

Investigating the Relationship Between Engagement of TikToks and Global Social Movements Related to the Iranian Women's Rights Movement

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Abstract

This research works to evaluate whether a statistically significant relationship exists between engagement between TikTok posts about the Iranian Women's Rights Movement and global social movements—in the form of protests. The methodology involved finding where viewer engagement occurred for each post and analyzing this in conjunction with information about whether a protest occurred within a particular region during the week each post was posted. From all of the posts, I ultimately found more occurrences of protests in geographic regions where viewers were located than not. I then used Python to find that a statistically significant relationship exists between engagement and global social movements.

I. Introduction

Laws that have required women to veil have resulted in widespread protests and sparked global discussions both in-person and on more recent social media platforms like TikTok. Following the formation of the Islamic Republic, the government required the wearing of a veil. These laws were enforced strictly, and if women wore the veil loosely, they often were arrested and attacked by the police. On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini passed due to being beaten by police forces for not wearing her hijab correctly (Naqvi and Zaheer 42). Unlike many other arrests, Amini's death received global attention and became a topic of conversation in many places, such as classrooms, homes, and workplaces, due to its timing and the clear injustice surrounding it. Protests erupted globally to fight against her death and the oppression that exists for women in Iran. Not only were there many face-to-face discussions surrounding the issue, but there were also many conversations on social media about her death and about support for the Iranian Women's Rights Movement. In general, all forms of social media have been increasingly used as a forum to discuss a variety of political and social issues. Following the death of Mahsa Amini, TikTok was especially used as a platform to raise awareness about the injustice women and Mahsa Amini faced in Iran. Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok has not been analyzed in academia

to the same extent due to its recency as a platform. Thus, the power that this application has—in context with the Iranian Women’s Rights Movement—remains unanswered.

To investigate the power of this application and help support the Iranian Women’s Rights Movement, my research will use a specific methodology to effectively analyze the relationship between engagement on certain TikToks and social movements globally. Particularly, the research question asks, “To what extent, if at all, is there a relationship between engagement on TikTok posts about the Iranian Women’s Rights Movement and international social movements on the streets protesting Amini’s death and/or the oppression that women face in Iran?” Throughout this study, certain TikTok posts will be analyzed, and there will be a particular focus on the engagement of each post. Further, the geographic region from which each viewer is from will be identified, along with the date of each post. This will be analyzed in conjunction with a focus on also looking at where and when protests occurred internationally. This study may help showcase the power of social media and the way that it can be used to effectively raise awareness to important social issues. This would benefit a variety of different actors, including non-governmental organizations and policymakers. It could also be informative for activists as it could show the potential power of social media to help arouse international protests. This study is extremely significant and has many potential implications. To effectively understand the context surrounding my research question, this paper will first begin with a literature review and delve into the crucial background surrounding this topic. This section is followed by an explanation of the methodology. Afterwards, the results, discussion section, and the conclusions of the study are presented.

II. Literature Review

Across cultures, women have been continuously belittled and treated inhumanely. There have been a variety of different movements throughout history that work towards improving women’s rights. These movements are often coupled with backlash pushed by a large demographic who hopes to revert to traditional gender roles. The women’s rights period internationally can be seen as a pendulum due to the nonlinear nature of the movement and continuous progress and setbacks. While this is true, it is important to recognize that the degree of rights women enjoy varies significantly across cultures. Religion and government frequently act as forces that work to place barriers on the amount of autonomy a woman has. In Iran, both of these forces play a significant role in defining what a woman’s life looks like. It is important

