

**Performative activism: A critical discourse analysis of a
Twitter corpus around the engagement of the Global
North in the 2022 #WomanLifeFreedom Iranian protests**

Engaging Public Issues

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging discourses on Twitter that refer to Western activism shared on social media concerning the 2022 Iranian protests. The focal point for these protests was the death of Mahsa Amini, which incited widespread demonstrations in Iran. Western activists aligned themselves with the protests by performing acts mirroring those of Iranian citizens, such as cutting their hair. These demonstrations, which gained attention in the online sphere, were critically assessed by Twitter users, leading to the emergence of various discourses. Employing a critical discourse analysis, the study aims to analyze the primary discourses constructed within the online environment. The analysis draws upon a dataset of 1,644 tweets posted between October and December 2022. The research is grounded in a twofold theoretical framework. Firstly, it explores the central concept of performativity, as articulated by Austin (1962), emphasizing the alignment between one's thoughts and actions. Secondly, it examines performativity in light of Thimsen's (2022) perspective, which relates it to slacktivism and value signaling. Through this investigation, the paper aims to scrutinize the complexities and implications of performative activism within the online realm.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis, performative activism, slacktivism, value signaling

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
1. <i>Introduction</i>	4
2. <i>Problem statement</i>	5
2.1 <i>Thesis Aims</i>	6
3. <i>Theory Framework</i>	7
3.1. <i>Activism and Performativity</i>	7
3.2. <i>Post-colonial Studies and Modernity</i>	9
3.3. <i>Gender and “Woman, Life, Freedom” Feminist Movement</i>	10
4. <i>Methods and data</i>	11
4.1. <i>Study Design</i>	11
4.2. <i>Data Collection</i>	11
4.3. <i>Data Analysis</i>	14
4.4. <i>Privacy and Ethics</i>	14
5. <i>Results</i>	15
5.1. <i>The Performative Activism Discourse</i>	17
5.1.2. <i>Call for Impactful Action</i>	18
5.1.3. <i>Hypocrisy and Comparisons</i>	21
5.1.4. <i>Sarcasm as a Coping Mechanism</i>	22
5.1.5. <i>Slacktivism, Political and Social Critique of the West</i>	23
5.2. <i>The Genuine Activism Discourse</i>	25
6. <i>Discussion and Limitations</i>	28
6.1. <i>Limitations</i>	29
<i>Bibliography</i>	31
<i>CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH</i>	37

1. Introduction

Less than one year ago, news worldwide announced the death of a young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini. On September 16, 2022, the woman was pronounced dead, following three days spent in police custody. On September 13, The Iranian Guidance Patrol, or the morality police, arrested Mahsa Amini as she allegedly failed to comply with Iran's dress code by not covering her hair fully. Although the police denied allegations of ill-treatment during custody and announced her death was due to falling into a coma, the unfortunate event provoked national protests as people distrusted the officials' statements on the death cause (Uygun, 2022). The young woman's death started a series of Iranian demonstrations where citizens protested against the country's strict dress rules by burning headscarves and shouting the slogan, "Woman, Life, Freedom." Some protestors, mainly women, displayed their resentment towards the Iranian government by cutting off their hair. This specific act is embedded in a deeply rooted mourning tradition, as hair is interpreted as a sign of femininity in Iranian culture (Mehrabi, 2022). Since long hair, perceived as a feminine trait, is intertwined with the dichotomic understanding of gender, cutting it as a protest for Mahsa Amini's death became not only a cultural expression but also a political demonstration aimed at destroying the long-lasting gender norms (Mehrabi, 2022). This materialization of the mourning tradition goes back to the epic poem *Shahnameh* in which Farangis cuts her hair as a mourning ritual for her deceased husband (Mehrabi, 2022). In light of the events happening in Iran, audiences from the Global North joined the protests by displaying solidarity and support for the Iranian citizens. Thus, Western actresses and politicians went public and showed themselves cutting off their hair in videos or more formal environments such as the European Parliament. The hashtags #WomanLifeFreedom and #MahsaAmini became the leitmotifs of these activist expressions as people were showing their support for the Iranian movement online.

Along with social media posts and messages, some Western activists joined the international protests by filming themselves cutting their hair and uploading the videos online to show their support for the demonstrations in Iran. Consequently, discourses quickly emerged around the authenticity and effectiveness of these performances. One central platform that hosted the appearance of such discourses became Twitter. News outlets and public figures promptly addressed and shared these events on their accounts, contributing to their visibility and promulgation. The events dissemination allowed several Twitter users to express various viewpoints once the posts reached a large online public.

2. Problem statement

Twitter is a social media platform that has earned popularity worldwide; it permits its users to communicate their views and reflections in tweets that can enclose up to 280 characters (Twitter Developer Platform Overview, 2023) and has been estimated to be actively utilized by around 555 million people (Murthy, 2013). Authors regard it as Facebook's public alternative (Murthy, 2013). Along with these features, Twitter's crucial characteristic is hashtag usage. Portrayed by Marcelo & Marcelo (2021, p. 72) as "words or groups of words preceded by the # symbol that allows users to participate in conversations on a specific topic and thus group them under the same label," hashtags can be used to link a message posted on Twitter to a precise cause, therefore joining the community of users engaged in the issue and the discourses around it. As it has become part of the mundane life of numerous people (Murthy, 2013), Twitter has intertwined with several sociological phenomena, including activism and activist performances (Chon & Park, 2020).

As social media use and popularity have extended over the last decades, it has coalesced with some forms of activism. People regard these platforms as valuable tools for disseminating societal or political issues (Chon & Park, 2020). In the context of the co-existence of activism, which has assembled a unique strand, social activism (Chon & Park, 2020), and social media, Twitter has evolved into one of the most prominent social media platforms associated with social media activism (Murthy, 2013). In his book about Twitter, Murthy (2013) has composed an extensive chapter about the platform and its relation to this recent type of activism. To emphasize how Twitter has been employed to support social causes, spread awareness or express activism and solidarity, the author notes several cases and the hashtags associated with them; Occupy Wall Street with #OWS / #Occupy, or the "Arab Spring" movements are some of them (Murthy, 2013, p. 92). By examining the interconnection between real-life movements and their online depictions, Murthy (2013) draws conclusions on how information shared on Twitter played an essential role in "facilitating a global network of individuals who participated in a wide-ranging set of mobilization efforts" (p. 114). As Andrew Sullivan (2009, apud Cabrera et al., 2017) phrased it a while ago while addressing the Iranian socio-political climate, "The revolution will be Twittered," thus underlining the platform's strong tie with social activism. Therefore, actions carried on this platform and discourses communicated by users may have a tangible impact on the causes they are associated with.

