

# **Exploring Iranian Feminist Activities on Instagram:**

**Challenging Cultural Values and Criticizing Discriminate Structures**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

I examine how Iranian feminist activists use Instagram to educate, raise awareness about women's issues, and challenge dominant cultural values. I used feminist theories, especially cyberfeminism that uses digital media to spread feminist messages, to empirically study the pages of nine feminist activists using interviews and content analysis. Among six different categories that emerged after sampling for content analysis, the issue of male dominance was discussed most in terms of percentage of posts, followed by inequality in society, and women's struggles for liberty. The issue of inequality in society was the most prioritized category highlighted by four out of the nine activists in content analysis. Male dominance and inequalities were emphasized in the interviews as well. Activists approach these topics mostly from the angle of cultural values. Both interviews and content analysis shows rather than challenging discriminate structures, they aim to raise social awareness and sympathy towards women's issues.

**Keywords:** Instagram; feminism; activism; Iran; cyberfeminism

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## Preface

I post on Instagram regularly, and I have always wondered what it means to be an influencer on social media. In 2020, when I had been active on Instagram for about three years and was interested in monitoring feminist activities on the platform, I posted about the Instagram movement #FilterDrop. I wrote about the images which women were publishing on Instagram with no filters, so that everyone could see that their skin was not flawless. Following this, my content went viral. I gained many new followers and actually became a part of the movement that I was explaining in my content. Then, questions started to emerge in my thoughts: Are my Iranian followers eager to read more about topics related to women's issues? If content about social media, the digital culture, and women's issues is sparse, is this their opportunity to learn and my opportunity to have an impact?

In the months that followed my initial post, I learned about more users who were publishing about women's issues on Instagram. While I myself leaned towards publishing about digital trends, I continued following feminist pages and monitoring their activities. This is where all my questions regarding this study began. I wanted to know what it means to create content on Instagram and raise awareness about feminist issues. Is the platform becoming a place for discussions that never have a chance to be raised in mainstream media because of their politically controversial nature? How are feminist activists on Instagram prioritizing topics? Who are they targeting and criticizing, and is this impacting their audiences? I tried to understand how these posts relate feminist issues to the Iranian society and what topics they mostly raise. I watched how they increasingly focused their activities on women's issues, and their pages became almost completely dedicated to feminism. They chose their topics following news and trends, or from their own personal experiences. I witnessed the rise of the Iranian #MeToo movement on Instagram and Twitter with the assistance of feminist pages, impressing every user with violent narratives that they had never heard before. My understanding from monitoring these pages during my research was that they mostly tended to criticize the Iranian culture and people's mindsets about women's issues. They did talk about politics and the manner in which legal frameworks of the Islamic Republic affected women's lives negatively and allowed for discrimination to take place, reducing women to second-class citizens. However, this seemed to be in the direction of raising

awareness rather than an effort to change anything legally. These feminist activists did not have governmental relations or organized ways for negotiation. Many of them were not even located inside Iran and would frequently report cyber-attacks to their pages by unknown users. As a result, I decided to examine my assumptions about their approach to activism in my academic study to further understand the feminist activities of Iranians on Instagram.



# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Social media have provided the opportunity for individuals to express themselves and their ideas publicly. Feminist activists and ordinary users who express their feminist thoughts are also a group benefiting from this opportunity. In Iran, social media have become a popular tool for self-expression in different areas from everyday life and personal experiences to politics and socio-cultural affairs. Instagram has become the most popular platform in Iran and a good number of its users have dedicated their personal pages to publishing feminist thoughts, considering the state of women's rights in Iran, and the push for a more equitable treatment. These Instagram posts provide substantial materials for studying the feminist efforts in the Iranian online sphere. In Iran's conservative society with its strong bonds to religion, feminist issues are considered sensitive and are not easy to discuss publicly. In this study, I will examine how Iranian feminist activists are using Instagram to educate users about feminism, raise awareness about women's issues, and challenge dominant cultural values. In the following, I will provide a brief background of the topic.

### **The State of Social Media in Iran**

Iranian governments have had a complicated relationship with social media. In recent years, every new administration has criticized their predecessors' censorship while they resulted in continuing those processes themselves. Most of the popular social media platforms are banned in Iran. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram are considered problematic by the Iranian government and domestic equivalents are available instead of them. For example, the platform 'Aparat' is an equivalent to YouTube. Nevertheless, this has not stopped Iranians, even Iran's political leaders and authorities, from using the banned platforms with virtual private networks (VPNs) (Khodabakhshi, 2018). Instagram remains the only platform that has not been filtered, and it is the most popular social media in Iran. Based on statistics generated by the web traffic analysis platform Statcounter, 88.5% of Iranians use Instagram while only 1%, 2.5%, and 2.3% are on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, respectively (Statcounter GlobalStats, 2022). This being said, there have been reports about banning Instagram

and replacing it with similar domestic applications in the coming years (Hashemi, 2021; Iran International, 2021; Al-Monitor, 2020). However, to this day Instagram has not been banned, probably because of the overall positive perception of it. It is likely that this positivity stems from the build-in features such as beauty filters and editing options which make the final result of edited images extra colourful, happy-looking, bright and more beautiful than reality. Such features have made Instagram different from the real world. It seems that in Instagram's aesthetic world, every positive moment and aspect of life is more likely to be highlighted, unlike Twitter where users mostly tend to reflect on news and react negatively to different events. Therefore, the Iranian government probably does not consider Instagram a political platform. Despite the threat of losing access to Instagram, several businesses run official pages on this platform and use it as a marketing tool. Some personal blogs generate high amounts of income from advertising on Instagram, and celebrities and even authorities use it as well.

Religious circles in Iran have played an important role in justifying the bans. "Immoral content" is a familiar title when it comes to banning websites and even Iranian media outlets, movies, and books (for example, see France 24, 2008; Daily Sabah, 2019). However, it is apparent that in Iran, social media have become a powerful political tool in the hands of the general public, and this has given the authorities enough reason to impose a ban on most of the platforms. Especially after the election of 2009, protests such as The Green Movement, which relied heavily on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs to quickly organize and coordinate demonstrations, resulted in more government censorship of media (Elson et al., 2012). However, Iranian social media users have taken advantage of different platforms for feminist activism. For example, activists used a Twitter hashtag for mobilizations against the compulsory hijab (Tafakori, 2021) and created social media pages to extend activities of feminist websites (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017).

Among the social media platforms in Iran, Instagram and Twitter are the most popular ones for mobilization, although the number of Twitter users is much fewer, and their activities are mostly reactions to different pieces of news. On Instagram, news plays an important role in deciding content priorities, but another part of feminist activities on this platform consists of blogging and education. Some feminist pages disclose the real individual identity of the bloggers, and some others have IDs that do not reveal the identity of the person behind them but represent the topic that they focus on.

These activists publish different issues on a daily basis, and followers learn from them about women's issues, their rights, news, and analysis.

In this study, I focused on Instagram pages that post under a certain person's name. I have content analyzed posts from nine feminist activists' pages on Instagram, and I interviewed them to understand their priorities and intentions in posting about feminist issues. Since my assumption, after monitoring their pages, was that they were targeting cultural values and the public mindset, I centered my research questions around the most popular topics and issues to be able to closely examine and analyze them. To recap, here are my research questions:

1. How are Iranian feminist activists using Instagram to challenge dominant cultural values about women?
2. What feminist subjects are mostly raised in the Iranian social media sphere?
3. How are cultural values in Iran impacting the women's movements?
4. Which cultural values about women are mostly challenged on social media?
5. What is the status of Iranian traditions in the online feminist movements?
6. How does Iranian online feminism relate to global feminist theories?

### **Feminist Activism in Iran**

The state of feminism in Iran is different from that of Western countries where feminism and the theorizing of it began. Iranian women have grown a strong social presence and achieved several improvements in education, the work force, and publications, among other areas. However, they are living in a society with strong bonds to traditions and religion including beliefs about the sacred role of women in the house and for the family. These beliefs are not only interpretations which have stemmed from Islamic values but are also rooted in the Iranian culture and history.

Historical and political events have affected women's freedom in Iran. For example, when Mongols attacked the country between 1219 and 1221, limitations began to decrease because Mongol women could become governors. Following that, other governments such as the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736) started to accept women in

social roles (Ravandi, 1977). The Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) also advanced women's role in society. In the autocratic and theocratic regime of contemporary Iran, women have very little place in politics and economics. Only in some movements, a few women appeared every once in a while, and raised women's demands in literature, film, and other artistic activities (Kar, 1997). The mentality that kept women away from social presence originated from the fact that women were not a part of economic activities, and that inner cities and the world outside the home were not safe for them (Ravandi, 1977).

In Iran, feminist activism is assumed to be developed under the influence of feminism in the West. "Belief in the superiority of Western feminist models influenced the state-sponsored Iranian feminist movement throughout the twentieth century and contributed to the alienation of more traditional and especially rural women from mainstream Iranian feminist discourse" (Naghibi, 2007, p. 44).

Fazaeli (2017) traces the beginning of the Iranian women's movement back to the late nineteenth century. Linked to Iran's relationship with Western powers, in particular Russia and Britain, and consequently to the Iranian nationalist movement and the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), women started to participate in politics. Despite their activism during the Constitutional Revolution, they were banned from voting or being elected to office. Universal suffrage was introduced much later in 1963.

In terms of social changes, most importantly, the rise in education allowed women to become more active in the public realm. Starting from the Constitutional Revolution, followed by modern beliefs stemming from the West, education became a right for women, and young girls started to go to school in 1918 (Ejlali, 2004). Women then began to attend universities and enter the work force. The number of women in the work force increased until 1976 and reached 12.9% but following the Islamic Revolution (1979), it decreased again and dropped to 8.2%. During the time of the reformist government of Khatami (1997–2005), women's presence in the work force grew (Malekzadeh, 2013). However, there are still ideal roles for women promoted in schoolbooks and national television such as teaching and nursing, while public opinion does not entirely support them. Women are not able to overcome these obstacles and change these stereotypes overnight. Therefore, they face family problems after starting jobs, since many of them are required to be in charge of house chores simultaneously (Honarparvaran, Ghaderi, & Ghobadi, 2011; Sadeghi & Badrimanesh, 2015).

In the feminist history that Naghibi (2007) and Fazaeli (2017) present, the Unveiling Act of 1936 by Reza Shah Pahlavi has been a significant point. The nationalist state formed by Reza Shah (reign 1925–1941) attempted centralization and modernization of Iran, and unveiling women was part of the Shah's modernization for the Pahlavi dynasty. However, forcing women to lose their hijab alienated religious women and traditional communities, especially in rural areas. When Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by the Allied powers in 1941, after their invasion of Iran in response to Reza Shah's support for Nazi Germany's war efforts, his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was enthroned as the new monarch. As a result, The Unveiling Act was rescinded, and women were free to wear or to discard the veil as they chose in public. While upper-class women were more eager to be veiled by the 1940s, at this time, they started to lose interest and instead, more working-class women became veiled (Naghibi, 2007).

Women started to establish political campaigns such as the Iranian Women's Party (Hizb-e Zanan-e Iran) founded in 1943 and the Society of Democratic Women (Jamey-e Democrat-e Zanan) established in 1942. They campaigned for women's political rights, especially for women's right to vote and for equal remuneration for equal work. The activism of more women's rights advocates led to the success of the women's suffrage movement being included as one of the six points of Muhammad Reza Shah's White Revolution. In the 1960s and 1970s, women's efforts for gaining equal rights started to bear fruit. The 1967 Family Protection Act (FPA) was an important move that led to the restriction of polygamy, raising the age of girls' marriage, allowing women the right to divorce, and more employment rights (Fazaeli, 2017). In the same period, the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) had ties to the second-wave feminist movement in the West, which was itself criticized for neglecting the needs of women of different races and social classes (Naghibi, 2007). This relationship with the Western version of feminism made it difficult for many Iranian women to relate to the movement.

### **Women After the Islamic Revolution**

There was mass participation of Iranian women in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, the regime that was established after the Revolution imposed different misogynistic laws that would limit women's social activities and establish more strict gender relations regarding the access of women to much of the public domain as well as strict Islamic gender relations (Fazaeli, 2017). One month after the Revolution in March

1979, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini announced decrees that would force women to be clothed according to [Islamic] religious standards in the ministries and other public offices (Moghadam, 1988). In 1980, working unveiled was completely prohibited by the Islamic Republic. In 1983, a penalty was imposed for women who would appear in public without hijab (Naghbi, 2007). The veil continued to play its role in women's social life, this time by becoming compulsory.

During the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), while men were heading to the frontlines, a number of employment opportunities were created for educated women. After the war, the Iranian society saw a growth of liberal publications and an increase in the number of active non-governmental organizations. Fazaeli (2017) mentions that a growing number of women had come to see no inherent link between patriarchy and Islamic ideals, and no contradiction between Islam and feminism (p. 27). With the presidential election of Mohammad Khatami in May 1997, different women's units were established. Soon they were labeled agents of the West and a wave of arrests started in 2004. In February 2004, the conservatives took control of the seventh Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Parliament) and the conservative political hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as president in June 2005. Civil society and women's movements faced new challenges and many activists left the country. However, in the same era, Shirin Ebadi, a lawyer who argued a new interpretation of Islamic law that is in harmony with vital human and women's rights, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her feminist efforts in Iran (The Guardian, 2003). Other activists who remained in Iran had to be creative, and using new media was an innovative way of self-expression for them (Fazaeli, 2017).

Some scholars have shown in their studies that Iranian women were not successful in occupying a significant part of the work force although they achieved more in education (Alaedini & Razavi, 2004; Zaranejad & Montazerhojat, 2005). In a study asking whether there can be a balance between housework and occupation, Iranian women mostly believed that there is conflict between the two (Tavasoli, 2003). The degree of this conflict is closely related to factors such as the level of education, the traditional roles in family, and expectations in the family (Moosavi, Safiri, & Arasteh, 2010). Many women have accepted the traditional roles of women inside the home and have internalized the values of patriarchy. According to the latest statistics, only 18.2% of the workers in Iran are women (Radio Farda, 2019). However, following social changes, the new generations are challenging these trends (Rajabzadeh, 2004).

