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# Digitally Mediated Protest: Social Media Affordances for Collective Identity Construction

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# Digitally Mediated Protest: Social Media Affordances for Collective Identity Construction

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## Abstract

Many scholars discuss the role of social media in the context of social movements, but there remain major disagreements regarding the precise role that social media plays. One area that deserves more in-depth study is the affordances of social media for constructing collective identity. This article examines the case of an Iranian women's rights campaign page on Facebook, "My Stealthy Freedom," using an analysis of textual and visual content. The article examines how online campaign pages on Facebook contribute to the formation of collective identity and the construction of a campaign narrative. Following the analysis, the authors discuss how photobiographic campaigns—social media users sharing personal photos and adjoining personal narratives in support of a cause—illustrate two affordances of social media for construction of collective identity: affordances for discourse and affordances for performance. Affordances for discourse contribute to the collective action framing process through sharing of grievances and collectively negotiating meaning. These affordances also contribute to a collectively and incrementally constructed narrative by sharing personal stories that resonate with the group. Affordances for performance focus on the enactment of protest through transgressive photobiographies deliberately staged to convey the movement message to broader audiences. Here, transgressive photobiographies are defined as modular performances that can be adopted for the repertoires of contentious politics through protesting of laws and norms, such as the mandatory hijab. These transgressive performances create group solidarity through engagement in risk, thereby contributing to the formation of group identities.

## Keywords

collective identity, women's movement, social media, affordances, digital protest

In 2014, Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist working in the United Kingdom, shared a photograph of herself driving an open-roofed car without her traditional head covering, known as a hijab. She posted the image on Facebook, reflecting on the freedom she had in the United Kingdom to appear without her scarf. In her home country, she could be punished for this act, but abroad, she was free to appear as she wished. In posting the photo on Facebook, she asked other women from Iran to share their own images of "stealthy freedom." Within the next 40 days, her Facebook page "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF) received over 600,000 followers and images from about 500 women participating in the protest (Alinejad, 2014).

MSF is not the first Facebook group encouraging women to take photographs of themselves in public without their hijab. "Unveil Women's Right to Unveil" began in 2012 and gained 60,000 followers (Khan, 2014). The proliferation and popularity of these groups suggest that Facebook is becoming a channel for users to protest restrictive laws, such as the hijab, via social media. However, there have been few

studies investigating how collective acts on social media enable the formation and functioning of groups such as these within a restrictive cultural environment.

Participating in such Facebook groups carries significant risks for female Iranian citizens. Yet, despite this risk, these groups continually grow more popular. MSF went viral in Iran within its first 40 days (Khan, 2014). It is because of this growth that MSF and similar pages are an important area of academic inquiry, as they represent spaces of collective protest through social media.

In the communication studies literature, the concept of affordances is used in a myriad of ways (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

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Following Gibson's (1977) ecological conceptualization, affordances are defined as what the environment or technological platform can offer its users to achieve their goals. Fayard and Weeks (2014) argue that "affordance offers a useful way of thinking about how practice is patterned by the social and physical construction of technology and the material environment" (p. 247). Moreover, social affordances are used to refer to "the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure" (Wellman, 2001, p. 228).

Scholars continually debate the role of social media in the context of social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts, 2012; Castells, 2012; Della Porta, 2011; Della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2012; Mattoni & Treere, 2014). One area of interest is the affordances of social media for constructing collective identity. The present study contributes to this discussion by investigating how online campaign pages on social media, specifically Facebook, contribute to the formation of a collective identity and construction of a campaign narrative. It discusses how photobiographic campaigns on Facebook, in which social media users share personal photos and narratives in support of a cause, illustrate two affordances of social media for constructing collective identity: affordances for discourse and affordances for performance. Affordances for discourse contribute to the collective action framing process (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992) through sharing grievances and collectively negotiating meaning. Affordances for discourse also contribute to a collectively, incrementally constructed narrative through sharing of personal stories that resonate with the group. The second set of affordances that this article focuses on, affordances for performance, are enactments of protest through creating and sharing transgressive photobiographies publicly.

While MSF is not a social movement per se, it can be understood as a campaign or coalition-building process (Diani & Bison, 2004) that contributes to identity-building mechanisms in the context of the broader women's rights movement in Iran. It also can be considered as a digital repertoire in the context of contentious politics in Iran (Khazraee & Losey, 2016). Therefore, this case study can offer evidence for investigating the affordances of social media for construction of collective identity. This study focuses on the first 2 weeks of the MSF campaign, when it burst into public attention and received 500,000 followers. Content and visual analysis are used to investigate the 200 images/narratives of protest posted on the page within this 2-week period in order to understand the group framing process and transgressive performances. A thorough analysis demonstrates how users engage in risky and transgressive behaviors to enact change and create a collective identity. This study positions itself at the intersection of media studies, communication studies, and social movement studies, and by engaging with literature on collective action and identity, investigates the process of collective identity construction and the affordances of social media in campaigns such as MSF.