In this light, the dynamic interplay between activism and Twitter makes it an intriguing examination subject, as it reveals how interconnectivity enables individuals to engage with the world and voice their beliefs. In the context of the Western activist performances, their displays were shared on Twitter; thus, they have reached a potentially vast number of people. As a result, this has sparked diverse discourses concerning the authenticity of these actions, demanding analysis as they reflect the response of various publics and their assessment of the perceived potency or inefficiency.

A critical discourse analysis was employed to explore the discourses that emerged around the case, utilizing its expertise in critically examining language usage to address social injustices and power dynamics (Albert & Salam, 2013). It is relevant to study different types of discourses on Western activism, as disagreements on what makes activism helpful can lead to potential productive outcomes by concluding and demanding what changes need to be done (Thimsen, 2022).

Hence, the research question of the present study reads:

- What are the discourses on Twitter in response to women in the Global North cutting their hair in solidarity with the Iranian protests of 2022?

2.1 Thesis Aims

The aims of the thesis are twofold. Firstly, it seeks to establish a comprehensive understanding of the enduring associations between conceptualized geographical spaces, "The West" and "The Orient," as described in Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism (Said, 1978). The examination comprises the cultural and political facets of these associations. Secondly, the paper analyses how the up-mentioned relationships facilitate activism and its impact on various publics. Throughout history, these associations have frequently emerged on demarcationist principles, wherein the concept of otherness reinforced power dynamics between geographically established in-groups and out-groups (Staszak, 2008). In the context of recent technological advancements, the study endeavors to examine these relationships within the realm of the online environment by building on digitalism and drawing upon post-colonial literature to undermine the junction between the two.

Additionally, the thesis explores how social media serve as means for individuals to articulate how they construct their understanding of the world.

One significant factor that influenced the analysis of the discourses was gender, given that the "Woman, Life, Freedom" is mainly a women's movement (Mehrabi, 2022). The exploration has provided special attention to which gendered groups have articulated types of discourses. In addition, a multifaceted conceptualization of "gender" has been provided to thoroughly understand what shapes it can take in collective imaginaries and how it plays a role in enacting violent behaviors and influences consequent responses online.

Another noteworthy acknowledgment of the thesis is the usage of the term "The West" and its derivatives (e.g., Western), despite the academic discussions regarding their colonialist implications. It is crucial to contextualize the language engaged in this paper. By employing these terms, the aim is to facilitate a comprehensive analysis and foster an active involvement with the language and perspectives performed by the principal agents. Although ample literature discusses the colonialist underlayers of these terms (Bhambra, 2014; Edwards, 2020; Said, 1978; Staszak, 2008), which might reinforce notions of otherness, a deliberate decision has been made to work with this terminology. Given that most of the tweets encapsulating the data of this examination employed this vocabulary, an equal relationship is established between them and the term "Global North," assuring a consistent tone throughout the thesis.

3. Theory Framework

The thesis adopts a theoretical framework that embraces literature on postcolonialism and theories on performativity. In conjunction with these relevant theories, a theoretical approach will delve into an extensive comprehension of gender, activism, modernity, and their intersectionality.

3.1. Activism and Performativity

As the case revolves around "performative activism," it is necessary to grasp what it entails. Using Chon & Park's (2020) definition of activism, this phenomenon is conceptualized as "the collective action of like-minded people (i.e., polarized people) to change a society, a policy, or an organization in relation to contentious issues." (Chon & Park, 2020, p. 74). Thus, activism encompasses the idea of change through collective endeavors.

Furthermore, to undertake an extensive analysis of the case, the term performative will be illustrated in both ways it has been conceptualized. Firstly, performative determines the congruence between individuals' theoretical and actual actions, as articulated by Austin (1962). Secondly, it has been used interchangeably with slacktivism, which refers to demeanors intended to signal allyship but lacking actual impact (Thimsen, 2022). The author notes that it is not necessarily online behaviors that build slacktivism; instead, what connects it to the online world is its strong tie to "digital technologies" (p. 84).

The well-established understanding of "performative" comes from J. A. Austin's and Judith Butler's work – their grasps support that for performative endeavors, what is said is also done, and the acts result from overlapping thought and its physical expression (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997, apud Thimsen, 2022). Butler's understanding of performativity links to self-construction and gender. In the discourse concerning gender performativity, Butler associates human life with a "ritual, social drama" and focuses on how the self is performed through repetitive social performances (Lloyd, 2015, p. 575). This comprehension of gender influenced feminist theory by emphasizing the agency of gender performance (Lloyd, 2015). For Austin, performativity is linked to language and speech, as he underlines the congruence between speech and the acts it describes (Lloyd, 2015). Therefore, these initial approaches to performativity and performance support gender agency and speech performativity regarding actions, highlighting the term's performative relatively positive and practical attributes.

In contrast, some literature has characterized the performative nature of specific actions as diverging from Butler's and Austin's understandings. In the context of solidarity, performative activism is commonly described as a form of inauthenticity and discrepancy. Along with the potential in-depth engagement that comes along with performative actions (e.g., educating the public on a topic through social actions) (Greijdanus et al., 2020), specific authors consider that performative activism can take the form of value signaling, which consists of actions that bring no positive impact to the cause (Thimsen, 2022). Additionally, posing as an ally may be seen as rewarding the self or even as a need to say something about the cause out of fear of being canceled (Kalina, 2020). Therefore, labeling certain acts and critiques of these acts as performative activism may sound like a critique itself, an accusation. However, using Thimsen's (2022) approach, this initial accusation should become a demand instead. As the author put it, the accusation of "performative activism," in fact, "demands more performance" (Thimsen, 2022, p. 88).

Some authors explore the meaning behind performative activism and suggest that this type of allyship/activism reinforces colonization by reifying and "continuing separation" (Klutz et al., 2019, p. 5).

3.2. Post-colonial Studies and Modernity

In light of the second approach to solidarity, performative activism, described as acts of rewarding the self, may find its roots in the post-colonial idea of "the other," as expressed by Bhabra (2014). Some literature noted that history had been reiterated through the Western lens, reinforcing a dichotomy that places modernity in opposition with the other (Bhabra, 2014). Substantive literature on modernity examined its colonial undertones and the contributors to its growth. According to Edwards (2020), the progress of modernity is, at its core, "colonial, racial, and global" (p. 1183). Its development is based on global relations, especially with the Global South, which has been since ignored and instead placed in an outside position. The author highlights the understanding of modernity's formation process through Winant's (2001, apud Edwards 2020) lens, which portrays modernity as a result of imperialist states and capitalism's international economic influence. "Modernity [was and is] a global racial formation project." (Winant, 2001, p. 19, apud Edwards 2020).

