Exploring Hashtag Feminism Around Sexual Violence on Farsi Twitter: Affective Practices, Hierarchy of Deservingness, and Media Solidarities

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This study investigates the participation of Iranian women in hashtag feminism on Farsi Twitter as a means of resistance against marginalization. Using frameworks of hashtag feminism and media solidarities, the research analyzes Bidarzani—a grassroots feminist campaign—tweets and online conversations around these tweets in 2020. Key themes include naming sexual violence experience, the transition from victim-blaming to systemic condemnation, and affective digital witnessing of pain. This moment of accumulation of personal narratives and users' affective attunement in a context where rape discussions are silenced provides the possibility for collective survival. However, despite Bidarzani's efforts to offer an intersectional feminist approach, limitations in users' participation suggest a hierarchy of solidarity and deservingness, where affective practices are not equally expressed across class and geographical lines. Through these findings, the research contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the implications of digital feminism in the Middle East.

Keywords: hashtag feminism, affective practices, media solidarity, digital witnessing, hierarchy of deservingness, Farsi Twitter

Since its resurgence in 2017, Tarana Burke's #MeToo hashtag, which initially emerged in 2006, has spread globally, inspiring feminist movements. Despite sexual violence persisting as a pervasive global issue and being used as a tool of war, governance, and oppression, especially targeting women's bodies, #MeToo has fostered calls for both local and transnational feminist solidarity. As existing feminist media studies show, sharing personal narratives has been integral to anti–sexual violence activism, emerging through various hashtags, survivor testimonies, and public expressions of solidarity on digital media (Schwartz, 2023). While the #MeToo movement is not the first iteration of mass-scale engagement in activism against sexual violence in many parts of the world, including India and South Africa (see De, 2023; Mitchell, 2023), the hashtag gained prominence when White feminists appropriated it in the aftermath of a tweet from the actress Alyssa Milano (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018). As the global marker of a transnational feminist movement against sexual violence, the transformations of the #MeToo movement

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into local movements and hashtag trends in the Global South demonstrate the experiences, possibilities, and pitfalls of this feminist hashtag experience beyond the Euro-American feminist context (Cheema, 2023).

In Iran, digital feminism around #MeToo began in August 2020 with several women tweeting their stories of being sexually harassed and violated. With the emergence and proliferation of hashtags, such as #tajavoz (#rape), #azar-e jensi (#sexual harassment), #ta'aroz (#sexual violence), and #motajavez (#perpetrators) in the Farsi Twitter threads, other users started retweeting, commenting on other users' narratives, and sharing experiences of being sexually violated. Although #MeToo was not initially used by the Farsi Twitter users who discussed sexual violence, the movement was recognized as an extension of the global MeToo movement in the Middle East. Sexual violence is a taboo topic yet to be sufficiently discussed in Iranian Islamic government-controlled television, the mainstream print media, and among the public. In such a context, women and feminist activists strategically move their statements onto social media platforms, particularly (formerly) Twitter, regardless of the cost of activism in online spheres.

This study critically examines women's engagement in the #MeToo movement in 2020, exploring the simultaneous possibilities and pitfalls existing in hashtag feminism and affective engagement on social media, particularly Farsi Twitter. By analyzing tweets and revelation narratives from Bidarzani, a grassroots feminist campaign, alongside online discussions of sexual violence on Twitter, I argue that the #MeToo movement has empowered women to speak up about sexual violence through naming and articulating their experiences, as well as witness each other's pain through affective attunement to this hashtag trend and transition from individual blame to critiquing systemic oppression. The accumulation of personal stories and users' affective responses in a context where public discourse on rape is often absent has led to significant moments in the emergence of hashtag feminism, broadening feminist activism against rape culture.

However, women's experience of the #MeToo movement via Farsi Twitter, particularly during the 2020 period under study, may not fully embrace intersectional feminist perspectives. The findings reveal disparities in narratives of sexual violence, with emotional responses differing across class and geographical boundaries. While solidarity among women was evident in hashtag activism on sexual violence, the hierarchical solidarity with narratives from marginalized groups reflected a hierarchy of deservingness. Here, the hierarchy of deservingness refers to a situation in which certain narratives of sexual violence are deemed more deserving of attention, empathy, and solidarity than others based on various factors, such as geographical location, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Sexual violence narratives from peripheral provinces or lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often met with skepticism, blame, and dismissal. Such narratives are marginalized compared with those perceived as more deserving of collective anger and sympathy. This dynamic perpetuates inequalities and reinforces marginalization within hashtag feminism, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to addressing sexual violence.

Hashtag feminism, a form of digital activism, employs social media platforms and hashtags as horizontal communication tools to raise awareness about gender discrimination and advocate for gender equality, as well as to address other forms of social oppression, such as race, class, nationality, and religion (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). Such movements mark discursive activism, challenging existing power structures by creating counternarratives and language that question the status

quo (Shaw, 2012; Wiens & MacDonald, 2020). Additionally, hashtag feminism harnesses affective intensities and emotions, using social media platforms like Twitter to amplify specific hashtags and evoke collective voices of sadness, anger, and rage (Cole & Atuk, 2019). Page and Arcy (2020) explained that sharing emotions and affective attunement to events on digital media have the potential to provide "a foundation for a politics of care" (p. 334), as opposed to punishment models based on surveillance and policing that destroy communities.