to understand what women's rights in Iran looked like before, during, and after the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Under Reza Shah, the period can be characterized as one where there were both barriers and advancements to women's road to achieving equality. For instance, the Shah banned one of the last women's organizations, yet also changed legislation later during his time in power, which granted women more rights relating to their ability to end their marriage (Mahdi 430). This apparent juxtaposition and change in his policies seems intriguing and unexplained. One of the Shah's goals was to showcase women as a symbol of modernity by making them seem like more defined members of society (Mahdi 443). Questions over whether the Shah truly cared about women's rights or cared more about the appearance of granting these rights to the Western world remain unknown. Some research points to the fact that much of his efforts were meant to uphold an artificial image of Iran (Brooks 7). Evidence, though, also suggests that the Shah had a tight bond with his mother and was aware of the strain that his father's relationship with another wife placed on her (Talebi 123). Given this, it may suggest that there are other influences and reasons, such as seeing his mom struggle, for the Shah's behavior that go beyond merely trying to uphold a superficial image of himself and Iran's women's rights progress. Despite many improvements to women's autonomy, their rights are still paradoxically dependent on male authority, as the Shah has the power to remove their rights at any time (Rafique and Butt 438). These improvements also had many unforeseen consequences for the Shah. His legislation that forced women to unveil seemed to be in contrast with the morality defined in Islam (Mahdi 430). Lots of writings exist from Shia researchers describing their viewpoint on what a woman should act like and what their role should be. The laws that he passed turned many religious figures away from his movement to modernize (Mahdi 428).

Beyond upsetting religious figures, many women were upset with his decree for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they felt the veil was tied to their identity or the fact that they believed that it was done out of superficiality rather than actual care for the cause (Brooks 64). While many women opposed the veiling legislation at first, over time, being unveiled came into practice (Rafique and Butt 437-438). Regardless of this veiling legislation, women still did not have any freedom and faced many challenges, which kept them in an inferior state. While the way women dressed helped project an image of Iran as a modern society, this was very much not the case (Orhan and Baneinia 1911), which upset many women. Ultimately, many grievances with the Shah helped accelerate the Iranian Revolution.

Women, for a variety of reasons, played a critical role in the formation of an Islamic society by supporting the Iranian Revolution. Beyond protesting in the streets against the Shah (Orhan and Baneinia 1910), women also married soldiers as a means to help the revolution (Afshar 180). The idea of promoting traditional roles for women as a way to support the war effort was encouraged by Islamic leaders as they pushed women to model the behavior of religious figures who took care of their children while their husbands fought (Teckchandani 103). While relegating women to more familial roles may seem demeaning, the revolution made women feel like they had a sense of control and agency (Mir and Khaki 83). Further, women's participation in the revolution gave women some semblance of status. For instance, women were now allowed to participate in Islamic parades and festivals during religious ceremonies (Teckchandani 102). Beyond gaining visibility and increasing their sense of inclusion and autonomy, a large reason why women contributed to the Revolution was that they felt feelings of hope related to the future. For instance, women thought that if they supported the Revolution, afterward, they would be granted more rights, as this idea is discussed within the Quran (Brooks 74). They were also hopeful that there would be an expansion of economic opportunities available to women in a variety of different sectors (Moghaddam 195). With women's rights varying considerably throughout this time, many women were driven by the hope and possibility for greater autonomy and believed that their support of the revolution could lead to this change.

This hope, specifically for the prospect of a better future, may seem unreasonable, though, given the actions and speeches of the Islamic leaders. One key action that the leaders took to curtail women's rights was when they repealed the Family Protection Act of 1967 (Ferdows 290). During the revolution, leaders not only debated changes in legislation but also engaged in discussions on broader topics, such as defining a mother's role and further establishing their authority to shape a woman's life (Loiacano 64). Leaders emphasized traditional gender roles by suggesting to women that their purpose in life should be centered around being a mother rather than achieving other goals. Additionally, their rationale for exerting control over women and determining the course of their lives is rooted in the advocacy for a distinctly patriarchal society.