We first present the conceptual framework of the article. Then we turn to the empirical study of the MSF Facebook campaign and present the findings and the discussion.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Risk and Transgression*

Saul (2016), a journalist, describes MSF as a collective campaign with the expressed unified position that hijab laws in Iran are unethical and reinforce inequality between men and women. Other journalists reporting on MSF elaborate that these laws require Iranian women to wear the traditional head covering when in public, and violators face intense cultural and legal penalties (Carpenter, 2014). While Alinejad, who started the campaign, was residing in the United Kingdom and had the liberty to freely protest hijab laws, engaging with such a campaign inside Iran is a transgressive act in many ways. First, appearing in public without a hijab is illegal in Iran. Second, Facebook is a blocked website, requiring citizens to use illegal circumvention tools to get around Internet-censoring apparatuses (Alimardani & Milan, 2017; Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2010). Finally, social protest is not tolerated in either physical or digital forms. Partaking in any part of these risks can result in legal, social, and familial ramifications by the Iranian government or security agencies. These ramifications are highly publicized by Iranian media ("Facebook is an Espionage Site," 2013), and, as reported by Saul (2016), the current risks to women digitally protesting hijab laws remain prevalently featured throughout Iranian media. Beyond state pressure, in a repressive cultural environment, female social media activists can easily become targets of abuse and gendered harassment both online and offline, particularly in the context of honor culture (Pearce & Vitak, 2016).

Previous research explores transgressive behavior on Facebook, as users engage the platform and use the affordances granted by the site, yet more research is needed in this area (Georgalou, 2015). Other works on gender in social movement campaigns have also identified risk as a salient topic. Novak and Khazraee's (2014) work on MSF argues that risk is a defining characteristic of the community, both enticing membership and assisting in promoting the group's aims within a larger audience. While the foci of this study extend beyond gender studies, risk as a mechanism of gendered social movement campaigns remains relevant.

### *Social Media Affordances*

In the context of social media, many scholars take an affordance-based approach to investigate a wide range of platforms (boyd, 2011; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2011; Sundar, 2008; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Vitak & Ellison, 2013; Wellman, 2001). Investigating social media uses, danah boyd (2011) identifies four sets of affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and

searchability. She argues that these affordances introduce new dynamics for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts. Treem and Leonardi (2013) identify a similar set of affordances for social media: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. While boyd (2011) and Treem and Leonardi (2013) discuss general and high-level affordances of social media, other scholars have investigated affordances in more specific contexts. Earl and Kimport (2011), studying the uses and affordances of the Internet and digital media in the context of contentious politics, concluded that people often (and increasingly) use online platforms for innovative forms of protest. Vitak and Ellison (2013) investigate Facebook's affordances for social capital processes. They discuss how Facebook users use features like status updates and wall posts to request a variety of resources, including emotional support and information, from their social networks. This study analyzes visual and textual practices enabled by the Facebook platform and their affordances in the context of contentious politics and collective identity. This study follows Treem and Leonardi's (2013) conceptualization, according to which affordances are relational properties that are "not exclusively properties of people or of artifacts—they are constituted in relationships between people and the materiality of the things" (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 146). This approach focuses on the ways the materiality of a platform such as Facebook, in combination with users' behaviors, contributes to forming a collective identity. It also helps better understand the role of infrastructure (i.e., social media) and platform gatekeepers in enabling, restricting, and shaping collective or networked action in the context of contentious politics. Platforms such as Facebook play the gatekeeping role in two ways: as infrastructure providers that provide access to platforms on different levels, and through infrastructure mechanisms that use the platform features and capabilities to enable, control, and shape the behavior of users (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The affordances lens can help better understand the relationship between the social and the technical in the context of collective identity and contentious politics. Through this lens, this study investigates the opportunities and constraints that social media create for social change. As users, we increasingly delegate our agency to the technologies and the platforms that play the most important roles in the co-construction of the sociotechnical phenomena (Gillespie, 2010, 2015; Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014), to the point that Milan (2015a, 2015b) describes the new form of protest as "cloud protesting."

### **Social Movements, Collective Action, and Connective Action**

Early social movement research focused on the means by which connectivity, power, and social change are achieved. The two major approaches emphasized the importance of resources and political opportunities, respectively (McAdam, 1982; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). While resource

mobilization theory and political process theory present different perspectives on social movements, both focus on the structural issues of collective action within social movements. These approaches emphasize *how* users are mobilized to react to a long-standing grievance but dismiss the question of *why* they are mobilized (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). The concept of collective identity was developed to fill this gap by explaining how a sense of cohesion that leads to collective action is developed in social movements.

In addition to collective identity, contention and conflict must be considered to understand how social movements work. Melucci (1985) defines a social movement as "a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs" (p. 795). Conflict occurs where systems pressure citizens to conform to institutions which produce symbolic code (Melucci, 1989) (e.g., the Islamic code of conduct). Touraine (1985) argues that gender movements are "centrally defined by a critique and transformation of women's status and image, and more broadly by the emergence of new ethical values" (p. 777). Gender movements exemplify both Touraine's (1985) and Melucci's (1985, 1989) notions of protesting and changing societal structures and regulations. However, most gender movement studies focus on Western examples. Little scholarship currently examines how these theoretical frameworks adapt in Middle Eastern cultures.

Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2012, 2013) suggest that the use of digital media creates an opportunity to personalize collective action, which they call "connective action." Personalized content sharing across media networks is fundamental to the formation of connective action. As explained by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), this self-organizing public-driven nature of connective action enabled by the affordances of new media distinguishes it from traditional organization-centered collective action. Contrary to the logic of organizational collective action, where organizations create and guide collective communications, the logic of connective action proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) is explained by a self-organized communication mechanism involving personalized information sharing through the use of digital media that leads to the construction of organizations of people forging collective causes. We previously argued (Khazraee & Novak, 2015) that MSF, by its nature, is an exemplar of connective action. In this study, we investigate how the personalized public communication on the MSF page started to create a kernel for collective identity, one that is "more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression rather than through common group or ideological identification" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 744).

