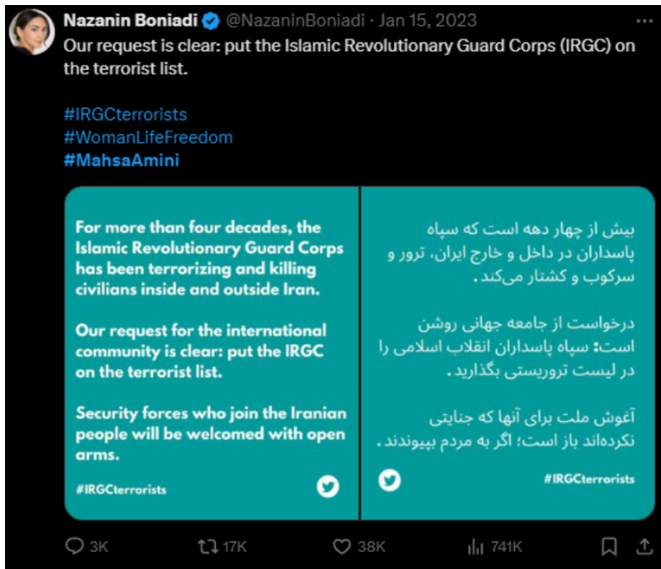
Figure 1: Tweet (Sadr, 2023)

Figure 2: Tweet (Boniadi, 2023)

Additionally, by identifying Ali Khamenei and Islamic elites (the Islamic regime as a whole) as common enemies, diasporas can form another narrative to construct a common identity. Compared to the IRGC and morality police, when diasporas talk about the Islamic regime as a whole, in addition to compulsory hijab, it also opens up discourse on Iran's socio-political landscape for women. For instance, the content in Figure 3 indicates a contradiction in Iran's justice system. Additionally, the word 'disgusting' in this context suggests a strong moral outrage and revulsion. Similarly, in Figure 4, diasporas accuse the government of women's unequal treatment by calling the Islamic principle as 'discriminatory inhuman law', used to harm women for decades. These are significant since these strong emotional expressions allow diasporas to construct their messages and values to frame the Islamic regime as their enemies. Furthermore, by framing the regime as 'they' it highlights the division within Iranians into two groups (Kenari, 2023, p. 204). An example of this is illustrated in Figure 5, where diasporas created a narrative that shows distinct groups of 'them' vs 'us'. This is a crucial stage of identity formation where 'they' represents the political system and 'us' indicates innocent Iranian people who protest for freedom. Additionally, this creation of 'us' can also contribute to community building, which suggests the process of frame alignment by

incorporating existing values and beliefs even further (Snow, Vliegenthart & Ketelaars, 2019, p. 394).

Figure 3: Tweet (Alinejad, 2022)

Figure 4: Diasporic website
(Center of Human Rights in Iran, 2022)

Figure 5: Diasporic website (Ravanipour, 2022)

4.3 Victimization

Through conducting the data analysis, it is possible to state that diaspora communities framed two different groups of people as victims to form a collective identity in cyberspace. The first group of people are the protestors in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, and the second group are the diasporas themselves. For the first group, the salient point in the data shows that victimization is often used to capture individual protestors, who faced violent force by the regime. In addition, more than half of the data collected was victimizing young Iranian girls who faced violent repression during the protest. Framing young girls as the victim of the Islamic regime contains important framing effects. For example, both Figure 7 and Figure 8 frame the narrative around the catastrophic death of young, innocent girls. First, the examples frame the victims as lively and vibrant people, which generates sympathy and empathy of their

