



## **From Hashtag to Policy Agenda**

*Exploring the Role of German Twitter in the 2022*

*Iranian Revolutionary Movement*

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## **Abstract**

This master's thesis examines how the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 utilised German Twitter to influence Germany's foreign policy agenda toward Iran. Discursive strategies in the context of social movement studies, besides frame theory, remain understudied. This is particularly true for movements resisting or challenging mainstream, hegemonic discourses. By exploring how the movement utilises German Twitter for the formulation of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance we can gain insight into the hegemonic discourse in German public and political discourses and how the movement addresses them. By using Lazar's (2005) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as the theoretical and methodological backbone it was able to identify two counter-narratives and two strategies of resistance and analysed the political impact of them.

**Keywords:** Social Movement, Revolution, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Media, Twitter, Iran

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To my father. You have shown nothing but endless support in me. Without your hard work and bravery, I would not be who I am today. I hope this thesis reminds you of our hour-long political discussion which are one of the reasons I chose this path.

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And finally, to the future: **To Jin, Jijan, Azadi. To Woman, Life, Freedom**

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1 Positionality .....	7
<b>2. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1 Social Movements and Discourse .....	8
2.2 Discursive Spaces and Social Media .....	14
2.3 Social Movements, Discourse, and Social Media .....	19
<b>3. The Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022</b> .....	<b>22</b>
3.1 Iranian Movements: History and Feminism .....	23
3.2 Iranian Movements: Social Media .....	25
3.3 Iranian Movements: Role of Germany .....	27
<b>4. Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>28</b>
4.1 Discursive Activism, Connective Action, Social Drama .....	29
4.2 From Critical Discourse Analysis to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis .....	31
4.3 FCDA: Theoretical Assumptions and Core Principles .....	33
4.4 Application of FCDA and Clark’s Theoretical Framework .....	36
<b>5. Methodology</b> .....	<b>37</b>
5.1 Research Design .....	38
5.2 Data Collection & Description .....	40
5.3 Analytical Framework: Counter-Narratives and Strategies of Resistance .....	45
5.4 Validity & Reliability .....	47
5.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations .....	48
<b>6. Analysis</b> .....	<b>50</b>
6.1 Counter-Narratives .....	51
6.2 Strategies of Resistance .....	58
6.3 Impact on and Recirculation by Political Actors .....	65
<b>7. Discussion</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>8. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>9. Bibliography</b> .....	<b>79</b>

## **1. Introduction**

A picture of a young woman. She is wearing a black headscarf. Strands of her hair falling into her face. She is smiling. She looks like many young women. But at the time a nation and the internet learn her name she already passed away. The 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 marks the day of Jhina (Mahsa) Amini died at the hands of the Iranian ‘morality police’ (Sinaee, 2022). Her death immediately sparks nation-wide protests in Iran and not long after leads to an international outcry in her name (Marks, Haghighatjoo and Chenoweth, 2022; *UWIRE Text*, 2022). Social media platforms, such is the case in many contemporary movements, take on a central role for the movement.

The movement is quickly being coined as a feminist revolution by activists. The central slogan reflects this, as it adopts the Kurdish phrase ‘Jin, Jiyan, Azadi’ (eng. ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’) which stems from Kurdish liberation movements (Sharma, 2022). Feminism and intersectionality are central tenets of the movement and the demands are clear: The regime must go (Amiri, 2023; Sahebi, 2023b). This movement is an example of how social movements and revolutions are moving closer to each other conceptually and we potentially see hybrids (Goldstone and Ritter, 2018). I argue that the movement as it emerged after Jhina’s death is such a hybrid. Its demands are that of a revolution, but its strategies and tactics are that of a social movement. Due to this I am referring to this movement as the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022.

Women and ethnic minorities experience oppression and marginalisation daily. There are a few ways for them to make their experiences heard, and one of them is via social media platforms like Twitter. In a public sphere that experiences extensive censorship, like in Iran, finding alternative discursive spaces is necessary. Kermani and Hooman (2022) illustrate the utility of alternative discursive spaces with the example of Iranian women sharing experiences of

sexual assault under a dedicated hashtag on Twitter. The platform in general, due to its technological affordances, has become a central discursive space of resistance in the Iranian movement (Schleifer, 2009; Golkar, 2011). The government has recognised this potential and responded with extensive repression and censorship, which simply led to Iranians learning how to circumvent it.

The current movement has moved Iranians abroad to break their silence in support of their family and friends (Amiri, 2023). Due to the extreme violent repression protestors in Iran face, Iranians abroad are advocating for the movement within their own national contexts. The goal is to increase pressure on the regime, with the hope that it will lead to its resignation. Germany has been one of the central figures, due to its traditionally protective role toward Iran, shielding it from harsh sanctions or other diplomatic actions (Küntzel, 2014).

The overall objective of my thesis is to examine how revolutionary movements utilise social media to influence political processes. In this specific case, I examined how the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 utilised German Twitter to influence Germany's foreign policy agenda toward Iran. The research focuses on the movement's ability to develop discursive strategies, such as counter-narratives or strategies of resistance to achieve its goals. As with many contemporary movements, social media has become a valuable tool for civil resistance. Research on the impact of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance and impact on political agendas remains limited. Out of this objective my thesis aims to answer the following research question and sub-questions.

***Research Question:*** How did the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 utilise Twitter to influence Germany's foreign policy agenda toward Iran?

- *Sub-Question1*: What counter-narratives or strategies of resistance did the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 develop in the German context?
- *Sub-Question1*: How were online counter-narratives picked up and recirculated by political actors?

As for the following sections, Section [2] is an extensive literature review addressing the existing knowledge on social movements use of discourse and counter strategies, specifically in the context of social media. The case study of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 will be outlined in Section [3]. The theoretical framework will be discussed in Section [4], followed by the methodology in Section [5]. The analysis of the Twitter data and counter-narratives of the movement can be found in Section [6]. Leaving Section [7] for the final discussion of the findings and limitations. Section [8] concludes the thesis with suggestions for future research.

## **1.1 Positionality**

Considering the case study of this research, I am not aiming to produce ‘objective knowledge’ as highlighted by Al-Ali and Pratt (2016). As a German-Iranian woman, I recognise that my identity and attitudes shaped my interest and approach to the topic of Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022. I have grown up in a mixed household with my mother who fled Iran after the Iranian Revolution 1979 and became an asylum seeker in Germany. She was an active part in the revolution and participated in the organisation of collective action during the revolution. Having grown up with her and my family’s stories I have an emotional connection to the suffering of women in the Iranian contexts. Yet, despite this I am aware that I am considered an ‘outsider’ to this suffering, due to having grown up in Germany. My connection to it originates from first-hand recollections of past experiences from my family members and not from my own experiences with the oppressive system in Iran. Furthermore, I actively

engage in activism in the context of the current movement and do see myself as a feminist. Lastly, growing up in the West and conducting this research within a Western academic context means my research comes from a position of privilege and by no means can I claim to understand the lived experience of marginalised groups. Nonetheless, growing up in rural Germany, the child of an immigrant mother, I experienced a fair share of racism and othering perpetuated by people around us, who did not see us as fully German. Lastly, it is important to highlight that despite my position of privilege conducting this research does not come without risks. The Iranian regime is known to be conscious of critical voices abroad and this may lead to varying consequences for my family members still living in Iran.

## **2. Literature Review**

*The following section offers a comprehensive review of existing academic work on the topics of social movements, discourse, and social media. I aim to summarise, analyse, and synthesise key arguments to establish a state of knowledge, identify potential gaps, and provide a foundation for my research.*

### **2.1 Social Movements and Discourse**

One of the core questions social movements scholars aim to answer is how social movements can influence political processes (Amenta, Andrews and Caren, 2018). The goals of movements in this context range from raising awareness about an issue to overthrowing existing political systems. Tactics may differ and are continuously being innovated by other movements in different social contexts (Soule and Roggeband, 2018), but at the core of it, movements, and collective action in general, participate in constructing meaning (Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2018). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) emphasise the cultural practice of meaning-making in their analysis on the nuclear power discourse in different United States media outlets. What this



case study highlights at large is the constructionist nature of discourse and public opinion, a dynamic that is relevant to social movements and their potential success (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993).

### ***Frame Theory***

The central theory in social movement studies on the construction of meaning and its importance for collective action, is frame theory. Key scholars amongst others are David Snow, Robert Benford, and William Gamson. Snow defines framing as “rooted in the symbolic interactionist and constructionist principle that meanings [...] arise through interpretive processes mediated by culture.” (2018, p. 393). As becomes clear from Snow’s definition and previous statements, social constructivism takes a central role in frame theory. What frame a movement chooses for its cause, depends on a multitude of factors. This includes the socio-political context it is embedded in, its internal organisational culture, and its target audience (Snow *et al.*, 1986). The reasons for framing being a valued perspective in social movement studies is that it highlights the relationship between meaning and mobilisation and its ability to develop an analytical framework allowing for theoretical and empirical analysis of framing processes and effects (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2018). The core tasks of framing are to identify a problem, assign responsibility, articulate a solution, and lastly, use this to formulate a call for action (Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2018). Snow and Benford (1992) additionally introduce the concept of ‘*master frames*’ which can be seen as umbrella frames that are being used across time and contexts, allowing for enough flexibility that a diversity of movements can huddle up under it. An example for such a master frame is the civil rights frame.

Whether framing aligns or resonates with an audience is central to its success (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2018). As mentioned previously, the goal of framing and meaning making at large is to mobilise

potential supporters and turn bystanders into active adherents. Whether constructed frames resonate with potential supporters depends in part on the use of symbols and discourse familiar to the target audience (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Benford and Snow, 2000). As simple as this is formulated, movements face a reality in which they are competing for the attention of the public with other movements and the potential of triggering counter-movements (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Snow, Vliegenthart and Ketelaars, 2018). Success in the context of framing is then seen in the resonance and alignment of frames, or put more directly, in its success of mobilising support. Snow (2018, p. 403) additionally points to potential, what he refers to as, '*framing hazards*' that may hinder resonance and alignment, such as internal frame disputes, frame shifts, or framing errors. A movement may choose a frame that does not resonate with people's beliefs or needs or use language and symbols that the target audience does not know. A movement's success or failure in the context of frame theory then reminds more of a marketing campaign able to sell a product or not. A clear limitation of frame theory is that it is unable to analyse movements that challenge mainstream discourses, including feminist movements. Multiple scholars formulate this criticism and offer alternative perspectives on how movements aim to impact public discourse (Steinberg, 1999; Ferree, 2003).

### ***Alternatives to Frame Theory***

The criticism of conceptualising frames as described previously, is that for a movement to be 'successful' it needs to align with the symbols, language, and discourse of the target audience (Steinberg, 1999). This theoretical lens is unable to grasp the successes of movements that went against mainstream assumptions and challenged mainstream discourse, such as feminist or revolutionary movements (Ferree, 2003; Goldstone and Ritter, 2018). Steinberg (1999) further points out that frame analysis has adopted a positivist instead of a social constructivist stance. Language is considered a rational and neutral instrument

composed of words that have one unique meaning (p. 739). Activists, contrary to this positivist assumption, cannot assume that their target audience will perceive their message as they intended. Multiple, potentially competing narratives can exist in one discursive field simultaneously. Following Steinberg's train of thought, framing is most useful when understood as an internal process. For the analysis of external communication they propose the concept of *dialogism*, which emphasises that *discourse is multivocal*, meaning words and phrases can hold multiple meanings depending on the context they are used in and what intention stands behind it (1999, p. 744). Dialogism as compared to frame theory "offers a model of discourse as a dynamic, conflict-ridden cultural terrain." (p. 748). Steinberg generally examines the emergence of counter-discourses and narratives among cotton spinners aimed at challenging dominant narratives. Such counter-narratives offer alternative perspectives and interpretation of the workers' experiences.

Ferree (2003) continues with this line of criticism, but instead of reconceptualising discourse she offers a theoretical lens to analyse nonresonant frames. The core concept here is *radicalism*, or *radical ideas* which "are attractive to movement actors who seek a restructuring of hegemonic ideas and the interests they express and support" (Ferree, 2003, pp. 305). She further introduces '*packages*' as a pendant to frames. Packages are "defined as socially embedded and complex systems of values, norms and beliefs, usually with historical roots in on-going power struggles." (Ferree, 2003, p. 308) and serve as interpretative frames. The core idea of radicalism particularly serves those who have been discursively marginalised, such as women or migrants, and due to that are unable to align their messaging with the present hegemonic discourse.

### ***Power and Discourse***

Both Steinberg (1999) and Ferree (2003) consider the relation between power and discourse central to our understanding and analysis of discursive spaces.

Present public discourses are ideological especially in the context of group conflict. According to Steinberg, ideology does not exist prior and detached from discourse and instead is being actively constructed through ongoing communication (1999, p. 745). Discourses are ideologically loaded and as a result continuously perpetuate power asymmetries guarding who can and cannot be part of the wider public discourse. It is a question of whose voices are being heard and who is being discursively marginalised. This constructivist and critical understanding of discourse needs to gain more attention within the field of social movement studies.

Other fields, such as linguistics, have recognised and analysed these discursive dynamics more extensively through theoretical approaches like Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The influence of patriarchy on our everyday and political discourses is a powerful example, as it showcases how the impact of 'gender' as a category has become normalised to the point where it is assumed to be neutral and appears invisible (Lazar, 2005). Movements, such as Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo, aim to shed light on these hegemonic discourses and the resulting social inequalities, but they face significant hurdles (Hurwitz and Crossley, 2018). Social movement scholars have yet to acknowledge and analyse these discursive power asymmetries and their impact on movement strategies in depth. Interdisciplinary approaches enable scholars to utilise analytical lenses, such as feminism, to grasp how movements aim to influence discourses (Taylor, 1998; Ferree and Mueller, 2004).

### ***Media and Discourse***

Both in the context of framing (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004) and more critical approaches toward framing (Ferree, 2003), the role of media and its relation to public opinion has taken a central role. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) highlight the close interaction and dependencies of social movements and the media.