### **Collective Identity, and Discursive and Enacted Processes**

Melucci (1985, 1989, 1995, 1996) developed one of the most systematic frameworks for studying collective identity (Fominaya, 2010). Melucci (1985) states,

Collective identity is . . . a shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action: “shared” means constructed and negotiated through a repeated process of “activation” of social relationships connecting the actors. (p. 793)

Melucci (1989) considers collective identity as a process that is negotiated over time with three parts:

First, formulating cognitive frameworks concerning the goals, means and environment of action; second, activating relationships among the actors, who communicate, negotiate, and make decisions; and third, making emotional investments, which enable individuals to recognize themselves in each other. (p. 35)

According to Melucci’s framework, shared meaning making, interactive activation of relationships, and making emotional investments are critical components of the process of collective identity construction. This study considers these processes as *discursive* and *enacted* processes of collective identity construction. Discursive processes concern narratives, frames, and meaning making. Enacted processes concern active forms of participation: activating networks of relationships inside and outside of the movement and making emotional investments. These processes are part of collective identity construction regardless of the medium and platforms used by movements or campaigns. However, as an analytical tool, these categorizations aid in the understanding of social media affordances for each of these processes and for collective identity construction. With respect to Facebook, discursive processes relate closely to the text, stories, and narratives shared by users, and enacted practices are best demonstrated by the use of visuals depicting deliberate staged performances.

Underlining the role of discursive processes, Hunt and Benford (2004) argue that “collective identities are talked into existence” (Hunt & Benford, 2004, p. 445). Thus, a major part of the collective identity process is meaning making and framing (making sense of the situation and finding a way out of it). Narratives are critical to a group’s sense of membership and collective identity, too (Polletta, 1998). These repeated stories can “compel participation” by outsiders as they describe the risks taken by members (Polletta, 1998, p. 137). Following the same line of thought, we investigate Facebook’s affordances for discourse in the context of MSF to understand the potential of such affordances for the construction of collective identity.

With the pervasive use of social media, networked publics have emerged (boyd, 2011), where individuals and identities are mutually transformed (Papacharissi, 2011). boyd (2011) argues that it is important to understand the affordances, dynamics, and implications of networked publics for social life. Recent studies on collective identity paid special attention to the intersection of social media and identity. Gerbaudo

and Trere (2015), in an introduction to a recent Special Issue of *Information, Communication, and Society* on social media and protest identities, argue that previous studies have neglected to identify a collective identity in association with the protest movements that were created via social media. The Special Issue presents a series of recent studies that begin to explore the link between collective identity and social media and how social media shapes the collective identity of protest movements. A recurrent theme in these studies is the role of discursive and enacted processes on social media in the formation of collective protest identities.

In her study of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Kavada (2015) emphasizes the role of users’ agency and discursive processes such as direct conversation in the construction of collective identity. She conceptualizes collective identity as an open-ended and dynamic process that is constructed in conversations and codified in texts. She then argues that social media is a mode of communication that allows the boundaries of the collective to be flexible and fluid, with no distinct leaders or engagement requirements. By encouraging inclusiveness and direct participation, social media tends to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of a movement. In contrast to discursive processes, Gerbaudo (2015) emphasizes the role of visual and expressive communication, such as images, symbols, and slogans, in the 2011 protest wave that swept the world from Egypt to Spain to the United States. He argues that such communication plays an important part in the construction of collective identity, which is historically verified and, with the introduction of social media, certified. Gerbaudo (2015) adds, for example, that by adapting protest avatars as profile pictures, individuals are temporarily abdicating individual identity in order to assume the collective identity. Milan (2015a) also claims that social media, in recent years, functions as an actor in the creation of collective identity and meaning, and has created a space with a unique mobilization dynamic, termed “cloud protesting.” Cloud protesting materializes social interactions and makes it visible, which individualizes the stories, creates “us” vs “them” boundaries, strengthens group bonds through impression management, and sustains the life of the movement through continuous daily interactions. In contrast to these studies which discuss the positive role of social media in the construction of collective identity, Coretti and Pica (2015), in their study of the rise and fall of the anti-Berlusconi protest on Facebook, claim that the platform was not conducive to collective identity. They argue that while communication is instrumental to collective identity and socio-political movements, Facebook only enables vertical, dialogic, and phatic conversation that does not create strong ties within the group.

To better understand the discursive and enacted processes for collective identity construction, the following sections will first discuss framing processes and then the enactment of protest in form of transgressive photobiographies.

### Framing Processes and Movement Narrative

As discussed, meaning making and framing processes are key discursive processes in the construction of collective identity. The concept of framing is used by social movement theorists to understand how common patterns of perception, interpretation, and a sense of direction in action are achieved by a social movement. To this end, frame analysis is used to reveal the problems and issues that encourage mobilization of the movement (Ryan & Gamson, 2015; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Social movement scholars borrowed the concept of *frame* from the work of Goffman (1974). Goffman defines frames as a “schemata of interpretation . . . [that] allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of occurrences” (p. 21). Frames enable understanding of the meaning of events and thereby help organize experience and guide action. Collective action frames convey meaning about the social system to actors. Frames are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). Thus, collective action frames are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Frames are necessary in order to enable actors to understand “what is going on” or “should be going on.”