death from the rest of diaspora communities. Second, by framing the Islamic regime as the 'killer' and describing in detail the death of the young girls, it engenders a shared feeling of animosity towards the regime. Moreover, the use of hashtags (such as #mahsaamini) would also bring back the bitter memory of the sacrifices of Iranian young women. Thus, framing young girls as the victims of the Women, Life, Freedom movement allows diasporas to unite against the regime through framing effects. Additionally, by amplifying their voices with anger, their narrative on anti-Islamic regime and gender equality for women becomes more salient as their master frame (Snow, Vliegenthart & Ketelaars, 2019, p. 395).
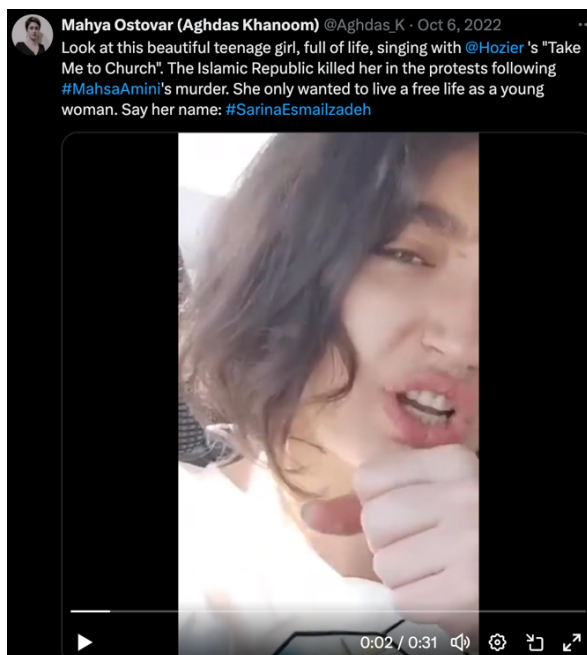
Figure 6: Tweet (Ostovar, 2022)
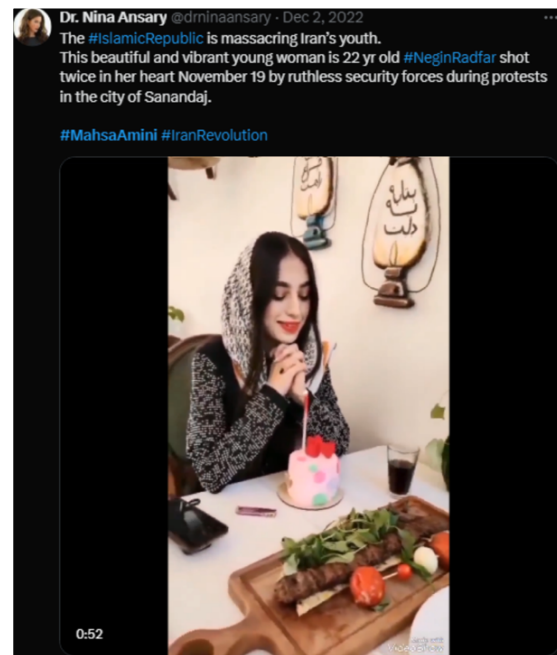
Figure 7: Tweet (Ansary, 2022)

The second group, diasporas, framed themselves as victims of the repressive regime to form solidarity. Compared to framing young Iranian girls as victims, the use of a diaspora's personal narrative becomes a more visible tool of identity formation in this section. The frame resonance is illustrated through the data analysis when diasporas share their personal experiences on an online platform (Snow, Vliegenthart & Ketelaars, 2019, p. 401). This is significant, since a lot of diasporic cyberfeminists have shared experiences with the Islamic regime's brutal actions against women. As an example, Figure 8 illustrates a diaspora's psychological impact on the removal of hijab even after she had left Iran. As indicated above, the hijab can be interpreted as a symbol of repression by the regime. Hence, by framing herself as a victim who still lives in fear and trauma, it could resonate with other Iranian diasporas who experienced or are currently undergoing similar difficulties. Moreover, in Figure 9, the diaspora portrays her 16 years old self as an innocent victim of the regime. Additionally, she describes

her emotional evolvement from fear to anger. This emotional response allows other diasporas to relate to themselves and potentially identify as one group who needs to unite and call for action. The emotional framing used here, helps with forming their collective identity as victims, generating unity whilst directing their attention and anger towards their common enemies.

"It was not easy to put it away, like overnight, it took three years for me, even outside Iran, to take off my hijab."
the first time she went out without a religious covering, in Lebanon, she saw a police officer and had a panic attack. "I thought the police are going to arrest me."