The experiences of hashtag feminism, discursive activism, and affective practices within these movements are not uniform across sociocultural contexts. For example, in the 2020 #MeToo movement in Iran, anonymity was prevalent in revelation narratives. Although journalists such as Sara Ommatali revealed famous figures like the Iranian painter Aydin Aghdashloo, who had sexually harassed Ommatali during one of their interviews for a news outlet (Basmechi, 2023), anonymity remained a key feature, particularly among the stories shared by ordinary women in society. The lack of trust in police and legal institutions further hindered survivors from seeking help, as the Islamic legal system often punishes women for out-of-marriage sexual relationships (Tafakori, 2020). For men, the consequences of rape accusations added another layer of complexity to the situation because the legal punishment for a proven rape was execution. Additionally, in an authoritarian state like Iran, state surveillance and control over online activities pose more challenges for online activism (Gheytanchi, 2015; Sreberny, 2018). Despite these obstacles, Iranian women and feminists have embraced digital media platforms as avenues for resistance, circumvention of censorship, and amplification of their voices (Khosravi Ooryad, 2020).

Social media platforms have become crucial arenas for women's activism in Iran, providing spaces for discussions on taboo topics such as sexuality, divorce, hijab, and religious issues. Batmanghelichi and Mouri (2017) highlight the significance of cyberfeminist activism in Global South contexts, where it fosters dialogue among ordinary women and expands feminist discourses beyond privileged circles. Limited public spaces for dialogue about gender injustice push more women to express their grievances online, challenging patriarchal forces in the private sphere (Tafakori, 2021). For instance, hashtag campaigns like #WhiteWednesday and #GirlsofRevolutionStreet serve as "affectively charged sites" for Iranian women to express anger and rage in response to gender injustices (Tafakori, 2021). Others have discussed how Iranian women's participation in hashtag feminism carries the potential to intervene in dominant power structures by generating solidarity and collective survival for women as marginalized and subaltern communities in society. For instance, in their analysis of Iranian anti-rape activism, Kermani and Hooman (2022) argue that through movements like #rape, Iranian Twitter users address structural factors perpetuating rape culture, including political repression, inadequate laws, and oppressive discourses, which silence victims in authoritarian regimes.

The recent 2022 uprising in Iran, known as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, following the tragic murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in Iranian morality police custody, underscores the pivotal role of social media platforms, digitally mediated protests, and hashtag feminism in amplifying feminist activism against gender violence. While discussing the specifics of the 2022 uprising exceeds the scope of this research, it is significant to contextualize the 2020 experiences of Iranian women and feminists in the #MeToo movement within the broader trajectory of women's struggles for agency and liberation. This contextualization provides

insights into the conditions under which expression and feminist activism flourish, transform, and advocate for agency through digital platforms.

Given the above arguments, the intervention of this research lies in addressing the central role of affective practices and emotions in hashtag feminism and their experience of the #MeToo movement in 2020 on Farsi Twitter. This research investigates how emotions shared and witnessed on social media platforms create opportunities for mediated solidarities, despite hierarchical and intersectional challenges in emotional responses to sexual violence. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two questions:

RQ1:   *What themes on Twitter reflect the feelings evoked, expressed, and witnessed in the context of anti–sexual violence activism?*

RQ2:   *What does such a mode of hashtag feminism reveal about the context within which it is taking place?*

My approach here draws on the work of Sara Ahmed (2015) and Kaarina Nikunen (2019), who consider emotions and affect as "part of social narratives and power relations" (Nikunen, 2019, p. 22) rather than outside social meaning-making processes that oppose discourses by questioning the dominant emotional structures. I consider emotions as modes of a broader emotional structure evoked by unique encounters, memories, and events that create alternative effects for activism and social change. For Ahmed (2015), emotions "mediate the relationship" between the self and the social. I reiterate this understanding as emotions being able to connect the individual's, here women's, psyche to socially and politically constructed forces. When expressed, narrated, and circulated collectively, emotions make critique and social change possible.

Analyzing tweets from the feminist page Bidarzani, along with related discussions on Farsi Twitter, I explore how the expression of emotions through these narratives shapes media solidarities in a society where offline activism faces repression. Following a critical feminist epistemology, I highlight the limitations of hashtag feminism, including a hierarchy of deservingness that excludes certain narratives from solidarity practices. While women's affective participation in hashtag movements offers crucial interventions into rape culture, the research reveals hierarchical solidarity and a lack of intersectionality in this activism in 2020. This exclusive approach underscores the possible limitations of contemporary hashtag feminist solidarity.

The Context of Bidarzani's Digital Feminism

Leftist in its political orientation, the Bidarzani—translated as awakening or women's awakening—website and campaign were launched in 2009 as a Tehran-based collective to raise public awareness about gender inequality, reproductive rights, and the realization of women's rights in a broader sense (Bidarzani, n.d.). With the Iranian Islamic government redrafting the Family Protection Bill in the eighth parliament under the Ahmadinejad administration, Bidarzani was among the first women's online initiatives to fight against the bill (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017). The bill was intended to curtail women's rights through different proposals, including allowing men to practice the right to polygamy without their first wife's consent.