Koopman and Olzak (2004), building on previous work by Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), identify two categories of actors, namely the gatekeeper, such as journalists, and claim-makers. Social movements take on the role of claim-makers that are put in a position in which they need to communicate their message in a way that incentivises journalists and editors to pick it up. This relationship clearly highlights the power asymmetry between the media and social movements, as the latter depends on the support of the prior to spread their message (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Soule and Roggeband, 2018). For media actors social movements are a great source of "drama, conflict, and action" (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 116). What narrative the media picks up depends on a variety of variables, which Koopman and Olzak (2004) refer to as 'news value'. This selection process is by no means objective e.g., violent movements are more likely to be picked up as they generate more engagement for news outlets. Due to this subjective selection process, movements are in competition with other claim makers, all of them hoping for their narratives to be diffused to a wider target audience and potentially gaining support.

The outlined relation between the media and social movements highlights the hurdles movements face in the diffusion of their narratives, especially if they are going against mainstream discourses. This is further emphasised by Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) observation that certain subcultures within the media landscape may deem a movements demands to be ideological and unreasonable. Such a situation especially emerges when movements attack the lived experiences of journalists or editors, leading to them closing the doors to the movement's narratives. These dynamics eventually push movements to adopt media like language and dedicate resources to the marketing of their cause. However, media outlets continue to be a valuable source for movements to learn from each other's tactics and approaches (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). Koopmans and

Olzak (2004) go into depth on how right-wing movements in Germany utilised media reports to learn what actions resonate with a wider audience and adjusted their tactics accordingly.

The prior review clearly emphasises the importance of understanding the relationship between social movements and discourse. Whether a movement's goals are revolutionary or policy-focused in nature does not change their need to identify strategies that will allow them to impact public discourses. Movements utilise discourse for mobilisation, raising awareness, and eventually achieving some form of change. Grounded in social constructivism, discourses need to be understood as ideologically loaded, and language as impacted by the large cultural context it is being used in. The media plays a central role in who receives public attention or not. The competition between movements is being fuelled by the idea of a bounded public sphere. Movements that challenge hegemonic discourses are inherently in a disadvantaged position. Feminist movements, such as #MeToo, are marginalised as they challenge dominant patriarchal systems. This dependence sets limitations for how such movements are able to reach a wider audience, but it also pushes them to continuously innovate their strategies (Ferree, 2003; Hurwitz and Crossley, 2018). What discursive strategies movements utilise in such cases remains a relatively understudied field within social movement studies. This is partially caused by the lack of an analytical lens able to grasp discursive spaces and strategies, working interdisciplinary offers a richness of theories scholars may draw from. I aim to address this gap and contribute to the existing knowledge throughout this thesis.

## **2.2 Discursive Spaces and Social Media**

As pointed out previously, scholars assume a bounded public sphere in which social movements are forced to compete with one another for the attention of the media as a discursive gatekeeper. Koopmans and Olzak (2004) challenge

this understanding of the public sphere as fixed and static, and have pointed to its flexibility and ability to expand, especially with the introduction of the internet. Citizen journalism offers an illustrative example of how average citizens and activists were able to utilise the internet, specifically social media, to report police brutality against protestors and generally raise awareness (Ozduzen and McGarry, 2020). The internet and social media platforms expanded the public sphere and reduced the importance of gatekeepers. For social movements the internet comes with new challenges and limitations, but looking the other way, online spheres can offer new opportunity structures, especially for marginalised voices to be heard (Shirazi, 2013; Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). Considering these aspects, it is necessary to analyse the role the internet plays for social movements that challenge existing hegemonic discourses and systems.

Social movement studies, as compared to other fields, has been relatively slow to pick up research on the topic of digital technology (Earl, 2018). Initial debates and scholarship on digital technology and social movements has focused primarily on major debates about whether technology even has an impact. This focus only shifted through the Arab Spring, where scholars moved away from broad discussions and toward the analysis of specific areas of research e.g., movement emergence and mobilisation (Iskander, 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Lim, 2018). However, scholars quickly fell into the trap of technological determinism, by causally connecting social media as the reason for uprisings in Egypt and other countries (Tufekci, 2014b). This deterministic view was quickly criticised through extensive research showcasing that social media alone did not lead to mass mobilisation and called for more critical analysis efforts on offline and online movement dynamics (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Pavan, 2017; Earl, 2018; Lim, 2018). Iskandar (2011) introduces the idea that social media merely acts as an accountability mechanism for traditional media. Kidd and McIntosh (2016) contrary to this

argue that social media platforms act as an alternative public sphere. Contrary to both, Lim (2018) argues that new and traditional media needs be understood within a hybrid media ecology wherein both exist simultaneously and influence each other. Lim's argument then does not sway to one side or the other and rather finds a middle ground acknowledging influences of both spaces on public opinion and social movements. Lim's analysis of how social movements strategically navigate different media forms and practices is representative of the importance of both. Yet, this expansion of the public sphere the internet introduced impacts social movements and their discursive strategies.

Current research on the role of social media plays for social movements has looked at multiple aspects of this larger phenomenon. With the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street a majority of the research looked at the impact of social media on mobilisation, both at the micro/individual-level (Hwang and Kim, 2015; Greijdanus *et al.*, 2020) and the macro-level (Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Tremayne, 2014; Ozduzen and McGarry, 2020). However, social media platforms due to their different affordances impact more aspects than mobilisation. Kow *et al.* (2016) for example analyses how social media was used in the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong to sustain the movement internally. They highlighted the technological affordances different social media platforms offer how they can be used, in their view "there exists an ecology of tools through which people can engage in the discursive, organising work, integral to the function of a social movement." (p. 3884). How movements utilise social media to impact and shape public discourses has been highlighted especially in research on hashtag campaigns (Clark, 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Kuo, 2018; Boling, 2020). Especially, feminist movements, addressing issues such as sexual assault were able to utilise hashtags to create a network of solidarity and a discursive space in which survivors were able to share their stories (Li *et al.*, 2021). Such hashtag campaigns, like #WhyIStayed (Clark, 2016) are able to impact public discourse as they showcase the gravity



of an issue through the sheer numbers of individual stories. Especially in contexts where women or other marginalized communities are being actively oppressed, such as in Iran, hashtag campaigns open a discursive space where people are able to share what they otherwise are not able to do publicly (Kermani and Hooman, 2022).

One aspect of criticism that is often brought forth is that online activism does not have that large of an impact and that it allows individuals to free ride without much risk attached. Christensen (2011) refers to this as ‘slacktivism’ and defines it as a low-cost, low-effort online activity that individuals engage in to express their support for a cause without any significant impact or commitment. Tufekci (2014b) challenges this criticism by highlighting that particularly in authoritarian systems the risk for people to even tweet a regime critical message is connected to significant risks. This touches on the trade-off between the tools the internet offers to social movements, and the surveillance potential it gives to states (Earl, 2018). Further research into the potential for state surveillance and repression has revealed that they do not deter future participation in activism, as previously assumed. Contrary to expectations, repression can actually stimulate online activism, which in turn has a positive impact on offline protests (Greijdanus *et al.*, 2020). This again, raises the aspect of power and discourse. The latter argument touches upon differing power dynamics online and offline and what this means for the constructed legitimacy of a given actor. As highlighted by Glozer *et al.* (2019), power relations must be addressed in online discourses as they determine how individuals and organisations, based on their power and authority, strategically employ language and imagery. This strategic usage of communication can maintain legitimacy or challenge the legitimacy of others.

Bennett and Segerberg (2014) highlight the importance of understanding the organisation of power especially in contention and its relation to political

outcomes. According to them, this understanding is necessary, but difficult to grasp, as power in an online context is relatively fluid. To ease the analysis, they focus on one specific aspect of power that, according to them, is detrimental to the success of a movement, which is “the constructive capacity to shape common attention and action” (2014, p. 2). They identify three patterns of power in technology-enabled contention, namely connective, interactive, and collective action. *Connective action* refers to a decentralised pattern in which power is distributed across a network. *Interactive contention* is marked by strategic coordination and framing efforts among diverse actors. Lastly, *collective action* is understood as power being concentrated among a few actors who are seen as drivers of the movement. These patterns demonstrate technological-enabled movements are not leaderless, contrary to assumptions made by scholars researching the Arab Spring (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011) and rather gain their power and legitimacy through a network between actors (Castelló, Etter and Årup Nielsen, 2016).

This online network as Aouragh and Alexander (2011) clarify needs to be understood in connection with offline dynamics, as during the Egyptian revolution central figures were deliberately kept offline to avoid state surveillance. Even in these cases, where clear leadership cannot be observed, it is still possible to identify what Bastos and Mercea (2016) refer to as ‘serial activists’, and Tremayne (2014) as ‘information hubs’. Both concepts refer to users who engage in persistent and continuous political activism focused on a specific issue on a given platform, like Twitter, over an extended period of time. Tremayne (2014) in their network analysis on the Occupy Wall Street movement on Twitter clearly identified these users at the centre of the movement online. These users spread information, raised awareness, and are broadly connected with the network. This connectivity, as Castelló et al. (2016) elaborate, leads to the construction of legitimacy. Traditional forms of media may still be received as more legitimate than such actors, but their influence does showcase a power

shift online due to new discursive opportunity structures offered by new media like social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Mattoni, 2017; Earl, 2018).

### **2.3 Social Movements, Discourse, and Social Media**

The interplay between social movements and public discourses is central to understanding a movement's successes or failures. The type of discursive strategies a movement deploys needs to be understood contextually and in relation to its goals. Whether a movement is observed online or offline impacts the discursive opportunity structures available to them (Mattoni, 2017). However, scholars have pointed out a rigid dichotomy between online and offline is not beneficial to the analysis of movement processes and strategies (Iskander, 2011; Earl, 2018; Lim, 2018). Nonetheless it is necessary to point to the affordances the internet, and social media specifically, have offered to social movements. Especially, marginalised voices and movements that challenge current hegemonic discourses are able to utilise social media to diffuse their narratives, raise awareness, mobilise support, and build networks of solidarity (Shirazi, 2013; Kidd and McIntosh, 2016; Hurwitz and Crossley, 2018). The body of literature on hashtag campaigns showcases how feminist movements have widely adopted this strategy (Clark, 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Eilermann, 2018; Boling, 2020; Kermani and Hooman, 2022). Hurwitz and Crossley (2018) do point to the strategic flexibility and willingness for tactical innovation of feminist movements, but further research on discursive strategies, specifically online, is needed.

Counter-discourses and narratives are important discursive strategies but have yet to gain much attention in the field of social movement studies. Fields such as linguistics or media studies have contributed significantly to this body of literature, and social movement scholars need to take on an interdisciplinary approach to benefit from the existing knowledge. The previous review of

literature on social movements, public discourses, and social media clarified that yes, the mere existence of the internet does not inherently lead to movements or political changes, but it does nonetheless shift existing power relations opening the discursive space for movements (Mattoni, 2017; Earl, 2018). Existing research does partially address how social movements can use social media to impact political processes, policies, or entire systems, yet further research is needed. In line with this, multiple scholars identify the need for further research on how the internet in comparison to offline interaction, facilitates interactions between movements internally and between them and institutions (Andretta, della Porta and Saunders, 2018; Goldstone and Ritter, 2018). One aspect of this is the impact of the internet on coalition building between movement actors and political actors or institutions on policy outcomes (Stearns and Almeida, 2004; Amenta *et al.*, 2010; Brooker and Meyer, 2018). Movements are utilising social media for various objectives, including raising awareness, gain support for their demands, establishing connections with a broader transnational network, and ensuring their voices are heard by political actors. Moreover, the distribution of power varies depending on the platform used, leading to the emergence of specific actor networks which can be observed and analysed.

New technologies like the internet change the speed and breadth in which movements spread, and make the international context more accessible for movements (Bob, 2018). Movements under the umbrella of human rights have been an exemplar of these dynamics (Tsutsui and Smith, 2018). Revolutionary movements, such as during the Arab Spring, further highlight the different functions social media can have for a movement and how it gives the ability for raising international awareness and support for their cause. Especially in the case that revolutionary movements face a closed state domestically, these transnational connections offer significant support (Goldstone and Ritter, 2018). In this context the internet may appear to transcend borders, but digital technologies need to be considered within the context they exist. Inequalities,

such as a potential digital divide, impact on the discourse we observe online. Language barriers, such as many scholars faced in their research on the Arab Spring, leads to misinterpretation of material and potential overstatements on cause and effect (Khamis and Vaughn, 2012).

Generally, social media data when researching discursive strategies needs to happen qualitatively to gain a contextual, in-depth understanding of the data (Kwak *et al.*, 2010; Tufekci, 2014a). A final note for research on social movements, social media, and public discourses is to reflect on how conceptualizations originating in the Global North, such as the Habermasian public sphere, are not directly applicable to other contexts, such as in the Global South (Khamis and Sisler, 2010). The way people interact with digital technologies is impacted through local contexts. Khamis and Sisler (2010) intricately analyse the characteristics of the 'New Arabic Cyberspace' and conclude that this space is made up of multiple public spheres and counter-spheres with intersectional approaches to communication.

To grasp such intricacies and gain the ability to investigate existing power relations in public discourses, it is important for social movement scholars to connect with critical theories, such as feminist and gender scholarship (Hurwitz and Crossley, 2018). Especially in the context where movements challenge mainstream discourses, taking an intersectional lens becomes necessary. Building on existing scholarship in social movement studies, linguistics, media studies, and political communication, my research aims to research how revolutionary movements utilise social media platforms to influence political agendas and outcomes. The research theoretically builds on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as framed by Lazar (2005, 2007, 2014) as it provides the methodological premises of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance actors are able to utilise to resist and challenge discursive hegemony. That FCDA is a fitting theoretical and methodological framework for the

analysis of movements in an online context is supported by a growing body of literature (Nartey, 2021; Chen and Gong, 2023). Existing research did consider how discourses on social media impact traditional media (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017), whereas I am utilising this analytical approach to analyse the impact on foreign policy agendas.