Following the Islamic Revolution, Sharia law was instituted, and there was a clear sense of marginalization that women endured. Sharia law is the moral and legal system of Islam, derived from the Quran, the Hadith, and sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Many scholars suggest that women did not fully appreciate the

rights that they had when the Shah ruled (Quraishi 178). This observation was made in light of the fact that after the Shah's fall, legislation was put in place to curtail women's autonomy. For instance, a key piece of legislation was implemented in 1980, which required all women to wear a hijab (Loiacano 52). Despite this law being enacted, there was public opposition to this law. For instance, one woman publicly hung her hijab on a pole as a form of symbolic expression.. Beyond just breaking the law by not wearing her hijab, she further showed her outraged expression at this piece of legislation by waving the hijab back and forth on the pole (Hashemi 8). Despite the consequences that many women, including Movahed, faced, the power of the women's movement should not go unnoticed. Iranian women have acted as an oppositional force to the regime, arguing for more social rights and the reassessment of Islamic rulings and principles (Mir and Khaki 84). The oppression that these women have experienced has also grown visible to the international community. Specifically, Mahsa Amini's death in custody, resulting from the physical violence she suffered after being arrested for not fully covering her hair with a hijab, received global attention and was talked about on a variety of different social media platforms.

While research exists on the significant implications of social media and particularly how Iranian women are using social media to discuss the movement, there is still a significant gap in the literature. Some research delves explicitly into how Iranian women have used social networking sites, specifically Facebook, as a way to challenge hijab-wearing and elicit action within Iran (Tahmasebi-Birgani 185). Other research adds to this finding by showcasing how social networks have been a successful place for women in Iran to have a voice and discuss (Abbasgholizadeh 190; Moghaddam 194; Shojaee 19; Tafakori 48; Zargarian 32). This movement has not just reached women in Iran but has also spurred international discussion about the movement, including among members of different religious faiths (Navarro and Peres-Neto 602). Limited research exists, however, on non-Iranian users using social media as a platform to raise awareness of the Iranian Women's Rights Movement to a broad audience globally. Further, despite the fact that there has been research that suggests the power of TikTok to potentially affect protests on a global scale, no research exists on the relationship between TikToks about the Iranian Women's Rights Movement and global social movements on the streets. Evaluating whether there is a statistically significant relationship between these two things is critical and will be examined within my study.

III. Methodology

The research described above has led to my current study, which will answer the question of whether there is a statistically significant relationship between engagement of TikTok posts and the existence of global social movements. I will begin my research by first searching on the TikTok For You Page for hashtags related to the Iranian Women's Rights Movement. These hashtags are #MahsaAmini and #WomenLifeFreedom. The Women, Life, Freedom movement originated from Kurdish women's resistance movements but gained global attention once it became a protest movement for women advocating for freedom following Amini's death. The two particular hashtags mentioned above will be analyzed, given that these were the hashtags that received the most views and were the most popular. After searching for each hashtag in the search box, I will analyze all posts that have either of the two hashtags in their posts. For my research, I will also take into consideration the date on which the post was published. While I could see the number of viewers a particular post received, I could not see any information about these viewers and where they were located, as I was not a creator of these particular posts. As a means to counter this, I reached out to all of the users and asked them for this particular information about their posts (89% of users responded). After obtaining this information, I analyzed the geographic distribution of viewers for each post. The results highlighted the viewer composition by percentage for each region. Using these percentages, I then calculated the number of viewers from each geographic area. After doing this, I checked a variety of databases and sources to decipher whether a social protest for the Iranian Women's Rights Movement happened in areas where viewers were located on the same day or within a seven-day period of the post being posted. I chose a seven-day window, given that most views for a post are within this period. Depending on the number of occasions on which a protest occurred in the same set time frame as a post was posted helped ascertain whether a relationship exists. However, I could not definitively say whether the relationship was statistically significant until I did a Logistic Regression analysis using Python. This data allowed the determination of the p-value for the viewers. This study looks for a p-value of $p < 0.05$. It is also important to consider that there are key limitations within this study.

One key limitation of the study is that I was not able to access all the data that could have added to my results and potentially changed the results of my study. First, I did not receive a 100% response rate from every profile when I asked them for the data metrics on their TikTok, hence limiting the use of their TikTok video within the study.