Construction of collective action frames requires meaning making and shared understanding by movement actors to identify the problematic situation and its attributions, to decipher who or what to blame, and to suggest a solution. Snow and Benford (1988) refer to these activities as core framing tasks and identify three types:

- (1) a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration; (2) a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done; and (3) a call to arms or rationale for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action. (p. 199)

These activities are called diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. These core framing tasks enable movement actors to achieve “consensus mobilization” and “action mobilization,” which facilitate agreement and promote action (Klandermans, 1984).

Motivational frames concern action mobilization and provide a motivational impetus for participation in the social movement. The three elements of motivational frames are injustice, identity, and agency (Gamson, 1992). *Injustice* refers to awareness that the existing situation is unfair and placing blame on antagonists. *Agency* refers to awareness of the possibility of changing the existing situation through collective action. *Identity* refers to the process of defining “we,” the movement protagonists, in opposition to “them,” the movement antagonists or those who are blamed for the injustice.

The notion of identity fields merges the two concepts of framing process and collective identity (Hunt, Benford, &

Snow, 1994). Identity fields are the framing processes that define the identities of three categories of movement actors: protagonists, antagonists, and audiences.

Describing the personalization of collective action as connective action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) discuss how connective action is characterized by self-motivated action, diversity, and inclusiveness of frames (personal frames). Personalized public engagement is necessary for connective action. They also add that personal action frames do not spread automatically. Frames require an interactive process of personalization and sharing to appropriate and disseminate themes. Affordances of social media platforms such as Facebook enable users to engage in such interactive processes to spread the negotiated action frames.

In addition to framing processes, discursive processes also include narratives. Narratives play an important role in construction and maintenance of collective identities (Polletta, 1998). Movement participants engage in the discursive process of framing by telling personal stories. These personal stories contribute to the construction of a movement narrative. In a movement, narratives contribute to self-identity and action by making sense of the past and present, and projecting a future (Polletta, 1998). Through narratives, participants in a movement can imagine a feasible future with different conditions—liberation and justice (Polletta, 1998). Therefore, such narratives reinforce the elements of identity and agency to motivate action. Narratives can not only strengthen collective identity but also contribute to the development of a coherent community (Polletta, 1998).

### Digital Performances and Photobiography

Campaigns such as MSF that involve actors making claims through coordinated efforts to advance their shared interests are defined as contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Claim-making performances, such as presentation of a petition or mounting a demonstration, are usually drawn from a repertoire of inherited collective action forms. Tilly (1986) introduced the concept of *repertoires* as the “whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals” (Tilly, 1986, p. 2). Repertoires are collectively shaped and learned, and they emerge from collective struggle (Tilly, 1993).

*Modularity* is one of the main characteristics of the modern repertoires of collective action, which makes them transferable and recognizable through time and space (Tilly, 1993). Modular performances are those “that could be adopted and adapted across a wide range of conflicts and sites of contention by a broad range of actors” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 12). Modularity reduces the learning curve of protest techniques, thereby reducing the startup cost of contention by rapid transmission and lowered cost of mobilization (Tilly, 1993). Claim-making performances, or repertoires, evolve with time, place, and available technologies (Tilly, 2006). Some digital performances on social media,

such as photo sharing on Facebook, can be considered modular performances adopted into other contexts as a form of protest. Their high potential for virality allows for inspirations and ideas to diffuse more rapidly through social media, contributing to the tactical diffusion of the movement beyond its context (Soule, 2004).

Protests are “sites of contestation in which bodies, symbols, identities, practices, and discourses are used to pursue or prevent changes in institutionalized power relations” (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, p. 268). Melucci (1980) argues that in many social movements “the body in its different significations becomes the cultural locus of resistance” (p. 221). In women’s rights campaigns such as MSF, female bodies turn into a site of resistance (O’Keefe, 2013) and consequently of contentious politics.

The practice of sharing photographs of oneself was studied by scholars even before the proliferation of digital social media. This practice and genre has been termed *photobiography*. In photobiography, users take, arrange, and share photographs of themselves to tell a story to a viewer (Eakin, 1992). Photobiography research suggests that an individual does this to explain their past, goals, or values to an audience (Thélot, 2003). This is done when an individual feels misunderstood or wants to prove something to an audience visually (Thélot, 2003).

The popularity of social media and photo-sharing services in combination with widespread use of smartphones resulted in the formation of a new genre of photography: the selfie. Senft and Baym (2015) argue that the selfie can be defined both as a photographic object to initiate communication and as a practice, “a gesture that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences” (p. 1589). They claim that the selfie gives the viewer the control of the viewer as a show of “self-enacting self” and also works as an invitation to reflect on identity of self as an image, a body, or a constructed effect.

Social media affordances make it possible to turn photobiography and photo-sharing into a modular performance for protest. Affordances for performance, we argue, are the capabilities and opportunities that emerge at the intersection of user practices and technological platforms to enable certain forms of performances deliberately staged to convey meaning to massive audiences. These affordances are related to the affordances of social media as infrastructure, such as visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) and scalability (boyd, 2011). Affordances for performance, however, are used to mobilize public opinion for a social cause. Affordances for performance similarly suppose that performed behaviors are framed and highly edited to impact the audience (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1959). Images are selected for impact and audience attention, which garner additional interest and potentially attracts new members (Joosse, 2012). Banks (2010) notes that the labor involved in framing and selecting images and content for a digital space may increase commitment and involvement in campaigns or protest

communities, although more work is needed to study this phenomenon.