Bhabra (2014) also addresses modernity using a post-colonialist approach – the author discusses its colonialist foundation and its opposition with an imagined other. In his work, Bhabra (2014) mentions Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1994), which argues the relation "between Western discourses and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern (woman)" (p. 117). The literature has been analyzing this opposition thoroughly for the past decades. Said (1978) has addressed this issue by pointing towards a deeper understanding of the historical juxtaposition between Europe (or the West) and the Orient. In his work, Said (1978) argues that Orient is instead an "integral part" of Europe, even though Western discourses had pictured it as an adjacent element (p. 2). As the author put it, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident" (Said, 1978, p. 2). Another core idea of the book suggests that the development of European culture has its grounds in the historical oriental colonies (Said, 1978).

In contrast, Western historical discourses regard "European identity as a superior one in comparison) with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, 1978, p. 7). In this light,

literature uncovers the colonial grounds of Western discourses concerning the Orient. As Klutzz et al. (2019) highlighted the connections between these grounds and current activism worldwide, it would be essential to scrutinize if these connections are reiterated in the corpus analyzed by this study.

3.3. Gender and "Woman, Life, Freedom" Feminist Movement

For the case of this study, a conceptualization of the term gender needs to be defined. The theories used to picture an understanding of gender encapsulate two approaches. One is J. W. Scott's (2013) approach, which views gender as "a perpetual site for political contestation, one of those locations for the deployment of knowledge in the interests of power" (Scott, 2013, p. 74). Under this light, gender serves as a foundation to explore the contested, constructed, and resisted visions of social order which appear around the definitions of masculinity and femininity. Thus, this conceptualization of gender provides insights into the reasoning behind naming the movement "Woman, Life, Freedom" and its potential political and cultural objectives.

As mentioned previously, the case of the Iran conflict and the Western women's acts of cutting their hair can highlight how knowledge about the said cause is produced and how it correlates with the "radical absence of the other" (Quijano, 2010, p. 173, apud Bhambra, 2014). The demarcation between Western modernity and other cultures, as explored by Bhambra (2014) and Klutzz et al. (2019), reinforces a sense of division between those engaging in (performative) activism as providers and the receivers, thereby settling a "us and/vs. them" framework (Klutzz et al., 2019, p. 5).

In these terms, the post-colonial approaches overlap the work of feminists worldwide who support the Iranian women's cause. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" is not only a women-led movement (Kohan, 2022; Dabiri, 2023) but also a feminist movement (Mehrabi, 2022). To explain why this is the case, the author portrays the term woman as the materialization of the gender issues perpetuated in the Iranian culture and addresses the deep conjunction between gender and hair (Mehrabi, 2022). In the paper, Mehrabi (2022) explains how long hair (usually covered by hijab) facilitates segregation and mistreatment of certain bodies. As a feminist movement, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests and demonstrations have been accompanied by feminist engagement from the Global North. One way they showed their solidarity for Iranian women was, as noted already, by cutting their hair in front of offline or

online audiences. In understanding the effectiveness of such acts, it is crucial to analyze the response from people actively affected by the ongoing situation in Iran. In an attempt to address colonial solidarity, Boudreau Morris (2016) notes that a critical point of decolonizing solidarity is engaging in discussions that embrace the potential discomfort and facilitate listening to other people. In addition, the author discusses how Western feminists must pay close attention to avoiding "othering in the name of feminism" (Boudreau Morris, 2016, p. 10).

4. Methods and data

4.1. Study Design

This project adopts a qualitative research approach to interpret the emergence of Twitter discourses surrounding the topic and how certain Twitter users perceive acts of solidarity in the Global North. The qualitative approach enables a nuanced and profound understanding of the phenomenon, offering thorough insights into the subject matter. Using this approach, one can analyze the meaning people give to "a social or human problem" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 41) inductively. Thus, it will help explore and grasp the meaning behind the comments posted on the platform regarding the current ongoing Iranian context that led to the response in the Global North. In this way, the study's findings will rely solely on the analysis of the texts found on Twitter and will result in an interpretation of how particular publics perceive the world they are part of (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Moreover, it provides the freedom to grasp the "complexity of views" instead of limiting the data to a few classes and categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 46). The content will be analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA represents a specific type of discourse analysis that explores "the role of language in society and political processes" (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; p. 178). It focuses on how language maintains social and political issues and analyzes how it can support power inequalities (Bouvier & Machin, 2018).

4.2. Data Collection

In the process of gathering the materials from Twitter, there were two phases 1) choosing a corpus of prominent tweets in which the acts of cutting the hair are presented and 2)

following the responses (in the form of tweets) to these posts over three months: October, November, and December 2022. As hashtags represent a core element of the 2022 protests, two of them were followed, #WomanLifeFreedom and #MahsaAmini. Two main subjects have been under the spotlight in the given context: actresses who displayed their acts of cutting their hair in support of the Iranian women online, and female politicians who did the same, but in more formal environments (e.g., the European Parliament). The data corpus comprises 1.644 tweets, out of which 676 were male and likely-to-be male-authored posts, 423 were female and likely-to-be-female-authored, five were posted by non-binary users, and 452 tweets were posted by users with unknown characteristics (Table 1 & Table 2). The tweets followed regarding these acts were divided into two categories, acts done by actresses and politicians. The responses from Twitter users regarding the two categories were analyzed, and differences or similarities between the perceptions and interpretations of these two classes were drawn and linked to the existing literature. Eighteen main posts and their comment sections were utilized in the analysis. The accounts chosen were either news accounts or public figures (activists or politicians). To create an in-depth analysis of the Twitter corpus, the differences between the discourses were drawn based on the gender, location, and ethnicity of the people posting the comments.

Table 1. *Descriptives. Posts about actresses.*

Discourses	<i>Male & Likely-to-be-male- authored</i>	<i>Female & Likely-to-be- female-authored</i>	<i>Non-binary</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Total</i>
Neutral Discourse	2	2	0	2	6
Performative Activism Discourse	237	198	5	160	600
Genuine Activism Discourse	92	59	0	47	243
Critiques of Critics Discourse	8	4	0	1	13

Table 2. *Descriptives. Posts about politicians.*

Discourses	<i>Male & Likely-to-be-male- authored</i>	<i>Female & Likely-to-be- female-authored</i>	<i>Non-binary</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Total</i>
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Neutral discourses	6	2	0	3	11
Performative Activism Discourse	286	64	0	160	510
Genuine Activism Discourse	76	54	0	70	243
Critiques of Critics Discourse	2	7	0	9	18

According to recent statistics posted by Statista (www.statista.com), the classification of Twitter users as of January 2022 was 56.4% male and 43.6% female. As of May 2022, Statista (www.statista.com) mentions that most traffic on Twitter has been registered in the United States (25.47%), followed by Japan (14.96%) and the United Kingdom (5.53%). Thus, analyzing these demographics provides valuable insights into the people creating the discourses. Although the Iranian "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests have received broad support from Iranian men activists, it is nonetheless a women-led movement (Kohan, 2022; Dabiri, 2023). These women are protesting against the mistreatment they have been experiencing by the Iranian regime based on religious rationales (Dabiri, 2023). As a woman-led movement, it is noteworthy to analyze which groups engage in certain discourses on Twitter regarding the activism coming from the Global North.