Although politics has been an important factor in determining the situation for women in Iran, cultural values have arguably always played an even more important role in affecting women's rights in Iran. In the Iranian classical design of homes, women had special areas called 'haram' or 'andaroon' (the inner court of a house), limiting and hiding them from public (Ravandi, 1977). Also, in the movies and other cultural products, there have been stereotypes of women's roles before the Islamic Revolution. Prejudice about protecting women from 'evil men' has been a popular concept among Iranian movies. Women were considered as symbols of honourability of the family and dependent on men (Ejlali, 2004). After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a religious discourse dominated the cultural industry in Iran. In the cinema, women were seen in specific social roles with an Islamic appearance (Farahmand, 2004). On television, as the main governmental media, the traditional roles of women are constantly promoted to this day, over 40 years after the Revolution (Sarookhani & Karoobi, 2004).

While every factor from politics to culture and society have been influential in shaping the situation of women in Iran, new media have become the new possibility for them to raise their voice. In the following section, I will review how new media provided an opportunity of self-expression for Iranian women.

### **Online Feminist Activism in Iran**

In Iran, feminists have been using online tools like many other countries. Some social media users write blogs and provide information to educate others about feminist issues, and these efforts have led to more attention and reaction to different news and events about women.

Online activism in Iran started when women in this country began to learn about the internet. During the reformist government (1997-2005), women's organizations had more freedom for their public activities than the previous years. Technology and cyberspace emerged as a useful space for activist journalists to discuss their opinions with a wider audience (Shojaee, 2016). However, this was not only limited to activists.

Since the Islamic Revolution, the government controlled women's activities. Activist women were dispersed, semi-open, and deprived of any media, venue, or platform to express their views (Moghaddam, 2019). The online aspect of the Iranian women's movement did not allow the same level of control by the authorities. While

women needed permission to plan gatherings and build official organizations, they were not asking for permission to post their opinions on their blogs and social media. Communication between women's groups became easier and personal thoughts began to be published everywhere on the web.

Women in Iran used to blog before social media became popular, similar to women in Western countries. There have been studies about female bloggers both in the time of weblogs and social media. Farshbaf Shaker (2010) writes that it was not easy for women before cyberspace to publicize their everyday life and experiences. According to the results of her study, women tried to reflect their personal life and work life in their blogs, and redefine feminine roles to defeat the single standard image of women that media had built over the years since the 1979 Revolution. Khalili (2005) studied the way women expressed their identity in weblogs and found that these users tended to express and highlight censored issues to cover socio-political news and criticize them.

Gheytonchi and Moghadam (2014) have studied the way the internet has been used in the case of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) societies for feminist causes. They explain that the free flow of communication afforded by information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow activists to plan ahead, communicate with the outside world, and circumvent state censorship and control. Al-Rawi (2021) also argues that new technologies facilitate women's activism in MENA societies, and assists them in creating positive change in their lives by providing venues to raise social awareness, establish networks, and practice religious, political, social, and cultural activism.

The democracy-seeking Green Movement in the aftermath of the allegedly rigged 2009 presidential election (happening in tandem with the Arab Spring in other countries of the Middle East) galvanized the women's movement in Iran. While the election's validity was at the center of attention, protesters also had other social and cultural demands. Although these protests did not lead to any immediate change, in the following years, rights-based platforms were flourishing in cyberspace, and many of them followed some feminist demands such as those of the Green Movement (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017). Many ordinary users who did not identify as feminist activists also joined the conversation on blogs and social media.



In recent years, several Iranian scholars have become interested in studying social media (for example, see Mesri, 2017; Alikhah, Koohestani, & Vaghe-e-Dashti, 2018; Einifar, 2016; Semati & Brookey, 2014; Majdighahroodi & Azari, 2011; Montazerghaem & Nooraienezhad, 2010). Overall, very few studies have covered online feminist activism in Iran. In fact, studying cyberspace, especially women's activities in cyberspace, entails the risk of not being allowed to publish the work. Iranian social media users and bloggers have become increasingly interested in following feminist demands in recent years. For example, they have introduced and disseminated many hashtags for different causes, and some users have dedicated their social media pages to spreading awareness about feminist issues. Some important causes in recent years include promoting the Iranian #MeToo movement, acting against the compulsory hijab, requesting women's presence in sport stadiums, protesting discriminatory rules about women's rights to child custody, asking for a reformation of patriarchal laws that encourage femicide and honour killing, seeking equal rights in family relations, and disclosing sexual assaults in workplaces.

### **Research Objectives**

In this study, I have investigated how Iranian feminist activists are using Instagram to challenge dominant cultural values about women. In addition, I am addressing five more questions:

1. What feminist subjects are mostly raised in the Iranian social media sphere?
2. How are cultural values in Iran impacting the women's movements?
3. Which cultural values about women are mostly challenged on social media?
4. What is the status of Iranian traditions in the online feminist movements?
5. How does Iranian online feminism relate to global feminist theories?

Feminist theories overlap and are hard to separate and define clearly. The activities of Iranian feminists are also hard to define as belonging to a certain feminist category or wave. In recent years, online feminism has been studied under a separate branch called cyberfeminism, which is also known as the fourth wave. In this study, I will use these concepts and try to redefine them based on the Iranian context.

In Chapter 2, I position the Instagram feminist efforts in the context of Iran. I start with reviewing a brief history of feminism, online feminism, and related theories. I then review the way online platforms have played their role in feminist movements in Iran.

### **Ethical Considerations, Challenges, and Benefits of the Study**

One of the important ethical issues that I needed to consider at the start of this study was providing anonymity for feminist activists in Iran. The Iranian government does not appreciate feminist activities (Hoodfar, 2018; Hakakian, 2021). However, it does tolerate them to some extent. Focusing and highlighting these activities in a study can raise sensitivity about the people behind these pages. It has been difficult to justify categories and explain what is included in each, without sharing any of the original text and visuals. However, I have anonymized and translated parts of their content to bring in examples for my findings.

A very limited number of activists have dedicated their pages to feminist issues, and I could not recruit all of them to cooperate with me. Therefore, I have not been able to include a number of high profile and influential Instagram feminists, and had to rely on others with a lower number of followers.

Another issue is the instability of feminist activities and the consequences that these can have in Iran. For example, one of the activists that I had in mind to recruit for this study has recently been arrested and sentenced to jail for her feminist activities. Such incidents concerned me about potential harms that my study may cause activist women inside Iran, and the difficulties in the process of reaching out to a sufficient number of them for the purpose of my research.

Besides the nine activists who participated in my study, I had talked to two other activists, and they agreed to participate in my interviews. One of them was arrested during the interview process, and after she was released, she did not want to talk about her activities to me anymore. Another activist's page was disabled, and I never found out if she disabled it herself or if anything happened to her. Therefore, my interviews resulted in nine activists— a setback perhaps expected when doing field research with human participants.

Some of these activists are inside Iran and others live abroad. Unknown, and perhaps anti-feminist groups, are not tolerating these activities and have attempted systematic cyber-attacks on these feminist accounts. In the final days of working on my project, all the Iranian feminist pages on Instagram in my research (and probably beyond) were under cyber-attack, and were forced to switch to private accounts in order to protect themselves from fake followers. Over 10 feminist pages were being followed by numerous fake accounts in an attempt to convince Instagram to ban these pages for having lots of fake followers. These activists announced that they were making their pages private and deleting all new followers in order to protect their media. This was simultaneous to the arrest of a number of women filmmakers and social activists. After my interviews and analysis were completed, these activists were still facing new problems, and one of them decided to deactivate their page completely in order to protect friends and family.

The advantages of this research can be seen from different aspects. On the one hand, feminist activists can understand how their efforts are being useful and see their activities from a researcher's point of view. I have told my participants that the findings will be shared with them if they want. On the other hand, exploring the important subjects shared in feminist posts reveals the gaps and new demands that need to be covered in the future, so that women can move towards experiencing better conditions in their lives. Furthermore, academic studies in this field can bring more attention to this movement and allow analysis while it is ignored in Iran's official media.

## Chapter 2.

### Literature Review

Social media have become essential tools for feminist activism in recent years globally. For both feminists who were active in the real world before social media and individuals who only share feminist thoughts online, it is now a means of self-expression. This kind of purposeful use of social media has led to identifying a new path in feminism. Online feminism is known as a branch of feminism, and in some scholarly studies, it has been called “cyberfeminism” (Plant, 1997; Stephan, 2007; Verma, Haq, & Rai, 2018). Some feminists also think it equals the fourth wave of feminism, which uses digital media to spread feminist messages (Yu, 2011; van der Gaag, 2014). Others use terms such as “networked feminism” (Fotopoulou, 2014) and other relevant terms to address the same issues which classic feminists are interested in. Generally, these terms emphasize the importance of cyberspace for providing free online opportunities for women’s self-expression and content publishing. In this literature review, I will identify useful theoretical frameworks related to online feminist activism. I am going to review the history of feminism briefly, then delve deeper into online feminist activism in general. In the last section, I will discuss how these theories are going to be useful in my study.

#### Feminism and ‘the Wave’ Metaphor

Feminism theories overlap and are discussed in different ways in scholarly works. Generally, most researchers have identified three main waves of feminism. The concept that Rome, O’Donohoe, and Dunnett (2019) name “Westernized feminism” has been conceptualized in terms of one emerging and three established waves. They believe first-wave feminism was comprised primarily of white, middle-class women who were trying to establish their similarity to men. Formal policy reforms and the right to participate in the political system were what they were seeking. LeGates (2011) explains that the beginning of first-wave feminism was marked by loosely organized or short-lived feminist networks in conjunction with the political reforms in Europe and North America in the 1850s and 1860s (p. 197). Accomplishing the right to vote for women, attacking the male monopoly of various institutions such as education, the work force, and arts and culture were the main demands of these movements. Participants were largely white

and middle-class women, and their goals reflected their desire for self-fulfillment and for greater influence in both family and in public life (LeGates, 2011). Not only feminist movements were mostly associated with whiteness and belonging to the middle class, but also the use of the term 'feminism' could be perceived problematic to some women's rights activists around the world. For instance, socialist women around the world were among those reluctant to use the term feminism because of its associations with the particular preoccupations of bourgeois women (Forestell & Moynagh, 2013).

In the book *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, Smith et al. have gathered a history of feminist efforts that were happening in other parts of the world when the movements began in the West. They describe those ideas about women's rights which traveled globally, creating both visible and invisible networks of women vying for equal rights. They show that the nineteenth century was one of the most critical historical periods in terms of challenges to male-dominant political, economic, and cultural systems, in not only Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand but in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (2022).

The years from World War I to the beginning of World War II were difficult years for feminists, or as LeGates (2011) reminds us, these years were hard for reformers or radicals of any kind. Post-war political tensions, economic downturn, and the rise of fascism all made it difficult to fight for more social equality on all fronts. However, suffrage campaigns started to achieve the right to vote for women in several parts of the world. While first-wave feminist movements have been criticized by socialists at the time for being timid about gender roles, and too accepting of class and race division, (LeGates, 2011) after WWII, the movement for sex equality intersected with demands for racial and economic justice (Molony & Nelson, 2017). Therefore, second-wave feminism became more inclusive of different communities. More women internationalists and organizations from other regions and countries joined the efforts, representing their own people and communities (Smith & Robinson, 2022). "Fighting for women's sexual, reproductive, domestic, and workplace liberation, second-wave feminists emphasized both their sameness with men as well as their differences from men" (Rome, O'Donohoe, & Dunnett, 2019, p. 253). It also identified patriarchy as the root cause of male dominance in society, and focused on the family and personal relationships rather than voting rights and ability to stand for office or employment (LeGates, 2011, p. 346).

In the 1990s, a third wave of feminists began promoting a broad politics of difference, not only from men, but from other groups of women as well, based on intersections of race, class, sexuality, style, and so forth (Rome, O'Donohoe, & Dunnett, 2019). In her book, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*, Evans (2015) describes that third-wave feminism engages more explicitly with global social justice agendas, seeking to reclaim and subvert traditional notions of femininity, being associated with women of colour and intersectionality.

When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989, she, as a black feminist critical race theorist, criticized the limitations of a legal regime in which sex and race discrimination were two separate forms of oppression. She challenged critical race theory in turn with feminism to force the law to respond to cases where both race and gender discrimination were involved (Gordon, 2016).

Personalization was another factor that defined the third wave. Snyder (2008) describes the tactical differences of third-wave feminism from the second wave. She mentions that the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multi-perspectival version of feminism. It embraces multivocality over synthesis, and action over theoretical justification, and emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of political feminism.

The rise of the internet, multi-media, and digital technologies led to the emergence of a fourth wave where personal experience stories are shared on digital platforms. To justify how fourth-wave feminism or online feminism is connected to the third wave, Yu (2011) explains that as third-wave feminists used personal narratives as a form of feminist theory, the fourth wave is using social media to make these personal experiences and expressions viral and more influential. Expressing personal experiences gave women space to recognize that they were not alone in the oppression and discrimination that they faced— potentially serving as a tool for building solidarity. Using these accounts has benefits because they record personal details that may not be available in traditional historical texts. Moreover, van der Gaag (2014) also confirms the mentioned connection and believes that third-wave feminists began introducing the concept of male privilege in the 1990s, and fourth-wave feminists continue to discuss it in academia and on social media, extending the discussion of privilege to include the problematization of whiteness as a source of social privilege.

Although explaining the chronological stages of feminism can help us to understand it, some scholars have challenged the 'wave' metaphor. Molony and Nelson (2017) think it was adopted widely outside North America in the 1980s as historians tried to record change and compare different time periods as well as find parallels with movements that were happening in their countries. However, this does not change the fact that women's activism has never been limited to certain parts of the world. As Weiss (2018) mentions, "around the world, under every sort of political regime, in every era and possible set of circumstances, there has been feminist resistance" (p. 11). She rejects that feminism is an overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and Western movement. In her book, she has gathered manifestos that demonstrate a history of feminism in every global region. For example, "The National Coloured Women's Congress Published in Washington, D.C. in 1896" or "First International Feminist Congress of Argentina in 1910" and many more manifestos around the globe.

Dean and Aune (2015) argue that the wave metaphor does not travel easily across national and regional borders. However, comparison and complementary investigation in other parts of the world has always been an option. In the rest of my investigation, I am concentrating more on online feminism or the so-called 'fourth wave.' I will then be reviewing it in the context of Iran and exploring the way these theories apply to that case.

### **Cyberfeminism in Feminism Theories**

Cyberfeminism is one of the terms that can be helpful in studying online feminist activism today. Stephan (2007) writes that cyberfeminism is a promising new wave of (post) feminism thinking and practice. Through the work of numerous internet-active women, now a distinctive cyberfeminist internet presence exists.