## Data Collection and Methods

Using textual and visual analysis techniques, this study explores how individuals participate in risky digital protest on social media and how these actions contribute to the development of a movement narrative and a collective identity. Altheide and Schneider (2013) describe both textual and visual analysis as important in social media research when looking for patterns of interaction, normal communicative practices, or how users create and design digital profiles. The combination of visual and thematic analysis allows for researchers to holistically examine all content found (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

The scope of this study includes a corpus of posts from the Facebook group. The corpus of posts collected for this study spans the first 200 photos posted to the page, from May 3, 2014, when MSF began, to May 15, 2014. Data from this period were collected because it was during the first 2 weeks of the campaign that the page received massive global attention and 500,000 followers. All 200 images and descriptions posted on the Facebook page were collected and imported into Atlas.ti software for analysis by two researchers.

The risk associated with membership in a digital campaign such as MSF raises ethical concerns for data collection. While all posted content is publicly available on the Facebook page, this study does not include any identifying features of members, such as usernames, images, direct quotes, or locations. This aligns with the ethical standards set forth in previous scholarship (Zimmer, 2010).

To conduct the thematic analysis, each of the two researchers engaged in a close reading of shared images, posts, and comments. Since one of the goals of this study is a better understanding of the social media affordances for discourse for collective framing processes, researchers followed the categorization developed by Benford and Snow (2000) for the analysis of core framing tasks as diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. To understand how participants articulated their motivations to take part in this collective act, researchers used the three elements Gamson (1992) identified in collective action motivational frames: injustice, identity, and agency.

Further attention was paid to the visual elements of the photographs shared on the pages. Previous research by Diakopoulos, Naaman, and Kivran-Swaine, (2010) suggests researchers must be especially aware of patterns within photographs, such as location/environment, lighting, cropping, expressions (non-verbals), styles of dress, figures, and layout when evaluating visual content shared on social media. This qualitative visual analysis allows researchers to identify patterns within the visuals, while recognizing that visual styles and norms may evolve over time.

To improve the study’s reliability and validity, each researcher conducted the visual and thematic analysis individually, and then united to discuss the narratives. When

meeting to discuss findings, the researchers debated and then agreed upon the findings based on both their observations. This reliability approach has been previously used in studies such as Pink (2010) and Schroeder and Borgerson (1998).

## Findings

Women in MSF use the affordances of Facebook to create a transgressive community that challenges hijab norms and laws in Iran. MSF represents a digital gathering space for women to articulate, debate, and narrate their experiences with hijab laws. Through the Facebook platform, women are encouraged to post selfies or share other transgressive images that openly challenge the hijab law and cultural norm. When posting, users are asked to share their own “stealthy” stories and describe their relationship to Iran’s hijab policies. This act of sharing illegal images on an illegal network to enact an illegal practice (protest) is characterized as transgressive due to the risk taken by users as they engage in the process. Risk is identified as a fundamental part of protest, as partaking in these groups often involves an element of personal or societal transgression (Polletta, 1998).

While MSF is more a campaign than a social movement, it relates to the broader women’s rights movement in Iran because it carries cultural elements that impact personal identity, everyday life, and motivation and cultural patterns of individual action. The MSF page provides space and infrastructure for discursive and enacted processes required for collective identity construction. In the following sections, we discuss the affordances for discourse and performance that relate to these processes.

### Affordances for Discourse

In the MSF campaign page on Facebook, participants clearly attempt to distinguish between “us” and “them” and cast these groups in a narrative. In this narrative, the protagonists are Iranian women facing injustice, the antagonists are religious or state authorities enforcing mandatory hijab law, and the audience is the broader national and international community. Social media enable this broad audience to witness and respond to the injustice and thereby contribute to the mobilization of public opinion.

Affordances for discourse are those affordances of social media that facilitate collective framing and narrative construction. Framing process and narrative go hand in hand, contributing to the abstract and concrete imagery of the campaign, respectively. Sharing stories in MSF incrementally forms a narrative of heroes and villains, in which the plot ends in the triumph of the heroes (the women) and the defeat of villains.

A frame analysis of the short narratives posted along with the images showing the participants protesting the hijab reveals how collective action frames emerged and refined through repeated posting and sharing stories. Following Benford and Snow (2000), this study classifies frames as

diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Beyond the framing process, each participant contributed to incrementally and collectively craft a shared narrative by sharing personal stories, which provide a vision of a future in which the participants can be transformed from oppressed to liberated.

*Diagnostic Frames.* Diagnostic frames include comments and posts that identify who or what is to blame for the situation the participants are protesting. They also identify what the “situation” or problem is. On the surface, the problem is the law requiring women to wear the hijab. On a deeper level, many of the MSF contributors believe that hijab is a symptom of the fact that the religion, government, and society oppress women by denying them the right to choose what to wear, and by extension denying that women are equal to men. They support their claim by drawing attention to the inequalities embedded in Iranian law, such as in the areas of inheritance and child custody. Several MSF comments state that they feel that the right to choose (writ large, not just about wearing the head covering) is a self-evident truth and a simple, natural human right, but that it is denied to women. Several of the comments then blame men and call on men to learn to view women differently. Some blame women for putting up with the law, while others state that their fear of the police, university officials, their families, and social stigma keeps them upholding the law. A few also say that they do not want to disappoint or cause trouble for their families, so they obey the law. Another recurrent point was that the perceptions of morality in Iranian society are tied in with the hijab, so that women who don’t wear it are viewed as promiscuous and immoral. These recurrent frames presented in the participants’ posts were further confirmed with the comments of Facebook users stating that such frames resonate with them.