Over the years, Bidarzani feminist activists have used digital activism alongside their on-the-ground efforts. Nikzad Zangeneh, cofounder of Bidarzani, reported distributing more than a thousand pamphlets across Iran to reach communities without Internet access (Radio Zamaneh, 2010). Zangeneh aligns Bidarzani's mission with leftist and intersectional feminist principles, emphasizing the interconnectedness of fighting various forms of oppression, including class, race, religion, and sexual orientation (Batmanghelichi & Mouri, 2017). Batmanghelichi and Mouri (2017) identified a Marxist feminist approach in Bidarzani's online presence, which focuses on amplifying the voices of marginalized women, addressing women's labor market concerns, and advocating for women refugees. Bidarzani views cyberspace and social media as platforms not only for disseminating feminist content but also for collaboration, coordination, and activist recruitment (Radio Zamaneh, 2010).

In August 2020, Bidarzani initiated the sharing of anonymous narratives of rape and sexual violence on Twitter. Over the following months, they posted 27 such stories along with related content addressing sexual violence, coping strategies, and awareness-raising efforts. The significant engagement on their Twitter page, including likes, comments, and retweets, underscores the attention they received, particularly from women users. Focusing on these 27 anonymous stories and associated discussions, this study explores how these narratives foster connection and support, leading to collective healing among women. Additionally, it examines the lack of intersectionality and the hierarchical distribution of attention and sympathy evident in the conversations surrounding these stories.

I selected Bidarzani for analysis because of its unique approach to providing a platform for sharing anonymous narratives of sexual violence on Twitter. Unlike mainstream outlets, Bidarzani prioritizes giving voice to these narratives over seeking visibility or recognition. By distancing itself from the discourse of visibility, Bidarzani creates spaces for everyone to document and share their experiences without conforming to mainstream social media logic. The patriarchal structures, along with the feelings of shame among women in Iran, make it difficult for many to speak out about such experiences, highlighting the role of platforms like Bidarzani in spreading taboo issues experienced by ordinary women. Also, Bidarzani's decision not to use the #MeToo hashtag for these stories underscores its commitment to prioritizing survivors' voices through a rhetoric that the survivors initially used in their narratives, although it later recognized the connection to the broader #MeToo movement.

Literature Review

Affective Practices in Hashtag Feminism

In the past two decades, media and communication scholars have underlined the role of the Internet and social media platforms as positive contributors to activists' mobility and organization, perpetuating feminist and antiracist narratives. Others, with equally rigorous research, have emphasized how digital technologies reproduce preexisting power imbalances. The first group provides evidence of social media's capacity in general, and Twitter in particular, to elevate and sustain online counterpublics and to produce counternarratives (see, e.g., Castells, 2015; Clark-Parsons, 2022; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016; Marchi & Clark, 2021). For instance, Mendes et al. (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with young women and feminists in the #MeToo feminist initiatives, demonstrating that feminist activists recognized digital platforms "as extremely positive in generating

community, connection, and support" (p. 177). Others, however, have indicated that social media platforms might be ineffective and even self-defeating in supporting and sustaining social justice movements at both local and global stages (Siapera, Boudourides, Lenis, & Suiter, 2018).

Feminist media scholars have explored how emotions intersect with online public discussions, activism, and power dynamics, highlighting links to capitalism and corporate interests. They have also delved into the potential of affective engagement as a tool for social change (Clark-Parsons, 2022). Hashtag feminism, while serving as a potent tool for amplifying marginalized voices and spotlighting social and political issues like state violence (Jackson et al., 2020), faces the risk of co-option by corporate interests, limiting its potential to challenge structural inequalities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014). Scholars have also discussed the affective economy in solidarity campaigns, where digital media industries capitalize on emotions to foster engagement in activism (Nikunen, 2019; Skeggs, 2010). In contemporary capitalist societies, this phenomenon extends capital into the private sphere, leveraging emotions and affect for profit (Ahmed, 2015). Therefore, social media platforms might exploit feminist campaigns and expressions of injustice for marketable purposes, relying on affective practices to evoke and package emotions for consumption.

However, it is important to note that the affective economy and its enactment through affective practices can exceed simple processes of emotional exploitation. New forms of digital connectivity, social media participation, and circulation of feelings may also challenge the established forms of power and extend "our understandings of agency, collective identity, and political solidarity" (Cole & Atuk, 2019, p. 27). Hashtags and social media movements have the potential to criticize social and cultural inequalities and question unjust social relations embedded in daily lives (Castells, 2015; Jackson et al., 2020). Yet, the practice of participating in hashtag feminism goes beyond simply sharing ideas on social media platforms. When coupled with commitment to justice and witnessing of other's pain, sharing feminist hashtags is more effective and carries more potential for generating solidarity, both affectively and politically (Nikunen, 2019). The following section maps out the act of sharing and digital witnessing as they intertwine with emotional sentiments, explaining how they can concomitantly open space for the formation of media solidarities.

Digital Sharing, Witnessing, and Emotional Sentiments

Focusing on practices of sharing, witnessing, and the centrality of emotional sentiments makes for another strand of research on hashtag feminism. While sharing is central to defining the use of social media and hashtag movements, the practice of sharing content on social media is broadly discussed in opposing ways. One argument is that sharing images, news, and stories not only maintains relationships and tells others who we are but also has the power to cause political uprisings and raise a sense of solidarity and consciousness among publics (Meikle, 2016). From this perspective, collective sharing is also recognized as a form of human sociability and as part of the fan culture that is extended to the social media environment (Jenkins & Ito, 2015). Another approach that views sharing more critically is from a political economy standpoint. Van Dijck (2013), for instance, argued that the practices of sharing and liking are parts of a larger commercial ecosystem and are engineered through technologies and the logic of social media. Morozov (2011) also noted that global social media campaigns include elements of slacktivism and are based on self-promotion and short-term feel-good-activism.

