JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES
Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 7, Issue 17, June 2023

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE YOUTH ACTIVISM: THE CASE OF GENERATION Z IN IRAN

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Introduction

The recent protests in Iran were characterized by the participation of a significant number of so-called Generation Z or Zoomers born between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. This demographic utilized Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok and WhatsApp to coordinate their activities and communicate their messages and opinions. Generation Z utilized social media tools to disseminate information as well as to organize protests. They also shared videos of police brutality, which helped to bring international attention to the situation in Iran and increase awareness. Their ability to harness technology to put pressure on the Iranian government is indicative of the important role they will play in shaping Iran's future. This study analyzes the impact of social media platforms on Generation Z participation with regard to the Iranian protests that erupted against the backdrop of the death of Mahsa Amini.

Iranian Protests: Background and Motivations

The roots of the recent protests can be traced back to the death of Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was arrested by the government's morality police in Tehran for not adhering to the country's strict hijab laws. The subsequent release of police footage showing her collapse in a police station sparked widespread outrage among the general Iranian population, leading to widespread protests. People of all ages, including women and schoolgirls, participated in the protests, which quickly spread across multiple cities and towns in Iran.[1]

The motivations behind the recent protests were multifaceted, and they encompassed a sense of nationalism and a desire for greater freedom. Gender issues, in particular, emerged as a driving force in the protests, with women and girls serving as symbols of change and key catalysts of the protest movement. At least 520 individuals have been killed to date,[2] though the actual number remains unknown. The Iranian government adopted a security approach in dealing with the protests, authorizing security agencies to crack down on protestors.

Since the 1990s, digital activism, or the use of digital mobile technologies and internet-based devices for political and social change, has been on the rise, with the internet demonstrating its effectiveness in mobilizing, organizing, informing and communicating on a global scale to bring about positive change.

Despite the Iranian government's censorship and crackdowns, Iranian Zoomers born between 1997 and 2010 played a crucial role in both the physical and online protests, using social media to express themselves and spread their messages. Protesters refer to the older leaders as "dinosaurs,"[3] highlighting the significant generational divide between them and the clerical establishment.

International support for a cause is a crucial goal of any social media campaign, but determining its impact can be difficult. The so called Arab Spring, also referred to as the Arab uprising, as well as the ongoing civil war in Syria, has demonstrated that social media can play a critical role in bringing international attention to a cause and conveying a sense of urgency.[4] This quest for seeking international attention is likely to be a key basis of future campaign plans for Iran's Zoomers, but the difficulty will remain in translating support into effective change on the ground.

Social Media Influence on Iranian Zoomers

In recent years, Generation Z's use of social media and the internet has increased significantly, particularly in Iran. They are now able to organize and communicate with one another in ways that were previously impossible as well as reach a much larger audience and garner more attention for their cause.

By blocking WhatsApp and Instagram and other social media platforms, the Iranian government has attempted to control the spread of information, but it is not a total blackout.[5] Social media has enabled young Iranians to see their country's misfortunes in real time, including nationwide or local protests, violent crackdowns, and the disparity in wealth between themselves and government elites.[6] This is

probably what provoked the Iranian Parliament to pass a bill declaring full state control over the internet and cyberspace just a few months prior to the recent protests, with the intention of restricting Generation Z's use of social media applications.[7] The Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has utilized Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to spread its message and mobilize young women against the mandatory hijab laws.[8] Generation Z employed Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, as one of the main platforms to disseminate information and coordinate logistics. This enabled them to bypass traditional channels of information dissemination, which are often subject to censorship or control by the Iranian government.

The use of social media also helped Generation Z in reaching a broader audience and amplified their message. It also helped in establishing connections with sympathetic individuals from around the world who are supportive of their cause, hence creating a sense of solidarity among protestors.

Hashtags (such as #MahsaAmini, #IranProtests and #OpIran) were instrumental in the success of the recent protests. They have served as a rallying cry for protesters and a way for people to express their support for the protest movement. These hashtags have enabled the creation of decentralized and organic forms of political activism, in which individuals can share their own experiences and perspectives while also enhancing the messages of the protest movement.