*Prognostic Frames.* Prognostic codes denote the comments that express plans or desires for the future, including actions to be taken. The most common prognostic comments are those that express hope for the future. One of the recurring prognostic frames elaborated by participants was “first step: facing our fears.” Several of the posters discuss the way in which posting to the MSF Facebook page was an act of rebellion because they were facing their fears and making their voices heard. Posters also stated that women should believe that it is “our right not a sin” to have control over how to present their bodies. It was clear that the participants understood that changing perceptions about women’s bodies and rights requires broader social changes. Therefore, they encourage a “call for tolerance, change of hearts, and male support” to build the required alliance for the social change in their society. This resonates with Melucci’s (1996) argument that women movements aim to transform society as a whole. Melucci (1996) argues that the women’s movement formed its collective action based on reflection on the female condition in society and an appeal to difference. Therefore,



by emphasizing the right to be different, the movement addresses not just women but society as a whole.

Another prognostic frame was the “constant small acts of rebellion are effective” frame, which argues that constant rebellion against conformity will lead to change over time. This happens partly because such acts of protest make the movement visible, so that the women’s voices and acts are “heard and seen.”

*Motivational Frames.* As participants in the campaign motivate each other and visitors to visit the page and take part in the campaign, the contributors to the MSF Facebook page, both women and men, make comments that fit into the three components of collective action frames: injustice, agency, and identity (Gamson, 1992). The commenters identify what they believe is the cause of injustice and what they want as an alternative to that injustice. They also grant the contributors a sense of agency as well as a sense of identity and solidarity. The women thereby encourage each other as well as newcomers to take moments of stealthy (or not so stealthy) freedom.

*Injustice.* Injustice frames resonate closely with diagnostic frames because they also provide the schema for interpreting the women’s situation as problematic and unfair. The most frequent theme comes from the grievances relating to denial of equal rights and freedom. Participants identify the “haves and have nots” and discuss how this distinction deprives half of society of a normal life and different opportunities. For example, a mother hoped that her daughter would not face the injustice she had experienced.

*Agency.* One of the main frames appearing in many posts relating to the notion of agency is that women are in charge of their destiny and have to believe this as a precondition for any change in their situation. They also argue whether or not their participation in protest will have an effect. For example, one participant says that she believes the posts to the page and other similar sites will overflow and that the world will notice them. Some argue that the campaign is about sharing their “tiny victories” with other people as they experience momentary freedom. Several comments suggest that the freedoms are not so stealthy anymore, and that more women are being more daring about them.

“Joy of freedom” is another motivational frame. Participants describe the joy they felt when they took their moment of freedom and when they think about their moment of freedom. Many of the comments convey a sense of a frustrated, joyless life, so the description of joy makes freedom appealing in contrast to the everyday. This might encourage others to join the campaign and post photos of their own, thus feeling the agency to break the joyless cycle of life. Through taking risk, participants try to convince others that they have the agency and the power to change the situation only if they take part in the process of changing it.

*Identity.* Frames related to identity clearly attempt to define the borders between “us,” “them,” and “the audience/you.” The language of the posts frequently includes “we” to refer to the people involved in the MSF campaign, who think of themselves as a community. For example, one woman suggests that they use the name “the fire generation,” creating a sense of collective identity. Similarly, some posts address the reader/viewer as “you,” that is, the bystander, and they often discuss the “they” who enforce the law and deny women their freedom. These framing acts create the basis for the narrative of heroines and villains and leave the bystander to choose a side in that story. Participants in the campaign also encourage the male audience to join the right side of history by pointing out the men who support them in their stealthy freedom and their hope for a change in the law.

Another frame encourages the feeling that “you are also part of the movement.” By using familiar situations, participants attempt to convey to the audience that they can start taking part in the process of change. Nearly all posts describe/name where the photo was taken, and many say when the photo was taken. This creates an understanding of the wide variety of places that women are taking moments of stealthy freedom in the plains, in the mountains, in cities, in neighborhoods, and so on. Particularly in cases when specific locations are named, this creates a sense that freedom can be taken on a reader’s own street, just as it has been taken by someone else already. It motivates others by making the freedom seem widespread, but also sometimes close to home and familiar. By connecting the campaign and its acts to the audience, the participants define an identity that bystanders can relate to, allowing them to feel that they are part of the broader movement. Similarly, several of the photos are of families or include descriptions of the women’s moments of freedom in relation to families that support them. Many of the posts are written by mothers who have taken a moment of freedom to defy the law in the hope that their daughters will not have to live under the hijab law. The identity fields outlined through these conversations are presented on a visible, internationally accessible stage (Facebook), which can bring support and affirmation to the campaign’s narrative protagonists (Iranian women) and place pressure on antagonists (Iranian authorities) from a wide international audience.

### *Affordances for Performance*

Beyond narratives and stories to express collective identity, movement members use various cultural forms, such as names, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, and clothing (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This underlines the importance of the symbolic visual performances in the process of identity construction as a part of enacted processes, such as the images and selfies shared on the MSF page. Through sharing photographs, participants frame what it means to be a woman, an inherently political act that invokes counter-narratives of otherness and repression. On the MSF campaign page,

multiple individuals can contribute to a narrative by sharing their own photobiographies (selfies along with personal stories), collectively building a shared story.