The language choice for the thesis, English, was based on a few considerations. Firstly, as the movement and the protests reached the international community, they were shared in English, so many people could engage with the cause. Therefore, several tweets depicting the gestures were posted in English, and most answers were written in the same language. Secondly, the choice goes back to personal limitations that did not allow the data written in other languages (e.g., Farsi or French) to be translated. This happened due to a need for more knowledge of the mentioned languages. As these considerations may foster limitations of the study, they will be explored in-depth in the Limitations section.

4.3. Data Analysis

Having collected all the tweets presenting the cases (either actresses or politicians cutting their hair), the demographics mentioned were analyzed using the program Namsor. This name-checking technology based on artificial intelligence processes over 7.5 billion names and enhanced its techniques in partnership with international universities (e.g., Harvard, Berkeley) and international institutions (e.g., ONU, European Commission) (Namsor, n.d.). Namsor shares reports on Twitter account names that provide insights into the country of origin of the tweet and the users' potential nationality and gender. As Twitter does not provide reports on gender (Meltwater, 2021), this characteristic was analyzed manually by collecting the names or usernames, adding the cluster into Namsor, and using the first name gender split (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020). Thus, using the website's databases, the users' genders were split into a few categories based on the first name displayed on the account. According to Thelwall & Thelwall (2020), this method provides three possible categories "(a) likely to be male-authored; (b) likely to be female-authored; (c) unknown" (p. 3). Additionally, several users added information regarding their characteristics on their Twitter profiles. Thence, users who expressed their features on their accounts were not added to the three categories mentioned above. In contrast, concerning gender, they were added to three additional categories: male, female, and non-binary. This way, the number of tweets posted by female and likely-to-be female and male and likely-to-be male authors are scrutinized, and the differences across the discourses can be compared. After gathering the data and exploring the demographics, the texts were coded using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), ATLAS.ti (Paulus & Lester, 2016). Analyzing the data was split into three phases 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding. These three phases facilitate the extraction of in-depth and nuanced meanings from the texts (William & Moser, 2019).

4.4. Privacy and Ethics

There is an ongoing debate on whether social media platforms are public or private spaces, given the large number of users and types of content shared. According to The British Psychological Society, "a blurred line exists between public and private online spaces. (...) In this new medium, it is not always easy to determine which online spaces people perceive as

'private' or 'public,' where they might be happy to be observed or otherwise. To complicate things further, a communication perceived as private at the time (e.g., a posting to a password-protected online discussion group) may become public at a much later date, should the archived information become publicly accessible (as has happened on occasion in the past)." (British Psychological Association, 2013, pp. 6-7). Therefore, conducting research that gathers materials from Twitter raises concerns regarding privacy and ethics. However, as Ahmed et al. (2017) stated, while Facebook is usually perceived as a private online space, Twitter is seen as the opposite. One reason for this is that content on Twitter can be easily accessed on an individual level using the Twitter API (Ahmed et al., 2017).

Moreover, the visibility of accounts and contents is set to be public by default; therefore, one can easily perceive Twitter as a public space (Ahmed et al., 2017). However, the authors consider the rationale arguable (Ahmed et al., 2017). Another sensitive aspect is linked to informed consent, which is usually part of research projects when gathering data. Ahmed et al. (2017) noted that, in the case of research on Twitter, informed consent is hardly ever used, as "it would be very labor intensive to individually ask each user whether or not they would take part in the research." (p. 87). As for legal concerns, by agreeing to Twitter's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy, users consent to third parties having access to their private data (Twitter 2016a, apud Ahmed et al. 2017). For this study, a principled approach to ethics and privacy has been implemented. Hence, the usernames of the accounts investigated throughout the three months are disclosed. In contrast, the names and usernames of the people engaging in the comment sections, where discourses are formed, remain anonymous. This approach represents the mix of two suggestions Ahmed et al. (2017) gave researchers looking to improve their projects' ethics and privacy procedures.

5. Results

Following the analysis of the Twitter corpus, several discourses have emerged around the case. Out of these, four main discourses were identified, each associated with different approaches. One discourse, which comprised the most tweets, argued for the performative character of the acts, synonymous with slacktivism - the Performative Activism Discourse. The second one depicted an oppositional perspective, arguing for the activism's genuineness and authenticity - the Genuine Activism Discourse. The third discourse holds the neutral position that some users took, which did not argue whether the acts lacked substance or were inherently helpful – the Neutral Discourse. Lastly, the fourth discourse that emerged

consisted of critiques that some people addressed to the critics of the actresses and politicians, noting that focusing on the level of authenticity of their solidarity may damage the cause – the Critiques of Critics Discourse. However, only two discourses are comprehensively analyzed in this study due to their predominance in the online environment, the Performative Activism Discourse and the Genuine Activism Discourse.

On the one hand, the Performative Activism Discourse was built upon critiques of performativity as described by Thimsen (2022) or Klutzz et al. (2019), which argued that performative activism overlaps value signaling and slacktivism.

On the other hand, the Genuine Activism Discourse portrays solidarity positively, viewing it as both practical and legitimate on a ground of performativity resulting from the uniformity between what one thinks and does (Austin, 1962).

The other two, namely the Neutral Discourse, where individuals neither critiqued nor praised the acts, and The Critiques of Critics Discourse, will be briefly mentioned for the study's integrity. The reason for not developing a thorough analysis of these two last discourses results from the lack of consistent data. As observed in Table 1 and Table 2, the number of tweets building the Neutral Discourse and the Critiques of Critics Discourse are a small part of the total number of tweets (1% of the total tweets was the Neutral Discourse for both actresses and politicians and approx. 2% was the Critiques of Critics Discourse). Given that the analysis of these two discourses would have lacked significant data to support a thorough comprehension, a decision was made to exclude them from the scrutiny. However, they might pose an intriguing case of study for further research projects should the researchers use a larger amount of materials.

A comparative analysis will be conducted between politicians and actresses to uncover both the similarities and differences between the discourses, providing a comprehensive insight into the overall discourse landscape.

One notable finding of this analysis is that the dominant group on Twitter, male and likely-to-be-male-authored, shaped the main two discourses, the Performative Activism Discourse, and the Genuine Activism Discourse. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, more than half of Twitter's users are male (www.statista.com), and this distribution is revealed in the analysis results.