Donna Haraway (1985) used the term 'cyborg' in her work "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." Sadi Plant (1997), director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in Britain, later built on Haraway's work and introduced the term cyberfeminism to the field to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the internet, cyberspace, and new media technologies in general.

In this respect, Paasonen (2011) says cyberfeminism has been understood as post-feminism (a highly unstable concept itself), and as synonymous with feminist studies of new media that investigate interconnections of gender, embodiment, and technology. Paasonen clears up the concept by dividing it into three categories, including (1) feminist analyses of human-machine relations, (2) critical analyses of cyber-culture in relation to feminist thought, and (3) analyses of the gendered user cultures of information and communication technologies and digital media.

Some scholars believe cyberfeminism should consider women's access to technology and their ability to design these technologies such as social media so that we can call it real power (Tuzcu, 2016, Gajjala, & Mamidipudi, 1999). They believe that cyberfeminism considers issues such as how power operates in online spaces, who has access to digital technologies, and how the design of online architecture may reproduce gender inequities (Cunningham & Crandall, 2014). Luckman (1999) believes cyberfeminism is considered as a female-central alternative to the overwhelming cultural dominance of men concerning matters of technological agency. Kember (2002) writes on the redefinition of life in contemporary techno-scientific culture and thinks of cyberfeminism as artificial life and new biology. These scholars emphasize the relationship between technology and body in cyberfeminism and pay less attention to the content of cyberfeminist acts. Some of these scholars believe the opportunities provided by cyberfeminism have not been equal for all women; cyberfeminism has tended to include mostly younger, technologically savvy women, and those from Western, white, middle-class backgrounds (Consalvo, 2002). Fotopoulou discusses the challenges of "networked feminism." This is the use of networked media by feminists in order to stay connected and to engage new participants in their actions, which is basically the same thing as cyberfeminism. This scholar believes that age, lack of resources, and media literacy are the three most important factors which modulate participation of women, and in many cases, become new types of exclusions of access to publicity and recognition (2014).

Other scholars, on the other hand, tend to look through the content of cyberfeminist acts and value cyberfeminism's viral nature. Verma, Haq, and Rai, for example, think it has democratized activism by using online tools that allow women to have their voices heard (2018). As these scholars claim, online feminism is a significant and valid source of feminist critique and analysis. Online feminism functions to educate



society or people and provide access to feminist knowledge. Users go online to seek and share information about feminism, and in the process, expose others to feminist concepts. Riera (2015) considers the unavailability of validation and support for many young feminists around the world and emphasizes on the importance of online communities. As the scholar explains, for feminist communities in particular, this is crucial because many young women grow up in contexts where feminist ideas are either unwelcome or not well understood. For these women, going online not only provides them with information, but crucial sources of validation for a range of lived experiences, as well as day-to-day support.

The online narrations about patriarchy, male privilege, and everyday sexism have become a huge part of online feminist activism. Sharing narratives began on April 16, 2012, when Laura Bates created the Everyday Sexism Project for women to report sexist encounters (Aitkenhead, 2014). Since then, many other activities were seen in social media and scholars began to study them. Social media provides more connectivity in less time. In addition, the range of interactivity and networking is global. Cyberfeminists are keeping social media as the main tool of communication, if not the only one (Verma, Haq, & Rai, 2018). In this regard, Leavy and Harris (2018) explain: “Feminist digital media makes it possible to have feminist memes, concepts, and incidents go viral and drum up support almost instantaneously” (p. 8). Such interpretations belong to the optimistic point of view about cyberfeminism. In the following section, I am going to explain another point of view that has questioned the effectiveness of cyberfeminism.

### **Is This Popular Feminism?**

Fourth-wave feminism or online feminism seems to be a more popular era for feminism. Online feminist activism using social media has attracted public attention and has allowed many individuals to participate in feminist activism who otherwise would not consider themselves activists or feminists. For example, viral hashtags such as #MeToo, #BringBackOurGirls, #YesAllWomen, and #BeenRapedNeverReported have highlighted the ongoing problem of violence against girls and women (Mendes, Keller, & Ringrose, 2019), and many women have participated in these campaigns without being an active feminist before these hashtags started running. To describe this further, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) use the term ‘popular feminism’ to show how subjects of

feminism have become widely discussed by social media users, mainstream media, marketers, and celebrities since 2000: “We see feminism represented and practiced in digital spaces such as blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, in addition to broadcast media and film” (p. 884). Guillard (2016) believes feminism is “trending.”

The popular feminism today is different from what started to appear online in the beginning of online activism in the early 2000s. At the beginning of the millennium, feminists started to use digital tools and build websites, petitions, and send mass emails as part of their activist attempts. However, as social media became popular, ordinary users who did not generally know themselves as ‘feminists’ started to participate in feminist activities. Personal narratives started to replace the manifests and organized activities, and as a result, popular feminism was born.

Banet-Weiser (2018) believes popular feminism is a “happy” feminism, one that is about becoming uplifted. This is in contrast to what Sara Ahmed calls “killjoy” feminism. Ahmed asks: “Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism?” (2010, p. 581). She believes feminists bring others down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism, but also by exposing how happiness is sustained. This is what online feminist activists avoid in the way that Banet-Weiser perceives. Therefore, this activism lacks effort for challenging the structures: “The visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important but it often stops there, as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4).

The media forms that online feminism users are partly responsible. They come from a neoliberal capitalist context. Feminists need to gain visibility on these digital platforms and this means popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible. Therefore, particular feminist messages of gender inequality, body positivity, equal pay for equal work, the normalization of sexual harassment, and increasing self-confidence circulate and achieve visibility on multiple media platforms and industries. In order to achieve the constant visibility, popular feminism relies on “platform capitalism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Platform capitalism is a term used by Srnicek (2016) to explain the business models of major tech companies as economic actors within a capitalist mode of production. On platforms, “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact” (p. 24) create data which play a central role and maintain economic growth. Data compete in the algorithms; therefore, they need to be engaging in order to be more visible. Therefore, this can push feminist content towards becoming more popular and likable. Despite these thoughts, Banet-Weiser makes clear that it is unproductive to simply dismiss popular feminism as just another branding exercise that serves the ever-expanding reach of neoliberal markets, or to try to determine the authenticity of certain feminisms over others. She speaks of popular feminism that focuses on media expressions and their circulation, and the social, cultural, and economic conditions that provide a context for a specific version of popular feminism to emerge as highly visible. She clarifies that this kind of feminism does not challenge deep structures of inequalities. Therefore, it is not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics (2018).

Although online feminism does not sound so revolutionary, it has brought everyday feminist topics to the attention of many digital media users around the world. While revolutionary feminist activism might be of more interest for feminist scholars, some think everyday feminism topics are helpful for spreading the thought. In her book *Feminism Is for Everybody*, bell hooks (2014) tries to explain feminism to everybody so that they can understand it easily without academic knowledge. This mindset relates to what online feminist activists aim to do when they bring up feminist topics on social media. They do not intend to do academic work, but find social media as a way to spread a feminist mindset to everyday life. hooks (2014) defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1). Her definition is simple and straightforward, and does not limit being a feminist to any specific academic or intellectual stage. Any person in society can be a feminist as long as they believe in this movement. She reminds us, “There was indeed a great deal of anti-male sentiment among early feminist activists who were responding to male domination with anger” (p. 2). However, today’s online feminism is different. hooks believes in the need of feminist education for everyone, females and males, because sharing feminist thought and practice sustains the feminist movement (p. 24). During the past years, social media have been the tool for this kind of feminism that talks to everybody.

Another challenge that online feminist activism faces regards the requirements of doing online activities. Digital media have provided the opportunity of self-expression for those with access to technology. However, they have not provided an equal amount of visibility for all. Harvey (2020) draws attention to the tension between promises of empowerment and fears of victimization in relation to women's and girls' engagement with digital media, often centering on a recurring question of visibility. Playing in the ground of capitalist platforms requires activists to know the rules of the game. Self-representation is needed for any online activity that looks for attention. Pruchniewska (2018) sees this process of personal branding as important for freelancers who produce creative content. They work in an increasingly precarious neoliberal economy, which requires self-branding, self-promotion, and constant audience engagement to succeed in gaining visibility. Seeking audience engagement can then lead to the algorithm effect, which provides more visibility for more popular topics. Therefore, as online feminists become more popular, they are accused of being less structure challenging.

It is hard to neglect the point that digital media have made huge differences in the manner in which feminist messages and activities operate. First, these messages can originate from any social media user or website, unlike the past, when certain people, magazines, or organizations were known as feminist activists. Second, messages can become widespread or totally buried under a huge amount of content because media knowledge and network skills are now important factors in creating impressive content and allying in digital media.

It seems that theories of online feminist activism illustrate a two-fold image of different aspects. In terms of accessibility, while online feminist activism is not very revolutionary, it expands the field of activism to a wider audience and makes feminism accessible for everybody. In terms of visibility, while online tools have facilitated democratic access to feminist knowledge, they limit visibility with their technical requirements. Therefore, the efforts can lean towards popular feminism. In the following section, I explain how I use these theories in my study.

### **Using Online Feminism Theories in the Context of Iran**

In this study, I have used feminist theories, especially cyberfeminism, to analyze online feminist activities by Iranian users on social media. By reviewing a brief history of

feminism in Iran, it is possible to consider backgrounds and social changes while looking into these activities. My study uses these theories and the historical review in different ways.

Cyberfeminism allows Iranian users to take advantage of its viral nature and allows some degree of anonymity, as well as providing vast access to feminist knowledge. While feminist activism has always faced obstacles in the country, Iranian users have identified the potential of social media for accessing a wide range of audiences.

In the context of Iran, where access to feminist knowledge is not easy and feminist thoughts are often restricted, cyberfeminism lets women gather virtually and discuss their rights and demands. Unlike feminist activists who needed different permissions to hold gatherings and circles, or to publish magazines and books about feminism, these users do not ask for any permission to be active online. With restrictions imposed on women's activism, digital media have become useful tools for self-expression.

Users who were not known as feminists before starting their activities on social media have had the chance to grow an audience and share their thoughts as well. As the idea of popular feminism suggests, these users find the topic interesting and trending. They use digital platforms that require applying factors of engagement to be visible. These activities can lean toward popular topics as a result. However, online feminist activism has brought everyday feminist topics to the attention of many digital media users. These everyday feminism topics spread the feminist mindset. Even if they are not so radical, they are practicing what bell hooks calls "feminism for everybody" as mentioned earlier.

In this aspect of feminism for everybody, there are different situations for activists inside and outside the country. Feminist activists inside the country have tried to be creative with social media while activists abroad have been publishing more radically. However, the activities by feminists inside Iran using social media has the potential to lean towards popular feminism, both for the potentials of the platforms and for the necessity of conservative activism. Feminist activists inside Iran are not only using the non-academic everyday language to speak to the public but also choose popular topics

to discuss and target the society's mindset and people's beliefs as to what needs to be changed. These topics do not challenge politics and fundamentals. On the other hand, activists outside Iran have the potential to be more radical, and the lack of potentials for challenging the structures outside social media might have made these activities more revolutionary.

Religious backgrounds in the society have also caused feminist activism to lean towards a conservative and sometimes an 'Islamic' reading. Ahmadi (2006) states, "everywhere in Muslim countries, Muslim and secular feminists, as well as those in political power, look for Islamic solutions for a very modern problem that is the result of the changed status of women. Women are increasingly calling for equality and participating in the politics of the Muslim world" (p. 35). The Western feminist history, on the other hand, is far from such perspectives. Llewellyn (2015) writes: "While the early stages of the women's movement are linked to Christian activism; a sacred/secular ideological structure has coded the wave metaphor and the development of feminism as a secular narrative" (p. 18). In Iran, the cultural background includes strong bonds to religion while feminist waves are structured in a secular way. The outcome in social media feminism seems to be ignoring or avoiding religious debates and instead, looking at the feminist issues from a social and human rights point of view. However, considering the historical perception of ties between feminism and the Western culture, confessing to feminist beliefs on social media has not been a wise choice for many.

Reviewing the history of feminism in Iran, I mentioned ties to Western theories. Today, rather than the Western influence, it is more rational to talk about the cultural exchange that happens in real-time and worldwide on social media. Although women in different countries follow different demands based on their own situation, digital tools have caused simultaneous similar activities all over the world including Iran, as it is seen, for example, in the #MeToo movement. Iranian users have published their experiences of everyday sexism and rape culture on Twitter similar to Western women, and have created the translated hashtag #من\_هم for it. This is one example that shows how the internet is allowing women to unite all over the world and make their demands widely considered. While in the past, it took years to translate Western materials about feminism and localize them, now, women in Iran and elsewhere can simply explore the web and become involved in any feminist campaign or hashtag that they would like to support, no matter where it has originated.

Understanding feminism as a historical ongoing cause helps discover whether online feminist activities can be an indicator of real feminist demands of a society, or if they are only part of content creation for the attention economy.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Methodology**

In my study, I have used two main methods: multimodal content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The multimodal content analysis consists of quantitative and qualitative parts where I co-created categories of content with the help of my supervisor and counted the number of posts that belong to each category, considering texts, images, and videos all together. This aimed to understand which were the most important feminist topics for feminist activists in the past two years. Then, I carried qualitative content analysis to understand how feminist activists have approached the topics in each category in order to discuss women's issues. Finally, I interviewed all nine activists whose posts I had analyzed in order to study another angle of their activities from their own point of view. In the following sections, I will describe each method in more detail.

#### **Content Analysis**

I used multimodal quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Instagram posts are multimodal; therefore, I will also refer to multimodal practices and how I applied them to my own work.

A simple definition of content analysis is as Lasswell (1968) states: "systematic, empirical studies of the messages transmitted in a process of communication" (p. 57). Alternatively, in Fiske's (1990) words, this method "works through identifying and counting chosen units in a communication system. The units counted can be anything that the researcher wishes to investigate: the only criteria are that they should be readily identifiable and that they should occur frequently enough for statistical methods of analysis to be valid" (p. 136).

Although content analysis was mostly used in quantitative procedures during World War II for analyzing newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, posters, broadcasts, films, and other channels (Lasswell, 1968), now, it is widely used for different types of studies including social media content (Riffe, Lacy, Watson, & Fico, 2019).