Figure 8: Diasporic website (My Stealthy Freedom, 2022)

"I was 16 years old, on a trip to visit my family in Kerman, Iran, excited to see relatives and friends, when I was stopped and arrested by two morality guards. They plucked me off the street, loaded me into their car, and took me to the local station. My crime? I had my hair uncovered, showing it to their male gaze. To this day, I remember the searing mix of emotions that is familiar to millions of Iranian women who are arrested every year for this "offense." First there was fear and anxiety, then shame and desperation, and finally righteous anger."

Figure 9: Diasporic website (Mahmoudi, 2022)

4.4 Empowerment of women

Diasporas frame women in Iran as resilient and brave, since this provides hope and encourages individuals to unite and stand together. Two strategies have been observed from the data, one is the empowerment of groups, and the other is the empowerment of individual women. These two strategies cause different effects but lead to the same result, namely collective identity formation. Diasporas use the empowerment of groups to try to inspire and form a tighter bond within communities, while the empowerment of individuals is used to inspire individual diaspora and providing them a sense of solidarity despite being alone.

As an example of the empowerment of groups, Figure 10 shows young Iranian girls walking in the street without a hijab, despite the great risks involved. This indicates the determination of Iranian girls who stand strong for the changes that they want to bring through

the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. The effect of this narrative of resilience is a significant impact on diaspora communities, encouraging them to unite together further. Additionally, these posts can inspire and affect diasporas who share similar cultural identities. Finally, by acknowledging that their fellow activists in Iran are advocating for women's rights with rising potential dangers, the solidarity, and commitment become even stronger, leading to collective identity formation.

The second strategy utilizes personal narratives to empower individual women. Figure 11 is illustrated as an example to notify the diaspora communities that even one individual's action can make a difference in the movement. The content focuses on her resilience, despite the injury she received on her eye. This post shows that individuals, regardless of being in a group, can make differences in the Women, Life, Freedom movement. In addition to this, their braveness can inspire other diasporic cyberfeminists, who strive for changes from outside of Iran, to make a difference. Additionally, diaspora can recognize common experiences with these narratives or vicariously experience these narratives, fostering a shared sense of unity. Thus, despite empowering individual women, a collective identity is formed between individuals.
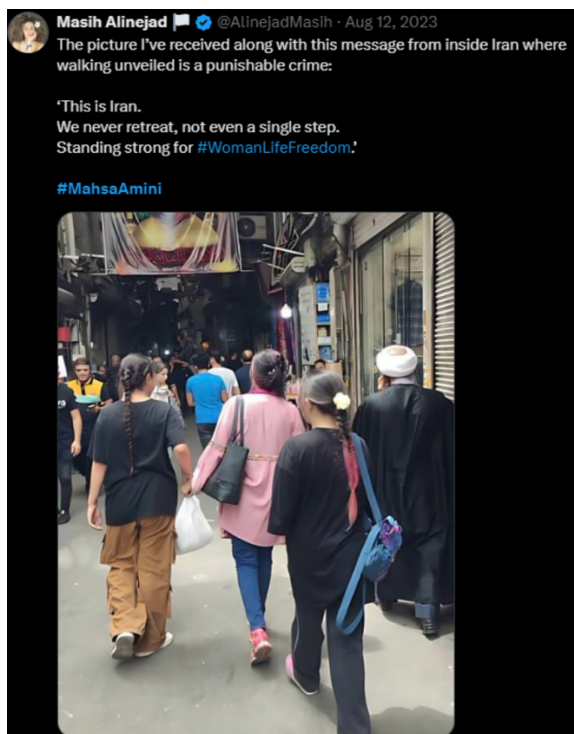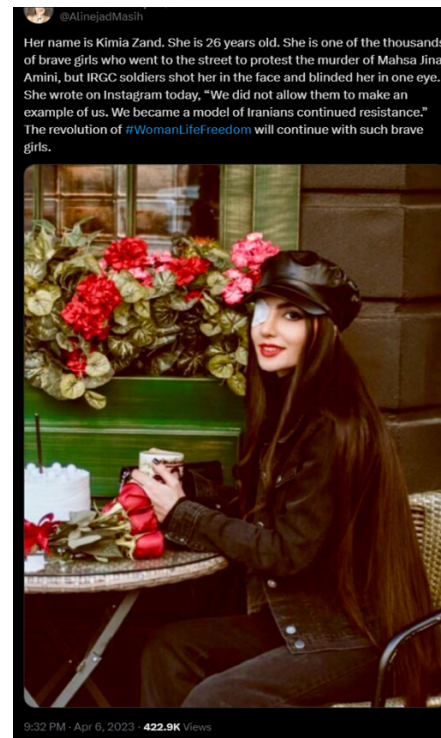