However, it is important to note that assessing the impact of social media as a tool for social mobilization is difficult. Key issues to examine include the following: the specific social media strategy and tactics used by opposition groups; the evolving use of different social media tools as mobilization happens; and the possibility of social media tapping into the emotions of people, hence having a persuasive impact. Even the most open governments in the world can be surprised by "micro-mobilizations" in opposition to policies and programs.[9]

Role of Social Media in Iran's Social and Political Movement

Student Activism in Iran

Student activism has a rich history in Iran, with universities serving as critical hotspots for political activism and opposition movements. During Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, the growth of the Iranian higher education sector provided students who were against the shah with opportunities to organize both domestically and abroad, leading to universities becoming hotbeds of activism during the period leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution. After the revolution, the university system came under intense pressure from the clerical establishment, which saw it as a challenge to its rule. Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat (DTV) emerged as the main umbrella organization coordinating Islamic student groups, playing a significant role in establishing the cultural and political hegemony of the Islamic left in universities.[10]

The reform movement in Iran was sparked by Mohammad Khatami's presidential campaign in 1997, which resonated with the rising demands of the middle class,

youth and women, who turned out to vote in record numbers.[11] The international community supported the reform movement by condemning Iran's human rights violations and advocating for a wider range of issues, including civil rights.[12]

Recent years have seen a steady growth in student activism in Iran, with young people leveraging the power of social media to organize and communicate their demands for reform such as improved access to education, an end to the compulsory hijab and discrimination against women.

Student activism is a catalyst for transformation in Iran. Despite confronting various obstacles, such as repression and censorship, students have persisted in utilizing social media and innovative forms of protest to express their demands and advocate for democracy and social justice.

An analysis of student organizations in Iran from 1996 to 2006 identifies the salient political discourses that they have championed: social justice, freedom, pluralism and Islamic democracy. These discourses have contributed to reshaping the Iranian polity, affecting both the student movement and the wider political landscape of Iran. The future of student activism in Iran is uncertain, but the country's young people are committed to pursuing change in their society.[13]

Role of Social Media and the Internet in Driving Social and Political Movements

The 2009 Iranian presidential election was won by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a landslide, but thousands of Iranians took to the streets in protest, chanting "Where is my vote?"[14] Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi emerged as the protest movement's leaders in response to opposition to Ahmadinejad's reelection. Twitter, Facebook and text messaging played a critical role in organizing and coordinating opposition efforts and public demonstrations.

By utilizing social media, the Green Movement was able to circumvent censorship and garner widespread support from diverse and frequently conflicting segments of the Iranian population. Particularly, Twitter protected Iranian users by making it more difficult for state agents to locate and detain them. Facebook also launched a beta version of its website in Persian to accommodate the volume of Persian-language news and information shared on the platform. YouTube also played a role by relaxing its restrictions on graphically violent videos, allowing videos of the Iranian revolution to be widely distributed on the platform.

After the contested election, which President Ahmadinejad won with 63% of the vote, citizens took to social media platforms to document their struggle and reach a wider audience. Social media allowed information to flow, including the viral video of Neda Agha-Soltan's murder, despite the state crackdown on domestic and foreign media outlets. The video received global attention, prompting the then US President Barack Obama to respond to it.

However, some scholars are skeptical of the "Twitter Revolution,"[15] because traditional media still wields considerable influence over the dissemination of information, and governments have the ability to monitor and censor social media sites.

Critics believe that social media only helps in raising awareness of issues, and it is the protestors, not the technology, that makes the real difference on the ground.

The internet, particularly social media, has provided a new platform for Iranian students to challenge the policies of the Iranian government and has also helped in propelling them to the forefront of political and social movements in Iran.[16] Students and the youth use social media to promote cultural values and norms and to challenge the government's official norms despite political repression. The Iranian government has attempted to exert control over social media by increasing its own presence on these platforms, instilling fear among internet users and restricting access to online networks. By the end of 2009, the Iranian government had amassed substantial control over the information environment, while the Green Movement had lost steam.

Impact of Social Media on the Advocacy of Social and Political Movements

The use of social media by opposition groups has enabled the decentralization of power and has also helped in the ability to evade retaliation, but the Iranian government has co-opted social media tools for its own purposes and has expanded its efforts to monitor and restrict online activity. The government has adopted a more aggressive stance toward online activity and launched a campaign against the perceived threat of a "soft war."[17]

The recent Iranian protests have depended heavily on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share information and coordinate activities. These platforms have enabled protesters to circumvent government-controlled traditional news outlets and reach a larger audience. Hashtags and other online organizing strategies have played a crucial role in the dissemination of information about the protest movement.

Despite the government's attempts to shut down the internet and heavily filter it, Iranian activists have been able to use a variety of tools to spread their message and connect with supporters around the world. Social media has helped make the protests a global phenomenon and allowed activists to share information and ideas. However, the government's crackdown on cyberactivity and dissent has been severe, resulting in the arrest, torture and imprisonment of numerous activists.

Digitally networked activism (DNA) movements have supplanted traditional hierarchical social and political institutions as the centers of power in society.[18] Coordinated by digital media technologies, DNA has led to large-scale collective action centered on broader political agendas such as economic justice and environmental protection.