Without the data metrics, I was unable to use their TikTok within the study. If these TikToks had been included in my study, the statistical significance level of my study may have changed. This is because I would have had more access to data points on the geographic regions from which viewers originated, and I could have analyzed this in conjunction with the protests that occurred in these regions. Even when I did have access to data metrics for a particular post, not all of these viewers could be taken into consideration within my study. As mentioned earlier, any individual who has a TikTok account that is not affiliated with their country could not be analyzed in the data. This is because on TikTok's data metrics, they are just grouped into a category called "Other," given that their location is not tied to their account. This group often made up a large percentage of the viewers on a number of posts, but it cannot be analyzed given its unknown geographic location. Thus, there may have been a variety of other places that could have been potentially analyzed if access to these viewers' locations had been provided.

Even in cases where I did have access to all of the data, certain information and data points were not taken into consideration, having the potential to vary the results of my study. For instance, a limitation of my study is that I analyzed whether a protest occurred within a week of the post being posted. This makes sense, given that it is critical to set a timeframe for which protests should be analyzed, as analyzing all protests and connecting them to this singular post would be problematic. Further, setting it as a week timeframe is logical given that most individuals view posts near when they were posted due to the TikTok algorithm. However, this is not the situation for all viewers, as some viewers may see the post past a week after it is posted. More specifically, after the week period, there may have been a large number of viewers within a particular geographic area that viewed the video, and there may have been a protest at this same time. This could have been significant for my research and could have altered the results of my study if taken into consideration. This is as it could have made the results more statistically significant. Another factor that may have influenced my statistical significance value is the fact that my results do not take into consideration the fact that protests cannot occur in certain regions due to governmental restrictions. Out of the twenty-two countries where protests did not occur, eleven of these countries faced some sort of governmental restrictions on protesting—either it was outlawed entirely or required permits, etc. This fact is an interesting point to consider, and the relationship may have been more statistically significant if this fact had been considered within my analyses, thus enhancing the study.

Another potential thing to consider is the fact that I had to rely on other people's data metrics that TikTok provided, which could have been potentially falsified. While I asked for a screenshot of this data in order to try and guarantee its validity, individuals may have used some form of editing apps in order to change the data. While this probably did not happen, given that the users do not have an incentive to do this and it would be time-consuming, it is an important thing to consider. I did, though, analyze each screenshot to try and ensure that none of the data looked like it had been altered visually using editing apps. Out of all the data given, none seemed to present as visually edited, but this is still something that must be taken into consideration.

IV. Findings

After conducting my research, it was discovered that there is a statistically significant relationship between engagement on these TikTok posts and the global social movements related to the Iranian Women's Rights movement. To come to this conclusion, I took note of every single post under each of the hashtags. As mentioned in the Methodology section above, I reached out to all of the users of these posts and received responses that gave data metrics pertaining to viewer engagement. An 89% response rate was achieved, allowing for the collection of data metrics for many of the posts. All posts for which data metrics were not received were excluded from the study. From the data collected, a pie chart along with the percentage of viewers and their geographic location was made. By knowing the percentage of viewers in each geographic location, the total number of viewers on each post is then ascertained to the specific number of views for each region.

In order to help articulate this, below is a bar graph created based on a TikTok posted by @Tareneh on March 13, 2023, that received 2.2 million views, shown in Figure 1. I chose this video because it exemplifies how a single post can generate widespread engagement and visibility.

The data was extracted and inserted into a pie chart to enhance understanding of the information. Utilizing the total number of views, Figure 2 represents the number of views for each geographic region.