Besides topics, the method of content analysis has also changed. Devi Prasad (2019) has reviewed the history of quantitative and qualitative content analysis (QCA) and the way researchers started to combine them. He explains that when using QCA, the process goes beyond counting words or extracting objective content to examining meanings, themes, and patterns. In QCA, capturing latent meanings is more context-dependent and interpretive, and therefore, the meanings are more likely to be subjective. This is what Krippendorff (2004) has emphasized, too. Krippendorff believes every content analysis requires a context within which the available texts are examined, and the analyst constructs a world in which the texts make sense. Including qualitative analysis leads to a stronger possibility of meaning making. Fiske (1990) believes, "while content analysis concerns itself with the denotative order of communication, it can, and does, reveal patterns and frequencies within this order that connote values and attitudes" (p. 144). In order to analyze those patterns and make sense of them, a qualitative approach is needed as well. Even classic content analysis scholars believe in the relation between content and social backgrounds. Gerbner (1958) writes about the common ground that inner and external reality share in content, stating: "Content arises out of the dialectical relation of subject and event. The nature of this relation depends on the realities of man's existence in, and struggle with, society and nature. Implicitly recorded in content, this relation becomes the property of a social event on whose terms the exchange continues" (p. 101).

In my study, I have applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. After the quantitative steps were completed, I reflected on the findings regarding the socio-cultural history and statues of feminism in Iran. As Fiske (1990) states, meaning is a dynamic interaction between reader and message. A reader is constituted by her or his socio-cultural experience which is, thus, the channel through which message and culture interact. It is important to relate these online activities and the social context to see how priorities in feminist activism are set, and how readers are going to understand their meaning. Social and cultural values are reflected in content. Content analysis can shape a critical awareness of social processes that shape communication products (Riffe, Lacy, Watson, & Fico, 2019). Riffe et al. say this regarding mass media production, but with the emergence of new media, we can apply it to new types of content as well.

Considering the above, it is clear that content analysis can be useful for analyzing social media posts and making meaning out of them. Next, it is important to apply this method systematically. Lasswell, Lerner, and Pool (1952) defined the steps to applying content analysis as: choosing a determinate universe, constructing adequate sampling that will represent the universe with optimum relevance and feasibility, pretesting which is intended to guarantee utility of results, and beginning the research operations including the reading of the texts selected and the recording of data. They then describe the analysis, which involves the testing of the hypotheses, if available, and the fitting of data to postulated models.

### **The Analysis of Multimodality**

Working with multimodal content can make this process different. Although multimodality is discussed separately, classical content analysis approaches have, in some cases, been used for analyzing multimodal content. For example, in their study about reactions to Brexit in social media images, Bouko et al. have applied Halliday's (1985) systemic functional approach to language to both text and images on Flickr. They explain that Halliday's approach to language is a model for thinking about general social and semiotic processes; it is not limited to linguistic signs and can be applied to visual signs as well (Bouko et al., 2021). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mention that "the 'grammar of visual design' operates the same as linguistic structure. Visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction. Meanings belong to culture, rather than to specific semiotic modes and the way meanings are mapped across different semiotic modes, the way some things can, for instance, be 'said' either visually or verbally, others only visually, again others only verbally, is also culturally and historically specific" (p. 2).

While these aforementioned scholars find the classic content analysis useful in multimodal content, there are specific multimodal content analysis approaches (MMCA) designed to make this process clearer. Serafini and Reid (2019), for example, have suggested a multimodal method to pursue the need for an approach to content analysis that moves beyond traditional analytical perspectives and procedures to address the complexities inherent in the multimodal nature of contemporary modes of communication. They explain the procedure of analysis that makes up the analytical framework for conducting MMCA as follows: (1) recognizing an area of interest; (2)

developing initial research questions; (3) constructing the data corpus; (4) defining the object of study; (5) developing initial categories; (6) developing the analytical template; (7) testing the analytical template or codebook; (8) applying the analytical template or codebook to the data corpus; (9) constructing potential themes; (10) implications of the analysis; and (11) dissemination of findings. As they explain, these procedures are presented in linear fashion, but they can actually overlap at times. I have followed Serafini and Reid's approach to design each step of my analysis as follows:

(1) As the area of interest, I have focused on the topics that feminist activists on Instagram prioritize in their content creation.

(2) I have developed the initial research questions stated in the first chapters.

(3) In terms of constructing the data corpus, I have chosen nine Instagram pages that have dedicated all or a significant amount of their content to feminist issues. I picked the relevant posts from their profile in the timeframe of two years. I eliminated the unrelated and personal posts so that I can focus on the purpose of the study. The number of completely related posts resulted in 1942 from April 2020 to April 2022. I find this timeframe suitable for this study because Iranian feminist activism on Instagram does not have a long history, and before this date, the majority of posts in these pages were personal and had not yet shifted to a consistent activist approach. The end of the timeframe marks the time when I stopped collecting data and started the analysis.

(4) I have defined the object of study, meaning the things I included as part of the study. I included the general meanings about feminist issues implied both from the text and from the image of each post.

(5) To develop initial categories, I reviewed all chosen pieces of content to construct potential categories for coding for both text and images. Then I defined topics that fit into each category.

(6) In this stage, I developed the analytical template or codebook. I needed to identify the ways in which I focused my attention on particular visual and textual features in the content. Based on the method, any analytical codebook or procedure would bring into focus particular aspects of multimodal phenomena, while diminishing or making invisible other aspects of the same phenomena (Serafini & Reid, 2019). I identified

important categories that I should look for in the captions and the pictures, and made a template to apply to each post. I tried coding some of the posts and made changes to my categories until they could cover all the topics without overlap.

(7) To test the analytical codebook, researchers usually work separately with the template and then statistically compare their coding. As an individual researcher, I asked another coder who is fluent in Farsi to code the sample independently from me and test the codebook using approximately 10% of the data. We separately coded 200 Instagram posts. Intercoder reliability was tested, and the results were acceptable  $\alpha \geq 0.936$  using Krippendorff's Alpha. As a result, I could finalize coding the remaining dataset. The finalized categories were (1) women's traditional family roles, (2) male dominance and violence, (3) motivational and empowering, (4) women's struggles for liberty, (5) inequality and stereotypes in society, and (6) other.

(8) I applied the codebook to all of the posts.

(9) At this stage, I constructed themes from the data set by close readings and interpretation of the data corpus. These themes are narrower than the categories. In other words, I extracted implied information out of the coding results. As Serafini and Reid (2019) explain, "themes or essences do not just emerge; rather, they are constructed by the researchers during data analysis by close readings and interpretation of the data corpus" (p. 22).

(10) This was the most analytical step where I defined implications of the analysis that led to the findings.

(11) In the final step, I disseminated the findings to report on the results of the study.

It may seem like these steps can be applied to any kind of content analysis, and that they are not necessarily related to multimodality. However, I found it useful for unfolding every step of the process, considering that multimodality makes the process more complicated.

Below, I will explain my process of the emergence of my categories and coding of all the posts from the last two years on these activists' pages.

## Emerging of the Categories

The categories that I found after several sampling efforts to make my codebook and apply it to the data were: (1) women's traditional family roles, (2) male dominance and violence, (3) motivational and empowering, (4) women's struggles for liberty, (5) inequality and stereotypes in society, and (6) other.

I needed to study these categories in order to understand how feminist activists on Instagram were prioritizing topics: who were they targeting and criticizing, and was this even working? An important point that I need to mention about my categories is that women's issues are closely related to each other, and it is very hard to separate them based on theme as I have done below. In any kind of categorizing, there are going to be shortcomings because these topics are related to several aspects of life. For example, the same mindset that imposes inequalities in the society (category 5) would also impose restrictions on feminist activism (category 4). Or the same patriarchal fundamentals that establish compulsory hijab (category 5) can lead to honour killing and prejudice against women in families (category 2). However, there needed to be a system for categorizing and distinguishing topics so that we can examine what is receiving the most attention in online activism. I realized some of these topics could be grouped based on the main themes that they carry. I have shaped a rationale to create these categories with the help of my supervisor, Ahmed Al-Rawi, and a second coder who also analyzed the sample. We discussed different types of categorizing and examined some samples several times until we could reach an agreement of about six categories. Below, I will justify the way I have organized the categories by providing a definition for each.

1. Women's traditional family roles: This category shows the most personal and family oriented kinds of inequality, where the discriminative law exists, but there is not a high amount of supervision on its execution. Important topics in this category include: explaining how women are in charge of house chores and family duties even if they work outside of the home, and explaining realities about motherhood, also highlighting that motherhood is not a value in itself and is not sacred. This category mostly involves cultural/personal aspects of feminism because the issues are directly related to family and the distribution of chores inside the home. Compared to the next category, these issues are softer and do not cause serious and immediate consequences.

2. Male dominance and violence: These posts describe how men are dominant and impose their power over women whether at home or in society. Some of these posts are created based on news and statistics about violence against women at home that can be as harsh as honour killing at the extreme. It also includes posts about how men and family members dominate women's lives and decisions. This ties to patriarchy in two ways: first, the need to protect women in the name of honour and family values (gheyrat and namoos are well-known terms for these in Persian) and second, the belief that women are not capable of making their own decisions. Posts about sexual harassment also belong to this category as another way of imposing violence against women, including any content related to rape culture and verbal and physical harassment, as well as posts from the Iranian #MeToo movement.

3. Motivational and empowering: These posts emphasize women's power and call to action. They mostly have a positive tone and provide solutions and suggestions. The dominant point of view is that you can do it yourself and you do not need anyone. Some posts are about praising women's achievements specifically or generally. Body positivity is another theme that raises awareness about different body types, promotes self-love, and opposes body shaming. This category also includes health advice about women's bodies to help them in living a better life.

4. Women's struggles for liberty: Issues related to women's liberty include several topics such as the right to decide about one's own body, controlling one's own sexual life, how women understand their bodies and their relationships (sexuality), choosing to have children and partners, and having access to abortion rights. Child marriage is also discussed in this category, aiming to raise awareness about young girls getting married in some less developed areas, focusing on the immaturity and lack of control over body and sexuality in married children. Posts about feminist activism also demonstrate other instances of struggles for liberty, including problems that feminist activists face, their limitations, and explaining what feminism is.

5. Inequality and stereotypes in society: Posts in this category discuss what women are deprived from in society, and the ways in which they are treated differently by the government and society in accessing facilities, having social presence, marriage conditions, or choosing what to wear, etc. The meaning of patriarchy and drawing attention to gender stereotypes and sexism is also part of this category. These include

criticizing the general beliefs about women, such as: women are emotional, women cannot be managers, etc. Some of these posts are about supporting Afghan women, describing the situation for women in Afghanistan, or comparing the Taliban to the Islamic Republic of Iran and expressing sympathy with Afghan women in terms of inequality in their society.

6. Other: I coded all the other minor issues that are related to activism under “other.”

I believe there can be some data reduction in applying content analysis on a large set of data. The main problem is that close reading is harder when the datasets are larger. Some sentiments can be lost in mentioning topics and not getting into detail about how each activist has explored the topic. There is also a potential danger of including positive and negative approaches to a topic in the same category. This is a point that I had to consider when I defined the categories, and I needed to be careful to split categories that contained opposing or different approaches.

To tackle such challenges that lie in the content analysis method, I combined this method with online interviews in my study. Riffe et al. (2019) do not see this as a shortcoming of the method and believe content analysis is often an end in itself. However, they suggest combining it with other strategies (p. 14) like interpretive analysis or thick descriptions.

### **Online Interviews**

I found semi-structured interviews a great method to complement my study because these could add a new angle besides my own analysis and point of view. I decided to carry online interviews because the activists whom I wanted to interview were located in Iran and Europe. An advantage of online interviews is that they can take place regardless of where the interviewer and interviewee are located. This method allowed myself to talk to my cases without extra time and cost that might result from traveling. For conducting the interviews, I applied for ethics clearance at the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University and received approval.

Dawson (2019) defines online interviews as “structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews that are carried out over the internet. These can be synchronous

interviews that take place in real-time (e.g., by video, webcam, web conferencing, live chats, text, or instant messaging) or asynchronous interviews that are not in real-time and can take place over an extended period of time (e.g., email, pre-recorded video, microblogs, blogs, wikis, or discussion boards)” (p. 268).

Salmons (2011) believes that some technologies provide the opportunity for a full range of visual and verbal exchange. For example, videoconferencing can resemble the natural back-and-forth of face-to-face communication and include verbal and nonverbal signals. Therefore, I used Zoom as my main channel for the interviews, except for the cases that ask for interviewing with another tool. I asked each activist to talk with me on a Zoom call. However, for two of them, it was more convenient to write down their answers, so I sent them my questions and received the written answers in Farsi. I also talked to the rest of the activists in Farsi and then translated all parts that I was using in my thesis into English.

Salmons explains “handling sampling and recruiting” as one of the main steps of online interviews as any other method of interviewing will also need it. Based on this explanation, qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling when selecting people based on motivations for conducting the interviews online (p. 106). With purposeful sampling, researchers can identify and select knowledgeable cases who would provide more information and are interested to participate (Palinkas et al., 2013). In my case, I am only choosing public Instagram users with a bold feminist approach on their pages.

For the two cases who requested to do the interviews via text messages, I sent them my questions and they replied in written format on Telegram and WhatsApp. In-depth interviewing by instant messaging is one of the other online interviewing methods which other researchers have used before. For example, Fontes and O’Mahony (2008) have introduced in-depth interviewing by instant messaging as a cost- and time-effective method. They have used instant messaging as a research instrument in their study of online social network websites and believe that it can be used widely by researchers.

After conducting the interviews, I used the data to create new themes of findings from the activists’ experiences which allowed me to complement the findings from the content analysis portion of my study. I used thematic analysis to find similarities, differences, and other useful findings from the interviews. Clarke and Braun (2017)



define thematic analysis (TA) as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (p. 297). Following, these themes would provide a framework for reporting observations from interview texts or other data. Guest et al. (2012) explain that in thematic analyses, the researcher moves beyond counting words or phrases and identifies implicit and explicit ideas within the data. It can be applied to data from interviews, focus groups, and other methods. In another book chapter, Braun and Clarke (2012) describe how this method helps in identifying commonalities in interview texts. By analyzing the manner in which a topic is talked about, the researcher could make sense of things those different interviewees have in common. This is exactly the way I used this method to analyze my interviews and find the mutual aspects of what my interviewees have mentioned. I will discuss my findings in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4.