Figure 10: Tweet (Alinejad, 2023)

Figure 11: Tweet (Alinejad, 2023)

5. Discussion

This paper has analysed how diasporas construct common identity in cyberspace in the previous sections, by identifying the master frame as gender equality for women. Additionally, through inductive data collection, this paper identified three movement specific frames: identification of common enemies, victimization, and empowerment of women. In this section, the paper will first identify the strengths and weaknesses of each theme to examine the importance and applicability of the framing themes. Second, assert the significance of diasporic identity formation in cyberspace.

Firstly, the strength of the 'identification of common enemies' lies in the fact that framing the opposite party as 'bad' does not rely on events to happen. For instance, diasporas can always frame IRGC as terrorists, regardless of which phase the contentious political action currently is. This is crucial due to that fact that the other two framing themes require people's suffering and resistance to validate the framings. Additionally, if the movement is lacking relevance in a certain phase, by framing the opposite party as the enemy, it can generate more attention and emotional grievances again, which can potentially mobilize the public in a difficult time. On the other hand, this strategy cannot be used too much consecutively since the lack of evidence on calling opposite party as enemy, can lose its legitimacy in the long term. Moreover, when people are exposed to such information in a daily basis, they can feel numb about the framing, leading to a loss in its effectiveness.

Secondly, the strength of the 'victimization' can be found in its power to mobilize people's emotion during the movement. For example, when people hear the word 'victims', people often feel sympathy as their first emotional response. Similarly, some psychology scholars argue that by framing the movement using victim-related language, it influences the perception and decision-making of other people (Flusberg, Vord, Husney & Holmes, 2022, pp. 534-535). Therefore, by framing themselves as victims, it signals to other people that they deserve support. Especially in this paper's case study, 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, the victimization strategy can be a powerful tool for mobilization since the cause of the movement is the death and victimization of Mahsa Amini. Hence, the victimization is strongly related to the origin of the movement. However, it is important to keep in mind that the degree of its effectiveness also depends on people's perception and recognition that they are the victims. Additionally, similar to the weakness of 'identification of common enemies', people would be desensitized after constant exposure to victimization, leading to a loss of significance.

Lastly, by utilizing the 'empowerment of women' as a frame, it brings a bright aspect in the movement which gives people a sense of courage and braveness. Perkins and

Zimmerman (1995) assert that empowerment framing allows people to gain control over their lives by identifying their own strengths and capabilities to tackle existing socio-political issues in their community (p. 570). This is important in Iranian context since empowerment can also help them to break socio-cultural barriers to further vocalize their demands in society. As an example, by portraying Iranian girls fighting against the Islamic regime by taking their hijab off, it gives Iranian women a sense of power and control over their choice in lives to express their identity. Moreover, Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) suggest that empowerment frame encourages participation of others in social movement and, potentially, improve the goal achievement for the organization. Yet, it is important to state that since the empowerment focuses on individuals, it can endanger these individuals, who put themselves out there in front of the regime. In other words, by empowering those individuals who took their risks for changing the regime, they can be in danger since the regime may give more attention to these individuals. Hence, from these points above, it is possible to state that the combination of all three themes is necessary for an effective framing strategy in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement.