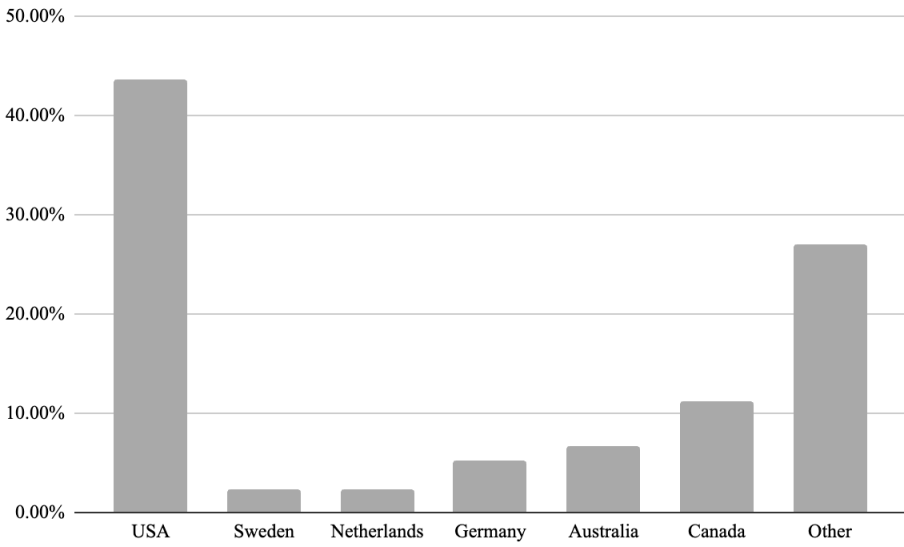


Figure 1: Percentage of viewers by country of a TikTok video by @Taraneh.

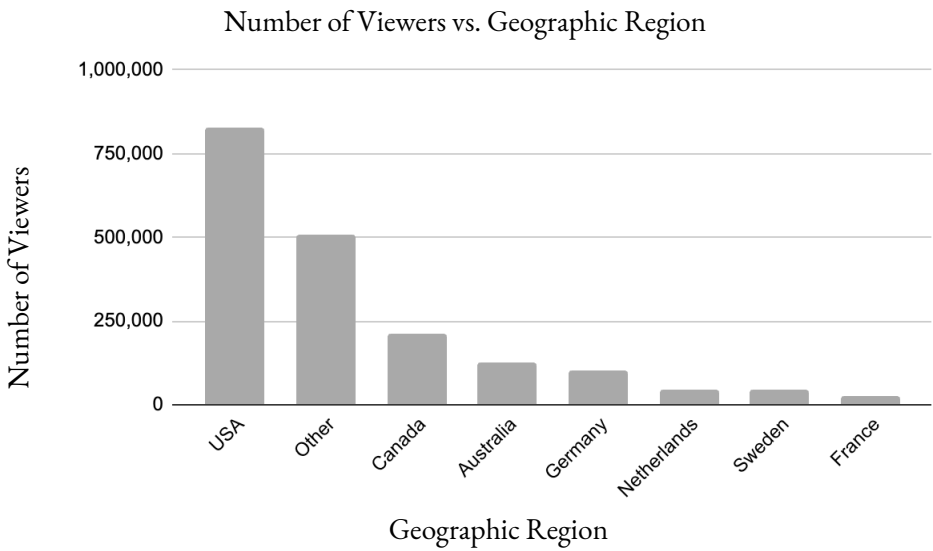


Figure 2: Number of viewers in each particular geographic region of a TikTok video by @Taraneh

For this particular post, many of the viewers are labeled as ‘Other.’ This ‘Other’ Category is created on TikTok to serve as a category for the individuals who use external means to access TikTok, and thus, their geographic location is not tied to their TikTok. This would have to be for individuals who use, for instance, a VPN. This often has to do with restrictions within their country on being able to access TikTok. For instance, there is a ban on TikTok in Iran, so it is impossible to see how many viewers in Iran saw each post. Thus, it is important to consider that there is a large sum of viewers globally who saw certain posts but cannot be considered in the analysis due to them using external measures to access TikTok. A variety of databases and sources were analyzed and tabulated to find whether protests occurred in each geographic area. An example of this is showcased in Table 1.

Table 1: Geographic region of viewers and whether a protest occurred on the day or week of a given post.