The selfie is discursively constructed as a gendered practice, sometimes devalued through association with feminine vanity, triviality, and sexuality (Burns, 2015). Participants in MSF turn this gendered medium upside down to send a powerful message challenging the gendered code of conduct and the other violations of women's rights. In this context, selfies also act as both seeing (capturing a scene) and saying (sending a message), dramatized by highlighting the presentation of self, an authentic interplay between self and environment (Koliska & Roberts, 2015). Rettberg (2014) describes self-representation with digital technologies such as selfies as self-documentation, as one logs and records moments of one's life. These captured moments can become icons to convey meaning. Capturing a moment of stealthy freedom, protesting hijab, with a selfie will be a log in the logbook of civil disobedience. Through this process, the short act of protest will find an enduring medium to be publicly staged for storytelling. Social media affordances allow users to capture and self-document these ephemeral moments of protest. Selfies can be understood as context-bound identities, presenting the subject as a witness to an event or location (Koliska & Roberts, 2015). As participants in MSF use known public spaces in Iran to capture their act of protest, context-bound evidence provides the proof of their transgression and the associated risk, making them credible contributors to the collective protest.

Beyond the frame analysis findings, MSF demonstrates another affordance of social media, through the imagery and visuals shared in user photos. Shared images in this campaign are an enactment of the protest because of their transgressive nature, in that participants break the law and engage in risky action. Affordances for performance make it possible to document these acts of transgression and protest and to use social media's visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) and scalability (boyd, 2011) to distribute it globally. In this sense, social media (i.e., Facebook) works as the infrastructure for digital protest, both as a stage for the performance and a means to mobilize public opinion.

Risk becomes a dominant discourse throughout the campaign and one of the underlying features that makes this site a place of collective protest. Many users acknowledge and focus on the risk that they take to participate in the campaign, either through the comments they place or through the photographs. This theme runs through the Facebook posts shared by women. Page administrators make it clear that they understand the risks associated with women sharing their photographs on the page by acknowledging the restrictions as well as the need to do this with "stealth."

The framing of women in shared pictures suggests that women are careful not to reveal too much of their identity in an effort to still protect themselves from potential retribution. Many of the shared images on the Facebook page feature women without their hijab, but still hiding their faces.

This is done by taking photographs of the backs of their heads (just to reveal their hair), wearing oversized sunglasses, facing away from the camera so the viewer can only see part of the face (such as the chin), or taking photographs while standing far away so facial details cannot be clearly seen. While most women sharing photographs did share images of themselves without their hijab, the visual practices and patterns within the images suggest that women rarely share close-up photographs while looking right at the camera. This visual practice suggests that while women want to participate in the online campaign, they also acknowledge risks of sharing an image that could be unmistakably identified as their own. Facial obscuring and removing other identifying features provides members with some protection. This also explains the "stealthy" nature of the rebellious acts, in contrast to a direct and open rebellion: women approach these acts with caution to minimize the risk.

Affordances for performance make it possible for a series of collective modular acts of protest to turn into a massive collective performance of protest staged to be seen globally and to attract attention to the unjust situation of women. Such performance resembles a play performed by a very large cast in which each actor only recites a short line, but the whole play is a significant and coherent public demonstration. Such coordination of massive staged acts to send a message becomes possible through social media's affordance for performance.

As Polletta's (1998) work argues, symbolic performances help groups form collective identity. MSF photographs serve this function in two ways. First, they demonstrate a long-term commitment to the goals and identity of the group. Taking a hijab off in a public setting involves risk and an investment of labor to produce an image that fulfills group norms and goals. The act of photography is enacted, requiring work and, later, careful consideration about the risks and benefits of sharing the image with a larger public. These steps reflect an individual user's commitment to becoming a member of the MSF collective.

Second, many of the photographs shared on MSF include multiple individuals. As Melucci (1989) states, this visual reflection of a network (of users both inside and outside the MSF community), is an enacted practice. Users are encouraged to share photographs of groups and physical networks of people who share the ideas and values of MSF. Photographs have the ability to visually represent the networks required for enacted processes. Affordances of Facebook for performance enable users to effectively stage these enactments and share them globally. Finally, these images fixate a moment of enacting the protest against the pressure for conformity, thereby contributing to interactively defining a field of action as defined by Melucci (1985).

The discursive performance of images has assisted MSF in organizing and forming collective identity. As transgressive photobiography, these images both reinforce and help shape the values and identity shared by the larger group. These photographs become part of the mechanism for

membership, as they reflect the risk an individual is willing to take in order to join or adopt collective identity. Due to the labor involved in capturing and sharing these pictures, they may also serve as a means to build commitment to the group by participating individuals (Banks, 2010).

## Discussion and Reflection

This analysis focused on the affordances of social media for constructing collective identity. Since the emergence of social media, their role and contribution to social movements and collective action has been the subject of extensive investigation. There is ongoing debates about the affordances of such platforms for collective identity construction. This is the area to which the present study contributes by introducing two affordances of social media: affordances for discourse and affordances for performance. Social media affordances for discourse contribute to the collective action framing process and movement narrative construction, and affordances for performance make modular performances of protest possible through transgressive photobiographies.

The affordances for discourse and performance observed in this study are also dependent on the nature of the Facebook platform. The rich textual content sharing feature of Facebook posts, in contrast to the 140 character limit of tweets and Instagram's focus on images, offers the opportunity to share longer protest narratives, which better suit the framing process. Posts also create opportunities for others to join the conversation and participate in the framing process through comments, while other users can show their support through likes. The rich textual features of posts are also accompanied by visuals depicting protest performances. These features make Facebook a more efficient platform for creating a campaign than other platforms, since it provides the visibility and scalability of social media with features that support discussion, framing, and a stage for performing protest. The Facebook page feature also makes it possible to curate these transgressive photobiographies in one place in chronological order. In contrast, while Twitter offers spontaneous interaction and information sharing, it does not offer a stage for a curated set of performances and stories which that can serve as a focal point and amass support through likes and comments. Facebook features such as groups and events played an important role during election campaigns in 2009 in Iran (Khazraee & Losey, 2016). Such features convinced Iranian authorities to censor Facebook, while Instagram, though it is owned by Facebook, is not blocked in Iran. Khazraee and Losey (2016) argue that this different treatment of platforms relates to the minimal affordances of Instagram as a digital repertoire for contentious politics.