Social Media and the Role of Generation Z in the Protests Over Mahsa Amini's Death

Methodology

This research explores the impact of social media and the internet on Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests. To achieve this end, a combination

of open-source intelligence (OSINT) and social media monitoring technologies were used to collect information on protesters' use of social media. Using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis, the collected data was then analyzed.

Identifying relevant social media platforms was the initial step in the research. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Telegram were among these platforms. Then, keywords and hashtags associated with the recent protests in Iran, Generation Z and social media use were identified and used to search for relevant data on the mentioned platforms.

To track keywords and hashtags and collect data on social media activity in real-time, social media monitoring tools were developed. The collected data included posts, comments, likes, shares and other forms of engagement associated with the recent protests in Iran and the participation of Generation Z. The data was stored in a secure and organized manner, and it was pre-processed to eliminate any unnecessary or duplicate information.

The pre-processed data was then analyzed using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis. The overall sentiment of the posts and comments related to the protests and Generation Z's participation was determined using sentiment analysis. Utilizing network analysis, the relationships between social media actors were examined and the most influential actors were identified. The content of the posts and comments were analyzed using content analysis to determine the topics and messages being communicated.

The Digital Landscape of Iran in 2023

Iran's digital landscape has been constantly evolving over the years, and the most recent data paints a vivid picture of the country's digital adoption and use. As of the beginning of 2023, 78.6 percent of Iran's population, or 69.83 million people, were internet users. This demonstrates the remarkable growth of the internet in Iran, where it continues to play an increasingly vital role in the lives of the Iranian people.

Social media usage has also increased in Iran, where 54% of the population, or 48 million people, are now active on social media. In Iran, social media has become an indispensable tool for communication, information sharing and entertainment. As more and more people incorporate social media into their daily lives, it is likely that its usage will increase further.

In addition to the increase in internet and social media usage, the number of active mobile cellular connections in Iran has also increased significantly. At the beginning of 2023, there were 126.9 million active mobile phone connections in the country, or 142.8% of the population. This demonstrates the widespread adoption of mobile technology in Iran, where individuals continue to depend on mobile devices for communication, entertainment and information access.

Iran's population stood at 88.84 million as of January 2023, which is an important fact to keep in mind when analyzing the country's digital landscape. The popu-

lation increased by 588,000 (+0.7%) between 2022 and 2023, with females comprising 49.5% and males 50.5%. In addition, as of the beginning of 2023, 77% of Iran's population resided in urban areas, while 23% resided in rural areas.

Figure 1, which is based on the data provided by Statcounter, provides a summary of the market share of different social media platforms in Iran from January 2022 to January 2023. The data shows the percentage of users who used each platform in each month.

Instagram appears to be the most popular social media platform in Iran, with a share ranging from 66.68% to 91.42% during the period. Pinterest, Facebook and YouTube also had a significant number of users, with market shares ranging from 9.46% to 26.31%. Twitter, LinkedIn and Reddit also had a small but notable user base, with market shares ranging from 0.46% to 6.09%. The other platforms listed had relatively low market shares during the period.
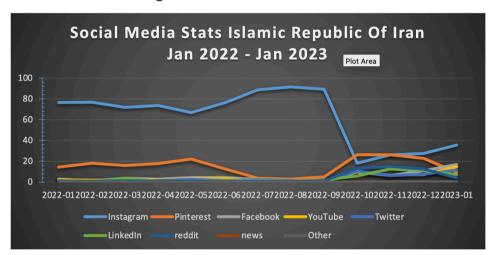
Figure 1: Social Media Stats in Iran

Source: **Statcounter.**[19]

Hashtag War

The #MahsaAmini movement is a rapidly evolving and multifaceted phenomenon, with an uncertain outcome and impact. Amini's hashtag broke the world record of 100+ million tweets.[20] This research has focused on the protest movement's hybrid nature and how it has leveraged Twitter to challenge the Iranian government. It also highlights how the movement reflects the technological proficiency of Iranian users.

In the case of #MahsaAmini, the hashtag became a symbol of protest against the Iranian government and gender discrimination in Iran. The use of the hashtag helped to amplify the message of protesters, making it visible to a larger audience, both within and outside Iran.

Hashtags also serve as a tool for tracking and monitoring the progress of an event or movement. By using a particular hashtag, individuals and organizations can track conversations, share information and measure the impact of the event.

The data provided by Keyhole (a social media reporting and analytics tool) shows the sentiments of posts on social media platforms using the hashtag #MahsaAmini. The data indicates that 60.7% of the posts were negative, or in favor of the protests, while 39.3% of the posts were positive, or in favor of the Iranian government (See Figure 2 and Figure 3).