5.1. The Performative Activism Discourse

In October 2022, shortly after the protests in Iran emerged, social media was flooded with posts showcasing public figures, particularly Western actresses and politicians, engaging in activism displays. Most posts about actresses on Twitter focused on French-based individuals who took the stage, particularly on Instagram. All nine Twitter posts in the analysis that mentioned the actresses made specific references to their French nationality. Additionally, seven of the nine embedded videos of the actresses cutting their hair, some even mentioning prominent names related to the protests.

"French actresses including Juliette Binoche and Isabelle Huppert cut locks of their hair off in protest over the death of Mahsa Amini, who died while in the custody of Iran's morality police"

One such example is the up-mentioned tweet by Reuters, an international news outlet, posted on its official Twitter account. Along with the caption, Reuters added a video compilation featuring several footages of individuals, "French actresses" as the tweet depicts, cutting their hair. The focus on French actresses undergoing the acts may have several explanations. A reason for the core association between Western solidarity and French agents links to the French actresses' popularity on Instagram. For example, as of June 2023, French actress Juliette Binoche is followed by 425.000 users on Instagram. Moreover, the platform has verified and checked her account, given that it features a blue verification mark. The blue verification mark was first adopted by Twitter in 2009, and since then, other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, have done the same (Xiao et al., 2023). The blue check on social media accounts marks the authenticity of the profile, ensuring a high level of trustworthiness in the identity of the person managing the account (Twitter Verification Requirements – How to Get the Blue Check, 2023). Given that the acts done by French actresses gained social engagement through their popularity on Instagram, they have potentially become leading figures of the demonstrations portrayed by news outlets on Twitter.

In contrast, most politicians who partook in these performances cut their hair in official environments. These performances were captured on camera and, later on, posted on Twitter. Consequently, a common reaction emerged, comprising critiques that emphasized these performances' theatrical nature and lack of substantive impact. As reflected in the analysis, an

intriguing feature of this discourse is the confluence between the core criticisms directed toward both groups of performers.

The Performative Activism Discourse dominated the online environment within the selected posts and did not vary depending on the agents performing (actresses or politicians). In both categories, it encompassed 600 tweets (actresses) and 510 tweets (politicians). As previously mentioned, the analysis indicated a dominant group that articulated the discourse, male and like-to-be-male-authored (523 tweets), followed by the group with unknown authors' characteristics (320 tweets), and then the group with female and likely-to-be-female-authored (262 tweets). This prevailing discourse underlines the perceived lack of authenticity in such displays of solidarity, as grasped by the online public. In light of this interpretation, the performative nature of solidarity becomes synonymous with slacktivism, increasing the "feel-good factor" of the engaged agents (Christensen, 2011, p. 1). Four main components consolidated the Performative Activism Discourse, the Call for Impactful Action rhetoric, Hypocrisy and Comparisons, Sarcasm as a Coping Mechanism, and Slacktivism, Political and Social Critique of the West, and will be analyzed as follows.

5.1.2. Call for Impactful Action

The theatrics and inauthenticity factor articulated by the discourse became apparent through one of the core constituents: -the call for impactful action- rhetoric. Several Twitter users have voiced their concerns regarding Western solidarity's perceived lack of impact, emphasizing the necessity of concrete actions. Critics not only underscored the need for actual acts but also provided context-specific actions that could be undertaken to make a meaningful impact. A prevalent demand, often portrayed with a sarcastic tone, was for the individuals to physically go to Iran and demonstrate solidarity.

"Cutting the hair in a meeting doesn't make sense. Go to Iran, stand on the street, and do the same. Then it is justified." (likely-to-be-male individual)

An illustrative example of these demands can be observed above. This user highlights that cutting hair outside of Iran to show support lacks justification. Consequently, the user demands physical action and engagement. In his paper on solidarity, Kolers (2011) discusses the four main characteristics that are "necessary and sufficient" for solidarity to be justified:

durability, deference, capacities, and duties (p. 2). According to his understanding of solidarity, it takes shape once groups unite to fight for a shared political cause (Kolars, 2011). By cutting their hair outside of Iran, Western activists' solidarity is portrayed as unjustified and lacking sense, even though they seem to share the same political struggle as Iranian citizens. From this perspective, solidarity gains credibility once it is not performed remotely.

"so go to that country and fight, do you expect belgium to go to war with iran to fight for women's rights, go to iran and join the protests there, belgium has nothing to do with it" (unknown user features)

On October 7, almost one month after the death of Mahsa Amini, Belgian foreign minister Hadja Lahbib cut her hair in the European Parliament in support of the protests that were happening in Iran. After the news about her demonstration reached the online public through Twitter posts, people quickly reacted to this gesture, linking it to a broader political context. As the tweet above shows, the action performed by an individual in an official setting became inherently associated with a specific geographical space, Belgium. The politician did not only exercise her agency but also became an imagined representative of a larger community. Consequently, a strong correlation was established between a social issue, the death of a young Iranian woman, and the political dynamics between Iran and Belgium. This perspective claims that when an ally fails to protest alongside the Iranian citizens directly affected by the ongoing Iranian context, they are considered to have no stake in the internal affairs of the Iranian state. This dichotomy has been explored by academic literature before when researchers questioned whether activism online could have the same positive impact and efficiency as in-person collective action (Polat, 2005). This raises a new concern: By demanding tangible physical action from the international community while advocating for non-interference by external states in another state's political and social climate, it becomes unclear whether it is outside individuals whose impact-lacking actions are at fault. The call for individuals to physically protest in Iran and exhibit genuine support raises the question of whether the geopolitical state in question should abstain from involvement. The evident demarcation between the in-group and out-group reinforces the idea of distinct identities, consolidating the notion of otherness (specifically, geographical otherness) (Staszak, 2008).