### **3. The Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022**

*The following section outlines the movement I am analysing in-depth. Gaining an understanding of the movement, its historic background, and use of social media will allow for a more contextual understanding of its significance.*

Leaning on the literature review, I will be analysing how revolutionary movements utilise social media to impact political processes and outcomes. The focus here is on discursive strategies, specifically counter-narratives. The Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 offers a relevant case study, not just due to its timely relevance, but insomuch that Iranian movements have a longstanding history of elaborating counter-discourses, both offline and online. Furthermore, I will be considering the movement within the context of Germany, due the shift the movement achieved in the foreign policy approach of Germany towards the Iranian regime (Albrecht, 2022). The significance of social media for movements becomes even more apparent when examining the case of the Iranian movements. Their reliance on social media is underscored by their experience of facing extensive state repression and censorship, which has influenced how they strategically utilise different platforms, both nationally and on the international stage. This section will go into depth on each of these aspects, justifying the selection of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 as a pertinent case study within this context.

The current Iranian Revolutionary Movement was triggered by the sudden death of a young Kurdish-Iranian woman, Jhina (Mahsa) Amini, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 (Sinaee, 2022). The so-called ‘morality police’ in Iran arrested her on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2022, as according to them she was violating the mandatory hijab regulation as a few strands of hair were showing. According to eye-witnesses, she was being beaten at the prison and only a few hours later admitted to Kasra hospital where she fell into a coma. The police stated that she suffered from a sudden heart attack while in custody. Yet, when two female journalists leaked images of her in the hospital and the medical report confirmed that she did not die from a heart attack and rather as a consequence of police brutality it immediately sparked nation-wide protests. The peaceful protests were met with severe violence and other forms of state repression, such as internet shutdowns. The movement’s feminist call of “زن زندگی آزادی” (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi), in English “Woman, Life, Freedom” resonated not just nationally across demographics, but was supported globally with protests being organised in solidarity with the Iranian people. Many coined this movement to be the a feminist revolution (Ratmann, 2023; Sahebi, 2023b) but this terminology continues to be highly contested. The debate also highlights the differing opinions on the terminology ‘revolution’. Goldstone and Ritter (2018) do highlight the shrinking distance between revolutions and social movements, with more cases like this emerging, that take a hybrid form of a revolutionary movement. The movement’s demands are not just for women’s rights and justice for Jhina (Mahsa) Amini, but for the right of self-determination for everyone.

### **3.1 Iranian Movements: History and Feminism**

Yet, to understand the current on-going movement and its potential national and global impact, it is necessary to understand the history of anti-regime movements in Iran and the role of women in them. Iranian history is marked by many revolutionary uprisings, with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 leading to the successful overthrow of the US-backed Shah regime. Ritter (2012) argues

that the positive relation between the United States and Iran was a key factor in the strategic choices of the movement to primarily remain nonviolent. United States foreign policy during this time was dominated by a liberal human rights approach, which made it politically too expensive for the Shah regime to respond with disproportionate violent repression. Ritter identifies this as a key reason for the strategic choices and the ultimate retreat of the regime. Their analysis further highlights how Iranians due to this relationship between the United States and the Shah regime were trapped in an ‘iron cage of liberalism’. Protestors needed to frame their demands to resonate with international liberal norms in order to gain international support (p. 98).

Women in Iran have always been at the frontlines of movements (Mohammadi, 2013; Marks, Haghghatjoo and Chenoweth, 2022). Despite the centrality of women in the Iranian Revolution and the feminist demands voices by the masses, these aspects stayed have been severely understudied. One reason for this is the fact that scholars in the Global North struggled with the fact that the Shah regime was replaced with the Islamic Republic instead of a liberal democratic system (Afary and Anderson, 2004). This left multiple blind spots, as it seemed contradictory for scholars to understand how feminist demands and women largely were in support of this new regime. What this point of view looks over is the fact that under the Shah regime women and many other marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities still were not given the right to self-determination. Nowadays Iranian women may be speaking about ‘the right to not wear the hijab’, but under the Shah regime, it was ‘the right to wear the hijab’ (Malaklou, 2022).

Adopting a liberal Western analytical lens and conceptualisation of freedom in this context reduces the understanding scholars would otherwise be able to gain. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 formulated feminist demands of self-determination for all and carried this on even after the success of the movement.



As Nategh (1986) showcases, the same women that supported the revolution and the Islamic Republic, now are its largest and most powerful opposition. Simply framing movements in Iran as ‘hijab protests’ only offers a superficial and misguided analysis of feminism in Iranian anti-regime movements. This is not only true for movements in Iran, but other movements in the Global South as well where feminist demands are central. Scholars need to situate movements within their cultural and socio-political contexts and avoid the trap of analysing them from a liberal Western perspective.

Mainstream social movement studies has excluded women’s collective actions in favour of assumed objectivity and to stay away from ‘identity politics’ (Taylor, 1998). Centring the role of women and other marginalised groups, means considering their lived experiences and acknowledging existing social hierarchies and power asymmetries they face and challenge. As Taylor highlights, taking this perspective is assumed to be ‘subjective’ instead of a core aspect of a movement’s strategic and tactical choices. Breaking down this distance and power asymmetry between researchers and activism allows for a more contextual understanding of movements and avoids academic blind spots as the current research on Iranian movements emphasises. Nonetheless, we do see a rising number of research on women’s role and feminism in Iranian movements and activism (Mohammadi, 2013, 2020; Naeli, 2018; Ranjbar, 2021; Kermani and Hooman, 2022). Interestingly enough a number of this literature, such as Naeli (2018) or Mohammadi (2020) looks at feminist activism in an online context.

### **3.2 Iranian Movements: Social Media**

The internet and social media have played an increasing role in Iranian anti-regime movements. During the Green Movement in 2009 social media platforms were used for mobilisation purposes (Golkar, 2011). Besides the potential impact on mobilisation, social media platforms open discursive spaces

and opportunity structures for marginalised voices (Mohammadi, 2020). As women and other marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, are prohibited from many public spheres in Iran they have been and continue to use social media to be present in public spaces despite these restrictions. Such spaces offer the opportunity to speak on topics that normally are considered taboo for Iranian women, such as sexual assault (Kermani and Hooman, 2022). Using social media as a tool for empowerment and giving voices to those that are excluded otherwise, has not been suppressed yet, despite all effort by the Islamic Republic (Golkar, 2011).

Instead of retreating from digital spaces in the face of state repression and surveillance, Iranians have learned to circumvent these efforts (Schleifer, 2009). Citizens learned to utilise technical solutions like proxies, and what functionalities the different platforms offer. Hashtag campaigns are one of the tactics used by Iranian feminists to build networks of solidarity and mobilise online (Naeli, 2018; Kermani and Hooman, 2022). Particularly the ability to connect with a broad network of like-minded activists, both in Iran and abroad, has empowered Iranian activists in their pursuits. Twitter has emerged as a central platform due to its technical affordances, such as building national and international networks, the rapid spread of information, and hashtags (Wojcieszak and Smith, 2014; Kermani and Hooman, 2022). Schleifer (2009) further highlights how Twitter due to its code-base offers the ability to build on-top of it, meaning people can tweet without having to visit twitter.com. Technologies like these, that allow for custom solutions, are difficult and costly to repress or surveil. The current Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022, utilises platforms like Twitter not for mobilisation, but for spreading their narratives and working against government propaganda (Schleifer, 2009; Marks, Haghightajoo and Chenoweth, 2022). In the initial phases of the current movement the main associated hashtag #MahsaAmini, as of February 2023, records 500 million tweets and counting (Kermani, 2023, p. 3). Twitter offers the space to counter

propagandistic narratives of the regime aimed at undermining the movement, and to call on international actors for support and increase external pressure on the Iranian regime.

### **3.3 Iranian Movements: Role of Germany**

For past as well as the current Iranian movement, Germany as a foreign actor due to its close relation to Iran. As stated by Küntzel (2014) Germany has politically taken on the role of a ‘protective shield’ for Iran. The country has actively lobbied to soften sanctions and has rejected any threat of military action against Iran. With Germany being a core member of the European Union (EU), this shapes a more open and communicative approach of the EU toward Iran (Harnisch, 2019). As Küntzel (2014) highlights, Germany continues its diplomatic, but more importantly, economic ties to Iran by being one of the only states globally going into business with the Islamic Republic. Impacting the current German diplomacy stance toward Teheran, is important for the movement as it will increasing external pressure on the regime. Yet, within the German context this also means to counter existing narratives on Iran and the Iranian people in the hopes of challenging the foreign policy agenda of the country. Such calls for changes by the movement seem fruitful, as the German Federal Foreign Ministry (dt. Auswärtiges Amt) initiated a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to vote on a resolution allowing further investigations into the abuse of the Iranian regime (German Federal Foreign Office, 2022).

Conclusively on this section, the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 and its use of German Twitter offers a case study that allows for and calls on a feminist analysis of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance. For the movement gaining the support of foreign actors, such as Germany, are relevant for their success, especially in the face of violent repression by its own government. Compared to previous movements, such as the Green Movement, the death of

Jhina (Mahsa) Amini has mobilised people across all demographics and localities in Iran, but it has also resonated internationally, in parts due to its use of social media (Kermani, 2023). Gaining an understanding of discursive strategies used by the movement contributes to the existing body of literature on the role of social media and discourses for social movements.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

*The following section outlines the theoretical framework, and with that the conceptual lens through which to assess the role of digital public spheres, particularly Twitter, in social movements and their impact on policy agendas and the wider political discourse. The following framework established the theoretical foundation guiding the analysis and interpretation of research findings.*

I draw on two key theoretical perspectives: Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2005, 2007, 2014) and Clarks (2016) conceptualisation of discursive activism, connective action, and social drama. FCDA provides a framework for understanding discursive strategies movements employed in digital public spheres, as it stresses the intersectional analysis of discourses, gender, and power dynamics. Building upon FCDA, Clark's (2016) conceptualisation of discursive activism, social drama, and connective action able to interrogate the transformative potential of social media platforms. Social drama allows for an understanding of the different stages a social movement and its connective actions passes through. At each stage movements and individuals can employ discursive strategies that challenge dominant discourse and promote social changes.

The theoretical foundations Lazar and Clark offer allow me to explore the discursive power and legitimacy platforms like Twitter enable. And gather how

these dynamics shape social movements and impact the wider political discourse and policy agendas. It provides a critical analytical lens for understanding the role of social media platforms for social movements and their broader societal impact.

#### **4.1 Discursive Activism, Connective Action, Social Drama**

In the context of her research on hashtag feminism, Clark (2016) introduces a theoretical framework constituted of three different concepts: (1) discursive activism, (2) connective action, and (3) social drama. With this approach she addresses the gap within existing research on the intersection between digital media and social movements. Most research located at that intersection sees digital media, such as social media platforms, as a means of mobilisation and organisational tool for offline movements. This is also a dominant discourse and the literature on social movements and social media in reaction to the Arab Spring (Iskander, 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2012; Lim, 2018). What Clark argues for, is to see digitally mediated discourse as being political in its own right (Clark, 2016, p. 791).

The conceptualization of discursive activism comprises the same feminist foundation as FCDA. Feminist activism depends on discourses to unveil the hegemonic and assumed normalcy of power structures (Clark, 2016, p. 791). In order to conduct feminist social movement research, it is then necessary to have a framework that grasps the political nature of discourse online. Discursive activism, following this logic, is to be understood as a way in which individuals, institutions, and collectives identify new ways and narratives to interpret and respond to an existing social order and power structures. It includes acts of knowledge building, meaning-making, raising critical awareness, and reframing (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017).

Collective action as a concept aids to grasp how discursive activism of an individual can form collective action. Citing Bennett and Segerberg (2013), Clark refers to the concept as personal ideas and actions linked through digital networks (Clark, 2016, p. 791). Instead of collective action being bound to a formal membership in an organizational structure, it is constituted through communication networks between activists. Hashtag activism is a perfect example such a communication networks. On platforms like Twitter one activist can introduce a hashtag which is then being used by others who can attach their person ideas and stories to that hashtag, yet they stay unified under the umbrella of that hashtag (Clark, 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Wang and Ouyang, 2023). I argue that connective action online goes beyond hashtags and can be achieved through counter-narratives, echoed by members of a movement or collective.

Lastly, the theory of social drama outlines the framework collective action pursues to resist dominant narratives and discourses. Through Turner (1982), Clark highlights that all interactions hold performative and dramatic qualities, and within connective action those qualities are heightened (2016, p. 792). Social drama constitutes three stages, *breach*, *crisis*, and *reintegration*. A breach occurs, when a social order or norm is being violated and through this the social drama begins. After the breach, the crisis stage begins, where we can observe an escalation between different actors and competing narratives. In this stage the different actors are competing for the attention of the audience. The aspect of competition is especially noticeable on online platforms, as activists attempt to spread their content through a multitude of means, such as hashtags, sharing images, likes, and many more depending on the platform. All platform users are seen as spectators which potentially can be won over by each of the actors. The final stage, reintegration, looks different in each case. A social movement may win over the audience and achieve some form of change, or it may end up succumbing to the dominant discourse. Yet, even in the case that a movement

may be unsuccessful in achieving change the strategies of resistance it developed are relevant for the learning process of future movements (Clark, 2016, p. 793).

#### **4.2 From Critical Discourse Analysis to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

FCDA branched off from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) due to a multitude of factors, so to better understand FCDA it is necessary to look at the history leading up to it. CDA, as Wodak and Meyer, highlight cannot not be seen or understood as one homogenous theory or methodology, and rather as a school of thought (2009, p. 5). The core of CDA approaches, is the understanding that language is a social practice. Language needs to be understood within the context it is being used. Each context inherits specific dynamics and power relations impacting the production and our understanding of the discourse. To simplify this, reading between the lines is necessary. Language is not neutral rather socially and politically motivated. As Wodak and Meyer state, “*CDA is therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach.*” (2009, p. 2).