This data suggests that the majority of social media users who used the hashtag #MahsaAmini had a negative sentiment toward the Iranian government and were in favor of the protests. However, it is important to note that the data only provides a snapshot of the sentiments associated with the hashtag #MahsaAmini and may not reflect the sentiments of all social media users in Iran. Further research and analysis may be necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the sentiments toward the Iranian government and the protests.

Figure 2: Sentiments of #MahsaAmini

Figure 3: Hashtags Used With #MahsaAmini Sept 2022-Feb 2023

The data provided shows that the largest group of social media users are within the 18-24 age bracket, with a proportion of 45.26%. The second largest group is aged 25-34, with a proportion of 18.43%. The third largest group is aged 35-44, with a proportion of 16.40%. The proportion of users aged 45-54 and 13-17 are 8.86% and 8.58%, respectively (see Figure 4).
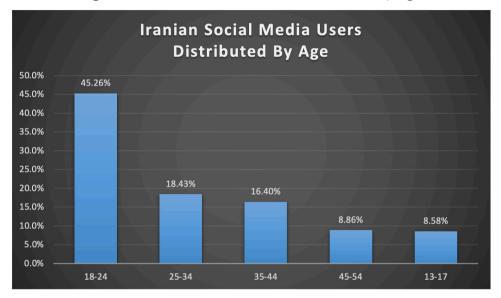
Figure 4: Iranian Social Media Users Distributed by Age

It is important to note that Figure 4 only shows the distribution of social media users by age and the difference versus the baseline. Further research and analysis may be necessary to understand the trends and patterns in social media usage by age and how it relates to other factors, such as gender, education level and location.

Results and Examination

Findings

The purpose of the research was to determine how social media and the internet impacted Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests. Using a combination of OSINT and social media monitoring technologies, data on protesters' use of social media was collected. The collected data was then examined using sentiment analysis, network analysis and content analysis.

As of 2023, 78.6% of Iran's population, or 69.83 million people, are internet users, while 54.0% of the population, or 48 million people, are social media users, according to the latest data. Additionally, the number of active mobile cellular connections in Iran rose to 126.9 million, or 142.8 percent of the population. Instagram was the

most prominent social media platform in Iran, followed by Pinterest, Facebook and YouTube. Most social media users who utilized the hashtag #MahsaAmini opposed the Iranian government and supported the demonstrations.

45.26% of all social media users in Iran were between the ages of 18 and 24, followed by 25-34 with 18.44%. The research also revealed that hashtags, such as #MahsaAmini, served as a tool for amplifying messages and monitoring events and movements.

Social media and the internet played a crucial role in Generation Z's participation in the recent Iranian protests, allowing people to communicate, share information and coordinate their efforts. The impact of social media and the internet on these protests reflects the significance of social media technologies in influencing public opinion and facilitating political activism.

Implications

These research findings have significant implications for gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of student activism in Iran. The importance of social media and the internet in driving social and political movements is one of the most significant implications. As the statistics illustrate, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Telegram played a crucial role in organizing and coordinating the recent protests in Iran, as well as amplifying protesters' messages.

The influence of social media and the internet on the advocacy of social and political movements is another important finding. Protesters' use of social media allowed them to avoid state retaliation and reach a larger audience within and outside of Iran. The research also revealed that the Iranian government has attempted to exert control over social media by increasing its own presence on platforms, instilling fear among internet users and limiting access to online networks.

The research also emphasizes the participation of Generation Z in the recent Iranian protests. The findings revealed that most social media users who participated in the protests were between the ages of 18 and 24 (45.26% of users). This demonstrates the essential role that Generation Z has played in the recent protests, utilizing their digital expertise and social media usage to challenge the Iranian political system's policies and orientations.

Conclusion

These research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of social media in driving social and political movements.

Firstly, the research emphasizes the significance of social media in facilitating the decentralization of power and the ability to avoid state reprisal. Thanks to social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs, Iranian protestors were able to circumvent censorship and garner support from all segments of the Iranian population.

Secondly, the research demonstrates the efficacy of social media as a platform for Iranian students to challenge the policies of the Iranian government and advocate for democracy and social justice. Despite political repression and censorship, students continue to express their demands through social media.

Thirdly, the research demonstrates the limitations of social media in driving social and political movements as the government has been able to co-opt social media tools and expand its efforts to monitor and restrict online activity. Despite protesters' widespread use of social media, the government has been able to control the flow of information as it did during the Green Revolution in 2009. The momentum of the protests, despite the manifold restrictions, affirms the significance of digital literacy and technological competence in influencing the dynamics of social and political movements. The #MahsaAmini movement exemplifies the technological prowess of Iranian users who have overcome digital handicaps and successfully utilized Twitter protests to challenge the Iranian government.

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