"Not a trim, ladies, if you want to make a statement." (likely-to-be-female individual)

"we need to shave it all. full-on sacrifice or nothing. This is a serious matter, but do take yourself seriously. Shave it all." (like-to-be-male individual; Farsi-looking name)

"That's simply pathetic. Let them cut it out all the way down to the skin. Instead, it's only pure virtue signaling with no sense and effect." (likely-to-be-male individual; Western-looking name)

"This is so performative. Women in Iran are literally SHAVING their whole heads." (likely-to-be-male individual)

Alternatives for actions lacking impact take different shapes. While some advocate for an alternative physical engagement through joining the protests in Iran, others demand proof of genuine sympathy from Western activists by addressing the amount of hair cut. In all four tweets above, users highlighted that making an impactful statement within the context requires sacrifice. As a symbolic act, cutting small amounts of hair is therefore regarded as theatrics and virtue signaling. Interestingly, this perspective contrasts the demand for physical actions in Iran. Although Western activists might not physically participate in the protests, cutting or shaving more of their hair would be considered a serious and effective form of solidarity. In this light, while their physical presence may not be directly affected by joining protests, their symbolic sacrifice of giving up their hair holds considerable potential in supporting the cause. The concept of sacrifice to protect, save, or prevent is deeply intertwined with distinct life forms, ranging from human individuals to bacteria (Bélanger et al., 2018). The authors argue that empirical evidence demonstrates the presence of "powerful social forces" underlying the willingness to self-sacrifice (Bélanger et al., 2018, p. 478). Thence, such acts are not regarded as "irrational" but rather critical factors in promoting "group survival" (Bélanger et al., 2018, p. 479). Consequently, sacrificing part or the wholeness of oneself gains emotional and social weight, bringing individuals closer in their shared fight for a common cause. Moreover, self-sacrifice shares similarities with egalitarianism, which advocates for equality among all individuals (Bélanger et al., 2018).

5.1.3. Hypocrisy and Comparisons

The fact that the protests in the West emerged shortly after those in Iran drew attention from some individuals who questioned the immediate response of activists and raised concerns about their reactions, or lack thereof, to former or ongoing violence or discrimination.

"I wish if the same solidarity will be done in support of the Palestinians, Afghans, Iraqis and the Pakistani girls." (like-to-be-male individual)

"Why not starve herself for 3 days in solidarity of the millions of hunger stricken kids living in Yemen, Syria, Gaza, Somalia and the rest. It's purely hypocritical to show you love Iranian citizens more than the Iran government. You can only deceive the fools." (unknown features)

Both tweets above highlight the ongoing political conflicts in other states geographically proximal to Iran, such as Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In the past decades, all these states have experienced violent incidents that have gained international attention from the public. The critiques focused on the activists' lack of engagement with these causes, suggesting their actions are hypocritical. As Western activists cut their hair in solidarity with Iranian women, some argue that proper support requires experiencing the same suffering as the victims of different causes. They propose that activists should even embrace starvation so their solidarity gains substance. This raises a provocative question about how people perceive the limited engagement of international activists with these causes, despite the existence of literature that has examined the potential beneficial consequences of both online and offline solidarity (Tabar, 2017; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). However, a counterargument for this unclear approach finds its roots in Mahbubani's (2022) work on Western hypocrisy.

According to the author, hypocrisy has become a two-edged characteristic of the West: while the West theoretically seeks to eradicate it, in practice, it might reinforce it, emphasizing the necessity of a robust moral reasoning compass (Mahbubani, 2022).

"But didn't said a word against hijab ban in France... " (like-to-be-male individual)

"Hypocrites all of them. Where were there voices defending the rights of women in France who choose to wear the hijab or modest swimwear?" (likely-to-be-female individual)

"If French women can do solidarity to Muslim women not to wear hijab on their choice, then French should respect those who want to wear hijab on their choice too. Don't simply ban and criminalised hijab wearing in French" (likely-to-be-male individual; Western-looking name)

A notable comparison has been drawn between the circumstances in Iran and the regulations regarding full-face coverage in France. Starting with 2010, France has imposed stringent rules regarding facial coverings, such as burka and niqab. Wearing one either could bring sanctions up to €150 fine (France, 2023). Nevertheless, these strict guidelines do not extend to headscarves or hijabs, which are legally permitted. Even so, lawmakers have tried and proposed to ban the hijab from particular contexts, such as competitive sports (Woodyatt et al., 2022, February 1). In 2016, a series of incidents started after French police began asking people to remove certain clothing items on the beach, including burkinis (Quinn, 2017). In this context, the tweets above illustrate the lack of alignment between the situation in France concerning the wearing of face-covering pieces and the solidarity of French actresses regarding the ongoing hijab situation in Iran. Specifically, they emphasize the lack of proactive measures French communities took to support women struggling with the criminalization of hijab.

5.1.4. Sarcasm as a Coping Mechanism

One finding that emerged as particularly significant in this paper was the coping mechanism many people opted for in response to the situation, namely sarcasm. Several Twitter users chose to mock the activists, used name-calling, or made jokes about the case without adding any additional criticism.

"Cutting off some hair is a sacrifice only a hero would make. Making sure to film it is what SUPERheroes do. Good job, ladies. Thank you for fixing the world." (likely-to-be-male individual)

"What? she wants a medal for this little effort?" (likely-to-be-male individual)

"So brave, cutting a whole inch off!"(likely-to-be-female individual)

In these tweets, the authors stressed the limited actual impact of these performances by employing sarcasm, linking them to heroic acts, or juxtaposing them with praising notions such as bravery, despite the action of cutting a small amount of hair lacking inherent bravery. Previous literature has attempted to grasp sarcasm, with some authors defining it as ironic statements that present contradictory ideas between what the speaker says and the context it is tied to, often carrying a critical undertone towards the target of the statements (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2010, apud Okonski, 2017). According to Okonski (2017), sarcasm can fit within a context only when the person using it is aware of the bigger picture and socio-political underlayers in which it takes shape. Therefore, here, people using sarcasm must be aware of what it would take for Western activists to impact the cause positively and to what degree cutting their hair plays a role. By making sarcastic statements, they infer that genuine impact requires more than cutting hair and showing it to the world digitally. By comparing such acts to grand actions undertaken by heroes or superheroes, the hyperbolic effect underscores the inefficiency of these behaviors. In the review of Haiman's book on sarcasm, Okonski (2017) highlights one core aspect: identifying sarcasm by looking for a metamessage. An individual can detect sarcasm within a text by searching for the metamessage "I don't mean this" (Haiman, 1998, p. 28, apud Okonski, 2017). In this light, using phrases like "some" and "a whole inch" and addressing the potential impact of changing the world or being brave stresses the under-layered lack of alignment between symbolic meaning and its verbal form. Understanding sarcasm is also context-specific, requiring a thorough grasp of the intentions behind a speaker's statements and the broader context, and it can also be utilized as a coping mechanism (Okonski, 2017). Sarcasm can be fundamental in managing an adverse event or situation, "creating humor, and providing emotional catharsis" (Okonski, 2017, p. 531).

5.1.5. Slacktivism, Political and Social Critique of the West

The broader performative activism discourse comprises, lastly, the rhetoric that highlights the performative nature of the acts, as articulated by Bhambra (2014). In this case, solidarity is perceived as selfish acts built on illegitimate and imbalanced power relationships. The discourse comprising perspectives that depict these gestures as slacktivism or value signaling is mostly intertwined with negative perceptions of the West.