Nikunen (2019), however, differentiated the practice of online sharing from witnessing. She argued that while sharing refers to the culture of connecting with others, the concept of witnessing emphasizes the "moral engagement" that can be a consequence lived or experienced through social media. "Witnessing refers to the act of seeing something important and bearing responsibility to something that one has seen" (Nikunen, 2019, p. 94), and it has the potential to constitute solidarity.

Based on the existing scholarly literature, one can suggest that sharing, witnessing, and constructing responsibility toward other social media users based on commonality can also lead to the creation of social ties and participation in hashtag activism. Though this participation takes place in private homes, Leurs (2015) noted that connective actions on social media blur the boundaries between the street and the media, the real and the virtual. Social media platforms have expanded the political space of visibility and political expression. Digital media can enhance the emergence of new social and political formations by organizing people across alliances (such as feminism) and creating horizontal participation (Leurs, 2015). With #MeToo movement, for instance, the practices of sharing and witnessing not only drew attention to sexual harassment but also invited others to participate in emotional and digital interactivity (Cheema, 2023).

Affects and emotions are central to the practices of sharing, witnessing, and participation accommodated by social media. Emotions reveal the "experiential dimension of suffering" by not only recognizing "the importance of sentiments of compassion and empathy: feeling with others, sharing emotions and understanding what injustice feels like" (Nikunen, 2019, p. 21) but also going above and beyond compassion and empathy through expressions of rage and anger (Ahmed, 2015; Nikunen, 2019). Affective practices can take various forms rooted within lived experiences, memories, events, and ideas in a community (Ahmed, 2015). Digital media offer a space for enacting affective practices, engaging in social and political debates, and participating in new forms of solidarity outside of market-based, commercial logics that govern media industries (Nikunen, 2019). Such a potential can be used as an effective tool for political change and the practice of agency among women. The circulation of emotions through individual experience co-constructs a sense of feeling common among women (Cheema, 2023), and social media platforms nurture this potential by linking disparate users around a similar issue.

Given the multidirectional perspectives about the potentials of online sharing and witnessing, the current research puts the two concepts into conversation with affects and emotions in hashtag feminism within the specificity of the women's experience of #MeToo movement on Farsi Twitter, explaining that although sharing and witnessing create a form of responsibility among social media users, urging them to participate in a political cause and move toward mediated solidarity, such practices can also reproduce hierarchies. In a context where conversations about sexual violence are invisible in mainstream media and everyday interactions, revelation narratives of women on Farsi Twitter deploy affective practices through sharing and witnessing each other's experiences and expanding spaces of political feminist interventions into rape culture. By participating in the hashtag movement, these women share emotions of confusion, empathy, rage, and anger, all of which provide grounds for new kinds of media solidarity. Yet, their affective practices lack intersectionality and reproduce emotional hierarchies by excluding and marginalizing the experiences of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and peripheral geographies. In other words, the digital media solidarities experienced in the Iranian #MeToo movement and enabled through anti–sexual

violence activism reveal a hierarchy of deservingness, which excludes certain narratives and revelation stories from care and empathy, illustrating the possible pitfalls in hashtag feminist solidarity.

Methods and Sample Tweets

The research draws on critical content analysis to explore how the practices of tweeting, retweeting, commenting, sharing, and circulating narratives on Twitter are enacted to not only challenge the dominant patriarchal discourse of society but also exchange feelings among social media users that foster solidarity. Here, a critical content analysis approach involves examining posts and comments to uncover how social media users reflect, resist, and reinforce the existing power dynamics. I focus on anonymous revelation narratives and tweets from *Bidarzani* and women's conversations and comments under these posts. Except for Bidarzani's tweets, the rest of the comments, conversations, and tweets by users are anonymized in the findings section for ethical and privacy considerations.

Following a thematic analysis method and situating the practices of commenting, retweeting, and sharing formed on Twitter within the sociopolitical specificity of Iranian society, this research examines the mechanisms through which users' affective meaning-making practices are formed.

Through the Followers Analysis website, I searched for Bidarzani's tweets in August, September, and October 2020, containing the hashtags #Tajavoz (#rape), #Azar-e jensi (#sexual harassment), # Ta'aroz (#sexual abuse), and #Motajavez (#perpetrators). The final report showed that aside from the 27 anonymous narratives of assault, Bidarzani produced more than a hundred tweets with either of the above hashtags. I focused on these tweets' comments and let them guide me through conversations around sexual violence to understand how conversations took place and how emotions were shared and circulated among users.

Findings

Analyzing these posts and readers' comments reveals the complexity of the affective practices surrounding discussions of rape and sexual violence in Iran. While feelings of curiosity, rage, anger, and pain facilitated agency and solidarity among these women on Twitter, they also perpetuated hierarchical dynamics. Three main themes emerged from the analysis, illustrating both solidarity and a lack of intersectionality in women's participation in the #MeToo movement. These themes include the practice of naming sexual violence, transitioning from victim-blaming to systemic condemnation, and moving from sharing to affective digital witnessing of pain and suffering. I studied the circulation of emotions in these practices, examining how hierarchies of deservingness manifest in online conversations, tweets, and comments under Bidarzani's revelation narratives.