CDA finds its origin in discourse analysis, and different conceptualisations emerged by a several scholars. The most prominent scholars came together in 1991 in Amsterdam to discuss their differing approaches (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 3). As a school CDA has always been heterogenous with an inherent theoretical flexibility allowing it to be utilised across disciplines and enable interdisciplinary collaborations. It further creates space for utilising different types of data and methodological approaches. Yet, despite this diversity of CDA applications, all studies find their common ground in that they explore the role of discourse in challenging or maintaining power asymmetries, hierarchies, and ideologies. Analytically CDA scholars aim at unveiling the way in which power,

identities, and societal norms are constructed, opposed, and reproduced through discourse. Due to the influence of critical theories on CDA it further recognises the agency of individuals and groups in shaping or contesting dominant narratives. Analytically CDA goes beyond linguistics, such as rhetoric or lexical analysis, and includes semiotics and the analysis of visuals. In this school of thought, the conceptualisation of discourse is painted with a wider brush due to recognising the importance of context, interdiscursivity, and intertextuality. The ability to employ such a plethora of analytical tools enables researcher to uncover how discourse is being used to uphold or contest social inequalities.

This heterogenous nature of CDA on the one hand led some scholars to distance themselves from it, whereas others created new approaches. Lazar's FCDA is one of these new approaches stemming out of a general criticism toward CDA. At the core of Lazar's criticism is that even though CDA acknowledges the construction and contestation of social practices through discourse, but "*a feminist perspective reminds that many social practices, far from being neutral, are in fact gendered in this way.*" (2007, p. 145). Another point of criticism echo's this move away from assuming neutrality, specifically looking at the position of the researcher. The role of researchers is not that of saviours who show everyone what is happening, but rather as another aspect of political action. Lastly, Lazar criticises that CDA has been built on the work done by feminist scholars and feminist theories without acknowledging them directly (2005).

Lazar further showcases how feminist researchers building on CDA were unable to find each other as they lacked an umbrella term that offers a home for their research, Lazar's conceptualisation of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis can be that umbrella. FCDA just like CDA actively encourages exchange, but takes it a step further toward research being a form of activism – academic activism (Lazar, 2007, p. 146). Feminist research aims to be actionable and praxis-



oriented (Lazar, 2005, p. 6). As highlighted by Lazar, FCDA is guided by the goals of "social emancipation and transformation" (2014, p. 182) following an emancipatory agenda building on the work of feminist scholars and theorists.

### **4.3 FCDA: Theoretical Assumptions and Core Principles**

FCDA builds upon the foundational principles of CDA while specifically focusing on gender as a central category of analysis. FCDA in Lazar's words "[...] is a perspective that seeks to examine the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and power asymmetries get discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts." (2014, p. 182). Lazar (2005, 2007, 2008, 2014) articulates five interrelated principles of FCDA as a theory and practice: (1) feminist analytical activism, (2) gender as an ideological structure, (3) complexity of gender and power relations, (4) discursive construction and deconstruction of gender and finally, (5) critical feminist reflexivity.

#### ***Feminist Analytical Activism***

At the core of FCDA stands the critique of discourses that are upholding a patriarchal social order (Lazar, 2007). The goal of this critique is to showcase how inherently gendered discourses are, how 'men' in contrast to 'women', simply for being men, are granted privileges in their daily lives. In this patriarchal system, others simply for not being 'men' are at an immediate disadvantage, experience exclusion and their voices are not taken seriously on the daily. To achieve FCDA's emancipatory agenda of shaping a just society in which people's identities and relationships to one another are not predetermined by gender, feminist analysis of discourses is necessary (Lazar, 2007, 2014). This analysis needs to go beyond describing dominant patriarchal narratives or unveiling of social injustices perpetuated through these discourses, but it needs to analyse strategies of resistance and change developed by a diversity of actors

(Lazar, 2014). The commitment inherent to FCDA analysis of discourses constitutes an act of “academic activism” (Lazar, 2007, p. 146).

### ***Gender as an Ideological Structure***

The patriarchal social order constitutes the dominant narratives in societies to the point where it is unrecognisable (Lazar, 2014, p. 186). This does not mean that patriarchy and its assumptions cannot be seen or analysed, but rather that in the existing social order it is seen as the norm. Due to this, the dominance of this narratives is not apparent anymore. This gender ideology is structural meaning that it is present in institutions and social practices which both perpetuate it further. Patriarchy mediates between individuals, institutions, and social norms.

### ***Complexity of Gender and Power Relations***

Current conceptualisations of power and hegemony have internalised a patriarchal social order. This internalisation makes its power over institutions and individuals invisible and subsequently legitimate. Even though historically patriarchy and sexism have been contested, it has simply found new ways to adapt and stay invisible. Like Lazar (2014) highlights, nowadays sexism has become to covert and indirect, that it can even seem progressive and only further critical assessment of it would make it visible again. FCDA aims at analysing how power is *discursively produced, resisted, and counter-resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk.*” (Lazar, 2014, p. 189).

At this point it is necessary to note that FCDA does not assume an essentialist or isolated notion of gender, but rather highlights the importance of an intersectional lens. Lazar clarifies that gender identity, both femininity and masculinity, is not homogenous (Lazar, 2014). She points to the risks arising when essentialise what it means to be a ‘woman’, as we would go about ignoring

the lived experiences of those not fitting a particular definition. Especially within a Western context, she speaks to how liberal feminism negatively impacts the emancipation and liberation of women for those who do not fit into the mould of a white middle-class woman in Europe or the United States. For the analysis of social movements and collectives this is especially important. It is necessary in these contexts to understand that people belonging to the same group are positioned differently due to a multitude of reasons (Filimonov and Svensson, 2016). Everyone experiences the world differently, basing our knowledge on just one perspective renders it incomplete, an intersectional lens seeks to remedy this.

### ***Discursive Construction and Deconstruction of Gender***

Discourse within the context of FCDA, and CDA, is conceptualised in accordance with a poststructuralist approach. What is being understood as gender is socially constructed, especially through discourse. Fairclough (1992) as cited in Lazar (2014, p. 189) defines the relation between discourse and the social as a dialectical relation, in which discourse impacts society and vice versa. Here the conceptualisation of discourse goes beyond linguistics and includes semiotics, visual language, etc. and generally is seen as multimodal. The interest of FCDA here is to analyse how power and gender ideology is being (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in different contexts (Lazar, 2014, p. 190).

Here it is important to again highlight the importance of intersectionality. Individuals can be impacted by many systems of oppression at the same time, and in many cases they are. These parts of their identities exist simultaneously, and none is more or less valuable than the other. They are always present at the same time, which is why FCDA actively encourages taking them into account as they are an essential part of the construction and deconstruction of gender ideologies.

### *Critical feminist reflexivity*

The aspect of critical feminist reflexivity is twofold as it concerns feminist theories as well as the self. Lazar (2005, 2007, 2014) articulates a criticism of liberal feminism and other theories following in that line. Idea that once certain equality indicators like access to education or equal participation on the labor force are achieved then sexism and feminism will render to exist. This similarly to liberal feminism echoes this idea that women just have to work hard enough to be equal. What both completely ignore is that individuals face different hurdles and for some no matter how hard they work they will never be able to empower themselves out of poverty. The influence of capitalism here cannot be ignored. This represents an active backsliding from the core statement of second-wave feminism: 'The personal is political'. Due to this feminism remains the most relevant theoretical lens, as its goal, for both the personal and the collective, is to make society a just place for all women, not just some women (Segal, 1999, as cited in Lazar, 2014, p. 195).

Lastly, Lazar (2005, 2007, 2014) stresses the importance of feminist self-reflection. Researchers need to continuously reflect on their own position toward their research and be critical toward their own knowledge. As researchers we always need to consider ourselves as a potential boundary to our research (Ackerly and True, 2008). This happens to a multitude of power dynamics at play, for example the relationship between researchers or a researchers position within society.

#### **4.4 Application of FCDA and Clark's Theoretical Framework**

Both Lazar's theory of FCDA and Clark's theoretical framework look at how individuals and groups, such as social movements utilise narratives or strategies of resistance to resist, negotiate and reconstruct dominant narratives and power structures. Multiple authors have showcased the importance of CDA in the

research on social movements and social media (Albert and Salam, 2013; Shirazi, 2013; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017). Yet, some studies fall short on acknowledging the multimodal nature of discourse online, even on text first platforms like Twitter (Albert and Salam, 2013). Social media has become important for feminist movements and other marginalized groups to empower themselves and others, because it allows those excluded from other public spaces to create strategies of negotiation, solidarity, and resistance (Nartey, 2021, p. 659). FCDA echoes that emancipatory agenda and more so than CDA focuses on its own role within activism and social transformation at large. Lazar (2014) has highlighted the potential for FCDA to be used in research on counter-narratives and how they are used to contest and impact political discourses. Some studies did pick FCDA for that exact purpose (Nartey, 2021; Chen and Gong, 2023), but like Lazar acknowledges herself, there is still a significant research gap. I attempt to address this gap the following analysis under the theoretical umbrella of FCDA. Integrating Clark's theoretical framework with FCDA enables me to analyse how movements utilise the discursive power of digital public spheres, like Twitter, and what impact their strategies of resistance have on a wider public and political discourse.

Especially in the context of feminist movements, it is necessary to employ a feminist theoretical framework as these movements have been mobilised out of women's and other marginalized people's everyday experience of oppression and exclusion from the public sphere (Taylor, 1998). They challenge society to look at the world through their eyes and experiences. Feminist frameworks like FCDA call for an analysis that acknowledges lived experiences and the inherent gendered structure of power. Clark (2016) makes it possible to analyse the dramatic elements and structures of a movements presence online.

## **5. Methodology**

*In the following section will outline the approaches I use to conduct my research. It describes the research design, data collection methods, analytical framework, and any tools employed during these processes.*

## **5.1 Research Design**

Like CDA, FCDA constitutes theory and methodology simultaneously. In accordance with this, my research design is guided by the Lazar's theoretical assumptions and core principles of FCDA as outline in the previous chapter (2005, 2007, 2014). The primary objective is the collection of data from Twitter, as a digital public sphere, to examine how social movement utilise social media platforms to impact policy agendas and shape public and political discourses offline. My analysis specifically focuses on identifying counter-narratives and strategies of resistance identified developed and employed by the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 and assess the impact of those narratives and strategies on Germanys Foreign Policy Agenda and political response toward the Iranian Regime.

I collected the data manually from Twitter to ensure contextuality and alignment with the principles of FCDA. The data stems from nine Twitter accounts, four of which run by female activists and five are German governmental accounts. I provide a detailed account on what exact data is being collected and how the user accounts were chosen in the Data Description sections. The timeframe for the data collection was determined by the framework provided by Clark (2016), specifically the theory of social drama. The movement I choose to analyse is contemporary and still ongoing, but through the three stages of the framework I am able to limit the timeframe.

Through the manual collection of the data, I was able to experience and assess the data within its original contexts, which gave me a more nuanced understanding of the specific temporal, social, and political context. Taylor

(1998) encourages such an immersive feminist approach to studying social movements, as it allows researchers to experience the environment as closely as possible to how the activists themselves experienced it. Conducting my research in this manner allows me to not lose the voices of the activists, I would have if I opted for scraping the data using the Twitter API. It further facilitated my understanding of how counter-narratives are being perceived in the comments or by other activists. Lastly, the manual approach allows me to observe and understand interactions between activists, politicians, and other spectators on the platform. Once I collected the data it was systematically organized, stored, and analysed following the theoretical framework as outlined in the previous chapter. I stored the data in an Excel database and conducted the analysis of both the collected data and government documents and speeches through close reading.

As highlighted by Wodak and Meyer (2009) different research approaches under the school of CDA, including FCDA, can be both inductive and deductive, whereas my analysis is on the inductive side. On the same note as previous studies, the counter-narratives and strategies of resistance are identified through a close reading of the data (Clark, 2016; Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Nartey, 2021). I opted for reading through the data three times. The first time took place during the manual collection period, where I noted down first impressions and prominent counter-narratives. Once collected, I read through it a second time and identify further counter-narratives informed by the first round. The outcome of the initial analysis is stored as a coding frame on the Excel Sheet. The third time then offers a final confirmation of the previously identified strategies. Lastly, my research design expands previous approaches by taking visuals connected to the collected data into account, as to explore the role they potentially play in the movement's discursive strategies.

Lastly, once I identified the counter-narratives and strategies of resistance utilised by the movement I am equipped to analyse government documents to assess the reproduction and impact of these strategies. The analysis will be conducted through close reading and the coding frame developed through the previous inductive analysis of the collected data.

In conclusion, the research design of my study adheres to the core principles of FCDA and Clark's theoretical framework. The manual data collection process from Twitter allows me to get a nuanced understanding of the context and dynamics of the discursive activism and strategies employed by the movement. Through the analysis of the collected data, following the insights of theoretical framework, I am able to identify the strategies of resistance and counter-narratives developed and employed by the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 within the given timeframe, while assessing its impact on the wider political discourse. *The following sections will offer a description of the data, the analytical framework, and the reliability and validity of the study, concluding with potential limitations and ethical considerations.*

## **5.2 Data Collection & Description**

In the following section I provide an outline of what type of data was collected, from whom I collected the data, and the methods used to retain it. The data manually collected, in order to study how social movements utilise the discursive power of social media platforms, in this case Twitter, stems from nine Twitter accounts, four of which run by female activists and five are German governmental accounts.