It is also important to acknowledge the effectiveness of cyberspace for Iranian diasporic women. Within the 110 data collected, this paper identified that more than half of the contents of the data include the accusations of the Islamic regime and the demand for abolition of compulsory hijabs. These two topics are considered as 'sensitive topics' to discuss in Iranian society due to fear of censorship and punishment from the Iran regime (Mavroudi, 2008). Thus, by utilizing digital environments, diasporic cyberfeminists can express their opinions of their home country (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017, p. 50). This safe space for freedom of expression largely contributes to the identity formation of diasporas, since the online space grants a process of community building. In this context, Benedict Anderson (1991)'s concept of 'imagined communities' becomes prominent, using digital media to shape people's ideology and collective identity in socio-political sphere. This is important since people would feel a sense of belonging to this imagined cyberspace community. Furthermore, the sense of belonging would amplify the collective identity construction for diasporas that are using these online platforms.

6. Conclusion

This paper started with the research question: ***How do Iranian diaspora communities construct identity through cyberfeminism in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement?*** This research question was stated due to the lack of research on identity construction through

cyberfeminism and the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. To answer this question, this paper took an inductive approach to explore different framing themes used by diasporas to form a collective identity. The first theme that was found was 'identification of common enemies'. In this framing theme, diaspora communities framed IRGC and morality police as terrorists to illustrate their suppression of Iranian women. In addition, diasporas distinguished themselves with an 'us' vs 'them' rhetoric, to further amplify their unity against the Islamic regime. The second theme is 'victimization' where diasporas victimized young Iranian girls and other diasporas to generate sympathy. By victimizing individual young girls getting killed, it would generate anger and sympathy in the communities. Moreover, using personal narratives and experiences from diasporas, a sense of solidarity is established between other diasporas. This all leads to the formation of a collective identity within the diasporic community, as well as the Iranian community. Finally, the third theme is 'empowerment of women' where identity formation is done using the empowerment of both individuals and groups. Diasporas utilized individuals to give people courage and the feeling of importance as an individual, while groups were used to provide people a sense of inclusion within the community. In conclusion, this paper has successfully answered the research question, as the data suggests that multiple framing themes were used to construct a collective identity within the cyberspace for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement.

However, there are some limitations of the research that need to be addressed. Firstly, this movement is still ongoing, yet in this research, the time was only limited to one year. Thus, if the paper examines a longer period, there may be new framing themes that arise, which could lead to identity construction among Iranian diasporas. Secondly, due to personal language barriers, this paper only examined English-based tweets and diasporic websites. By framing their personal narratives in their non-native language, it could lead to difficulties when expressing their values and beliefs. Additionally, this could potentially lead to unexplored themes or information that are found in Persian posts. Lastly, the number of data and hashtags could be increased to gain a larger pool of information. For instance, in this research, only three hashtags were used to limit the data to the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. However, other less common hashtags were also employed in tweets for this movement, which may contain relevant data. Moreover, as the scope of the diasporic websites is large, not all websites were analysed thoroughly. Therefore, this paper recommends future researchers who understand Persian to further widen the scope of the research. For example, other social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, can be used to supplement the content analysis. Instagram especially focuses on visual posts; thus, textual-visual thematic analysis can be conducted in a longer

period to observe the identity formation in both short term and long term (Trombeta & Cox 2022).

The examination on how diaspora communities form collective identity through cyberfeminism within the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement contains important academic and societal implications. First, this paper allows future researchers to identify how different diaspora communities from other countries use distinct mechanisms to influence their home countries' socio-political sphere. Additionally, by understanding the influence that diaspora communities have on their home country, it helps researchers predict Iranian policy shifts and changes in diplomatic relations between Iran and other countries. On the other hand, the impact that diaspora communities have on their host country might also affect the diplomatic relations between their host and home country. Apart from the academic implications, the societal implications of this paper need to be discussed. This research contributes to the opening of discourse on women's rights in the Iranian patriarchal society. Finally, this research can inspire diasporas from other countries to act for their home countries, most notably diaspora communities who share a similar background as diaspora from Iran.

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