### Findings and Discussion

Online feminism, which is also known as fourth-wave feminism, includes sharing personal experiences online as I discussed in my second chapter. Analyzing the content from the pages of nine activists (six activists inside Iran and three others living abroad) confirms that lived experiences play an important role in selecting topics and prioritizing them on their Instagram pages. These cyberfeminist activists use Instagram to reach a wider audience than they would through word of mouth or traditional media forms, and they become the voice of thousands of other women who have lived the same moments.

In this section, I share the results from coding all the posts and calculating percentages which each activist has allocated to each topic, as shown in Table 1. This shows what categories the activists have prioritized, and which ones received less attention. I characterize the approach of Iranian feminist activists towards these issues. In other words, I try to answer if they approach feminism in a “happy” manner (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4) to gain users’ attention, or if they attempt to challenge the patriarchal structures. I also investigate to what extent they target legal institutions and cultural beliefs.

*Table 1. The rows show the number and percentage of posts that each activist has published in each category and the rank of each category in their content. Categories are: (1) women's traditional family roles, (2) male dominance and violence, (3) motivational and empowering, (4) women's struggles for liberty, (5) inequality and stereotypes in society, and (6) other.*

Activist	Cat. 1	Cat. 2	Cat. 3	Cat. 4	Cat. 5	Cat. 6	Total
#1	4 (1.6%)	136 (53.7%)	22 (8.7%)	54 (21.3%)	27 (10.7%)	10 (4%)	253
Rank	6	1	4	2	3	5	-
#2	8 (2.6%)	55 (18.2%)	36 (12%)	84 (28%)	93 (30.9%)	25 (8.3%)	301
Rank	6	3	4	2	1	5	-
#3	12 (7%)	18 (10.4%)	19 (11%)	25 (14.5%)	91 (53%)	7 (4%)	172
Rank	5	4	3	2	1	6	-
#4	1 (0.3%)	120 (37.7%)	3 (0.9%)	71 (22.3%)	102 (32%)	21 (6.6%)	318
Rank	6	1	5	3	2	4	-
#5	1 (1%)	27 (29.3%)	3 (3.3%)	18 (19.6%)	36 (39.1%)	7 (7.6%)	92
Rank	6	2	5	3	1	4	-
#6	34 (14.6%)	61 (26.1%)	28 (12%)	31 (13.3%)	61 (26.2%)	18 (7.7%)	233
Rank	3	2	5	4	1	6	-
#7	4 (5%)	10 (12.6%)	33 (41.8%)	12 (15.2%)	15 (19%)	5 (6.3%)	79

<b>Rank</b>	6	4	1	3	2	5	-
<b>#8</b>	0 (0%)	186 (64.1%)	13 (4.5%)	24 (8.3%)	48 (16.5%)	19 (6.6%)	290
<b>Rank</b>	6	1	5	3	2	4	-
<b>#9</b>	7 (3.4%)	39 (19.1%)	25 (12.2%)	71 (34.8%)	56 (27.5%)	6 (3%)	204
<b>Rank</b>	5	3	4	1	2	6	-
<b>Total</b>	71 (3.6%)	652 (33.6%)	182 (9.4%)	390 (20.1%)	529 (27.2%)	118 (6.1%)	1942
<b>Rank</b>	6	1	4	3	2	5	-

In this table, I report the number and percentage of posts published by each activist under each category in the rows. It shows that each category has received a different amount of attention from different activists. For example, activist #8 has not published any posts in category 1 while activist #6 has published 47.9% of all the content in this category. In category 2, two activists (#1 and #8) have created almost half of the whole content (49.3%).

The column at the right shows the total number of posts that each activist has published. Activist #4 has published 16.4% of all posts, which is the highest number, followed by activist #2 who published 15.5%, and activist #8 with 14.9% of all posts.

In terms of frequency, the most popular category for posting between feminist activists in the past two years has been the second one: “male dominance and violence” with 652 posts out of 1942 (33.6% of all the posts), followed by category 5: “inequality and stereotypes in society” with 529 posts (27.2% of all posts). After these, category 4: “women’s struggles for liberty” is the next popular category with 390 posts (20.1%). As for least popular categories, category 1: “women's traditional family roles” with 71 posts (3.6%), category 6: “other” with 118 posts (6.1%), and category 3: “motivational and empowering” with 182 (9.4%) posts received the lowest amount of content, respectively. Looking at the percentages of posts in each category, however, gives us another picture, for they show that category 5 has been the priority for four of the activists in terms of the percentage of posts which they dedicated to those categories out of their total posts, while category 2 has ranked first for three activists. Therefore, considering both factors (percentage of posts created and most prioritized category), the second and fifth category have been more populated than the others. Below, I will describe the most discussed topics in each category.

### **Category 1: Women's Traditional Family Roles**

In category 1, I have gathered all posts about house chores, family duties, and motherhood. Only 3.6% of all the posts are dedicated to this category based on percentages. Activist #6 has paid the most attention to this category and has published 47.9% of all the posts, which is 14.6% of all of her own posts. She mostly focuses on motherhood responsibilities, and also emphasizes that motherhood is not a value in itself and is not sacred. For example, in one of her posts, she shared her opposition to posts that make fun of fathers, stating: "Raising children is not mothers' chore. Children need to spend time with their fathers as much as they need their mothers. Women are trained to take care of others since childhood; however, fathers are capable of learning it, too."

Most of the other activists do not have children and have paid less attention to this topic. Another favourite issue in this category discusses that house chores are not women's duties and should be fairly distributed in the family. Activist #3, who has dedicated 7% of her posts to this category, had written several posts describing and criticizing how women are placed in charge of house chores during family gatherings or at home.

In this category, many of the posts raise issues related to men's role in the family and in relation to women. While family duties are a huge part of women's lives, discussing the way men can contribute to house chores and child rising, brings this topic to the attention of male users. As I mentioned in the previous chapters, hooks (2014) believes in the need of feminist education for everyone including females and males, because spreading the feminist thought between different groups of people is what helps sustain the movement. This is the point that these posts generally highlight.

### **Category 2: Male Dominance and Violence**

Category 2 is the most discussed category in terms of post count based on frequencies and percentages with 33.6%. However, three out of nine activists have published a large number of these posts. Activist #1 and #8 have dedicated over half of their content to this category with 53.7% and 64.1% posts, respectively, and activist #4 has published 37.7% of all of her content under this category. There are two main topics

that are discussed most in this category: sexual harassment and honour killing. During this study, Iran was experiencing the #MeToo movement. In August 2020, Iranian women started a wave of calling out rapists and sexual offenders, making it one of the most serious acts of online feminism in the country. Since then, narrations have been published about several famous and infamous men, revealing how women have been experiencing harassment in their workplace and even educational institutions. These posts include news about stories published on Twitter and elsewhere, sharing opinions and sympathy. In some of these posts, feminist activists talk about the shortages of law that lead to silencing the victims. Activist #4 ties the sexual harassment cases to the regime and writes that “male dominance is the politics of the Islamic Republic,” relating the systematic discrimination and violence to the major power relations.

In some other posts, the target of criticism is the society and the manner in which people themselves react to harassed victims. For example, activist #8 has written in a post:

Dear friends of offenders and harassers, harassment victims have shown us their sorrow and pain but you defend your friends saying that they are only being naughty! You have not been in the victims' shoes to know how painful it is to hear that! You are reproducing harassment by hiding the truth.

Posts in the other popular topic of this category, honour killing, are about violence against women at home by their close relatives and family members. In the past two years, there have been several pieces of news published about fathers, brothers, and other male family members killing girls and women in the name of honour. Several cases went viral, and names of the victims have turned into hashtags on social media. Other posts in this category include those about men and family members dominating women's lives and decisions in the name of honour (specifically gheyrat and namoos in Persian). Feminist activists narrate these stories emotionally to raise awareness about the influence of patriarchy which do not seem to be providing any legal solutions. Activist #4 writes, “Killing women in Iran is easy because of the social structures.”

A large number of the posts under this topic promote a hashtag that mentions women are not men's honour. Activist #4 writes: “Don't think that you are protecting us by calling us your honour! Domestic violence and honour killing are caused by

glamorizing dominance over women's bodies. Don't make this look normal by approaching "honour" as protection. We are no one's honour."

While the issues discussed in this category are largely related to discriminatory laws that encourage violence against women such as in the cases of honour killing, these posts mostly reflect an attitude of criticizing traditional cultural values. As Banet-Weiser (2018) reminds about popular feminism, it focuses on media expressions and does not challenge deep structures of inequalities. In the example of posts in this category, it is seen that feminist activists use their media to express and circulate the news, however, no specific effort is seen in terms of challenging the social structures that set the stage for violence.

### **Category 3: Motivational and Empowering**

In category 3, activists write with a more positive tone, and offer solutions about healthcare, motivation, and passion for success. Activist #7 has published 41.8% of her posts under these topics. Activists #9 and #6 have also paid attention to it with 12.2% and 12% of their feminist content. However, others have not published as many posts under this category, and it is generally among the less discussed issues with only 9.4% of all the content covering it.

Body positivity is the most discussed theme in this category that raises awareness about different body types, promotes self-love, and opposes body shaming. These posts also include health advice about women's bodies and emphasize women's power and the ways in which they can be independent. For example, activist #7 writes that "women who read books are dangerous in patriarchal societies because they can imagine a better world and start fighting for it." Activist #2, who has dedicated 12% of their posts to this category, explains facts about women's periods and narrates memories from childhood about wrong approaches toward this natural physical fact.

The topics that are raised in this category seem to be very close to the concept of "happy" feminism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017). They are uplifting, positive, and motivational. However, most of the Iranian feminist activists have not prioritized these topics in their activities. They have rather focused on negative aspects of feminism and women's problems. Probably because many of the general accounts of girls and

young women on Instagram already cover such topics due to the overall positive atmosphere of the platform.

#### **Category 4: Women's Struggles for Liberty**

Category 4 has received fair attention by all activists and activist #9 has allocated her highest percentage of posts to it (34.8%). In this category, two groups of topics were mostly raised: feminist activism and body. Posts about feminism describe what it means to be a feminist and problems which feminists face. These activists use this theme to discuss how liberty can be reached and how women can become involved in achieving their rights despite all the barriers which society and law would impose. Activist #9 is mostly interested in this topic, and in one of her posts, she describes what feminism exactly is, and explains how it is different from misandry:

Feminism opposes patriarchy and this is not equal to misandry. But why should we fight patriarchy? It is because it has been many years that women have been misunderstood and women's rights have been neglected all over the world just because of their gender. Some of these definitions of womanhood have even been loveable in our own eyes but they have restricted our lives in different ways.

The body is another popular topic in this category, including the right to decide about one's own body, controlling one's own sexual life and relationships (sexuality), choosing to have children and partners, and having access to health and abortion rights. Activist #6 writes in an Instagram post:

For centuries, women's bodies have been treated like public property. It's been a field for politics, war, restrictions and deprivation. Getting pregnant, covering the body, limitations for the body have been subject to policies. The society also imposes rules for women's bodies. They have to be slim, not too big, be beautiful, and be standard and pleasing to men. Anything related to our bodies is priority! We need to bring discussions about the body to the public sphere.

Child marriage<sup>1</sup> is another topic that is frequently discussed to raise awareness about its problematic angles. Activist #1 writes: "Is it possible to push a young girl whose period

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Sharia law, the age of puberty is 9 for girls and 15 for boys, and under-age marriage is subject to the permission of the guardian and the discretion of a competent court. However, in Iran's law, the minimum age for legal marriage is 13 for girls and 15 for boys (Dehkordi, 2021).

cycle has not started yet into marriage? She still doesn't have an understanding of sexuality and womanhood."

Topics in this category are mostly brought up in an educating manner. Feminist activists try to focus on educating their audiences and raising awareness in these posts, while also being critical of popular beliefs and discriminatory laws. These posts are also in the direction of making Feminism understandable for everybody, (bell hooks, 2014) and explaining fundamental feminist knowledge using a simple language.

### **Category 5: Inequality and Stereotypes in Society**

Category 5 has been the most prioritized one based on percentages, with four activists publishing about it more than any other category. Activists #3, #5, #2, and #6 have published 53%, 39.1%, 30.9%, and 26.2% of their posts about these issues, respectively. All of the other activists have also dedicated at least over 10% of their content to this category.

In category 5, the topics are very scattered and point at any kind of inequality, sexism, and gender stereotypes that derive from law or cultural beliefs. Several posts in this category describe how patriarchy operates and how cultural beliefs support inequalities imposed by law. Activist #3 writes in a post: "Criticism about women's issues is usually against the official structures and those in power; however, an important portion derives from the patriarchal culture that is rooted in the society."

Marriage conditions are one of the highly discussed topics in this category which point at unequal marriage rights by law. However, most of these posts focus on raising awareness about the ways in which women can ask their spouse to assign equal rights to them when they become married, rather than directly requesting for a change in law. Activist #2 explains in several posts what different rights women need to claim when they become married, emphasizing that women must "definitely claim these rights and legally register them when you get married. These make women's rights much more equal to men's and your husband can no longer deprive you from work, education or traveling abroad."

In the cases where these activists question the law, it is limited to expressing dissatisfaction and raising awareness about the inequalities. When the parliament



passed a new law which limited the amount of money which women could request at the time of marriage based on the “Mehrie” law, activist #6 wrote:

The parliament has limited Mehrie to 14 gold coins and if men cannot pay more than that to their wife, they will no longer be imprisoned. This new law is designed to reduce the number of men imprisoned for Mehrie. This is what patriarchy looks like! For several years, there has been no effort to reduce the pain and sorrow that women experience because of inequalities in their marriage, and authorities don't feel the need to change anything. But they easily eliminate the only weapon that is left for women in Iran to fight inequality in marriage.

Such posts fail to offer a clear path to protesting and changing these rules. A large number of posts in this category express sympathy towards Afghan women after the Taliban overtook Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. Feminist bloggers raise Afghan women's issues and compare the unequal situation which the Taliban has made for women in that country to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Activist #9 writes:

First images we saw from Afghanistan after Taliban took over was covering women's images on the walls of the cities. First law that they passed was about women's clothes and the way they should be present in the society. How familiar are these images for us women in Iran?