The relevant activists were identified through their presence both on the platform and offline. All of the activists work in some capacity on the topic of Iran, and all have a personal relation to the country and the Iranian people. They all actively participated and organized protests, created petitions, participated in



public debates, wrote publications on the movement and situation in Iran, and meet with key political figures, such as the Foreign Minister or Chancellor of Germany. They all aim at shaping the German discourse surrounding the Iranian Revolution, may that be through their active criticism or contribution of knowledge. Each of the activists has a minimum of 8.000 followers on Twitter up to approximately 140.000 followers.<sup>1</sup> The number of followers partially adds to the perceived relevance, but cannot be taken as the sole measure, as it omits the broader context. The German governmental accounts, are public Twitter accounts by the following entities with a follower count of 10.000 up to 700.000<sup>2</sup>:

- the Minister of Foreign Affairs,
- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*two accounts*: one in German the other in English),
- the Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance,
- the German Chancellor

The timeframe for the data collection was determined by the framework provided by Clark (2016), specifically the theory of social drama. The movement I choose to analyse is contemporary and still ongoing, but through the three stages of the framework I am able to limit the timeframe. The breach is marked on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2022 with the death of Jhina (Mahsa) Amini which started this movement. The data collection ends with the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, as it marks the day on with the 200<sup>th</sup> political sponsorship has been taken up by a German member of parliament arranged by activist of the movement. This timeframe allows me to capture how the discursive activism is unfolding on Twitter and identify moments of contention and events where key

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<sup>1</sup> These follower counts are stated as observed on the 22.02.2023. The date marks the start of the data collection.

<sup>2</sup> These follower counts are stated as observed on the 22.02.2023.

counter-narratives and strategies of resistance are used by activists of the movement.

The initial step taken to collect the data was the creation of a new Twitter account used for the sole purpose of collecting the data. The data was directly collected from the accounts, specifically via their “Replies” tab. The “scroll back method” was used to go back in time of the user timeline and identify all relevant post (Robards and Lincoln, 2020). I determined relevancy of a post through two factors, (1) if the user referred to the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022, either through related hashtags (e.g. #MahsaAmini, #Iranianevolution) or by directly or indirectly referring to it, and (2) if it referred to Germany or the German context. Only if both criteria were fulfilled the data was collected and transferred to an Excel dataset.

Overall, I collected 2.475 data points. With data points I specifically refer to the content of tweets, retweets, quote retweets, comments, and interactions posted by the identified Twitter accounts within the given timeframe. With interactions I refer to the following instances:

- one of the users mentioned another user in a tweet;
- one user quote retweeted a tweet by another user;
- one user commented on a tweet by another user.

I collected the data manually over a period of two months, specifically 22.02.2023 – 22.04.2023. The initial data collected from each account are their username, number of followers, biography, and the date they joined the platform. Each account was assigned a pseudonym e.g., Activist 1 for an activist and Gov 1 for a governmental actor. After collecting the account meta data, I started the collection of relevant data points from each user. Table 1, as seen below, serves as a data summary of the number of followers, data points, and interactions for each user.

**Table 1** Data Summary: Number of Followers, Data Points, and Interactions for each User

User	Activist 1	Activist 2	Activist 3	Activist 6	Gov 1	Gov 2	Gov 3	Gov 4	Gov 5
<i>N of Followers</i>	138K	50.6K	8235	53.4K	701.7K	592.2K	895K	286.6K	10.1K
<i>N of Data Points</i>	278	563	921	593	3	29	26	22	39
<i>N of Interactions</i>	80	203	339	283		1	16	15	13

**Legend:** *N of Followers* as retrieved on 22.02.2023; *Green:* Activist Accounts; *Blue:* Governmental Accounts

For each data point the following information was collected:

- *Type of Data:* Tweet, Comment, Threat, Retweet, and Quote Retweet
- *Text:* the text of a Tweet, Comment, Threat, or Quote Retweet
- *Interaction (1/0):* Whether they interacted with one of the other users by mentioning them, e.g. @activist1
- *Interaction with:* If they interacted with someone, who was it?
- *N of Views:* introduced by Twitter mid-December 2022, a measure to indicate how many people saw this post on their timeline
- *N of Likes:* number of likes their post receive
- *N of Retweets:* number of retweets their post received
- *N of Quote Retweets:* number of quote retweets their post received
- *Main Tweet:* if it was a Retweet, Quote Retweet, Threat, or Comment: the URL of the original Tweet
- *URL*
- *Date*
- *Hashtag*
- *Visual (Image/Video)*

Once the data collection was finished the data was cleaned by going through each row of the Excel database. The initial step was to ensure that none of the information was missing where it was needed, such empty cells for *Types of Data*, *Interaction (1/0)*, or missing *Text*. In columns, such as *Visual (Image/Video)* where the information was written manually, it was necessary to

check for any spelling mistakes. Furthermore, initially only one *Interaction with* column was created, but after multiple data points mentioned multiple other users three more columns were added. Lastly, when opening the Excel database in SPSS, any leading and trailing spaces were removed from all string (textual) values.

Following the data collection and cleaning, the data was summarised in SPSS and visualised via the following tables. [Table 2](#) gives an overview of the types of data and interactions per user. Activist 3 is the user with the most data points amongst all the accounts, but Gov 5 has the most data points out of the governmental accounts. This visualisation will lend itself to the following data analysis as it highlights which type of data generated the most interactions.

*Table 2 Overview of Types of Data and Interaction per User*

	Activist 1	Activist 2	Activist 3	Activist 6	Gov 1	Gov 2	Gov 3	Gov 4	Gov 5
<i>N of Tweets</i>	168 (16)	246 (15)	343 (73)	286 (101)	3	11	12 (9)	6 (4)	20 (3)
<i>N of Threads</i>	1	44 (2)	176 (17)	111 (25)		17	3 (3)	10 (10)	6
<i>N of Retweets</i>	76 (53)	206 (174)	206 (190)	124 (122)		1 (1)	3 (3)	5	4 (4)
<i>N of Quote Retweets</i>	32 (11)	50 (9)	101 (26)	39 (19)				1 (1)	
<i>N of Comments</i>	1	17 (3)	95 (33)	33 (16)			8 (1)		9 (6)
<b>Total</b>	278 (80)	563 (203)	921 (339)	593 (283)	3	29 (1)	26 (16)	22 (15)	39 (13)

**2.475**  
**(950)**

**Legend:** *Number of Interactions* are shown in parentheses; *Green:* Activist with most data points;  
*Blue:* Governmental Account with most data points

Furthermore, [Table 3](#) visualises which actor is interacting with whom and how often. Activist 4 and Activist 5 are included in this data grid, as the other users did interact with them, but as no data was collected from their accounts the correlating rows are empty. This grid enables initial observations, such as the governmental account barely interact with other accounts, and if they do it is mostly with other governmental account.

**Table 3 Data Grid: Who is interacting with who?**

	Activist 1	Activist 2	Activist 3	Activist 4	Activist 5	Activist 6	Gov 1	Gov 2	Gov 3	Gov 4	Gov 5
Activist 1	1	30		5	3	29	4	9	1		
Activist 2	31		13	99	2	51	1	2	1		
Activist 3	40	131	1	64	2	24	18	21	25		8
Activist 4											
Activist 5											
Activist 6	37	71	19	29	72		6	32	4		9
Gov 1											
Gov 2											1
Gov 3						1		14			1
Gov 4								15			
Gov 5			6		1			5	1		

**Read as:** Row interacting with column. Example: Activist 1 interacted (mentioned) 30 times with Activist 2.

Finally, [Table 4](#) highlights the use of visuals within the collected data points. The number of images and videos are showcased in percentage as a varied amount of data points were collected from each user and this enables a comparison.

**Table 4 The use of visuals by each user**

	Activist 1	Activist 2	Activist 3	Activist 6	Gov 1	Gov 2	Gov 3	Gov 4	Gov 5
Image	50.72%	29.66%	7.275%	32.72%		3.448%	3.846%	4.545%	5.128%
Video	28.78%	17.58%	5.103%	21.92%	66.67%		19.23%	13.64%	
Without	20.5%	52.75%	87.62%	45.36%	33.33%	96.55%	76.92%	81.82%	94.87%

### 5.3 Analytical Framework: Counter-Narratives and Strategies of Resistance

Compared to CDA, FCDA calls for research focusing on the construction of resistance instead of deconstructing discourses of oppression and discrimination. There are several scholars who have followed this call already

(Clark, 2016; Nartey, 2021; Chen and Gong, 2023), and my research as presented here follows their suit. Each of these studies follows the theoretical notions of FCDA with the same aim in their research, but they all utilise different analytical frameworks. Yet, all of them showcase the potential of FCDA as a methodological framework allowing for a level of flexibility giving researchers the ability to grasp different contexts and employing an intersectional lens.

Nartey (2021) identifies central strategies of resistance present in Ghanaian feminist blogs and suggests an analytical framework to identify such strategies. The analysis is informed by the core principles of Lazar's FCDA and made up of three steps. The initial step entails the identification of resistance strategies and counter-narratives through close reading. In the second step, the identified strategies are being interpreted within the larger context and any available background information. Lastly, the analysis entails an explanation of the potential impact these strategies have on the audience. Barker- Plummer and Barker-Plummer (2017) elaborate on the last step in their analysis on how a feminist online protest can be recirculated and mediated within by mainstream media outlets. They analyse how news outlets picked up the online discourse and counter-narratives of the movement and whether they accepted their content or rather contested it. In order to achieve this they utilised the same step as Nartey (2021), but expanded the last step by providing an analytical framework in order to access how the counter-narratives and discourses have been picked up by entities outside of the digital network, in this case media outlets. My study builds on this combined analytical framework, but instead of looking at media outlets I am analyzing the recirculation and mediation of counter-narratives in the foreign policy discourse in Germany, but the government and the federal parliament.

As outlined in the research design, the first step of identifying counter-narratives and strategies of resistance in the collected Twitter data happens by closely

reading over the data three times. Once I identified the counter-narratives I will be utilising them as a coding framework for governmental documents and the data collected from governmental Twitter accounts dealing with the movement or the Iranian Regime within the given timeframe. The selected documents include policy briefs, parliamentary speeches, and articles authored by politicians, from within the given timeframe and only when they mention the topic of Iran and/or the Iranian Revolutionary Movement. All the documents were retrieved from German governmental websites, specifically, the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Bundestag [Federal Parliament], the Federal Government, and the Chancellor.

#### **5.4 Validity & Reliability**

Ensuring the validity and reliability of my research findings is necessary to maintain the integrity and credibility of my study. In this section I am outlining the steps I took to enhance the validity and reliability of the research design and analytical framework.

Firstly, the selection of Twitter as the platform of interest is based on its significance as outlined in current social movement research on the topic (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Tufekci, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2021), and its significance to Iranian social movements (Schleifer, 2009; Mueller and van Huellen, 2012; Kermani, 2023). Choosing Twitter ensures that the data I collected is relevant to the research objective and provides enough contextuality for analysis. Further, the manual collection of data allowed for a nuanced understanding of the context the activists are embedded in on the platform. I am able to observe how the different actors interact with each other and their audience. Being able to read the comments under each tweet allowed me to further understand how spectators and a wider audience reacts to their counter-narratives. Generally, the manual collection allows me to pick up on the

subtleties of tone, language, and other rhetorical devices employed by the activists and governmental accounts.

To enhance reliability of my research, I ensured that the process and data is documented consistently. The outlined research design and developed coding framework allow for the replicability of the findings. Whereas the findings are not generalizable, but the theoretical framework and outlined methodological steps allow for them to be applied to other potential case studies.

Lastly, I utilise a multitude of data sources in my analysis to ensure a rich contextual understanding. Besides the collected data and governmental documents, I am utilising news reports, podcasts, interviews, and other relevant sources to understand the context of the movement in Germany. The activists face a multitude of hurdles in a German context and the richness of data enables me to grasp this properly.

## **5.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

Ethical considerations need to be central to the research design, data collection, and analysis of this study. The reason for this is that the case study I chose is contentious and ongoing, with the activists I am analyzing putting themselves and their close circle at risk every day by being part of the larger movement. Iranian activists abroad have always been aware of the risk that voicing criticism and opposition to the Islamic Republic entails. As I do not interact directly with the activists and did not receive informed consent for the data collection, I made the decision to anonymize them in the study itself via pseudonyms. The collected data is only being viewed by me and upon request by my thesis supervisor. In compliance with the ethics regulations of the of the University of



Glasgow, I went through the ethics application process for non-standard data<sup>3</sup>. I received the approval in February 2023.

Furthermore, contextuality is an important consideration in my research design. The importance of the context for any study under the umbrella of FCDA is being clearly outlined by Lazar (2005, 2007, 2014), but especially when studying feminist movements or feminist topics, it is important to not speak for individuals or groups. Context allows us to understand their voices and amplify them instead of creating unnecessary distance. Social media platforms in particular are places where those normally silenced are able to have their voices heard (Shirazi, 2013). Taylor (1998) highlights how participatory methods are the best to conduct feminist research on social movements, which within the limitations of this study was not possible, but immersing myself in the online environment. Like this I am able to observe how activists' tweet, interact with the audience, support each other, or react to backlash and criticism.

As becomes clear through my positionality statement, I am by no means a stranger to the topic or the movement, which has the potential of introducing bias. On the other hand, the understanding I gain from being an 'insider' of the movement enriches my contextual understanding of case study and relevant actors. I also see this aspect mitigated through continuous reflexivity throughout the research process, the clarity gained through my positionality statement, and lastly by the extensive theoretical and methodological framework at the heart of this research.

Originally, my aim was to collect data from six activist accounts, yet due to changes in the Twitter API and the platform in general after the Musk takeover in 2022, the data from Activist 4 was not available anymore. Additionally, upon

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/undergraduateandpostgraduatetaughtstudents/#schoolsethicsfora,ethicsformsandguidancenotes%3Augandpgt>

further observation the content of Activist 5 and Activist 6 was identical, leading to the decision to only collect data from the latter. The decision was taken to avoid duplication of data points. The reason for this duplication is that these one of the accounts is run by an activist and the other account is being run by the organisation they are headed. Upon further observation it was clear that the organisational account was simply retweeting the activist due to obvious organisational ties. Yet, this would have added too much confusion to the dataset and result, which is why I made the decision to exclude it.