"Call #Rape by Name": Women Naming the Experience of Sexual Violence

The analysis indicates that shedding light on issues of rape, sexual assault, and harassment helps women recognize and understand different instances of sexual violation. This heightened awareness often stems from their ability to revisit, articulate, and vocalize their experiences with sexual violence. For instance, one woman's comment, translated as "call #rape by name," underscores the importance of openly

acknowledging instances of rape. By using the hashtag #rape, she aimed to draw attention to situations where labeling and naming such experiences may be perceived as shameful. Her comment, along with others in conversations on Farsi Twitter, sought to challenge the stigma and taboo surrounding discussions of rape, encouraging others to use the hashtag as a means of reclaiming agency and initiating dialogue.

Within those comments that urged women to revisit their past sexual encounters and express them by name, I observed the formation and circulation of emotions in the comments around these revelation stories. Confusion, self-blame, and anger stood out the most. One example of this is the anonymous narrative 14, shared by a Bidarzani Twitter account on September 6:

> 14th Narration—First, let me say that in my experience what happened might not be exactly what we have previously known as #rape. I thought I was sexually harassed. I was forcibly touched and my body was violated and the guy called me "rural", "unmodern," and "a feminist who doesn't respect the desires of her body" as he was doing this to me. (Bidarzani, 2020a)

The narrative vividly depicts this woman's experience of being sexually violated. As the conversation unfolded beneath these tweets, other users, identifying as women, urged her not to "blame" herself, affirming that what she experienced constituted "#rape," regardless of any doubts or self-blame.

In other conversational threads, many women asked questions such as, "Is this really rape," "What do you mean by unwanted sex," "Is consent necessary or what it means," "Is rape only defined as penetration?" (Personal communication, September 6, 2020), and so on. By examining these questions and how they were asked, one may infer that there is a lack of awareness and consensus among many people, or at least among the women who participated in such conversations, on the meaning of sexual violence, sexual assault, and rape. Women on Farsi Twitter conversations noted that they were confused about what had happened to them at the moment of the occurrence of rape or harassment.

Being afraid of the unknown and complicated consequences of accusing their perpetrators, many women turned to self-blame and accused themselves. For example, in response to one of the other Bidarzani revelations, the following comment states: I keep asking myself why I went to his house. How couldn't I see what he really wanted? (Personal communication, September 22, 2020).

In response to this comment, another user wrote, "Please don't blame yourself. In a healthy world where men were not granted unequal power, your behavior would have been normal. I'm sorry for what happened to you. You did nothing wrong (Personal communication, September 24, 2020)."

As is notable here and in many other instances, the gender norms that uphold men's patriarchal power and dominance have often led many women to internalize sexual violence as an inherent aspect of their womanhood (Bidarzani, 2020b). However, when women articulate their experiences with sexual violence and express their emotions about it, they embark on a journey of understanding what it means to be sexually violated and how they can speak up about it. They seem to realize that unwanted and forceful sexual encounters should be acknowledged as forms of violence. Moreover, by sharing their stories and

supporting one another through confusion and pain, women not only affirm each other's experiences but also foster a sense of solidarity and togetherness.

Other revelations and conversations show that at the time of being sexually harassed, women would have doubted themselves. These instances of self-doubt may also indicate that women have internalized self-blame and are conditioned to question their own behaviors. For instance, in a few comments, users wrote that "Was this rape or was I being illusional" or "It was not a big deal . . . I thought I was delusional," according to an anonymized account (Personal communication, August 29, 2020). In response to the last comment, another user replied:

> Those men make me sick! The system that supports them makes me sick! They're all condemned, what we can do in the face of such petrification about #rape is to show them we have each other." (Personal communication, August 29, 2020)

Upon reviewing these tweets and testimonies shared on Bidarzani and the conversation formed around them, it becomes evident that Farsi Twitter users are acutely aware that the patriarchal legal system and cultural structures that have long supported them might remain largely unchanged. Despite the prevalence of sexual harassment, it is not legally recognized as an offense or harm, as it is difficult to prove (Kermani & Hooman, 2022). Furthermore, the consequences of proven sexual violence, rape in particular, are severe for both the accuser and the accused, leaving women hesitant to seek legal help (Basmechi, 2023). In the absence of legal support in Iranian society, women have turned to alternative modes of survival via social media platforms. Indeed, they have turned to sharing personal narratives and seeking help and justice in each other's feelings and emotions about their lived experiences grounded in an unjust cultural and political system.

The analysis shows that confusion, self-doubt, and self-blame were common emotional expressions among the users, who appeared to be in the early stages of narrating their experiences, articulating them by name, and comprehending what sexual violence entailed. Such utterances were often accompanied by reassuring comments from other women users who shared the same questions about the meaning of sexual violence and harassment, yet simultaneously attempted to convince others that such instances were forms of sexual violence. These conversations, to which women are often emotionally attuned, contribute to questions about the already existing meanings of rape by inviting women to engage in meaning-making processes, think through alternative ways of articulating sexual violence, and create new discourses around it.

"Stop Blaming Us:" Transitioning from Blaming Survivors to Condemning Systemic Issues

Another prevailing emotional expression in the conversations was the public manifestation of rage and anger. The target of such anger is often the repressive state system, which is embodied within the legal structure and unequal gendered norms in Iranian society. Ultimately, systemic discrimination against women gives the state more control over women's bodies and leads to less support for survivors of sexual violence. For instance, a tweet that reads "stop blaming us" captures the anger of a woman against the systemic injustices against women's bodies, which attempt to pinpoint and blame the survivors. This phrase may also illustrate how these Iranian women, urged to conceal their feelings of anger to fit the gendered stereotypes

of a modest woman, rely on Twitter to both express their anger and target and condemn the repressive state system for its discriminatory legal and social politics.