"Cutting hair is visible and performative - and easy. What you're asking is much harder. So many will do an easy thing such as cutting their hair to feel like they've done something, instead of actually doing something." (unknown user features)

Doing what seems to be the easiest and most ineffective option is the core characteristic of slacktivism (Christensen, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2017). Even though the tweet does not mention the concept per se, it provides a brief description of the term, which has been conceptualized similarly by academic literature. Cutting one's hair seems not to hold enough impact and is therefore perceived as a gesture meant to bring visibility to the individual performing it. Thus, the focus switches from the group experiencing the adverse effects of the political climate in Iran to people engaging in online solidarity endeavors. However, although this activism is perceived as unhelpful, several studies concluded that sometimes slacktivism could lead to engagement in impactful social activism (Kristofferson et al., 2013). These findings may question whether visible and "easy" actions and meaningful involvement are mutually exclusive.

"This has huge "how can I make this about me" vibes." (female)

"Many will follow suit, especially the TikTok generation. Not because they show solidarity, but because they want to gain more followers and use the fight of brave Iranian women for their own publicity." (likely-to-be-male individual)

These two posts picture selfishness in distinct ways, maintaining a similar conceptual underlayer. Both refer to Western solidarity as ways to bring the focus to oneself, thereby improving self-image or popularity digitally. TikTok has become one of the biggest social media apps in recent years, reaching over two billion downloads in the first half of 2020 (Korbani & LaBrie, 2021). However, it has been noticed that TikTok has become an ideal environment where toxic trends can emerge (Verma & Avgoulas, 2015). Thence, picking up the potential trend of cutting hair to support the Iranian protestors might become a means to an end, namely self-satisfaction, and may negatively affect the broader cause. As Kristofferson et al. (2013) put it, slacktivism becomes meaningless once the focus is placed on the individual performing it.

While some users perceived the actions as slacktivism, others chose to link it to broader critiques of the West. Thence, several individuals engaged in name-calling or chose to critique the socio-political climate produced by the West or one with which it is actively engaged.

"Drama , this how it begins when the west wants to distabilise a country" (likely-to-be-male individual)

"While you hypocrites of white privileged Europe are at it, cut the hair longer, and donate it for wigs to be made for cancer patients." (likely-to-be-male individual)

These tweets address two sensitive topics that have transformed into critiques of the West: Western involvement in other states' internal affairs and the West dealing with white privilege. By stating that the West is looking to destabilize another state, it is inferred that imbalanced power dynamics still build the international political scene. Alongside white privilege, which is assumed to be featured in the West, the demarcationist concept of in-groups and out-groups (Staszak, 2008) is reinforced. Therefore, the colonial dynamics that shaped the conceptualization of us vs. them (Klutzz et al., 2019) are reiterated through collective imaginaries.

5.2. The Genuine Activism Discourse

The second dominant discourse from the analysis opposes the first one. While the first discourse expressed critiques against the actions performed by Western actresses and politicians, the second depicts a positive perspective. This narrative comprises the gratitude and support for international solidarity expressed by a significant number of Twitter users. Similarly to the first discourse, there were no differences in attitudes toward politicians and actresses. Both categories encompassed the positive discourse, with 243 tweets for actresses and 243 for politicians. In addition, authors to have mainly articulated the discourse were male and likely-to-be-male, with a total of 168 tweets, followed by 117 tweets from users with unknown features and 113 tweets from female and likely-to-be-female-authored. One core feature of this discourse was gratitude depicted by people through their comments.

"Thanks to her for the support on Iran movements #mahsa_ amini #iran" (likely-to-be-male individual; Iranian-looking name)

"I'm so thankful to you to everyone out there who's standing with Iranians, thankful for your support and covering the news. thanks a lot . #MahsaAmini #OpIran" (likely-to-be-female individual)

"Thank you. We will remember your support in this uncaring world #MahsaAmini #NikaShakarami #IranRevolution" (likely-to-be-female individual; Iranian-looking name)

All three tweets above show gratitude for people engaging in the acts of cutting their hair. What is striking to observe is that, unlike the critical tweets, these all comprise one core hashtag of the study, #MahsaAmini. As expressed at the beginning of the thesis and articulated by Marcelo & Marcelo's (2021) perspective on hashtags' significance in fostering engagement on Twitter, the usage of the hashtag in the context of indicating gratitude establishes a symbolic connection between the genuine feeling towards Western activists and the inherent hashtag representing the cause.

"plz continue to raise awareness of iranian people" (unknown user features)

In apparent contrast to the previous grasp, some people perceived the solidarity of Western activists as means of raising awareness. While several users considered the behaviors self-centered and thus performative, others believe that actively engaging with the cause, even though merely cutting one's hair and sharing it online, can contribute to spreading awareness and potentially helping the Iranian people. This perspective accentuated a second fundamental feature of this discourse: the call for Western activists to intensify Iranianians' voices and advocate for their cause.

"Be our voice #MahsaAmini #Opiran" (likely-to-be-female individual)

"#MahsaAmini ... thank you for being a voice for Iranian people who are risking everything" (likely-to-be-female individual)

"This woman is an amazing voice for women everywhere, most importantly the women and girls of Iran." (likely-to-be-male individual)

The three tweets above emphasize the necessity of articulating the voices of the Iranian protestors. In this context, it becomes imperative for people outside of the state who can and are willing to actively engage with the protests to take on the agency of representing them. Schlozman et al. (2005) summarized that "the exercise of political voice goes to the heart of democracy." Once this exercise is no longer feasible, it shall be passed to people who can perpetuate the objectives of the cause and ensure its proper articulation. When Iranian voices are silenced by emergent violence following the protests, their political involvement gets censored. As a consequence, "civic engagement" can no longer positively affect "equal protection of interests" (Schlozman et al., 2005, p. 29). Demand for keeping Iranian women loud through international activist agencies is made to save these interests.

"Symbolism and Gestures can do wonders." (likely-to-be-female individual; Western-looking name)

"It's a symbol of Hope. Which is more powerful than money." (unknown user features)

Another positive characteristic perceived by the groups articulating this discourse stands for the symbolism behind the gestures. Digital activism provides new possibilities for collectives to undergo mobilization for social causes, thus becoming the playground for new expression forms to emerge (Rodríguez-Suárez et al., 2021). In this light, solidarity in digital settings becomes the symbolic expression of in-person protests, contributing to fighting for the collective objective. As Rodríguez-Suárez et al. (2021) explained, the dichotomic juxtaposition creates a broader "panoramic view of the current state of social mobilization." (p. 52). Joining the series of face-to-face protests using digital tools facilitates the consolidation of a new type of collective imaginaries, "virtual us," which may enhance collective mobilization (Rodríguez-Suárez et al., 2021, p. 51).