Posts published in this category raise awareness about legal and cultural discrimination. However, the efforts end there, and no solutions are suggested. Banet-Weiser (2018) has mentioned this when she discusses the manner in which online feminism brings visibility for activists; examples appear in media, but the efforts often stop there, “as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures” (p. 4). Similarly, these activists are making feminist issues visible for Iranian users, but then they stop there.

### **Category 6: Other**

In category six, there are several different minor topics discussed; however, one of the most frequent sub-topics is about queer feminism. Since many feminists believe that the binary approach towards gender is outdated, they discuss issues of other genders along with women's issues. One of the activists in this study self-identifies as non-binary and introduces themselves as “queer feminist.” Another one of them self-identifies as bisexual. Others have also mentioned queer issues in their posts. I did not delete them from the data as irrelevant because understanding gender diversity is a

topic of discussion for queer feminism. Activist #4, who introduces herself as bisexual, has discussed her own experiences of being queer several times in her posts. Also, activist #9 who explains feminist topics in simple language, talks about queer issues, too. In one of her posts, she explains: “Different sexual orientations are not related to moral deviation. A person can be or not be moral with any type of orientation.”

Queer issues and other scattered topics discussed in this category have not had the chance to be prioritized during the two years which my study covers. However, future studies can show if priorities will change, and if other topics will gain more attention.

The distribution of the highly discussed topics is not equal in all activists' pages. Some of the activists have been paying special attention to some of the topics. For example, activist #6 has paid the most attention to “women's traditional family roles.” For activist #1, category 2 has been a high priority since her job is also related to empowering women who have experienced violence, and many of her posts are about experiences in her daily life. For activist #9, explaining what feminism is and why we need it is the highest priority, and she has dedicated the highest number of her posts to topics around women's liberty. This is worth mentioning because activists' personal priorities can affect the number of posts that are discussed in each category.

Based on reviewing the above Instagram posts, I found that these activists do not place much hope in changing the unequal laws. Instead, they try to find other ways to teach women how to use certain possibilities to go around the law and obtain more rights for themselves. In other words, they prefer to talk to people rather than the government or lawmakers.

An important example is about marriage conditions. Feminist activists explain the legal situation where women can have conditions signed by their spouse so that they are able to divorce, exit the country, or keep other rights reserved for themselves before they allocate them to their husband at the time of marriage. This is among the sensitive issues which activist women who have been teaching marriage rights workshops have been arrested and imprisoned for. Although it is obviously a shortcoming of the law, feminist activists find it more practical to improvise solutions for the existing law rather than attempting to change the law, believing they are hopeless to be influential in that aspect.

In the case of honour killing, the activists refer to legal shortcomings that allow men to judge and act, but they also raise awareness about alternative possibilities for women. For example, activist #1 has talked about “social emergency” in several posts. The service is a governmental facility that rescues women under domestic violence, but many women are not aware that it even exists.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) use the term popular feminism to show how subjects of feminism have become widely discussed by social media users. Culture seems to be a more achievable target for popular feminist activists. They challenge behaviours towards women’s issues in different ways, but they do not hope to be able to have much influence on legal institutions. Activist #1 explains how even the society itself can still be resistant towards feminist topics. She describes how men support feminism whenever feminists talk about shortages in law and legal barriers. However, the same men refuse to support them when feminists target the culture and call out on men. She writes: “Law has not put all home responsibilities on the shoulders of women. Law has not prevented women from working. Even if we have bad laws and if a man does not execute it at home, it will not be executed.”

It seems that these activists mostly focus on changing people’s mindset and attitude, with the hope that long-term commitment to a cultural shift will bring about a political shift. Even when it comes to politics, they do not seem to look forward to legal changes. For example, at the time of the presidential election, many of these activists mentioned that they would not participate and vote. When politicians offer reform, activists are not very optimistic about it. In one of her posts, activist #4 writes:

The most important reason for the continuous oppression against women is that these diplomat men remember half the society only at election time and when they attract women’s votes they forget about their promises. As women do not have a choice to be a part of the elections and introduce candidates, why should we even bother and vote?

When they do point at the law, they still rely on audiences to take action rather than being able to hold authorities accountable. For example, in one Instagram post, activist #1 writes: “Whenever there is a debate about the importance of law and culture, I am on the side of the law. I think violence will be defeated when the law restricts it.” In the same post, she asked people to tag Iran’s Vice-President regarding women and family affairs.

It appears that these activists do not put much hope in being able to talk to authorities, meet them, or negotiate in more organized ways.

Regarding the topics of inequality, the conservative culture of Iran is at the center of attention widely, rather than legal institutions. For example, activist #2 writes: "Don't be too happy for special attention. There are bitter facts behind them. If providing essentials for the family is not a duty for women, you should not be happy. Because that is the reason that takes away better job opportunities from women. Men are not doing us a favour by offering such points."

The activists do, in some cases, refer to inequalities imposed by law, such as restrictions on women to enter sport stadiums. However, in those posts, they still do not directly point at a certain person or authority in the government, and the posts end at expressing opposition. Referring back to Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017), regarding the lack of effort for challenging the structures in popular feminism, it seems that these activists are not directly targeting political structures. They prefer to target cultural values as a more accessible goal. In the following section, the findings which emerged from the interviews are presented and discussed.

### **Interviews with Feminist Activists on Instagram**

The remaining findings are six themes which I extracted from the interviews. These are the activists' understanding of feminism, changes in their audiences' responses to their posts, their reasons for choosing Instagram for feminist activism, topic priorities, and challenges of online feminism.

#### **Theme 1: The Meaning of Feminism**

I asked each interviewee if they self-identify as a feminist. All of them said that they did self-identify as feminists and admitted that other people also know them as feminists. Then I asked them to define what feminism means to them and why they want to pursue their activities as a feminist.

Six activists (#1, #3, #6, #7, #8, and #9) used the word "equality" to describe what feminism stands for. Two (#2 and #5) mentioned "women's rights" to define the concept and another activist #4 centered it on "women's liberation."

No matter what descriptions they used, some of these activists leaned towards extending feminism to a vaster point of view rather than focusing on gender. For example, activist #1 believes that we should see feminism further as a way of looking at humans regardless of their gender, language, race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Also, there is a need to extend this mindset of equality to the environment, water, the South Pole, and even outer space, for a world of equality for every creature. She believes that women have a huge role in achieving peace in this world.

Activist #8 also has a similar approach and defines feminism as a movement that promotes the belief that discrimination exists and has resulted in the suppression of certain communities. She criticizes the power relations and explains the power pyramid. She also believes in an intersectional point of view and thinks feminism, and especially the #MeToo movement, seek to question both power relations and human responsibilities in the power pyramid.

Activist #2, who mentioned “women’s rights” also adds that feminism follows equality for all men, women, and queer people, and does not aim to homogenize all, but demands equal rights. This activist believes, in order to be a feminist, you only need to accept equal human rights for everyone. They believe queer feminism is not binary and therefore is a better solution.

Activist #4 takes this approach further and points at class as an important factor in the women’s movement, which caused feminism to be an epistemology and not just a movement. She believes we now need to lean towards queer feminism to be able to break free from the gender binary. Gender is not the only concern now, rather, intersectionality matters.

Not all activists have the same approach towards the meaning of equality. Activist #3 thinks we need to understand feminism based on our own situation. In Iran, where the laws are patriarchal, activists need to fight for equality and achieve economic independency for women.

Activist #6 also admits that anybody can follow feminism based on his or her own priorities and needs. She thinks feminism is about a series of social movements seeking equal rights and anybody who has a sense of belonging to these movements is a

feminist. Whether they are interested in activities about “free the nipples” or “canceling virginity tests in Iran.” All those demands are valid.

As discussed above, these activists center their understanding of feminism on equality, women’s rights, and women’s liberation. However, most of them have described that they follow a broader point of view which does not merely limit feminism to struggles for women’s rights but aims to fight all types of inequality.

## **Theme 2: Changes in Audiences’ Approach**

I asked feminists to elaborate on the ways in which audiences respond to their posts and to share whether most feedback were positive or negative. Something that they collectively mentioned was that these reactions have changed throughout time, and their audiences are now more open to feminist topics compared to earlier times when they had just started posting. Activist #6 had experienced threats, humiliation, and vilification, especially in the beginning of her public activities. She had been questioned because of being married and being a mother, mostly by those who believed these characteristics do not suit feminist activism. However, over time, she could shape a closer relationship with her followers, even those who were not like her in beliefs. Now, after four years, she feels that her audiences have a different impression of her, and they sometimes thank her for her posts, even though she can see in the chat histories that some of those same people have been insulting her before. She oversees another feminist page which has never been able to reach even 10% male followers; however, on her personal page, she has 20% male followers. She believes being labeled as a feminist carries a negative connotation and that she would have gained more followers if she did lifestyle blogging. This narration reminds of Sara Ahmed’s concept of “killjoy” feminism (2010, p. 581). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, she uses this concept to emphasize that feminist topics are not very likable and kill other people’s joy. Highlighting and criticizing the problems that women face in their everyday life with a negative approach can make it hard to create likable content on Instagram and raise awareness about these issues. Therefore, these feminist activists need to be able to publish them in a popular manner (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Activist #8 also admits that feminists are not very popular on social media:

We don’t talk about lovely things. Our hard job is to gain the interest of women themselves. Good news is that we have been able to do it. We have

an Iranian feminist on Instagram with over 300K followers. That means it is possible to get the attention even with these topics that are not very interesting and likable by the general public.

On the other hand, some of these activists find a bolder positive experience overall. For example, activist #1 mentioned:

My audiences have always given me positive feedback. Attacks have been rare and organized by specific groups. I have given legal and psychological support to thousands of women, and I do the same on my page. Therefore, I see it as a space to support woman and girls who have been affected by sexual violence. I do not let feedback and negativity affect my work.

All of these interviewees have experienced systematic attacks against their pages. They believe a small number of people are interested in feminist issues; however, they are optimistic about the future. For instance, activist #2 says: "Comments matter, especially negative ones that target my appearance, but 95% of the comments are positive. Some tell me that I motivated and inspired them or made them read and think. That feels so good."

Some of these activists believe the tone of each post matters when it comes to reactions. Activist #3 says: "Whenever I write more radically, negativity increases. I need to go step by step." Activist #5 speaks to the same point: "I don't see many negative comments, because I am not radical, and I do talk about men's rights, too."

One activist, for example, mentions that in the beginning, users attacked her for publishing pictures of bodies, but after a while of talking about different body shapes, they started to accept the content and see their own issues in her content. The same activist #7 further explained:

I used to get upset with negative comments, but I feel that people have changed. I see the same people that attacked me still following me and changing their attitude after a while. It is effective! I see real change. One of my male followers told me that he had bought a cake for his daughter when her period happened for the first time, to let this start with a sweet memory for her. People have told me that they have changed their minds about undergoing cosmetic surgery.

There is an agreement between these activists that the higher number of negative reactions come from male followers. Activist #3 says over 70% of criticism comes from male followers, therefore, she tries to write more moderately and less radically so that everyone would stay and learn. She also admits that:

As long as we criticize the government, men come along with it, but when we target them as part of the problem, they attack us. I think men are still not very open to hearing about feminist issues, but women have become more interested.

Activist #4 agrees with this and mentions that her audiences are mostly women and they do not give her any negative impressions. Male followers, however, bully her sometimes. Some of the bullies are also far-right people and monarchists who mostly oppose feminists. Some are only anti-feminist, and some organize cyber-attacks against her. She describes that women's comments are more important to her: "I discuss with them when it's needed, but I usually do not want to discuss with men as some of them just want to oppose and are not flexible."

Activist #8 also says that she cares more about women's reactions and thinks that the best strategy is to strengthen the oppressed community. The concern is not about educating people, but it is about building power and capacity through organizing women, and helping them find inspiration by themselves to know how to make the power relations fairer. She said:

I have serious boundaries in both pages, I delete negative comments and block users that make the space unsafe. I have a limited capacity and need to focus it on creating a space for women to talk and organize themselves. However, positive reactions outweigh negativity. I notice that comments with a victim-blaming intention have decreased significantly since two years ago. I feel like education has been effective on feminist pages. While my purpose has been to create this atmosphere for organizing rather than educating, the education has also been effective.

The overall impression which these activists express shows that they find their activities useful and think their audiences have become more mature in approaching women's issues throughout the past few years. As Riera (2015) mentions validation and support are important benefits that cyberfeminism provides, especially in communities where feminist ideas are unwelcome. These activists have been able to gain their audiences' support and validate their activities as these audiences continue to follow activist pages.

### **Theme 3: Why Activism on Instagram?**

Instagram has become a popular platform in Iran during the past few years, and feminist users are also taking advantage of the presence of people on this platform. I asked all activists to explain why they have put most of their efforts on Instagram and



what were the affordances of this platform. I found their ideas to align with cyberfeminism and its global capacities for interactivity and networking (Verma, Haq, & Rai, 2018), with the possibility to have feminist concepts go viral and attract support (Harris, 2018).

All activists agree that Instagram is the best place to access people and educate them at this time within the Iranian context. Even though some of them have been active outside social media as well, they think nothing can compare to popular social media when it comes to access and reach. Activist #1, who is in direct interaction with many women who experience violence in her NGO, says:

Women and girls do not study legal sources much. However, Instagram is a part of their everyday life. Even in remote areas, they use it. However, social media only provides a space to give hints to women about everything from marriage conditions to domestic violence, but it is not enough for serious work. It just helps getting the attention and raising some concerns in their minds.

Some of these activists have tried to reach their audiences on other social media platforms and admit that Instagram has been the best tool. Activist #6 has tried Twitter. She believes Twitter is not a suitable platform for feminist activities because her target audiences do not have access to it. Her followers, however, have access to Instagram since it is not banned in Iran yet.

As reaching more audiences becomes easier on social media, the visibility of online feminist activities increases. Activist #2 admits that being active on social media makes the activities vastly visible, saying: "I learned a lot here myself and I can connect with people with less effort and cost." Activist #3 agrees that her activities would have a much smaller range of reach if it were in the real world. In her words: "On social media, it is easier to connect and find like-minded people. I have worked with feminist magazines too, but social media is much better for our activities."

Despite these advantages, popularity of a social platform and the possibility for anyone to speak up can have negative consequences as well, as activist #5 says: "There are active users who post without sufficient knowledge about women's issues and promote a popular attitude rather than a well-thought social position-taking. Some others also make it hard by being too radical and making feminists look bad."