On a concluding note, the analysis of counter-narratives does not come without challenges and limitations. This analysis requires careful attention to context and background information and a consideration for the broader discursive landscape and power dynamics in which they emerge. Furthermore, the assessment of whether counter-narratives have an actual impact or are able to bring about tangible social, and in this case, political change can present difficulties. However, by following existing analytical frameworks I am able to provide valuable insights into the strategies of resistance and general discursive strategies movements develop and employ in their pursuit of social transformation via social media platforms.

## **6. Analysis**

*The following analysis revealed two counter-narratives and two strategies of resistance of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 utilised via German Twitter to impact the German foreign policy agenda.*

Examples of activists' tweets, comments, retweets, and quote retweets are loosely translated from German into English. To protect the identity of the activists I am using pseudonyms throughout my analysis. The loose translations

opposed to a literal translation is in accordance with the ethical consideration of my research, and a further measure to avoid activists being identified through my analysis.

## **6.1 Counter-Narratives**

Counter-narratives in the German context focus on critiquing and resisting cultural relativist interpretations of the movement as well as racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic narratives. Both call for an intersectional and non-Western lens to understand the complexities of the movement and the discursive practices used in the German context.

### ***Critiquing Cultural Relativist and Western Interpretations of the Movement***

Even though activists have repeatedly highlighted that the movement aims at the right of self-determination for all and not simply about the right to unveil (Malaklou, 2022) the latter idea prevails within the German Twitter sphere. The wording ‘hijab protest’ or ‘Frauenprotest’ (eng. women’s movement) remains dominant on the platform and in the wider public discourse of German media. The activists strongly criticised such framing, as it perpetuates ideas of cultural relativism, white feminism, and interprets the situation from an assumed superior Western lens. Relativism in this context, as outlined by anthropologist Abu-Lughod, “[...] says it's their culture and it's not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand.” (2002, p. 786). Specifically, that the right to unveil will intrinsically lead to the liberation of women in ‘Muslim cultures.’ Cultural relativism on German Twitter is particularly present in the comment section of activists, as many reply to their demands with questioning of why Germans and Germany care or interfere. This reflects a positivist understanding of cultures.

Activist1 is faced with this narrative in her comment section of a tweet about an interview she gave where she stated that even though the Iranian regime may

claim to have loosened their mandatory hijab regulations, whereas in reality, this did not occur. Users in her comment section argued that the mandatory hijab is normal in the Arab world and belongs to Arab culture. What this example showcases is the lack of cultural understanding leading to such misinterpretations by the audience. She responds to these comments and offers in-depth knowledge on the hijab in the Iranian context as compared to an Arabic context. This situation highlights a lack of knowledge on the MENA region leading people to paint with a broad brush.

Activist2 further elaborates this in a quote retweet, where she highlights that even in the case that the mandatory hijab regulations were lifted the movement did not succeed, as at the core of it, it is about so much more. The activist goes on to tweet about the symbolism of the hijab in the Iranian context. Removing the hijab does not represent the rejection of Islam, but rather a rejection of women being dictated on what they should and should not wear. It is about the right to self-determination and bodily autonomy free from state interference. Removing the hijab is symbolic and has turned into an act of defiance women in Iran have used for many years to stand up to the regime (Sadeghi and Narain, 2022). The activists utilise their comment sections and quote retweet to call out that this discourse on equality, rights, and freedom in the West resonates with colonial and missionary rhetoric (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This is particularly visible in the conversation surrounding Muslim women and the hijab.

Both ‘hijab protest’ and ‘Frauenbewegung’ miss the mark as descriptors of the movements (Sahebi, 2023b). All activists continuously tweet about the need for an intersectional understanding of the movement. As compared to previous movements, such as the Green Movement which occurred 2009 in Iran, this particular movement has achieved to gain support across demographics and localities in Iran itself (Kermani, 2023). Activist3, Activist4, and Activist6 continue to highlight that the movement is intersectional and that ethnic

minorities, such as Kurdish-Iranians, and queer communities are just as central to the movement as women. This is best represented by the fact that Jhina (Mahsa) Amini, whose death triggered the movement, was a young Kurdish woman, a fact often overlooked in the German public, according to the activists. Activist2 further highlights this intersectionality in response to people claiming that Iranian men are not actively supporting the movement. Statements such as these underline an idea of gender division in Iranian society, which in reality is not present and Iranian people, including men, support the movement. Another critique voiced by activists, is that the focus on women is supposed to make it more palatable to a Western audience. This framing of the movement within the ‘iron cage of liberalism’ as Ritter (2012) calls it, undermines the movement rather than empowering it. As an example of activists countering these narratives, Activist4 tweets the following:

*“Yes, it is a feminist revolution. One that is supported by everyone, including men. It's as if, especially for "Western" ears, people always talk about women. Women are at the forefront. But they are not standing alone. This is the true feminist revolution.”*

Activists expose and actively criticise statements such as “Why should we care?” which carry the assumption that there is no relevance for people in Germany to care about a situation in Iran. Statements like these are often combined with victim-blaming, that in some way this was the choice Iranians made when removing the Shah monarchy in 1979. These statements carry a tone of supremacy in the sense that this would not have happened if Iranians would have opted for a liberal democracy instead of the Islamic Republic. Activists clearly state that the narrative that Iranians actively chose oppression with the introduction of the Islamic Republic, is a wrong statement and lacks contextual understanding. This idea of Western supremacy is further highlighted and criticised by Activist2, when commenting on the narrative that the movement is not useful, because it does not offer an alternative government or tangible steps after a potential success. These arguments are self-righteous in the sense that

actors in the West make their support dependent on criteria they themselves set, while, as the activists point out, people in Iran are fighting for their survival every single day. Activist2 in particular, uses sarcasm as a tool to raise awareness toward this discourse, as the following example shows:

*“Remember: The West determines when protesting against tyranny and oppression makes sense. If there's no real concept, sorry, there's no support. Colonialism 2.0.”*

This picks at the core of cultural relativism. People in a position of privilege and living in a powerful state, tend to take on a neutral position of an observer in which they rationally assess their responsibility in the situation (Abu-Lughod, 2002). It makes them assume that they stand outside and above other, assumed oppressive cultures. In the context of the movement this happens when people refer to this as a problem of Arab cultures. Assuming this position leads to harmful interpretations and narratives that are blind toward the lived experience of others.

An example of such narratives occurs when activists voice their worry about Twitter being shut down due to Elon Musk taking over the platform in 2022. Many users suggest that people should simply move over to alternative platforms like Mastodon. The activists counter this understanding by tweeting about the importance of Twitter for Iranian movements, and how they cannot simply move to a new platform in the face of the current situation. Schleifer (2009) highlights that Iranians were able to build strong platforms for their activism and networks to raise international awareness via Twitter. Germans' nonchalance reflects the dissonance of the German public discourse toward the importance of social media in authoritarian contexts versus democratic contexts (Tufekci, 2014a). Activists emphasise how for Iranian people to engage online and for instance share videos of police brutality in Iran, and to generally voice opposition toward the regime comes with a large risk of being prosecuted for it.

All activists attempt to counter this cultural relativist and Western stance by highlighting the voices of Iranians with the aim to nurture solidarity. They share messages and videos they received from people in Iran and utilise visuals of young women and men who have been killed to reduce the perceived distance between Germans and Iranians. They address cultural relativist narratives by digitally constructing martyrs, and instead of showing images of victims brutalised or dead bodies, the focus is put on celebrating their lives. We see videos of Jhina (Mahsa) Amini dancing, laughing, and being a joyful young woman full of life. This visual narrative is being used to show that Iranians are no different to people in other parts of the world, and that like everyone, they deserve the right to live freely. Digitally mediated martyrdom is a phenomenon we were able to observe during the Arab Spring (Meky, 2014; Lewis, 2019). Martyrs in the context of movements like in Egypt or Black Lives Matter were mostly young men, like Khaleed Saeed. This is contrasted by Iranian movements, who since the Green Movement have utilised young women in their digitally mediated construction of martyrs, such as Neda Agha-Soltan or now Jhina (Mahsa) Amini (Yarbakhsh, 2014). Gender becomes a central part of digitally mediated martyrdom, through which activists are countering the narratives that girls and women in Iran have no agency and instead construct them as ‘fighters’, ‘brave’ and a woman ‘like you and me’. The German-Iranian activists utilise these tactics to actively counter-narratives of cultural relativism and white feminism and instead foster a more intersectional understanding of the situation and solidarity with Iranian people.

### ***Resisting Xenophobic, Racist, and Islamophobic Narratives***

Closely connected to the cultural relativism are xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic narratives activists resist on Twitter. From the analysis of the collected data, it becomes clear that this counter-narratives encompasses two main aspects: (1) the experience of Iranian-Germans as a minority in Germany

and (2) the appropriation of the movement by individuals and actors for their own narratives.

For the first aspect, Iranian-German activists utilise Twitter to call out racism and xenophobia in German media and public discourse. One central narrative in this hegemonic discourse, is that only non-Iranian journalists should report on the situation in Iran, as Iranian-German journalists are unable to report objectively on the movement. An example of activists calling out racist undertones of such statements, is a tweet by Activist6:

*“Ultimately, it is a racist argument that is now being applied to exiled journalists as well, as if emotions are clouding the brains of people of color and they no longer know how reporting works. Believe me: it's not like that. So, stop it.”*

This critique further showcases how inherently gendered the German public discourse is. The dichotomy of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ knowledge is representative of the binaries in patriarchal systems. Emotions and subjectivity are associated with ‘women’ as a category, whereas ‘men’ are associated with ‘rationality’ and ‘objectivity’ (Lazar, 2005, 2007). Activists here call out racism, but simultaneously shed light on the sexist assumptions underlying these narratives. Activists rhetorically resort to irony echoing a tiredness and pointing that such narratives are no surprise in German discourse, especially considering the current political climate. This is further highlighted in a tweet by Activist3:

*“Some politicians still have not understood that not all people want to come to Germany, where there are racist murder series and racist terrorist attacks. Instead of making Germany more attractive, they run anti-foreigner campaigns. Not smart at all.”*

German society is diverse with a fourth of its population having a migration background (Kazim, 2020). Yet, that fourth of the population, including Iranian



women, are consistently being put in a position of having to renegotiate their gender roles and rightful place in Western societies (Moghissi, 1999). By activists pointing out the discrimination and exclusion German-Iranians experience through racism and the harm it does to the movement, they also allude to larger societal dynamics and inequalities in Germany. Lastly, activists by pointing to the racist and gendered power dynamics also highlight the intersectional experience of individuals. In this case Iranian-German women experience discrimination due to their gender and ethnicity. Ironically, this resonates with narratives by the Iranian regime, which activists point out in parts through rhetorical questions and highlighting a German ‘Doppelmoral’ (eng. double standard). In this context they use irony and rhetorical questions to highlight that even though Germans think they are more open and inclusive, these discourses show that they are more similar to the Iranian regime than they think.

Closely connected to such attitudes and discourse in Germany is the appropriation of the movement by political actors, such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, eng. ‘Alternative for Germany’). The AfD and other conservative actors utilise the previously discussed narrative of ‘hijab protests’ to justify Islamophobic attitudes and political agendas. Activist4 points this out repeatedly by shedding light on the political agenda behind these efforts:

*“We will not be instrumentalized by #Weidel and the racist #noAfD! The #IranProtests2022 and the murder of Jhina #Mahsa\_Amini to instrumentalize for racist anti-Muslim agitation, is just disgusting!”*

*“We will not let our fight for freedom be misused by the #noAfD for anti-Muslim agitation! Those who want to ban headscarves here are the same fascists as those who want to impose them in #Iran!”*

To address these narratives activists keep tweeting about the feminist goals of the movement. The symbol of removing the hijab is continuously being contextualised by the activists to counter anti-Islam narratives building on it. Yet, this instrumentalization and re-framing is also being seen on the political spectrum of the left in Germany. Activists here have to address criticism they receive for supposedly being Islamophobic themselves, by putting the words ‘Islamic Republic’ and ‘terror’ in the same sentence. Activists tactically point this out and address it in the comment sections to avoid further perpetuation of these narratives. They also raise awareness by explaining concepts like ‘terror’ or ‘Islamophobia’.

Activists further highlight the central role of ethnic minorities, like the Kurdish and Baloch populations, and the queer community in the movement. By continuously reiterating the diversity and intersectionality of the movement, activists aim to shut down and address any claims of Islamophobia. One central tactic for activists here is to retweet or quote retweet any exclusionary claims about the movement, especially since the role of ethnic minorities is being further contested by actors within the movement. Another tactic is to build a network with activists from these minorities and amplify their voices through retweeting their content to their own audiences. Like this, activists utilise the technical affordances of Twitter to further amplify the voices of marginalised communities and counter any potential instrumentalization of political actors. Standing in solidarity and showcasing it through networking and active online engagement is at the core of this resistance.

## **6.2 Strategies of Resistance**

Strategies of resistance in the context of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 in Germany are focused on (1) the fact-checking of traditional media outlets and (2) holding politicians accountable for their inactions. For both

strategies, activists outline the disadvantages potential actions by the media and politics can have on the movement and the safety of people in Iran.

### ***Calling out Perpetuation of Regime Propaganda and Rewrite Incorrect Narratives***

One central rule of social media for movements is the ability it gives activists to hold traditional media accountable and ensure that it is not being dominated by regime propaganda (Iskander, 2011). Throughout the analysis of German Twitter on the movements, this was the most prominent strategy activists employed. One core tactic is the support and amplification of citizen journalism coming out of Iran. This is particularly important during periods of where the Iranian regime shuts down the internet for longer periods. Activists in Germany are in contact with friends and family back in Iran and receive a constant stream of content and information, which they can continue sharing even in the case of internet shutdowns. Videos and images are important in this context and highlight the disproportional violence the regime uses against its own citizens. Activists are documenting human rights violations committed by the regime which is important for investigations and potential future prosecution of such wrongdoings (Amnesty International, 2013). The visual tactics used here are able to evoke emotions and a sense of urgency in the German context.