Geographic Region	Number of Viewers	Protests on that Day or Within Week
USA	827,200	Yes
Other	510,400	Not Measurable
Canada	211,200	No
Australia	127,600	No
Germany	101,200	Yes
Netherlands	44,000	No
Sweden	44,000	No
France	26,400	Yes

Out of all the posts, there were more instances where a protest occurred on that day or within the set week time frame than instances where this did not occur by calculating the number of “yes” versus “no” responses for each post’s respective data charts. 71.7% of the time, there was a “yes” response, while there was a “no” response 28.3% of the time. Directly after Amini’s death, no protests related to the Iranian Women’s Rights Movement occurred in the following countries: the United Arab Emirates, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and New Zealand. Further, no protests

occurred in Indonesia, Russia, Malaysia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia from October 13 to October 21, 2022. Additionally, no protests occurred in the United Arab Emirates from November 6 to November 13, 2022. No protests also occurred in Poland, Australia, Sweden, and the Netherlands from March 11 to March 18, 2023. Also, no protests occurred in Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, and Sweden from March 13 to March 21, 2023. An important thing to consider within this research is that 50% of the instances in which there were no protests within the particular time frame were in countries where it was either outlawed to protest or individuals faced restrictions. Despite this, these places were still regarded in my research as places where no protests occurred. This will be discussed more in the Discussion section of the research paper.

While there were more instances in which a protest occurred during the set period within a particular geographic region than not, this is not sufficient to conclude that there was a statistically significant relationship between the engagement on the TikToks and the protests. In order to evaluate statistical significance, the data was compiled and processed using Collab with Python. The ‘Other’ category was eliminated if it was present in an individual’s post data-metric, given that it would not be possible to evaluate which geographic regions viewers were from within this category. After putting the data into a table, the focus was on using Python by deciphering the proportion of views in each region that had a protest and the proportion of views in each region that did not have a protest. These proportions were necessary to conduct a logistic regression analysis, as showcased in Table 2.

Table 2: Logistic regression analysis and statistical significance evaluation.

Variable	Coef	Std. Err.	z	P > z	[0.025	0.975]
Intercept	-0.2071	0.440	-0.471	0.638	-1.069	0.654
Viewers	1.497e-05	5.81e-06	2.577	0.010	3.59e-06	2.64e-05

Table 2 shows that the $P > |z|$ for the Viewers was 0.010 (<0.05) which highlights that the number of viewers that a post received, grouped by nation, is a statistically significant predictor of protests.

V. Discussion

These findings have large implications as they help highlight the potential power of social media as a forum for activism on the streets. While these results align with the research done by Lee and Abidin through their suggestion about the power of social media, this research fundamentally adds to the literature as it is specifically focused on the situation in Iran. Further, no research works to explore activists from all over the world discussing the Women's Right Movement on TikTok and whether this is a statistically significant relationship between these posts and protests. Given that millions of women face oppression and marginalization at the hands of the Iranian Regime, this research is critical in its exploration of a promising avenue in which global activism can occur. Global activism is essential as the eyes of the international community may influence the Iranian government to decrease the extent of its oppressive acts towards women. This global activism may lead to more support and protection for Iranian women. My results suggest a statistically significant relationship.

Future research should be done on this topic, given how significant it is, as it impacts millions of women. An area of future research that can be explored could be related to the messaging within TikToks, as individuals could evaluate whether certain rhetoric and messaging could lead to more protests or if it leads to higher engagement and views. Another area of future research should be done by evaluating the relationship between engagement on TikTok and social protests in Iran. Given that TikTok is banned in Iran, it could not measure how many of the viewers for each particular post were from Iran. However, a researcher who has access to more resources and more time may be able to combat this challenge and find a way to access this data.

VI. Conclusion

This study concludes that there is a statistically significant relationship between engagement on TikTok posts and protests globally. This was accomplished by analyzing posts under the two most popular hashtags. As a result, the hypothesis was supported, revealing a statistically significant relationship. This finding addresses a gap within the literature that is critical for activists and has substantial implications for political science, along with the media studies field. Yet, this study does have some limitations that other researchers and readers must take into consideration. Future research must be conducted in order to further evaluate the role that media plays in social activism and viewer engagement. This research aims to shed light on the systemic

gender-based violence in Iran and to ensure that the injustices faced by women are neither forgotten nor ignored.

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