Another reason that some of these activists find it suitable to write on Instagram is that they believe it is almost the only way. Knowing that in-person activities need to have government permission in the conservative society of Iran, Instagram is where they can write for their Iranian audiences without needing the government's green light.

Activist #8 says:

We are doing this in a patriarchal and tyrannical atmosphere where protesting in the streets has a high cost. Therefore, we build virtual streets. This is a new era in women's movement and it is working. #MeToo started in the virtual world and has had real consequences. This is actually working!

In terms of real consequences, she points at the case of Mohsen Namjoo (Iranian musician) who lost fans in real life. In another example, a psychologist was deprived from being on the official list of designated experts as the result of #MeToo. The list is published by the Medical Council; an independent organization that protects psychologists and patients' rights in Iran. Activist #7 agrees that online activism is the only way to be effective, saying she could not talk freely in magazines. She censors herself on Instagram, but at least experiences more freedom of expression online.

For those activists who live inside Iran, not only the possibility of expressing feminist thoughts relies on online activities, but also the online path seems to be safer. As activist #9 mentions, there have been heavy punishments set for two of the activists who were holding educational workshops. However, in the virtual world, there is a lower risk for activism. In the conservative society of Iran, discussing feminist topics can be costly for activists. Activist #2 is aware of the challenges and points at taboos. Taboos are forbidden cultural elements and have been a part of different societies for a long time. Farberow (2017) has reviewed taboos historically, and describes it to be "less about what is prohibited than about the emotion inspired by the thought of what is prohibited" (p. viii). In other words, the role of culture is important and that is why a concept can be taboo in a part of the world but not in other areas. In this respect, activist #2 admits that:

I'm not ready to do anything outside of social media as it might cost a lot for me. Many feminist topics are considered taboo. For example, talking about period would have been considered wrong 3 to 4 years ago, but now, I see people sharing my content about it. This wouldn't have been easy in real world.

Some of those who have experienced in-person activities claim that the atmosphere is not suitable for continuing these in-person activities. Therefore, social media are considered as an alternative.

While different groups of intellectuals may see social media as insufficient for their purposes, these feminists have found it mostly satisfying to be on Instagram, not only in terms of safety and reach, but also in terms of functionality. Activist #4 says:

Instagram surprised me. I was coming from a mindset that understood Instagram as a cheap platform, but I found it very suitable for activism when I started myself. I understood that our audiences have concerns that we didn't care about. I used to write many articles and I still do, but Instagram gave me a better vision of what people think and what they need. It's not the only place I am active on but it's an important one.

It seems that the alternative that these feminists had chosen to overcome the limitations has revealed further potentials for reach and visibility than in-person activism could never provide. Referring back to Banet-Weiser's (2018) popular feminism, online activism has facilitated visibility. This quality has elevated online platforms to functional tools for activism rather than just alternatives to in-person activism.

Moreover, Instagram provides functional tools for personal branding and creating a trustable image for feminist activists. Pruchniewska (2018) talks about personal branding for freelancers who produce creative content as they work in a neoliberal economy, which requires self-branding for visibility. Since some of these feminist activists were not known as feminists before starting their activities on Instagram, they have been able to use Instagram's functions to build trust around their feminist identity.

#### **Theme 4: What Topics to Prioritize?**

As the main question of my study, topics that have gained the most attention in feminist pages are important since they reflect what has been on the top of mind in society. I have found six categories of the most discussed topics by these feminist activists and have analyzed their content. However, I also asked themselves to describe what feminist topics they think are most important and need to be prioritized on Instagram. I also asked the same question about the audiences' point of view and topics which the audiences find more interesting to engage with and react to.

As for activists' opinions on priorities, most of my interviewees believe that none of the women's issues should be prioritized over the other because women come from different contexts, have different needs and priorities, and their needs are all equally valid. However, except for activist #8, others did mention the topics that they personally try to give more attention to. I have summarized these topics in Table 2 at the end of this section.

Among the topics that activists have mentioned are issues related to both culture and law which are considered equally important topics to focus on. However, most of them preferred to focus on cultural issues, and only three activists (#1, #4, and #9) have directly mentioned law as the most important issue. Therefore, I found cultural aspects of feminism to be of greater importance for most activists.

As discussed in chapter two, cyberfeminism has been accused of not being able to challenge the discriminate structures. Looking back at Banet-Weiser's (2018) descriptions about popular feminism on social media, the activists' preference to highlight cultural issues rather than politics and law would make sense. She believes popular feminism provides visibility but it often stops there and lacks the ability to change the patriarchal structures. Therefore it is not disruptive to mainstream politics. Between my cases, most of the activists have highlighted culture and think they need to focus on that front as I mentioned above.

Those who mentioned law highlight the issue of discrimination caused by patriarchal laws. Activist #1 thinks topics about discrimination, altering discriminatory law and creating supportive law, creating an atmosphere for men to support women's rights, and encouraging women to break the silence against discrimination need to be prioritized. For some of the other activists, law is not the single important factor. For example, activist #4 emphasized law over other cultural aspects of discrimination. She thinks that there are things that every woman faces, for example, compulsory hijab, sexual violence, systematic oppression of women, and forced marriages, to name a few. These experiences are related to both discriminatory law and cultural beliefs in her opinion. However, she concludes by highlighting the law and says that the vast array of misogynist laws makes it difficult to prioritize. Other activists also think that law and culture are intertwined, and both are important to discuss. Activist #9 steps further and connects cultural issues such as honour killing to law. She is certain that misogynist

laws, lack of law in some cases, and the fact that some rules are being executed against women are important issues, such as the compulsory hijab, unequal marriage laws, child marriage, lacking laws to confront honour killing, and lack of laws in supporting women who experience domestic violence. However, she also highlights those issues related to the culture and traditions are necessary to raise awareness such as controlling women under the name of honour, the mindset of owning women, women's bodies' taboos, and other issues like these. These are important because they are related to women's lives, safety, and freedom.

As for the other activists, mostly cultural issues are brought up when asked about priorities. Issues that put women's lives in danger are among those which activists have highlighted. Activist #2, for example, points at some topics related to women's lives, including child marriage, honour killing, and domestic violence. They say:

I know people who are really in danger and I don't know how I can help them by posting, but I feel like I can at least help them get more educated. Systematic work needs to be done for such issues and many of the people in danger don't even have access to social media.

Activist #5 also thinks sexual violence and honour killing are the two most important feminist issues in Iran, saying: "I have experienced it myself and I talk about it a lot. For my followers also, these issues are top priorities."

Some of the other activists who mentioned cultural aspects pointed at issues related to the body. For instance, activist #6 says that bodily integrity is very important and includes many women's rights such as the choice to have sexual relationships, abortion rights, and to generally have autonomy over their own bodies. Some activists mention more detailed cases of bodily integrity; activist #7 highlights "period taboo" as one of the most important issues that she has discussed. Many of her followers and some celebrities joined a campaign that she ran and published about women's periods. About the importance of the topic, she says:

I have followers who tell me about problems in their family. One of them was told not to step in the agriculture field when she is on her period, otherwise nothing will grow there! Even ads about women's pads are sarcastic and indirect! I want the period-related products to be advertised freely so men can also understand what the ad is about and learn about it.

She has created other campaigns about body positivity as well, and is concerned about cosmetic surgeries<sup>2</sup> that in some cases are dangerous and painful. She discourages her followers from undergoing cosmetic surgeries and talks about different body shapes.

Besides raising awareness about body image and encouraging a positive attitude towards body types, other ways of empowering are also among the important issues discussed. Activist #3 thinks work needs to be done to empower women: “We have so many priorities in women’s issues in Iran. Honour killing has become very bold in media in the recent months. These happenings take so much of my energy that I feel it is better to focus on empowering women instead of publishing such news and talking about them. At least women can learn to become independent.”

As I discussed in the literature review, the intersectionality approach in feminism aims to make women’s rights inclusive to all groups of women. Iranian feminist activists on Instagram use the same rationale to avoid prioritizing certain demands over others. For example, activist #8 strictly insists not to name any topic and believes that it is very sensitive to set priorities when it comes to women’s issues: “Women of different classes, races, ethnicities, and religions have different priorities, and prioritizing takes away the power for organizing. All of these needs and issues are connected. The mindset behind compulsory hijab is the same thing that leads to beheading girls by their fathers. Touching on every single issue matters.”

While cultural aspects of inequality are highlighted by most activists, the strong connection between discriminatory laws and behaviours in society makes it hard to separate these issues completely, as biased laws would pave the way for violence, control, and other shapes of coercive power against women in society.

I generally found the activists’ responses in the same direction with my findings from the content analysis, because “violence” as in category 2 and “discrimination” as in category 5 have been highlighted in their interviews, too. These two categories have been the most prevalent ones in terms of highest percentage of posts (category 2) and most prioritized by activists (category 5).

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<sup>2</sup> Iran is among the world’s top 10 countries performing plastic surgery. In 2013, it ranked fourth after Brazil, Mexico, and the United States (The National, 2016). Based on reports in 2013, Iran was known to have the highest rate of nose surgery in the world (The Guardian, 2013).

Another similarity between findings from the interviews and content analysis is the fact that these activists mostly prioritize talking about culture rather than law. They aim to focus on raising awareness and do not seem to attempt to change laws or target legal institutions directly. These findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Common and unique topics that activists mentioned in their interviews as most important issues. The common topics are mutual at least between three activists.

Activist	Common topics	Unique topics
#1	Discrimination	Encouraging men to support women's rights, encouraging women to break the silence.
#9		Child marriage, controlling women under the name of honour, the mindset of owning women, women's bodies' taboos.
#4	Violence	Systematic weakening of women, forced marriages.
#2		Child marriage.
#5		-
#3	No common topic mentioned	Need to focus on empowering women.
#6		Bodily integrity; including the choice to wear or not wear a hijab, abortion rights, etc.
#7		Period, cosmetic surgeries, different body shapes, marriage rights, financial life.
#8		No priority. Touching on every single issue matters.

### Theme 5: Topics That Followers Request Most

To talk about audiences' preferences and priorities, I asked the activists to reflect on the social media posts which have been the most engaging and popular. Activist #6 mentioned that a post with more engagement is not necessarily a more popular one because in some cases, people would engage to show disagreement or bully the activist. However, they all had an understanding of what their audiences mostly liked to see on their pages by common sense and experience.

Topics that break a taboo and start exploring a less discussed issue are among the favourite ones. For instance, activist #2 says: “My followers love sexual topics, posts about period and gender stereotypes. However, topics like domestic violence, rape, murder and such issues that are brought up based on news and happenings usually annoy people and many would deny them unless something has gone viral.” Mentioning taboos again, activist #7 admits that taboo topics make a post interesting: “Anything that is about sex is interesting for both male and female users.”

Many of the topics related to the body are also among the taboos, and audiences seem to be interested in them. Activist #6 says:

I think sexual topics, masturbation, consent in relationship, women’s different body shapes, topics about cheating in relationships, and polyamory are among popular topics that I have discussed. Whatever is related to the body in a way is very controversial and discussions will go beyond my page.

Taboos about women’s bodies are mentioned by other activists too; activist #9 also admits that the most favourite posts on her page have been those regarding the taboos around women’s bodies and virginity myths.

Besides taboos, violence is another topic—again related to the body—that some of the activists list as their popular discussions. Honour killing and marital rape were among topics that gained much attention on activist #9’s page. Similarly, activist #1 mentions sexual violence at home as a popular topic on her page along with explaining marriage conditions and solutions to fight violence.

Another aspect that makes topics popular on feminist pages is the extent to which they cause sympathy. Activist #4 states: “When women find words for what they are experiencing, they like it. Posts about #MeToo and violence were popular ones.” This point relates to the popularity of topics related to the body as well. As activist #8 admits, discussions about sexual violence are highly demanded because many people experience it. She states:

For my followers, #MeToo has been a very important issue. Sexual violence is vastly experienced and there is public silence associated with shame around this issue. Compulsory hijab, violence, and being threatened to death are things that I found repeated in #MeToo narrations that women sent to me.



The way that activists approach a topic and the language they use can affect the popularity of posts. Activist #3 explains: “Whenever I go more radical, the post creates a bigger buzz.” As taboos are radical topics by nature, it makes sense that they have been repeated in the responses of most activists about their audiences’ preferences.

## **Theme 6: Challenges to Online Feminism**

When I asked about the challenges of being an activist on social media, almost all of these feminists told me that their activities had caused them troubles in different ways; however, they were all happy to feel influential, and preferred to tolerate the problems and keep posting about feminist issues.

Some activists mentioned being threatened in the real world because of their online activities. These problems vary from personal problems with friends to governmental security problems. In this respect, activist #5 said: “I have received warning text messages probably coming from Iran’s intelligence organizations about my activities on Instagram. I’m not sure if it was a random message or targeted at me but I am overall conservative with what I do online.”

Some of the other activists try to avoid certain issues, especially those who reside inside Iran. For example, activist #2 said: “I avoid topics about religion and the regime. I have not faced security problems so far, but I am always concerned about the possibility of it.”

Even if they do not directly face trouble, the challenges that other activists face make the other activists worried as well. In sensitive times, they may try to shift their focus to safer topics in order to prevent trouble, forcing them to exercise self-censorship. Activist #3, for instance, said: “My feminist friends have faced interrogation recently and the rest of us are worried, too. Sometimes even my followers tell me to be careful with what I say. Therefore, focusing on empowering women in economic independence is my priority now. I write about my freelance experiences and such things that can help them decide for their own future.” The fear has caused some activists to take extra precautions as well. Activist #9 has recently deleted all her chats and some of her posts because other activists were arrested.

In terms of the way in which these challenges affect their activism, some of them mention having thoughts about quitting. Activist #4 admits that challenges can make them regret being an online activist and expectations can grow too high, stating:

Sometimes there is too much pressure and I ask myself why I do this? Especially during #MeToo moments, it's a lot of pressure. Sometimes people whom we call out on behalf of other women do not easily leave us and continue harassing us. They might also encourage other groups to harass us. People do not know these issues and expect a lot from us. They want us to be selfless. However, I know that they care about us and get worried when we don't show up for a while. All these types of feedback come to our real lives. Some of my male friends left me after #MeToo. I got threats in real life and didn't even feel safe here outside of Iran.