By participating in conversations around Bidarzani's narratives, women on Farsi Twitter are enabled to articulate and vocalize their anger in various forms. They show this anger through multiple forms, such as resentment toward the casualness with which sexual violence is viewed by men. For instance, one tweet reads, "I hate the fact that men don't take it seriously and laugh about it among themselves" (Personal communication, October 14, 2020). In addition, conversations reveal women's anger over the emotional toll they bear after sharing accounts of their experiences. As expressed in one tweet, "Shut up and stop blaming us for lack of coherence in our stories! When we write in tears, we don't think about how qualified our stories are for your taste!" (Personal communication, September 28, 2020). Finally, women's feelings of anger and rage directed toward the gender-biased structures governing Iran. The last theme aligns well with Kermani and Hooman's (2022) findings about how the cultural and political systems in Iran impede and discourage women from speaking out about their experiences of being sexually violated.

Several women on Farsi Twitter expressed anger and rage at the legal system. For instance, a Twitter account describing anger about how and why sexual violence is not prevented in a patriarchal structure under Bidarzani's tweet thread reads, "You know what makes me angry? That the fucking system backs them up like it always has . . . men rape us and the government rapes all of us. They're responsible for this fucking rape culture" (Personal communication, September 2, 2020).

As Page and Arcy (2020) note, expressing "feminist rage is not new" (p. 340). Supporting this claim, the current analysis argues that recognizing the expression of anger through affective and emotional attunement to this movement –using hashtags, comments, and retweets– can serve as the initial step toward acknowledging sexual violence that deserves to be met with anger and indignation. This expression of rage becomes particularly important within the Iranian legal context, which has yet to acknowledge sexual violence as an offense, harm, and abuse. These captured conversations illustrate that women who have read Bidarzani's tweets and narratives of people being subjected to sexual violence often find these experiences worthy of anger and rage. Their feminist anger is validated by other users' emotional responses. Sharing and commenting on each other's anger is a form of engagement in affective practices, since they identify and legitimize the source of anger through collective practices (Nikunen, 2019).

Women's collective anger, as noted by Ahmed (2015), can serve as a productive force, particularly for those facing multiple marginalizations because of their geographical location, family dynamics, and socioeconomic status. However, this anger sometimes fails to recognize intersectional oppression, leading to conversations on Farsi Twitter that perpetuate a hierarchy of deservingness among women. Another Bidarzani's tweet sharing an anonymous narrative from a peripheral province in Iran illustrates this issue:

> A narration from Bushehr province: I have been struggling with myself for days to tell my experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. I just realized what other people have suffered while writing their stories. I have written and deleted this text many times . . . #rape" (Bidarzani, 2020b)

Despite the painful nature of the narrative, reactions and comments lack empathy and fail to condemn the structural oppression the survivors face. In some instances, the anonymous narrator was accused by other women of "having a distorter memory," "being unfortunate due to poverty," or "being the victim of poor rapist men" (Personal communication, September 9, 2020). These patterns, repeated in tweets where survivors come from peripheral regions or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may demonstrate a hierarchy of deservingness in Twitter conversations. Such a hierarchy of deservingness refers to the tendency for certain narratives of sexual violence to be considered more worthy of attention and empathy. Although Bidarzani aims for an intersectional feminist approach, users' reactions often exclude experiences they deem unworthy of collective anger and sympathy, particularly those of peripheral women and those from lower socioeconomic classes.

"We Are Not Alone in This:" Moving from Sharing to Affective Witnessing

At first glance, the revelation narratives shared by Bidarzani's Twitter account primarily emphasized individual empowerment and visibility. However, further analysis of the conversations around these personal stories demonstrated that they initiated dialogue and encouraged women to step forward by linking their experiences of sexual assault to other women's testimonies. As Ahmed (2015) puts it, although pain is an individual experience, it "creates mutuality through the process of disclosing and recognizing one another's pain" (p. 29). Indeed, one tweet noted, "As long as we all shout it out, we can survive together" (Personal communication, October 3, 2020). This mutuality of pain and ethical response to suffering echoes a move from mere sharing to affective digital witnessing. The process of reading, retweeting, and commenting on other women's personal narratives through affective and emotional practices created a community around suffering. For instance, a Twitter account commented on Bidarzani's revelation narrative: "I've read this story many times. I haven't been raped or sexually violented in my life, but I feel the pain. I want you to know [the anonymous storyteller] that I'm here for you because I understand pain" (Personal communication, September 14, 2020). Another comment mentioned that "we're all the bearers of your pain. Now that you've shared it, you're not alone anymore" (Personal communication, September 16, 2020). These affective moments of witnessing, with particular emphasis on the survivors' experience and distancing from the perpetrators, emphasize understanding each other's pain and acknowledging mutual suffering over revenge. In this sense, "We are not alone in this" is a common theme that emerges in the tweets and comments. Through various phrasings of this theme, users on Farsi Twitter attempt to invite expressions of solidarity through affective digital witnessing.