Activists point out that German media either stays silent on the situation in Iran or actively perpetuates regime propaganda. Whether journalists do this consciously or subconsciously is not of priority for activists. The fact that it is being done and negatively impacts the movement, is motivator enough to point it out. Tactically activists' approach this by stressing the specific language and narratives the regime is pushing and how media outlets are picking them up. One example for this by Activist2, is the narrative of a 'civil war' happening in Iran. It is aimed to cover-up the fact that the majority of the population wants the regime to resign. She further explains that for the regime this narrative

justifies and legitimises their use of violence against protestors. This perceived legitimacy gets heightened once it is being framed in the same manner by international media outlets. ‘Unruhen’ (eng. ‘unrest’) and ‘Auseinandersetzungen’ (eng. ‘disputes’) are further framings of regime propaganda picked up by German media. These two descriptors for the situation in Iran undermine the severity of the situation in Iran for citizens. This connects to the Western interpretation of the situation and once the mandatory hijab regulations are lifted, that protests will stop. The Iranian regime utilises this assumption and pushes fake news about the loosening of regulations and the ‘morality police’ being dissolved. Activists criticise that such pieces of propaganda are being blindly reported on without fact-checking the claims. Activist6 tweets the following:

*“After human rights activists from Iran and Iranian media professionals around the world explained why the report on the morality police is not true, it is everywhere today. I didn't expect that. The Iranian regime knows how to wage media war.”*

With their own citizen journalism and sharing information they received from protestors in Iran they are able to debunk the regime’s propaganda. Through the function of mentions on Twitter, activists directly tweet at news outlets or journalists and call on them to take down disinformation. Generally, they highlight how if one were to just follow German media, they would receive a skewed image of the situation in Iran.

Another aspect they specifically focus on is the concept of ‘violence’ and who is being violent. Especially, in the initial phases of the movement, German media reported on protestors showcasing a readiness to use violence. Activist1 points out the falseness of these statement:

*“the Iranian protesters are not "ready for violence", but it is the naked fight for survival. The Ukrainians who are resisting Russia are hardly "ready for violence" either. Inform yourself.”*

Initially, after the death of Jhina (Mahsa) Amini activists actively engaged in correcting narratives in traditional news outlets. Central German state media framed her death as allegedly being caused by the police and the claims of police brutality just being voiced by ‘critics’ of the regime. Activist2 and Activist6 respond to this by highlighting the existing evidence clearly showing that Amini has been killed at the hands of the Iranian state, simply for being a young Kurdish woman. Activist4 summarises this in the following tweet:

*“"Police violence" and "government critics"? This is not police violence, it is state-orchestrated terror, and people are not taking to the streets because they "criticize" government policies, but because their government is oppressing and killing them.”*

All this returns to the assumption that Germans and German media somehow can take on the role of an objective observer. Activists again use irony and humoristic statements to point out that in their objective position, journalists are positioning themselves as part of the propaganda apparatus of the regime. Activists directly engage with journalists on Twitter who claim that they can objectively and freely report on the situation in Iran. Yet, the focus of activists in this strategy is to showcase that the words we use to describe a situation matter and have an impact. Language is not neutral, and in the case of Iran, perpetuating the words of the regime legitimises its position and violent repression of citizens.

The movement specifically refers to this strategy when larger events occur in Iran, such as Jhina (Mahsa) Amini’s death, the fire in Evin Prison in December 2022, and when the executions of protestors started. Nonetheless, the movement

continues to use the previously outlined tactics throughout the entirety of the analysed timeline.

***Critiquing the Silence of, and Actively Engaging in Dialogue with Political Actors.***

Due to the previous outlined political and economic relationship between Germany and Iran the silence of political actors on the movement and demands do not come as a surprise. Yet, due to this relation it is central to activists' strategy to counter this protective discourse on Iran. Achieving a shift in German foreign policy agenda toward Iran, can significantly increase the external pressure on the regime and support the movement (Amiri, 2023). With Germany's recent implementation of a feminist foreign policy approach, activists are offered a better foundation for their demands.

In the initial phase of the movement central political figures, such as Annalena Baerbock the Foreign Minister of Germany, or Olaf Scholz the current Chancellor, remained silent on the movement. Activists in this phase called on political actors to denounce the actions of the regime against its citizens and called for the government to end the negotiations of the nuclear deal with Iran which Germany agreed on in 2015. Activists utilise Twitter to highlight that supporting the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 and the protection of human rights need to take priority over the nuclear deal. Especially in this context Germany's feminist foreign policy approach is used as a way to hold the government accountable to its agenda. This often happens in the form rhetorical questions, such as in the following tweet by Activist1:

*“When I look at statements & behavior of @Bundeskanzler and @ABaerbock it becomes clear: they don't believe in success of #iranRevolution, maybe even don't want it. JCPoA seems to be more important than values and human rights. Where is feminist foreign policy?”*

This sentence of “Where is the feminist foreign policy?” is being used actively across the dataset in numerous iterations. As the data description shows, activists utilise the mention functionality on Twitter to interact with accounts of politicians. Eventually, multiple activists organise different online events with the current German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, to directly engage with her and voice the Iranians people’s demands. I was able to observe many tweets that formulated the Iranian movements demands regularly. The activist’s approach toward the Foreign Minister differs from that toward the Chancellor. They point out the underlying impact of ‘gender’ as a category, where they claim that the Chancellor is unloading this unwanted burden onto the Foreign Minister. The following tweet by Activist6 verbalises this and showcases a narrative of ‘feminist foreign politics is a woman’s business’:

*“Olaf Scholz's silence on the protests in Iran can have 3 reasons: 1. he is not interested. 2. it is a "women's issue" for him. The foreign minister should take care of the feminist foreign policy. 3. the nuclear talks are more important to him than human rights.”*

Calling out the silence of the Chancellor is central to this strategy. This targeted approach is due to his central position in German politics. Activists utilise mentions, but a more active approach is initiated by Activist3 by starting a hashtag campaign and connected petition calling on him to break his silence. This campaign is being retweeted by all activists in the dataset. His silence is further being called-out through constating his behaviour with more active heads of states, such Justin Trudeau or Emmanuel Macron. The following tweet by Activist2 draws this comparison and highlights the absence of the German Chancellor by showing that people in Iran do not even know his name:

*“What's your chancellor's name again now? Why doesn't he say anything about our revolution in #Iran, look at @JustinTrudeau?” is not the first time I hear today in phone calls with Iranians.... His name is @OlafScholz I say then.”*

The Chancellor's Twitter account eventually does tweet about the situation in Iran and voices his solidarity with the protestors. This tweet is widely shared across the activist network and largely criticised for its poor choice of words. Activists reshare an image of the Chancellors tweet where certain words have been crossed out and added with a red marker. Utilising the screenshot offered a successful opportunity for activists to showcase their disappointment and the government's shortcomings.

From the collected interactions between the different user accounts, it is clear that activists utilise mentions extensively, yet we do not see the same engagement in return. Nonetheless, through the manual collection of the data I was able to identify multiple direct Twitter conversations between activists and government accounts or political actors. In the beginning of the movement, specifically in the beginning of October 2022, a conversation happened between Luise Amtsberg, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance, and one of the activists. The conversation started through the activists mentioning Amtsberg in a tweet and stating that Germany is not doing enough for the Iranian people. Amtsberg comments on this tweet, which triggered a back and forth conversation on what actions Germany has taken and what further actions should be considered. For this conversation to happen on Twitter is significant, as it is open for an audience to watch and comment on. Amstberg actively asks for the movement's demands for political actions and responds back with what may or may not be feasible. Interesting here is that she is open to the exchange and criticism of the activists. This signals that the she is taking activists serious within a social media space.



Another case of an interaction between activists and a political actor, is the response of Janine Wissler, the head of 'Die Linke' Germany's left-wing party. She, like Amtsberg, responds to one of the activists' tweets on how they have seen no solidarity from her party. In response to the criticism, she offers an insight into what the party has done in response to the movement. Yet, Activist2 continues to point out that since 'solidarity' is a central value of the party that they expected more public support for the movement.

One tactic that was employed in this context is using Twitter to connect with politicians and have them act as political sponsors for Iranians who are facing the threat of execution. Once the campaign was started by multiple activists, political actors commented on their tweets asking to be a part of the campaign. They provided politicians with images and hashtags to utilise when raising awareness about the political prisoner they took the sponsorship on for.

### **6.3 Impact on and Recirculation by Political Actors**

In this second part of the analysis, I am assessing the impact these counter-narratives and strategies of resistance have on political actors in Germany. Gaining the support of the German government will increase the pressure on the Iranian regime which the movement hopes will lead the regime to step down. Even in the first parliamentary session on the situation in Iran, members from different political parties as well as the German Foreign Minister who used the core chant of the movement 'Woman, Life, Freedom' in their speeches (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022a). Political actors who did this legitimised the movement and its claims. On the surface this showcases that the politicians have stepped away from a cultural relativist narrative and actively stand in solidarity with the movement. Nonetheless, political parties like the AfD, continue to instrumentalise the movement to push an Islamophobic political agenda. For the AfD in particular, this instrumentalization attempt did not change and was still

a focal point in their speech during the second parliamentary hearing on Iran (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022b).

Another core aspect highlighting the political retreat from cultural relativism is the fact that politicians from the SPD, Germany's social democratic party, Die Linke (the left), and the governing Green party acknowledge the centrality of ethnic minorities in the movement. A female politician from the left party gives her speech while wearing a t-shirt with the Kurdish spelling of the movement's slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi". With this act she acknowledges the contribution of the Kurdish people to the current movement.

One important observation is the solidarity expressed by the CDU, Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Party. This party has significantly shaped Germany's foreign relation with Iran since the 1980s (Küntzel, 2014). CDU politicians in their speeches show how the party line has changed on the issue, with a strong call for the protection of human rights and more drastic diplomatic actions against the Iranian regime. This is reflected by activists in the dataset retweeting, quote retweeting, and mentioning prominent CDU politicians, such as Norbert Röttgen. This new found support for Iranian people finds its climax in Friedrich Merz, the current leader of the party, taking on the political sponsorship Jamshid Sharmad an imprisoned German-Iranian in danger of being executed (CDU/CSU-Fraktion, 2023). Merz taking this political sponsorship means he is in active contact with the German-Iranian activists whose twitter accounts I analysed and actively utilises their material and hashtag for the campaign.

The political sponsorship campaign in general, initiated by multiple activists, showcases the success of the strategy of resistance where activists critiqued the silence of political actors and engaged in dialogue with them. What the campaign emphasises, is how activists can actively support politicians in

showing solidarity with a movement. In this context, activists utilise social media for coordination by connecting politicians with political prisoners and providing visual material as well as hashtags for the politician's social media campaigns. The activists were able to connect over 200 politicians with political prisoner via symbolic political sponsorships. Activists state via Twitter that these symbolic sponsorships do impact the regime and its decision to move forward with executions. By using Twitter to announce whenever a new political sponsorship has been taken on, activists establish a system of accountability for the politicians' promises.

As for the German government, the Foreign Minister is seen engaging both online and offline with activists. She attends multiple virtual events with activists and actively listens to the movements demands. Despite being at the brunt of online criticism, she continues to engage and takes political actions, such as initiating a UN resolution on the human rights abuses in Iran (Die Bundesregierung, 2022). The fact that she introduced a feminist foreign policy approach in Germany laid the groundwork for activists to formulate demands toward German foreign politics. As Robinson (2021) states "feminist foreign policy can and indeed should be 'ethical' foreign policy, but not where ethics is understood as a set of fixed, absolute principles based on Western liberal notions of human rights or 'justice'." (p. 33). Baerbock and the Foreign Ministry take this retreat from cultural relativism seriously, as visible through her tweets and speeches given in various contexts (Auswärtiges Amt, 2022b). As highlighted in the analysis, Luisa Amtsberg as a part of the German foreign affairs apparatus takes on an active role online by engaging with activists and a wider audience. The only governmental actor not changing course is Olaf Scholz. The Chancellor has barely tweeted about the situation and only gave a short statement on Iran in his visual podcast (*Gewalt und Proteste in Iran – Was tut Deutschland?*, 2022).

The only strategy that has shown no consistent success is calling out the perpetuation of regime propaganda. Even though activists put the most effort hence Twitter activity, into this strategy, German media continues to report on alleged loosened mandatory hijab regulations, the supposed removal and as of June 2023, the reintroduction of the ‘morality police’ (Husmann, 2023) with reports generally stay on the surface. However, activists continue to call out false reporting and the spread of regime propaganda and have taken on to actively contribute to the German traditional media landscape by publishing reports, books, and so on.

## **7. Discussion**

The Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 has utilised German Twitter to formulate counter-narratives and strategies of resistance with the goal to impact the German foreign policy agenda toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Germany's importance for the movement as an international actor stems from the extensive economic diplomatic ties between the two states (Küntzel, 2014). Germany has taken on the role of a protector, especially with the more confrontational diplomatic approach of the US, and as a result sanctions or other diplomatic actions against the regime have been watered down. The current movement aims to change Germany's approach, due to the need to increase external pressure on Iran with the hopes of toppling the regime (Amiri, 2023). As Amiri argues in her article, we have never seen this amount of pressure from abroad on the regime and she acknowledges the impact of Iranians abroad who have decided to break their silence and advocate for their friends and families in Iran. The internet and social media platforms like Twitter have been central to Iranian movements in the past (Golkar, 2011), but in this movement particularly people in Iran and abroad utilised it to connect and circumvent the regime's propaganda apparatus (Kermani, 2023).