She is not the only activist abroad who has faced stress and other consequences for her activities. Activist #8 also lives abroad and admits the same problems:

Every day I think of stopping this. The atmosphere is not fair. We are constantly under attack for what we do. Women have gained some power online that is out of men's reach; instead, they target us to spread their anger. We have even experienced relations with men that try to get close to us by having conversations about feminist issues, but we do not feel safe about some of these relations. I cannot go back to my country. I even hesitate to travel to Turkey. We are constantly threatened but we do not take them seriously. However, the stress is real.

Besides such pressures, the audiences' expectations cause some activists to think if activism is worth these challenges. Activist #6 says there are times when feminist activists make a shield of themselves by publishing anonymous narrations instead of real people who do not want to do it themselves, such as #MeToo narrations. In such high-pressure times, she has even thought of whether this is worth the troubles, stating: "People expect me to answer their questions and help and support them."

Although most of the activists have faced challenges for their activities, activist #7 is the only one who has never experienced any serious problem and has been conservative enough to stay on the safe side; however, she has been under emotional pressure for continuing what she does:

It took time for my own relatives and friends to join my page. I feel a duty to raise awareness and that is not easy. I am hesitant to talk about women's legal rights because I'm afraid it can cause trouble for me. I just try to implicitly explain the ways that they can secure more rights in their marriage and everyday life, especially financially.

Organized and coordinated cyber-attacks in different forms, such as sending fake followers to the activists' pages and sending several insulting direct messages, is another issue that all these activists have experienced to some extent. Activist #6, for example, mentioned that in certain times, she observes similar threats and vilification by different accounts. Incidentally, shortly after I finished the interviews, all the feminist pages started sharing about coordinated attacks against their pages and subsequently made all their pages private to protect their accounts. This took several weeks and forced feminist activists to keep their pages private. As a result, they were not able to reach a broader audience. These technical barriers made by unknown anti-feminists are efforts to push these activists back and make them abandon their activism.

In relation to the theories discussed in Chapter 2 and to answer my main research question regarding the ways feminist activists challenge dominant cultural values about women, my findings show that Iranian online feminist activism is not "happy" feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4). However, it does rely on the capacities of the platform to gain attention and raise engagement. At the same time, it is not challenging the discriminate structures either, rather, it is focused on targeting cultural values. Long-term commitment to a cultural shift, however, can bring about a political shift. Therefore, it is logical to take these activities seriously and not to simply dismiss the effectiveness of them. Further, looking back at the concept of "feminism for everybody" (hooks, 2014), it seems that these activities are providing the opportunity for the general public to become involved in feminism, demanding activism and supporting the activists. This can be considered as an achievement for Iranian online feminist activism.

The feminist activists who participated in my study were mostly focused on trending news, and their activities were not generally built around positivity. I examined feminist subjects that are mostly raised in the Iranian social media sphere to answer my second research question. Looking back at the content categories: "male dominance and violence", "inequality and stereotypes in society", and "women's struggles for liberty" have the highest share of content, and are related to negative news and factual information. On the other hand, the "motivational and empowering" category which generally contained positive motivational and informative content has received less attention. Some of the activists even mentioned in their interviews that what they do is not "likable" and that is why some of their pages grow very slowly and are frequently

trolled. In relation to that, and to reflect on my third research question about the way cultural values in Iran impact women's movements, I showed that feminist issues are considered sensitive in the conservative society of Iran in my discussions in Chapter 1. However, Instagram has become a free tool for Iranian feminist activists to educate users about feminism and challenge the dominant cultural values. As activists have mentioned in the interviews, their audiences have changed their attitude towards these issues over time and are now being more accepting of feminist topics.

To understand which cultural values about women are mostly challenged on social media which is the focus of my fourth research question, I have investigated the topics that feminist activists are interested in prioritizing besides the topics that I found mostly highlighted in their posts. Most importantly, the mindset that allows "violence" and "discrimination" against women is challenged on social media under topics such as violence against women in the name of honour, rape culture, and social gender stereotypes. Most of the activists have focused on these two concepts while talking to me in the interviews and in their Instagram posts.

As my fifth question asks about the status of Iranian traditions in the online feminist movements, it seems that traditions are not necessarily respected; rather, many of them are criticized and considered problematic by these activists like the case of child marriage. The latter issue has been a traditional practice in some areas of the country, or the tradition of valuing housework and motherhood over women's social presence, which has been blamed for underestimating women's social roles.

As I have asked in my sixth research question, I tried to understand how Iranian online feminism relates to global feminist theories. Through reviewing feminism in Iran and in general in the first two chapters, I explained that Iranian feminism historically ties to Western theories and is inspired by them. With the digital media flourishing in recent years, Iranian feminists have adopted some global movements such as Metoo and its tactics such as hashtag activism and blogging on social media. This global cultural exchange has led to similar types of online activism that allows applying global feminist theories to the case of Iran.

Therefore, I was able to discuss Iran's case under theories such as popular feminism. Regarding my main research question and in relation to these theories, it

seems that while Iranian online feminist activism is not really “happy”, it does not deeply challenge structures of society either. Rather, it aims to raise social awareness and sympathy towards women’s issues by highlighting the pains and sorrows which women bear. Alternatively, in Banet-Weiser’s words, it “stops there, as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures” (2018, p. 4). This does not bring us to the conclusion that these efforts are useless. Cyber-attacks, aiming to paralyze these pages every once in a while, show how vulnerable the patriarchal structures are to online efforts and feminist visibility, even though these activists do not have any offline political power other than revealing and narrating stories online. In other words, digital awareness can be the first step to change and is a powerful tool.

While feminist activists on Instagram do not directly target laws, authorities, and the government, their activities do seem to put pressure on both legal institutions and social norms. Some of the activists talked about real changes that happened after some of the #MeToo narrations were released. In one case, for example, Keyvan Emamverdi, who was accused of rape by several women online, was arrested and confessed to 300 rapes through legal investigations. Famous artists such as Mohsen Namjoo and Aidin Aghdashloo were boycotted because of the #MeToo stories that were told about them online. Activists also told me that users frequently thank them for raising awareness and express the change in their own attitudes. In the #MeToo example, and for cases that do not have a chance to be followed legally, the rationale has changed. This is how calling on offenders is justified: if protesting is shameful and taking it to the court will not lead to justice, activists will spoil the names of the offenders instead so that they cannot continue to do it to anyone else or remain in a safe zone!

Nevertheless, there are Iranian pages on Instagram that promote an emotional and motivational approach towards feminism focusing on popular aspects and ignoring harsh realities such as violence. Most of these pages are active under appealing titles like “Amoozesh\_dokhtarooone” (translates to “girlish education”). Since I only chose my sample from pages that are managed by real people under their real names, these types of positivity-centered pages were not included in my case studies.

I find Banet-Weiser’s claim (2018) that popular feminism relies on platform capitalism valid; however, I think feminist activists have managed to use the platforms in their own favour. They do need to be engaging in order to be more visible. However, this

has not led to push feminist content towards being more popular and likable. Instead, the importance of the relatable topics which they talk about has gained visibility for their content.

Another claim that Banet-Weiser (2018) makes in relation to popular feminism is that this kind of feminism does not challenge deep structures of inequalities. Therefore, it is not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics. This seems to make sense about Iranian Instagram feminism, and that is because activists do not place much hope in changing structures and social media has not given them that power. They cannot organize meetings and discussions for real action with authorities unless they become accepted by them. "Feminism for everybody", as bell hooks (2014) names it, can be the greatest achievement of Instagram feminism. Power relations and the manner in which patriarchy operates in society can be understood when explained on popular platforms where people actually spend time. Overall, Iranian Instagram feminism does not sound so revolutionary; however, it has brought everyday feminist topics to the attention of many social media users. While revolutionary feminist activism might be of more interest for feminist scholars, some think everyday feminism topics are helpful for spreading the thought. Even if these topics are not brought up so radically, they are taking steps towards what hooks calls "feminism for everybody."

There are limitations to the effectiveness of cyberfeminism on social media. Cyberfeminism might not mean access for raising the voice for every single woman, but feminist activists have tried to speak on behalf of some of the oppressed groups of women who do not have the capacity to own online media themselves. That being said, it is still limited to the women who have access to the internet and social media so that they can send their stories to activists and educate themselves using feminist pages.

In my conclusion, I will review the most important results of the study.

## Chapter 5.

### Conclusion

In this study, I investigated how Iranian feminist activists are using Instagram to challenge dominant cultural values about women. I began by highlighting the issue of cultural values based on personal observations before starting the study; I assumed that these activists mostly talk to people and challenge social relations and culture rather than the structures of political power. As I went through the process of coding and talking to the nine activists, I found my initial assumptions valid.

Looking back at the history of feminist waves, I discussed online feminism, also known as fourth-wave feminism, where personal narratives are shared on digital platforms. Social media often allow these personal experiences and expressions go viral and become more influential. Online tools let women own their media and generate support online.

Following a literature review exploring the history of cultural values about women in Iran, I investigated the feminist subjects which Instagram activists mostly raised in the Iranian social media atmosphere and found that activists approach these topics mainly from the angles of 'people' and 'culture.' These activists seem to feel hopeless regarding being able to change the structures of power. They do not have access to fundamental parts of governance and cannot negotiate in organized ways. Therefore, they prefer to target their audiences' mindset and the society's dominant conservative culture in an attempt to influence the public aspects of feminist issues. On that front, they have been focusing more on some topics and less on other ones.

Regarding the feminist subjects that are mostly raised in the Iranian social media sphere, I found similar results from the content analysis and the interviews. In terms of frequency, the most popular category for posting between feminist activists in the past two years has been the second one: "male dominance and violence" with 33.6% of all the posts published under it, followed by category 5: "inequality and stereotypes in society" that includes 27.2% of all posts. After these, category 4: "women's struggles for liberty" is the next popular category with 20.1% of all posts. As for least popular categories, category 1: "women's traditional family roles" with 3.6%, category 6: "other"

with 6.1%, and category 3: “motivational and empowering” with 9.4% of the posts received the lowest amount of content, respectively.

Looking at the percentages of posts in each category, another major result emerges. The percentages show that category 5 has been the priority for four of the activists and they have dedicated the highest percentage of their own posts to those categories, while category 2 has ranked first for three activists. Therefore, considering both the percentage of posts created and the most prioritized categories, the second and fifth categories have been highlighted more than the other ones. These two priorities were also highlighted in the interviews as activists repeatedly named “violence” and “discrimination” in their top priorities speaking about important topics. Cultural values related to these two categories are in the centre of attention as a result. Including Iranian traditions that contribute to male dominance and gender inequalities.

The activists’ approach toward feminism is a factor that could provide more context on the reasons for prioritizing some of the topics over the others. When asked about the definition of feminism, “equality” emerged again as the most important mission that these activists wanted to pursue. Six out of nine activists named “equality” as the main goal that they are seeking through their activities.

Other findings from the interviews were related to the affordances of the Instagram platform for achieving their main goals. They all agree that Instagram is the best place to access people and educate them at this time within the Iranian context. They have come to the conclusion that Instagram seems to almost be the only way to reach their audiences regarding restrictions that they would face for real world feminist activism. While they have all encountered several types of challenges, from political to personal, yet they prefer to continue their activities as they find them affective in real world.

Iranian online feminism relates to global feminist theories in different ways. Focusing on cyberfeminism as a branch of feminism that uses digital media to spread feminist message, I discussed related theories that explain the online activities further. Some of these theories present cyberfeminism as a popular and happy type of feminism, which does not aim to challenge the social structures. However, what I found in my study indicates that this is more complicated about the Iranian online feminist activism. These



activities do not sound very happy on Iranian activists' pages, but they still use the capitalist platforms as a means to drive attention to their feminist thoughts. They have managed to use the digital platforms in their own favour; however, their efforts are limited to revealing issues and they do not manage to get deep into solving those issues by negotiation or practical solutions.

Considering that social changes emerge gradually, it is not easy to dismiss these activities as ineffective; rather they can be seen as initial steps towards social change. As some of the theories that I discussed in this study have suggested, making feminist discussions available to everybody, would result in general interest in these topics. While Iranian feminist activists do not hope or have the power to change much in legal institutions and social structures, they are initiating more discussions and making them available to the public. As some of them have mentioned in the interviews, they explicitly see how some of their audiences have changed their minds about feminist issues and have started to pay more attention to them.

We also need to keep in mind that internet and social media access is not equally available to every women in Iran. Cyberfeminism does not provide access to feminist awareness for every single woman, but feminist activists have tried to speak on behalf of many of the oppressed groups of women.

### **Study Limitations**

In this study, I combined different methods to make my findings more valid and comprehensive. However, the selection of nine feminist activists could have affected some findings. For example, one of the activists who has not participated in my study leads the topic of equal work at home on Instagram. She has created a hashtag that translates to "home chores are not feminine" and has asked other feminists to write about it, too. Therefore, if she had participated in my study, there would have been a higher record for posts in category 1. This can be considered as one of the shortcomings of this study because the sampling process can influence the outcome of prioritized topics.

In their interviews, some of the activists mentioned that they do not believe in prioritizing feminist topics because different groups of women may have different needs

and priorities. However, apparently, they—consciously or unconsciously—have prioritized some topics based on their own approach to women’s issues.

The limitations are also related to the news and events taking place during the timeframe of my study. During the last two years, the #MeToo movement in Iran has been trending on social media, and that has highly affected the number of posts in the second category. Due to the fact that every day, new stories are being told, and these feminist women are publishing these stories on pages such as @me\_too\_movement\_iran, this has brought more attention to this topic on the activists’ personal pages. In addition, several cases of honour killing have been highlighted in the news media during the past two years, and this is another factor that has changed the ranking of categories like the second topic. Therefore, it is important that similar studies are carried out regularly so that comparative research can be made throughout different time periods and possibly, other topics can be captured and analyzed.

The number of posts on each page and the number of activities that each feminist has on social media also affected the categories. This is because some feminists have been more active while focusing on certain topics based on their personal preferences. Others were less active and the topics that they focus on might have received less attention as a result. I have tried to resolve this issue by using percentages and reporting priority categories for each activist in relation to their own content.

Another concern of mine is that some unrelated data that I deleted can actually make meaning in the big picture; for example, two of the feminist activists are married and one of them is a mother. In some of the unrelated posts that I deleted, they try to show their love to their spouse or child, and that could be a part of their effort to break stereotypes about feminist activists, such as the belief that they do not care about marriage or family. Therefore, deleting seemingly unrelated data may have resulted in losing some background information.

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