These instances resonate with prior research emphasizing the significance of not only sharing but also witnessing each other's pain on social media, fostering collective survival and moral responsibility among users (Page & Archy, 2020). Bidarzani's tweets and anonymous narratives have effectively transitioned women from mere sharing to engaging in affective digital witnessing. By inviting women on Twitter to bear each other's pain, these narratives go beyond sharing to provide survivors of sexual violence with a sense of solidarity and support. Such conversations demonstrate how narratives build upon one another, inspiring multiple women to share their stories and engage in the affective aspects of survivorship.

While emotions expressed through sharing and witnessing pain on Twitter foster meaningful media solidarity beyond superficial interactions like liking and retweeting, there is a notable oscillation between

sharing and witnessing, highlighting the limitations of this solidarity. Bidarzani's narratives spark discussions on sexual violence, providing a digital platform for solidarity in a society where such conversations face obstacles and backlashes. However, digital witnessing through comments and engagement may raise ethical concerns, potentially perpetuating social inequalities rather than addressing them.

In this sense, the findings highlight two key issues: limited engagement with certain tweets and the temporality of digital witnessing. First, there are constraints on how widely diverse voices and narratives are heard and acknowledged on Farsi Twitter. This is evident in the varying number of likes, retweets, and comments received by different anonymous stories, indicating a preference for certain narratives over others. For instance, narratives involving intellectual elites, journalists, or artists, whether as survivors or perpetrators, tend to garner more attention, while those considered ordinary receive less attention. Even though all the narratives are anonymously shared by Bidarzani, some of these personal testimonies revealed contextual elements—such as the level of education and location of sexual encounter (e.g., an art studio or a newsroom) —that could help other women identify the people involved in the sexual violence. In such instances, affective witnessing intensifies, and more empathic feelings are shared around the narrative. This selective recognition of certain narratives as credible underscores the privileging of specific stories by women on Farsi Twitter.

Second, the temporality of witnessing presents another challenge that is closely linked to the previous issue. Such temporality refers to the immediate nature, duration, and pace of digital witnessing, which may prevent deeper engagement and solidarity with narratives of sexual violence. With a structure designed for immediacy and encouragement to share (Van Dijck, 2013), Twitter narratives around sexual violence are inevitably limited in their capacity to forge longer-term witnessing. Given this, despite Bidarzani's efforts to provide contextualized narratives, the sense of urgency, immediacy, and often impatience among users to share and witness more and more revelation narratives may lead to superficial media solidarity among the #MeToo movement participants on Farsi Twitter.

Discussion

Through an analysis of Bidarzani—an Iranian feminist grassroots network—revelation narratives about sexual violence and the conversations formed around these narratives on Farsi Twitter, this article examines how women navigated and resisted oppressive structures. These structures form a web of power at the intersections of patriarchy, the authoritarian Islamic government, the traditional family structure, and educational systems. By examining and analyzing practices of sharing, commenting, and retweeting, the study shows how these women revisited and articulated their experiences of sexual violence, moved from victim-blaming to systemic condemnation, and digitally witnessed each other's pain, all of which were experienced affectively.

The circulation of emotions, such as self-blame, rage, and anger, on Twitter conversations as modalities of broader emotional structures has encouraged more women to express their feelings about the experience of sexual violence. This finding confirms the previous studies about the global experiences of engagement in the hashtag #MeToo movement, where the accumulation of personal narratives along with other users' affective practices on Twitter—in a society where dialogue about sexual violence in public spaces is intentionally dismissed—has become a key moment in the emergence of hashtag feminist praxis (Cheema,

2023). Additionally, the feminist praxis of narrative sharing and witnessing provided critical interventions into rape culture by building mediated solidarity through opening new horizons of action, agency, and collective survival.

This analysis further shows that such collective participation has provided a powerful platform for individual users to share their narratives of a traumatic experience and to channel their emotions of confusion, self-doubt, self-blame, rage, and anger into collective modes of survival (Basmechi, 2023). By sharing anonymous revelation narratives, Bidarzani invites women to collective survivor care and healing, further offering a model of media solidarity. The experience of media solidarity occurs through sharing narratives and affectively witnessing one another's suffering. In this way, this moment of hashtag feminism provides a powerful tool for collective healing and care and creates a space for the voices of survivors to be heard and valued.

There is a shared sense of solidarity among women facilitated by hashtag feminism. However, such an experience of mediated solidarity and hashtag feminism is not free from limitations. The research findings highlight a hierarchy within expressions of solidarity concerning Twitter users' engagement with sexual violence narratives. There exists a hierarchy in viewing and commenting on the personal narratives shared by lower-class women and those residing in marginalized areas. This hierarchy is characterized by varying degrees of emotional engagement and affective practices. I framed this specific hierarchy as a hierarchy of deservingness that excludes certain groups of women from expressions of sympathy and solidarity. The hierarchy of deservingness refers to the unequal treatment of sexual violence narratives, where certain stories are deemed more worthy of attention, empathy, and solidarity based on factors like geographical location and socioeconomic status. Narratives from peripheral provinces or lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face skepticism and dismissal, with survivors accused of lying or distorting their experiences.

This hierarchical deservingness is further influenced by two key factors closely linked to Twitter's affordances: the level of engagement with specific tweets and the temporality of digital witnessing. These factors underscore a trend in which certain narratives are prioritized, reflecting a politics of deservingness and hierarchy within feminist solidarity movements on social media. Despite Bidarzani's efforts to embrace an intersectional feminist approach by incorporating diverse narratives of sexual violence, emotional responses and affective witnessing around these stories often lack an intersectional feminist solidarity perspective.