The counter-narratives activists formulated in the German context showcase a surface level understanding of Iran and Iranian people in the public discourse. This is further visible through and perpetuated by the traditional media landscape in Germany. News outlets continue to perpetuate regime propaganda and through that actively undermine the movement. By taking on the wording of the regime, journalists are legitimising the Iranian regime and further marginalising the Iranian people and their demands. These boundaries of the German public sphere are actively being expanded by activists who utilise platforms like Twitter to hold the media accountable. This happens in two ways: (1) citizen journalism and (2) taking on the role of fact-checkers. As the analysis has highlighted activists regularly call out journalists and media outlets via mentions to point out disinformation. They also spend a considerable amount of their tweeting activity on amplifying the voices of Iranian citizens who are experiencing state repression first-hand, via visual and written material.

Visuals in general play an important role. One reason being that through the sharing of visuals, activists can document regime actions avoiding that the Islamic Republic may make false claims about the violence used against protestors. A second central function is the ability to construct martyrs of the movement, which as a process is referred to as digitally mediated martyrdom (Lewis, 2019). In the case of the movement this process is intentionally gendered to counter cultural relativist and Western narratives.

In their critique of cultural relativism, they encourage a more intersectional understanding of the movement and Iranian society at large. One aspect of this critique is the differentiation they make between Arab cultures and Iran. Their awareness work helps to foster a more nuanced understanding of Iranian people within their diversity. The success of this counter-narrative can be seen by parliamentary speeches given by German politicians which acknowledge the central role of ethnic minorities, such as Kurdish, Arab, or Balochi people. The

movement uses their slogans and fights for their right for self-determination as well as much as for women. Another Western narrative activists counter in this context is the idea that Iranian men are not participating in the movement. This is countered through debunking this assumption as well as sharing images and videos showcasing fathers, brothers, and friends supporting Iranian women in their demands.

The analysis did showcase that activists were able to partially break the silence of German politicians by engaging with them both online and offline. On Twitter, activists engaged politicians by mentioning them in tweets or in discussing demands with them in their own comment sections. The case of Luise Amtsberg shows that this strategy can work. However, it seems to be dependent on who activists address as in the case of Olaf Scholz the increased pressure only led to a few superficial tweets and a short video announcement (*Gewalt und Proteste in Iran – Was tut Deutschland?*, 2022). Activists may be right in their previously outlined assumptions that he is seeing the German Foreign Minister as the one responsible. Annalena Baerbock does actively engage with activists online and offline and has initiated several political actions against the regime in Germany as well as in the context of the EU and the UN. She mainly utilises her Twitter account to put out updates on potential sanctions and other diplomatic actions. The governmental human rights report acknowledges the counter-narratives of the movement and most importantly takes a more contextual look at the situation in Iran instead of assuming a superior position (Auswärtiges Amt, 2022a).

Despite seeing the change in German foreign policy stance toward Iran, activists continue to voice criticism (Memarnia, 2022). The main point of critique is that Germany's actions toward the Iranian regime are too symbolic and need to be harsher and more consistent to support Iranian citizens (Sahebi, 2023a). The Iranian regime, as of July, has executed 406 people this year alone (*Iran Human*

*Rights Official Website*, no date). This marks a 75% uptake compared to previous years (El Damanhoury and Ataman, 2023). This continued violent repression of protestors and oppositional voices showcases that the external pressure the regime experiences and diplomatic messaging may not be as effective as assumed. Yet, my research is unable to formulate a clear stance on this, as more variables and dynamics are at play that this analysis does not address.

The movement throughout the counter-narratives and strategies of resistance utilise several linguistic tools, such as rhetorical questions, irony, humour, sarcasm, and contrast. These tools allowed activists to address complex issues within the given character limitation of tweets. Returning to the theoretical framework by Clark (2016) it is not necessarily obvious whether different narratives or strategies are more prominent in one phase or the other. What the framework did allow me to observe is that there were several different breaches for movement actions. I identified the main breach of the movement with the murder of Jhina (Mahsa) Amini, but events such as the fire at Evin prison or the announcement of executions represented smaller breaches where the activity of activists increased. The two strategies of resistance were most prominent in these peaks, as activists made sure the situation received media coverage and that German politicians are commenting on or condemning events in Iran. As for the crisis, the analysis showed that the two counter-narratives were competing with other narratives as outlined above, throughout the entirety of the set timeline. One central limitation of my research is that the stage of reintegration as I identified it, is artificial as the movement is ongoing still as of summer 2023. This means that the actual outcomes of the movement are yet to be seen. Nonetheless, the analysis identifies relevant counter-narratives and strategies of resistance activists utilise and offers a foundation for future research

Another severe limitation my research process faced is the Twitter takeover by Elon Musk. Due to the manual collection of the data, the API limitations did not apply to my research, yet I was not able to collect all data within the set timeframe, as the platform experienced severe bugs in the code base leading to the inability to scroll back further than a month. This was only the case for one of the activists, in which case I collected the data whenever an activist retweeted them. Throughout the collection phase, I saw the platform change daily by removing or adding certain functions. One example is the introduction of the number of views a tweet had in the middle of November. Despite all changes, I was able to connect enough data for an in-depth analysis.

Twitter is an important digital platform in the context of the movement, but platforms like Instagram or alternative platforms like Mastodon have grown in importance, especially due to the previously outlined issues with Twitter. Each platform has their own set of affordances for movements limiting the generalisability of my findings. On the topic of generalisability, I am looking at one movement in a specific national context. The findings do offer insights into potential utilities of social media platforms for activists but given another national or international context these may change.

Lastly, throughout the data collection process, I was unable to access government policy documents, but I was able to substitute this shortcoming through speeches and other documents, such as human rights reports by the German Foreign Ministry. The Twitter data collected from government documents also added a limited insight to the analysis, as most of the accounts were merely used to report news and diplomatic updates. Yet, I was able to observe one exception in the case of Luise Amtsberg and other political actors through the analysis of activists' tweets.



## **8. Conclusion**

The overall aim of the present research was to examine how revolutionary movements utilise social media to influence political processes. In this specific case, I examined how the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 utilised German Twitter to influence Germany's foreign policy agenda toward Iran. The research hones in on movements' ability to develop discursive strategies, such as counter-narratives or strategies of resistance. Resulting from the analysis, I was able to identify two counter-narratives and two strategies of resistance:

- *Critiquing Cultural Relativist and Western Interpretations of the Movement*
- *Resisting Xenophobic, Racist, and Islamophobic Narratives*
- *Calling out Perpetuation of Regime Propaganda and Rewrite Incorrect Narratives*
- *Critiquing the Silence of, and Actively Engaging in Dialogue with Political Actors*

Movements that are resisting and challenging hegemonic discourses, such as patriarchy or liberalism, turn to strategies like radicalism (Ferree, 2003) instead of attempting to resonate with the target audience. Through strategies like these movements engage in meaning making. Within social movement studies, frame theory (Snow, Vliementhart and Ketelaars, 2018) has been the central theory on how movements approach meaning-making through collective action. However, frame theory has fallen short in explaining the discursive strategies movements formulate when going against mainstream ideas and assumptions in society. Analysing counter-narratives and strategies of resistance is a central aspect of feminist research in social movement studies and the field of linguistics (Taylor, 1998; Lazar, 2005). Lazar (2005, 2007, 2014) in particular highlights the manner in which women and other marginalised groups can use counter-narratives to resist and challenge existing power asymmetries

discursively. These strategies of resistance and counter-narratives and show to be widely used, especially in online spaces (Clark, 2016; Nartey, 2021). The digital sphere offers movements an extension of the existing public discourse where they are able to more freely engage with the target audience and other movements. Previously, movements and activists were dependent on journalists and media outlets at large when raising awareness about the issues they address (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). The internet and social media loosened the dependence on gatekeepers.

One central strategy of resistance for the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 on German Twitter is critiquing the perpetuation of regime propaganda and rewriting incorrect narratives. Throughout the entirety of the analysed timeframe, activists were pointing out instances of disinformation of reproduction of language used by the regime. An example of this is media outlets referring to the situation in Iran as a ‘civil war’-like situation. The Islamic Republic uses this narrative to avoid acknowledging the movement’s demands and instead legitimise further use of violence. German media reproducing this narrative further legitimises the Iranian regime in its position. Activists offer alternative reporting and narratives on what Iranians are experiencing on the streets of Iranian cities and villages. This is being achieved by activists when engaging in citizen journalism and as a result, acting as an amplifier of Iranian voices.

The movement has a clear feminist agenda and demands (Ratmann, 2023; Sahebi, 2023b). To fully capture the movement it is necessary to adopt a feminist framework for both the theoretical foundation and methodology. Feminist critical discourse analysis as conceptualised by Lazar offers this framework (2005, 2007, 2014). Lazars approach does not just offer the ability to grasp ‘gender’ as a category impacting discourses, but points to the importance of taking on an intersectional lens. A person can experience discrimination and

exclusion through a multitude of social categories being present at the same time, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. By building on Lazar approach in combination with Clark's (2016) analytical frame of social drama theory, I was able to offer an in-depth analysis of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance. Following Lazars (2005) framework allows me to make my research a piece of academic activism, a political action, in itself by raising critical awareness.

Looking at the data through an intersectional lens I was able to identify counter-narratives and offer an analysis showcasing underlying power asymmetries and dynamics of the discourse. Activists critique cultural relativist narratives perpetuated in the German context. The movement is faced with questioning why Germans should care about the movement or even actively support it. This narrative initially seems neutral and curious, but upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that these narratives assume a superior and self-righteous position. The counter-narrative activists offer a more nuanced understanding of Iran and its people. They emphasise that the movement is not just about the right to unveil, but rather about the right for everyone to live their lives as they desire free from state repression. Taking on this more nuanced approach may represent learning from past revolutionary movements in Iran which got stuck in the 'iron cage of liberalism' and lost their own voice in the process (Ritter, 2012).

The second counter-narrative connects to the prior one, but specifically resists xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic narratives. The German public discourse and media landscape through the analysis appears riddle by underlying racist and xenophobic notions. In this context activists also must consistently engage in renegotiating their own identity when faced with racism. These narratives often represent an instrumentalization of the movement by political actors, such as the AfD, for pursuing and justifying Islamophobic agendas. Activists counter this by highlighting the diversity within the movement and centrality of ethnic

minorities. Similar to the first narrative, they point out that the movement is by all for all. The slogan of the movement, “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” (eng. ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’), is representative of this and of the fact that ethnic minorities like the Kurds have always been at the heart of movements like this.

The slogan of the movement was picked up by many political actors in their speeches, publications, and comments on the movement. Repeating the movement’s chant is symbolic of accepting its core tenet, especially in the context of this movement where the slogan is ideologically loaded as outlined earlier. The last strategy of resistance I was able to identify is that of critiquing the silence of politicians and actively engaging in dialogue with them simultaneously. As showcased through the two counter-narratives, Germans lack an in-depth understanding of the Iranian context which is no different for many politicians. Yet, by actively engaging with politicians and calling them out for their silence the movement has pushed for significant changes in Germany’s foreign policy agenda toward Iran. Central political actors, across different parties, were actively showing support for the movement both online and offline. The question of how much is done out of genuine support or political gain remains an open question, not addressed in this research.

The Foreign Minister in particular was at the forefront of this political shift. However, this shift is not simply explained by the movement’s pressure on the German government. The introduction of a feminist foreign policy approach laid a foundation for the movement and enabled it to hold the Foreign Ministry accountable in case that it does not adhere to its own promises. Despite Germany becoming a central initiator for UN resolutions or EU decisions on the topic of Iran, criticism remains loud and clear on that much of this effort is symbolic without much impact (Memarnia, 2022; Sahebi, 2023a).

Twitter offered activists several affordances regarding the creation of counter-narratives and strategies of resistance and their potential impact. Especially in

the context of countering regime propaganda and rewriting incorrect narratives, Twitter allowed activists to circumvent potential gatekeepers and still hold them accountable. They have the ability to respond quickly to events happening in Iran through sharing visuals and citizen statements. The mentioning function Twitter offers enables direct engagement with journalists and media outlets. Activists utilise mentions to directly address media outlets and journalists. Being able to respond to something instantaneously is another affordances activists use extensively. Retweets, quote retweets, and comments offer the ability to build a network between actors and amplify a message even more. A message on Twitter may be short, but the potential of thousands of people engaging with the message can give a sense of legitimacy. Lastly, as highlighted in many previous studies, hashtag campaigns remain relevant to connect actors and push a narrative further (Clark, 2016; Kuo, 2018; Kermani and Hooman, 2022).

As outlined in the discussion section, the research faces a number of limitations. One core limitation out of my control, nonetheless very important, is the downhill path of Twitter. The changes introduced by Elon Musk have already reshaped Twitter significantly and continues to do so. Considering Twitters central role for social movements and its accessibility to researchers, it important to see where movements migrate to for their online engagement. This does not go to say that online activism exists in an isolated manner, it instead needs to be seen in relation to offline collective action. Another limitation is the low potential for generalisability of the findings since I analysed a specific case within a specific national context. However, the findings are still a relevant to the existing body of literature as I attempt to identify counter-narratives and strategies of resistance and how these are being picked-up by political actors. Previous research has attempted this in the context of media recirculation of narratives (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017), but I build on this with my findings.

For future research I suggest to further develop a theoretical and analytical approach to further investigate if and how counter-narratives are being picked-up by politicians. Conducting interviews with key activists or political actors would give further insight into the dynamic between online activism and offline action. Generally, continuing the exploration on counter-narrative and strategies of resistance and the role social media plays here for social movements is a valuable avenue for research. The impact of a feminist foreign politics approach on social movements and vice versa remains an open field ready for future research. A last avenue for future should explore the use of visuals, especially digitally mediated martyrdom as a strategy for movements facilitated by technology.

To conclude, the analysis has identified two counter-narratives and two strategies of resistance used by the Iranian Revolutionary Movement 2022 within the German Twitter-sphere. As for its influence on Germany's foreign policy agenda, it is not possible to attribute all political shifts to online activism, but it is clear that political actors are impacted by the strategies to some degree, and we are able to observe a shift in political attitudes. Lastly, it is clear to say that the movement and its core tenet continue: 'Jin, Jiyan, Azadi' / 'Woman, Life, Freedom'.

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