Campaign pages such as MSF effectively turn photo sharing and photobiography into a modular performance: "generic forms that can be adapted to a variety of local and social circumstances" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 13) and contribute to the tactical diffusion of movements (Soule, 2004).

Transgressive photobiographies are used as a form of claim-making performance to advocate for the shared interests of women in Iran and as part of an emerging repertoire to define a new area of digitally mediated protest. This study argues that the affordances of social media permit these performances to blend together the textual and visual, and to create digital visual stories that perform the protest.

While this study identifies the two affordances of social media for creation of collective identities, such platforms also have shortcomings. Tilly and Tarrow (2007) note that "all forms of contention rest on performances, but performances range from direct assaults on others to theatricals staged for nearby or distant audiences" (p. 12). Clearly, MSF has the elements of theatrical staged performance. Beyond Iranian women, the campaign also targets a distant audience—the Western media—in order to attract support for the movement. Initially, the Facebook page and the posts were in Persian; however, immediately after the quick burst in the number of followers in the first few days of the campaign, all posts became bilingual (Persian and English) and later multilingual (adding French and Arabic). A significant presence of international users who praise and encourage the participants through their comments and likes shows that the international community is an important audience. This fact is confirmed by numerous interviews of Alinejad, who created the campaign, by Western media, to promote MSF. This, in turn, creates a concern that the campaign may fall into the process of tabloidization (Turner, 2010). After the initial period following the launch of the campaign, it is not clear whether this is a campaign for women's rights or a social media brand for Alinejad. In part, this is a consequence of how the MSF page is created and administered. Because of the risk associated with publicly posting photos to the page, there is a process of semi-anonymization. Participants through Facebook directly submit photos and stories to Alinejad, the creator and administrator of the page. She verifies that the photo is taken in Iran and posts it to the page. This is a mechanism to mitigate some risk by concealing the user's identity, particularly because under Facebook's real name policy (Kayyali & York, 2014), if users submit the post directly on the page, they are identified easily. This mediated nature of the campaign gives Alinejad the power to filter the content and control the direction of the campaign as she wishes. Therefore, using Facebook pages for such protest may create an imbalance of power in form of gatekeeping, as observed in case of MSF.

Another challenge of such digitally mediated protest relates to the limits of social media (e.g., Facebook) affordances, because such campaigns usually do not have an organization or network that can transcend the photo-sharing practice. While transgressive photobiographies can frame a moment of protest and distribute it globally, it remains a challenge to translate these moments of protest into enduring social change. Therefore, while discussing the positive affordances of social media, it is important to address the concerns related to the permanence of social media affordances.

Khazraee and Unsworth (2012) argue that social networking sites contribute as mobile but not durable materialities in the formation of social change networks. They suggest the notion of transient collective identities, which emerge, disappear, and reappear on social media. This fluid nature of emergence and disappearance of collective identities on social media challenges the idea of permanence in collective action literature. However, Milan (2013) argues that the transitory nature of such movements does not alter the fact they are indeed social movements, because environmental conditions only make them submerge and resurface but do not change their constituent features; only movements' strategy and visibility change according to circumstances. Therefore, we can argue that while collective identities on social media may not be permanently visible, they have the potential to reemerge very quickly when conditions require or permit. For example, the collective identity formed during the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Kavada, 2015) reemerged during Occupy Sandy disaster relief attempts (Hwang & Kim, 2015). For future work, it is important, from an empirical perspective, to study whether a series of episodic emergences of collective identities might have a long-term effect on the formation of more durable movement identities.

## Conclusion

As MSF and other social media protest groups proliferate in contentious political environments like Iran, it is important for scholars to examine how these spaces provide structures and affordances that promote group membership, collective identity, and political momentum behind changes in public policy. Most social movement and social media studies have been focused on Western contexts and case studies, and little work has been done in Middle Eastern cultures. In contexts such as Iran and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the notion of risk and transgression is radically different from Western democracies. Beyond political pressure, social norms also play an important role in defining the boundaries of transgressive acts as well as social media affordances (Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Moreover, in the MENA region, many women's rights movements recently gained momentum and came to the forefront of social change. Understanding the affordances of social media for such movements has practical value for activists. This study contributes to a growing body of literature that investigates the affordances of social media for social movements by introducing social media affordances for discourse and performance in the construction of collective identity. This study helps us to understand how marginalized groups such as women can use social media to create a national and international conversation about their rights and contribute to construction of a collective identity. It also presents a perspective on the women's rights movement in Iran beyond traditional media, which is necessary for the way we study and understand women's movements around the globe today.

This study also presents how social media offers an infrastructure for digital protest while physical protest is restricted. Such infrastructure offers affordances for framing processes required for collective identity and social movements. Through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, and the transgressive photobiographies of MSF, the protest movement gained momentum and traction within the Iranian political environment. Future studies should investigate how these same practices manifest or change within other international contexts, particularly against a backdrop of different social or political climates in the MENA region.

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