Additionally, exploring how emotions are connected and shaped by the social, political, religious, and cultural realms of a society, this research extends the literature on hashtag feminism and media solidarity experiences, arguing that such expressions do not occur in a vacuum. Affective practices in digital activism and hashtag feminist movements do not just happen by themselves. They are productions of particular contexts, and they are connected with the social conditions and politics within which they occur. Such politics are not restricted to the dominant discourses of power and patriarchal structures in society. Rather, these political movements may be reproduced in alternative spaces, such as social media platforms, which are known as spaces upholding feminist resistance. In this sense, the claim that participation in hashtag feminist activism and the affordances of social media platforms for affective practices can reproduce the very same hierarchies that they aim to fight against add a layer of complexity to the existing scholarship about the possibilities and pitfalls within digital feminist activism.

In the social and political context of Iran, sexual violence and rape are taboo topics to be discussed. A repressive legal system rooted in an Islamic theocratic government has extremely criminalized rape, traditional family structures impede women from stepping forward, and official media and educational system have intentionally ignored the issue of sexual violence. Within these repressive dynamics, women and feminist activists move their revelation narratives to digital spaces to break their silences, raise awareness among themselves, and collectively resist multiple structures that have attempted to erase their narratives and experiences of sexual violence. In Khosravi Ooryad's (2020) words, when every tangible physical public space becomes an impediment to women's participation, their digitally mediated protests, activism, and resistance become more relevant. The findings affirm this claim, demonstrating that in a context where women have not expressed their emotions of rage and anger about sexual violence before and have blamed and accused themselves of such incidents, the 2020 hashtag feminist moment on Twitter brought (and can keep bringing) forward the emotional aspects of survivorship by allowing women to share and witness each other's emotions through affective practices.

Yet, such emotional expressions do not necessarily guarantee an intersectional approach to the digital feminist movement and hashtag feminism. They can be exclusive, insufficient, and unequal in their practices of sharing, witnessing, and emotional sentiments and create hierarchical solidarity. That said, the discursive and affective practices shaped around the #MeToo movement create dual possibilities: They include certain groups of women in the experience of collective survival and solidarity while excluding others from the same emotional mechanisms. Such a discourse, although alternative and feminist, might perpetuate inequalities within feminist activism.

By no means do I frame all activism of women around sexual violence on Farsi Twitter as hierarchical or exclusive. It is important to note that the 2020 #MeToo movement brought an invisible part of Iranian women's existence to the public arena and turned the experiences of sexual violence into a collective issue that needs to be revisited, named, felt, and acknowledged. Sharing and digitally witnessing this mutual experience may have changed the consciousness of those involved in the movement and opened new spaces for mediated solidarities.

As Nikunen (2019) argued about media solidarities, social media platforms have the potential to enhance solidarity, as they provide spaces for people to come together, express compassion, and voice injustices. Here, by offering a space for enacting media solidarity, Farsi Twitter created a new form of feminist praxis and participation in hashtag movement around sexual violence. This experience—regardless of limitations such as being shared among a limited group of women who at least had access to social media platforms and reproducing a hierarchy of deservingness in some moments—is no longer a mystery and cannot be ignored. This moment, aside from its limitations, needs to be viewed as an experience of successful feminist practice and solidarity in the digitally mediated world.

Thus, by shedding light on the dynamics of hashtag feminist activism at a particular moment, this research extends our understanding of how affective practices in online spaces can both empower and marginalize. Through a critical exploration of hierarchical media solidarities, it not only analyzes the limitations of digital activism but also underscores the necessity for an intersectional approach within hashtag feminism. Such an intervention has theoretical and practical implications for feminist media researchers and activists who might be concerned with achieving a deeper understanding of the interplay

between digital media, emotions, and activism. Given the contributions of the current study, investigating the impact of intersectional approaches within digital feminist activism on broader social, political, and cultural transformations in Middle Eastern societies is one avenue for future studies.

Finally, the present studies' findings demonstrate that to create more inclusive avenues for practicing media solidarities, Iranian hashtag feminist projects need to radically redistribute care and survival beyond the existing lines of gender, class, ethnicity, and region. Looking at the more recent collective engagement of Iranian women in hashtag feminism in the aftermath of the state murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022 shows that digitally mediated feminist activism in this context has evolved into and shifted toward more intersectional spaces of activism.

With Kurdish and Balouch women and their feminist collectives at the forefront of digital activism during the Jian, Jiyan, Azadi (Woman, Life, Freedom) movement in Iran, one can realize the transformation of hashtag feminism into radical modes of care, affect, and resistance. The emergence of radical feminist collectives in 2022 further shows that intersectional feminist approaches to digital media attempt to not only use the hashtag #MahsaAmini as a tool to consolidate information in digital networks but also actively strive to contextualize the hashtag within the broader social, political, and cultural realities of Iranian society, emphasizing the significance of intersectionality in feminist resistance.

While this subject falls outside the scope of the present study, it provides a valuable context for understanding digital feminism within the broader context of the ongoing liberation struggles. Future research could also delve into how patriarchal structures influence the expression of solidarity, care, and affective practices, as well as explore the evolution of hashtag feminism from more centrist engagement to radical modes of care and resistance.

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