In this way, the performativity attribute of actions, as described by Austin (1962), takes shape within the same climate in which performativity is perceived as inauthenticity. Interestingly, two distinct grasps of the same notion co-exist concerning the same agent or concept.

6. Discussion and Limitations

This thesis scrutinized the reaction that emerged on Twitter once Western displays of solidarity for Iranian citizens concerning the protests in late 2022 were posted on the platform. Once the analysis was undertaken, four discourses could be outlined: while two dominated the scene, two were rather niched. Along the two main discourses which emerged, the Performative Activism Discourse and the Genuine Activism Discourse, two secondary discourses appeared, the Neutral Discourse and the Critiques of Critics Discourse. The last two discourses highlighted two unique perspectives, which did not inherently assess the acts' authenticity. The Neutral Discourse did not value the performativity or genuineness characteristics of solidarity. It solely presented comments made by users which were remotely related to the cause. The Critiques of Critics Discourse addressed the negative impact people who negatively assess the activists' actions may have on the core cause. However, the corpus used in the study needed more materials to facilitate exploring them. Therefore, the lack of scrutiny of the Neutral Discourse and The Critiques of Critics Discourse can pose a starting point for future comprehensive and extensive research on the topic.

Moreover, the principal discourses that arose from the materials, the Performative Activism Discourse and the Genuine Activism Discourse, brought to light how online publics made sense and interacted with the said activist endeavors. The findings presented striking conclusions about the data and showed how history could repeat itself in particular contexts.

The first finding that stood out for its particularity was the dominant gender across the main discourses. While the "Woman, Life, Movement" protests are a women's movement at their core (Mehrabi, 2022), the analysis highlighted a surprising fact: out of all tweets used, most of them and those that articulated the discourses were male and likely-to-be-male-authored. This is not a complete surprise, given that history shows it has been happening for a long time. In their paper on the lack of female public opinion presence, Harp et al. (2014) address the reality of a gender-imbalanced climate in the news media. After a thorough exploration of academic research, they concluded there are several main reasons that this happens: women are brought up believing they have no qualification or right to articulate their views, the culture of news is male-dominated, and women are not given enough opportunities to voice their ideas (Harp et al., 2014). Throughout history, women who demanded their voices heard were perceived as exceptional cases covered with an androgynous allure (Beard, 2015).

Consequently, women's social and political issues have been addressed through male lenses and influenced by this dominant presence in the public sphere. One crucial example refers to the ongoing pro-abortion vs. anti-abortion debate in which both men and women have taken sides and expressed their beliefs. Over time, this sensitive debate has been argued to take the shape of a social problem. (Ntontis & Hopkins, 2018). Looking at other labels used to demarcate the dispute, pro-choice/anti-choice, pro-life./anti-life, one can search and try to determine the identity of individuals engaging in certain discourses (Ntontis & Hopkins, 2018). While women are the protagonists in the abortion dispute (Ntontis & Hopkins, 2018), it nonetheless has seen effects from men engaged with the cause, regardless of their stand. Previous literature has explored how men's inherent role and involvement in women's issues could be targeted and utilized to end discrimination against women (Fabiano et al., 2003; Steele & Shores, 2015, apud Hunt & Friesen, 2021).

A second striking finding of the analysis was the utilization of sarcasm as a coping mechanism within a hostile climate. While several Twitter users chose to portray their critics or anger directly, others chose a more nuanced and subtle form that comprised sarcastic inferences. An outsider could easily grasp the setting only by reading a tweet candidly addressing the issue. Whereas, if confronted with a sarcastic statement, one might find difficulty in placing the idea within a context. Thence, the metamessage, the critical component of sarcasm, loses sense. Although sarcasm provides critical "communicative functions" that cannot be expressed through plain language, it is nonetheless considered an aggressive and impolite way of expressing one's thoughts (Zhu & Wang, 2020, p. 1). It seems, however, that sarcasm is linked not necessarily to cognition but to high levels of emotional processing (Olkoniemi et al., 2016, apud Zhu & Wang, 2020). Thus, by employing sarcasm while addressing solidarity in the context of Iranian protests, one must possess considerable levels of emotional resources to both manage and regulate their feelings towards the emerging violent incidents and express sarcasm comprehensively.

6.1. Limitations

The present study acknowledges certain limitations that, if addressed by future researchers exploring the same topic, could contribute to increasing the subject's apprehension. One limitation represents the absence of tweets expressed in languages other than English. As described earlier, a choice to employ only English posts has been consciously made.

Consequently, this has led to a significant number of tweets, or posts left out due to a lack of considerable knowledge of other languages found on Twitter while researching: French and Farsi. Had tweets posted in different languages been added to the data corpus, more insights into individuals' grasp on the situation, especially Farsi speakers, would have been explored. A second limitation refers to the platform used to gather materials, Twitter. Although users have widely used it to express their opinion or share news, Twitter can hardly embrace all insights that people share on the Internet concerning the case. However, the choice to utilize merely a reduced number of posts from a singular platform goes back to the spacial limits imposed by the thesis and the possible poor feasibility levels of conducting more extensive analysis. In the future, literature could complete the academic grasp of this topic by scrutinizing discourses emerging on different popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

The third limitation links to the significant number of users whose characteristics could not be identified. Given that the unknown users made a large part of the corpus, part of the data that could have improved the discourse analysis was not used. A thorough future exploration of online discourses may consider this aspect, ensuring that attributes such as gender or country of residency are analyzed and that all or most of the data contribute to the analysis process.

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CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: *Western performative activism in solidarity with the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Iran, and the Palestine-Israel conflict*

Name, email of student: Iustina Manea, 669100im@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Lore Van Praag, vanpraag@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: December 2022 – June 2023, 7 months

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? NO
Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1. | Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? | NO |
| 2. | Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? | YES |
| 3. | Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? | NO |
| 4. | Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?
<i>Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).</i> | NO |
| 5. | Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? | NO |
| 6. | Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? | YES |
| 7. | Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? | NO |
| 8. | Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? | NO |
| 9. | Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? | NO |
| 10. | Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? | NO |

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Given that I will be using materials from Twitter, asking for written or verbal informed consent from the users will not be feasible. This issue will be analyzed thoroughly in the "Privacy and Ethics" section of the thesis.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

The users' anonymity will be protected by not adding usernames to the research project.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

No

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Twitter

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

Min. 100 materials from Twitter (tweets)

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

Min. 500

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Digital data on my personal computer; I will store it up to the thesis deadline.
Afterwards, it will be deleted.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Iustina Manea (myself)

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

As frequent as necessary / Weekly

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

I will not link the data to any identity that could be found on the Internet.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Iustina Manea

Name (EUR) supervisor: Lore Van Praag

Date: 25.06.2023

Date: