

“Woman, Life, Freedom”: A Visual Rhetoric Analysis of #MahsaAmini on X

MENNA ELHOSARY*
City, University of London, UK

LAILA ABBAS
The University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

SHAHIRA S. FAHMY
The American University in Cairo, Egypt

This study examines the visual rhetoric and activism themes on #MahsaAmini through a quantitative content analysis of 520 visual tweets. The findings show massive support for the women’s movement in Iran through a predominantly visual pro-movement slant, which highlights the role of emotional visual tweets in mobilization. The study adds a unique dimension to Aristotle’s rhetorical framework in the context of state violence and women’s rights in the Middle East by exploring the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement. In addition, it provides valuable insights into how persuasion strategies shape feminist movements and encourage retweeting, especially amid cultural and contextual challenges in the region.

Keywords: #MahsaAmini, digital feminism, visual rhetoric, persuasion appeals, woman, life, freedom, X/Twitter, Iran

On September 16, 2022, protests erupted in Tehran following the death of 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini, who died in custody after being arrested by the morality police for breaching the nation’s hijab law (Reuters, 2022). Amini’s death coincided with the state’s crackdown on women’s rights, where Ebrahim Raisi, Iran’s hardline president, signed a decree in August 2022 to impose punishments on women who posted anti-hijab content online (Guardian News, 2022). The collective fury of women derived from the lack of control over their bodies and sexuality resulted in street protests inside and outside Iran (Akbari, 2022).

Security forces responded to the protests by killing and injuring thousands of protesters, arresting journalists, activists, and citizens, and sending enforcement patrols to violently detain women on the streets

Menna Elhosary: menna.elhosary@city.ac.uk

Laila Abbas: labbas@wisc.edu

Shahira S. Fahmy: shahira.fahmy@fulbrightmail.org

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(Guardian News, 2022). As protests continued, the country witnessed a “nation-scale” loss of Internet connectivity, and the government blocked Internet access and shut down messaging platforms (Moshtaghian et al., 2022). Despite constant attempts to suppress the movement, anti-regime protests continued, where videos of women burning their hijabs went viral under #MahsaAmini (Guardian News, 2022). Thanks to social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), global attention was sustained. “Woman, Life, Freedom” were the words repeatedly written on banners in protests and used in social media posts under #MahsaAmini during the movement (Akbari, 2022).

According to Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright (2019), hashtags unite people on virtual platforms, allowing for mobilization and activism. Groups and individuals who are concerned with social and political issues rely heavily on social media to address matters in a decentralized manner, free from organizational and institutional restrictions, especially on platforms such as X, which help people mobilize, seek information, and raise awareness (Howard & Hussain, 2011). This is grounded in the social media activism phenomenon, which has recently received intense scholarly attention (Abbas, Fahmy, Ayad, Ibrahim, & Ali, 2022; Chon & Park, 2020). Digital feminism facilitates online discourses to resist injustice, call for freedom, gender equality, and women empowerment (Leupold, 2010). These movements emerged in response to the discrimination faced by women globally because of their gender (Mohanty & Samantaray, 2017).

Guided by the literature on digital feminism, we explore the persuasion techniques—which Aristotle classified as Ethos, Pathos, and Logos—that X users deployed in their visual rhetoric of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement to call for global support against violence and oppression within Iran. Although several scholars have analyzed visuals from a framing perspective (e.g., Cowart, Blackstone, & Riley, 2022), limited attention has been given to visual analysis through the lens of Aristotle’s persuasion strategies. We take the lead in expanding Aristotle’s theoretical framework to matters of violence, abuse, and discrimination against women in Iran, following Fahmy and Ibrahim (2021), who proposed the applicability of Aristotle’s theoretical framework to digital feminism. The study contributes to the literature on cyberfeminism in the Middle East, where digital platforms have provided individuals a space for challenging hegemonic forces and sharing stories on how politicizing religion is used as a license to oppress women (Holt & Jawad, 2013).

Although our study focuses mainly on content analysis rather than audience reception, we also analyze the impact of Aristotle’s persuasion strategies on retweeting as a means of audience engagement, aiming to determine the most effective persuasion strategy for driving higher engagement. Furthermore, we examine the activism themes and the overall tone reflected in the rhetoric: pro-movement or anti-movement. This study adds to the body of knowledge on how cyberspace empowers women amid what Oracle’s Internet Intelligence called the “largest Internet shutdown ever observed in Iran” (Moshtaghian et al., 2022, para. 29). Through our analysis of visual tweets, we uncover how global online discussions may break through geographical barriers and help women reclaim their agency in the social system.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

On September 13, 2022, in Tehran, 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini was imprisoned by the morality police on the charges of improperly wearing the hijab (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Three days later, she went into a coma and died in police custody (Lana, Nieto, Rodrigues, & Ortiz, 2023). The Iranian security forces issued a statement claiming that her death was due to cardiac failure. However, her family alleged that she

had died because of custodial brutality inside the detention center (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Her pictures bore marks of beating and suffering, which sparked protests against the Iranian regime (Basu, 2022).

During Amini's funeral, demonstrations took over the streets in Tehran, where people chanted "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Alkhaldi & Moshtaghian, 2022; "Iranian State Coroner," 2022). The government has repeatedly referred to these protests as a plot by "Iran's enemies," including the United States ("Iranian State Coroner," 2022). To counter the unrest across the nation, security forces killed and arrested hundreds of journalists, activists, and citizens (Alkhaldi & Moshtaghian, 2022). Social media erupted with thousands of visuals showing Iranian girls cutting off their hair and burning their veils, as well as Iranian women appearing without their hijabs (Basu, 2022). Other videos showed men standing on the front lines to protect the women protesting from police violence (Kohli, 2022). Protesters used #MahsaAmini to compile evidence of what was happening under one hashtag (Alkhaldi & Moshtaghian, 2022; Guardian News, 2022).

Although Iranian women are no strangers to movements (Al-Sulami, 2022), the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement is different. Amini's death took place amid the state's crackdown on women's rights, reflected in the decree signed by Iran's hardline president, Ebrahim Raisi, in August 2022, forcing sanctions on women who post anti-hijab content on the Internet (Guardian News, 2022). Moreover, this was the first time Iran witnessed the participation of the elite-subaltern, and it was the first revolution to be fundamentally triggered by the strict censorship of social media. Finally, this was the most widespread and longest protest in the history of Iran, as well as the country's biggest Internet outage on record (Al-Sulami, 2022; Moshtaghian et al., 2022).

Visual Activism and Digital Feminist Movements on X

In contemporary activism, movements are initiated among members who are previously unfamiliar with each other, although they can remain stable and develop long-term relationships over time (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Chon and Park (2020) define activism as a social phenomenon that "often features the following: (a) contentious issues, (b) collective action, (c) solidarity or collective identity, and (d) an effort to solve problems using communication" (p. 74). Social media has been extensively studied as a tool for the emergence of grassroots movements and political expression (Abbas et al., 2022).

The Arab Spring is an example of demonstrations inspired by social media (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). During these protests, X was indispensable for local citizens, who used the platform to organize and share updates on what was happening (Youmans & York, 2012). However, the platform was not only bound to local citizens; every user could express their ideas regardless of geographical location (Bastos, Recuero, & Da Silva Zago, 2014). This was made possible through hashtags, which are keywords that typically start with a hash symbol (#) and reference a specific event or person to help people access information (Small, 2011). Hashtags enabled individuals not only to initiate conversations and spread ideas but also to organize protests and marches, reach a global audience, and enable people inside or outside of a group to become informed about an issue (Kuo, 2018).

Similar to social movements, such as the Green Revolution and the Occupy Wall Street movement, feminist movements emerged in response to the continuous discrimination and injustice against women globally.

These movements strive for freedom, gender equality, and women empowerment (Mohanty & Samantaray, 2017). Digital feminism originated on social networking sites, where feminist discourses and resistance were facilitated. Feminists in the current era have an excellent opportunity to deliver women's voices around the globe (Leupold, 2010). This is facilitated through cyberspace, which paves the way for women's liberation by giving them a platform to participate in online discussions (Colley & Maltby, 2008). Kuah-Pearce (2008) points out that women have not only accepted but also intensely used cyberspace to negotiate and reclaim their identities within the current social system, changing the perception of cyberspace as a male realm.

In the context of X, Munro (2013) argues that digital feminism is characterized by its inclusivity of dynamic sexualities and cultures that use the platform to challenge sexism and misogyny. Various scholars have focused on analyzing visuals in online social movements. For example, Cowart and colleagues (2022) discussed how online posts about George Floyd were predominantly posts featuring either commentators, politicians, celebrities, or the law. Likewise, Vance and Potash (2022) explored the themes that emerged from photographs related to Black Lives Matter. The authors discussed several themes expressed by the movement: (1) social change, reflected in the declarations that call for structural and attitudinal transformation; (2) root problems, which reflected the problems that originally spurred the marches; (3) identity affirmation, which embraced the Black identity and unashamedly confirmed pride; (4) aspirations, rooted in calls for unity and hopes for peace; and (5) emotions, which included portrayals of human beings expressing grief (Vance & Potash, 2022).

Our work seeks to unravel the activism themes that dominated the visual rhetoric on #MahsaAmini and capture the context and overall stance of the users who posted on this hashtag. To achieve the latter, we borrowed from Cowart and colleagues (2022) and Vance and Potash (2022) and proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the dominant activism themes present in the image tweets for the hashtag #MahsaAmini?

RQ2: What was the overall tone (pro/anti-movement) reflected in the image tweets for the hashtag #MahsaAmini?

Persuasion Appeals and Visual Rhetoric Analysis

Aristotle (1926) analyzed rhetoric, referring to it as the art of persuasion. He articulated that speakers usually implement one of three appeals to persuade their audiences: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. These appeals are the successful determinants of any argument. They divide persuasive argumentation into inducements for both the audience and the speaker (Johnson, 1984). Ethos is an ethical appeal that exploits the credibility and charisma of the speaker. It aims to establish the speaker as a trusted source who has good intentions (Johnson, 1984). Pathos is the emotional appeal that elicits the audience's emotions to persuade them, and Logos is the rational appeal that depends on logical discourses, reasoning, and analytical skills.

Aristotle's work has served as the foundation for most contemporary persuasive strategies, which are mostly "derived from the work of Aristotle in some way or another" (Larson, 1992, p. 61). Several

communication studies have depended on Aristotle's modes of persuasion in their discourse analysis. For instance, Mshvenieradze (2013) studied the preelection persuasive techniques employed by French presidential candidates in 2002 and 2007, concluding that while Chirac depended on Pathos, Sarkozy focused on Ethos to emphasize his personality. Similarly, Mori (2016) conducted a discourse analysis of three UN 2015 General Assembly speakers, revealing that all speakers implemented the three persuasion techniques in their discourse. However, Rouhani emphasized Ethos more frequently, Abbas depended more on Pathos, and Netanyahu emphasized Logos.

Although rhetorical philosophy has its roots in verbal discourse, visuality has always been an intrinsic part of rhetorical consciousness (Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008). The distinctive features of the visuals, including their eye-catching effects, memorability, and ability to evoke emotional reactions, make them powerful for persuasion (Seo, 2020), especially since images can be identified and recalled more efficiently and for longer periods than words (Fahmy, Bock, & Wanta, 2014). Moreover, several scholars have noted the power of visuals in facilitating persuasion (e.g., Gibson & Zillmann, 2000). They argue that textual information should be enriched with visual content, which serves as exemplars to impact the recipients' ability to process data (Zillmann, 2002). Seo (2020) argues that communications that include both verbal and visual components are more influential than verbal-only communication because they help recipients absorb and comprehend messages more efficiently.

Despite scholarly support for the power of visuals as persuasion tools, limited studies have employed Aristotle's strategies to analyze social media visuals. In this context, Pang and Law (2017) argue that the classical rhetorical theory is an effective framework for analyzing the visuals on X. The authors explored the persuasive strategies visually communicated on #WorldEnvironmentalDay and found that Ethos dominated the visual rhetoric and was impactful in garnering the desired support for the cause (Pang & Law, 2017). Fahmy and Ibrahim (2021) examined the persuasive strategies used in the visual and textual tweets of the #MeToo movement, revealing that most tweets visually relied on Pathos to convey a wide range of emotions. Drawing from these studies, we propose our third research question, aiming to extend the scarce literature on visual rhetoric and explore how X users employed the three rhetorical persuasion appeals in their visuals under #MahsaAmini:

RQ3: How was each visual rhetorical persuasion strategy (Ethos, Pathos, Logos) implemented in the visual tweets tagged under #MahsaAmini?

In the context of social movements, Corbett and Connors (1999) noted that "the emotional appeal is vital in the persuasive process; intellectual conviction is often not enough to move people's will to act" (p. 84). Burke (1966) argues that Pathos enhances identification as it reflects the communicators' understanding of the audience's needs. Huntington (2017) demonstrated that emotional appeal triggers solidarity and sympathy with political causes, as it can influence feelings and attitudes. In addition, Blankenship (2019) argues that integrating emotional stories with activism content leads the public to resonate deeply with the activist's views. These arguments were nuanced by Fahmy and Ibrahim's (2021) findings that most tweets during the #MeToo movement relied on Pathos rather than Ethos and Logos. Accordingly, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1: Visual tweets tagged under #MahsaAmini focused more on the Pathos appeal and less on the Logos and Ethos appeals.

Several scholars have highlighted the influential role of persuasion appeals in shaping recipients' thoughts, emotions, and reactions (e.g., Higgins & Walker, 2012). It has also been consistently observed that tweets featuring visuals tend to attract higher engagement and retweet rates (e.g., Guan et al., 2014; Liu, Burton-Jones, & Xu, 2014). Shao (2009) contends that online engagement serves as a critical benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of communication. In this context, Bennett, Wells, and Freelon (2011) noted that analyzing users' engagement with online content can illustrate how they feel about it. Nevertheless, literature on audiences' reactions to rhetorical persuasive appeals is still scarce. Pang and Law (2017) indicated that the employment of visual rhetorical persuasion appeals—that is, ethos, pathos, and logos—had an impact on retweeting the content on ##WorldEnvironmentalDay. Drawing from this literature, we propose our second hypothesis:

H2: The use of visual rhetorical persuasion appeals, i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos, had a significant impact on the retweeting of the visual tweets under #MahsaAmini.

Methods

Data Collection

We used a systematic quantitative content analysis to explore how X users visually tackled Amini's death in terms of the persuasive techniques, the activism themes, and the overall tone. We gathered all English tweets present on #MahsaAmini, relying on the hashtag as a methodological tool, as commonly used in online research (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Data were collected from September 16, 2022, the day of Amini's death, and continued for two days after Iran curbed Internet access to capture user's immediate reactions.

First, we used an API to extract all tweets under #MahsaAmini. The initial extraction process yielded 700K original tweets containing text, photos, videos, and links. These were manually filtered to include solely visual tweets published in English, facilitating analysis and capturing both international and national perspectives. This filtering resulted in 2,539 retained tweets. Subsequently, a second screening was conducted to omit tweets from media outlets or organizations, focusing solely on users' original content, resulting in a total of 2,436 visual tweets. Finally, duplicates and retweets were removed from the data set. The ultimate sample composed of 520 visual tweets shared by national and international users on #MahsaAmini between September 16, 2022, and September 23, 2022.

Coding Scheme

We coded 520 tweets, with a single tweet as the unit of analysis. For multi-image tweets, which included multiple visuals, each visual was coded separately. In addition, we considered the captions while coding to facilitate our understanding of what the attached picture depicts. For the first step, the type of visual was coded for descriptive purposes under one of the following categories: (1) picture, for regular still

images; (2) meme, for images with overlaid text (Figure 1); and (3) illustration, for drawings or paintings. Next, we coded for the following variables: overall tone, dominant theme, number of retweets, ethos, pathos, logos, and dominant visual rhetoric.

Overall Tone

This variable aimed at capturing X users' overall stance toward the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement to uncover the prevailing collective sentiment expressed on the platform about the movement, distinguishing between (1) A Pro-movement stance for tweets encouraging and/or supporting the movement, and (2) An Anti-movement stance for tweets discouraging and/or opposing and criticizing the movement.

Dominant Activism Theme

Drawing from the work of previous scholars (i.e., Cowart et al., 2022; Vance & Potash, 2022), this variable aimed at determining the most prominent theme present in the visual tweets; therefore, we coded for (1) social change: chants and declarations that call for structural and attitudinal transformation, (2) identity affirmation: affirmations of stance toward hijab or indications of support for Mahsa Amini and other women, (3) root problems: direct reference to police or demand for women rights and/or ending violence, (4) aspirations: signs of peace, hope, unity, and community building, and (5) emotions: grief in funerals, memorials, or protests, (6) talking heads: politicians, celebrities, or commentators. Understanding the prominent theme allows us to grasp the primary message that X users conveyed in their visual tweets, thereby uncovering the aspects of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement that they resonate with.



Figure 1. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini meme from X, also the most retweeted visual in our sample (Anonymous Operations, 2022).

Number of Retweets

This variable measured X users' engagement level with each of the visual tweets through retweeting. We inserted the frequency of retweets for each unit to explore how the various visual rhetorical appeals resonated with X users during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

Ethos

This variable explored how X users leveraged influential figures and sources to enhance the credibility and persuasiveness of their online activism messages. Therefore, each visual tweet was coded based on the presence of the following categories: (1) celebrity (e.g., a picture of Mark Zuckerberg), authority (e.g., a picture of Ebrahim Raisi), credible figure (e.g., a picture of a UN official), (2) testimonials (e.g., close-up of a protester), and (3) not applicable.

Pathos

This variable explored the emotional resonance used to mobilize support and provoke reactions to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Each visual tweet was coded on the presence of multiple emotions, following previous scholars (e.g., Aho, 1985; Pang & Law, 2017): (1) sarcasm for visual tweets mocking the situation, (2) inspiration and hope for visual tweets that aspire for a better future, (3) sadness for visual tweets that depict tragedy and evoke sorrow, (4) sympathy and pity for visual tweets that evoke compassion for the challenges Iranian women face, (5) courage and strength for visual tweets that depict bravery and resilience, (6) hatred for visual tweets that criticize or express hostility against the movement and its goals, (7) other for visual tweets that emphasize an emotion other than those above, and (8) not applicable.

Logos

This variable uncovered the logical reasoning and evidence conveyed through the visuals associated with the movement. It investigated how essential data are substantiated visually to enhance the persuasiveness of activist messages. Therefore, each visual tweet was coded based on the presence of the following categories: (1) recorded evidence, (2) facts/historical data, (3) other (e.g., graphs and charts that include statistics about the protests), and (4) not applicable.

Dominant Visual Rhetoric

This variable categorized each visual tweet based on its primary visual rhetorical strategy, aiming to understand the main persuasive appeal conveyed through the visuals associated with the movement. We coded each visual tweet for the dominant visual rhetoric strategy: (1) ethos for visual tweets that mostly focus on the presence of authority figures or testimonials to persuade viewers; (2) pathos for visual tweets that mostly elicit viewers' emotions to mobilize support for the movement; and (3) logos for visual tweets that primarily present evidence or data to persuade viewers.

Intercoder Reliability

The first author coded the sample ($N = 520$). Then, to test the intercoder reliability, the second author coded 10% of the sample ($n = 52$). For all variables, Scott's pi values were acceptable and ranged from .87 to .100 (see Scott, 1955). Specifically for overall tone, the agreement was .98; for dominant theme, the agreement was .88; for number of retweets, the agreement was .100; for ethos, the agreement was .87; for pathos, the agreement was .90; for logos, the agreement was .94; and for dominant visual rhetoric, the agreement was .95.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS was used to run statistical tests to examine the research questions. First, we ran chi-square tests to explore the variations among the frequencies as well as the significance of each coded variable (i.e., ethos, pathos, logos, overall tone, dominant activism themes). Second, we ran a one-way ANOVA to explore whether the overall visual rhetoric would impact retweeting and whether the categories within each technique would differ in their impact on retweeting. However, an independent sample t -test was run only for the categories within the Ethos because it included only two categories.

Results

The data corpus consisted of 520 visual tweets. As shown in Table 1, nearly half of them were pictures (44%), followed by memes (30%), and illustrations (26%). Overall, the visual tweets were moderately retweeted ($M = 77.83$, $SD = 191.057$), meaning that there was an overdispersion in the sample since the standard deviation was larger than the mean. The most retweeted visual received 3,515 retweets (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of the Type of Visual Included in the Tweets on #MahsaAmini ($N = 520$).

Type of image	Frequency	Percentage
Picture	229	44%
Meme	156	30%
Illustration	135	26%
Total	520	100%

Research question one investigated the extent to which the activism themes were present in the visual tweets on #MahsaAmini. Our analysis indicated significant differences among themes ($\chi^2 = 328.931$, $p < .001$). Root Problems dominated the visual rhetoric (41%), followed by Aspirations (20.8%). The least employed themes were Talking Heads (2.9%), and Emotions (1.5%; see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of the Dominant Activism Theme Present in the Visual Tweets on #MahsaAmini (N = 520).

Dominant Activism Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Root Problems	216	41.5%
Aspirations	108	20.8%
Identity Affirmation	87	16.7%
Social Change	86	16.5%
Talking Heads	15	2.9%
Emotions	8	1.5%
Total	520	100%

$\chi^2 = 328.93, p < .001$.

The second research question examined the overall tone (pro/anti-movement). The results of a chi-square test showed significant differences between Pro-movement and Anti-movement tones ($\chi^2 = 496.287, p < .001$). The visual rhetoric on #MahsaAmini was significantly Pro-movement at (98.8%), with only (1.2%) representing Anti-movement tweets (see Table 3).

Our third research question inquired about how each strategy in the visual rhetoric—that is, ethos, pathos, and logos—was used in these image tweets. Findings showed that most image tweets used more than one strategy. For pathos, users mainly focused on courage and strength (34.6%), followed by sympathy and pity (18.8%), and inspiration and hope (15.2%). Users focused significantly less on sarcasm (1.7%) and least on anger (2.3%). For ethos, users heavily used testimonials (34%) and less frequently used credible figures such as celebrities and authorities (7.5%). Finally, for the least deployed strategy, namely logos, as shown in Table 4, users heavily included recorded evidence (23.1%) and minimally used historical data (5.8%).

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentage of the Overall Tone Present in the Visual Tweets on #MahsaAmini (N = 520).

Overall tone	Frequency	Percentage
Pro-Movement	514	98.8%
Anti-Movement	6	1.2%
Total	520	100%

$t(519) = 104.19, p < .001$

Our first hypothesis, which predicted that image tweets for #MahsaAmini, significantly focused more on Pathos and less on ethos and logos, was supported. Results from a chi-square test that compared the dominant visual rhetoric, that is, ethos, pathos, and logos, revealed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 27.165, p < .001$). Results showed pathos dominated the rhetoric (44.04%), followed by logos (29.04.%), and then ethos (26.92%).

Table 4. Frequencies and Percentages of the Way Visual Rhetoric (Pathos, Ethos, and Logos) Were Employed in the Tweets on #MahsaAmini (N = 520).

Persuasion Technique	Frequency	Percentage
Pathos		
Courage and strength	180	34.6%
Sympathy and pity	98	18.8%
Inspiration and hope	79	15.2%
Happiness	22	4.2%
Hatred	19	3.7%
Sadness	17	3.3%
Other	17	3.3%
Anger	12	2.3%
Sarcasm	9	1.7%
Total	453	87.1%
Not applicable	67	12.9%
Ethos		
Testimonials	177	34%
Celebrity, authority, credible figure	39	7.5%
Total	216	41.5%
Not applicable	304	58.5%
Logos		
Recorded evidence	120	23.1%
Facts/historical data	30	5.8%
Other	5	1%
Total	155	29.8%
Not applicable	365	70.2%

Finally, our second hypothesis predicted the use of visual rhetoric, that is, ethos, pathos, and logos, had a significant impact on the retweeting of image tweets for the hashtag #MahsaAmini. Results based on a linear regression analysis showed no significant differences ($F(3) = .602$, $p = .61$). To analyze how the strategies deployed within each persuasion technique—for example, the usage of recorded evidence in Logos—impacted retweeting, further statistical tests were carried out. A one-way ANOVA for the impact of the strategies used within pathos and logos on retweeting revealed no significant differences: pathos ($F(10) = .482$, $p = .90$), logos ($F(3) = .067$, $p = .98$). On the other hand, a t -test for the ethos strategies (celebrity, authority, credible figures vs. testimonials) revealed a significant difference between both strategies ($t = -2.460$, $p < .007$), as follows: celebrity, authority, credible figures ($M = 31.79$, $SD = 38.38$), and testimonials ($M = 77.86$, $SD = 115.342$). This finding indicated that the presence of testimonials in the visuals led to a significant increase in the number of retweets, which showed partial support for H2.

Discussion

This study sought to analyze the visual rhetoric of the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement. We examined the overall tone of the movement, the visual rhetoric, their impact on retweeting, and the dominant activism themes. The study uncovered the various visual rhetoric strategies employed by digital users in a feminist social movement in the X-sphere, extending the scarce literature on digital persuasion and online activism.

Our analysis reveals an overall pro-movement tone in the visual tweets on #MahsaAmini, with only 1.2% of the tweets reflecting an anti-movement narrative. This finding reflects strong solidarity from both national and international communities with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. It also reflects their support for the movement’s demands, including freedom for Iranian women, an end to the compulsory hijab laws, and the outcast of the authoritative Iranian regime. X users expressed their solidarity through explicit self-drawn illustrations and visuals, such as videos and photographs, which were either captured by themselves or quoted from others. Moreover, they overlaid the images with texts and disseminated expressive memes. Examples of the overlaid text included a direct reference to the Internet cutoff, “Be our voice” statements (Hope, 2022), and listing facts about the Iranian regime and its history of murdering women.

Our findings reveal that X users employed the three strategies in the visual rhetoric: ethos, pathos, and logos. While most image tweets used more than one strategy, the emotional appeal, pathos, was the most dominant, reflecting that Emotions were intensely used when tackling Amini’s death to call for freedom and global attention. This finding is aligned with previous research, noting that user discourse is heavily loaded with Emotions, which are known to increase virality (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021). The results align with the findings of other researchers who argued that when it comes to collective action, Emotions are essential for persuasion and motivation (Van Ness & Summers-Effler, 2018).



Figure 2. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that reflects women’s courage in standing against police forces (Nobody, 2022).

Among the Emotions, courage and strength were the most frequently used. This category included visuals that reflected the power of the Iranian women, including their ability to stand courageously against the violent police forces (Figure 2), cut their hair to express their solidarity against compulsory hijab laws, and challenge the Iranian regime by burning out the nation's flag and scribbling on pictures of the Iranian leaders. This finding suggests that the visual rhetoric attempted to convey a courageous and strong image of Iranian women, assertive in demanding their rights.

The second most used Emotions were sympathy and pity, which were used as a persuasion strategy to express solidarity with Iranian women. This was done by arousing peoples' sympathy through the documentation of the daily repression they faced from the morality police. Prominent examples included visuals of young women locked in a police van and illustrations of vulnerable women bleeding from their faces (Figure 3). In general, sympathy and pity depended on portraying the nation of Iran and its people in dire need. This also included references to digital repression through glimpses of the consequences of the Internet cutoff. For example, the statements Be our Voice and Be their Voice as textual elements in the visuals documented how Iranian authorities silenced dissent. Right after sympathy was inspiration and hope, but with very slight differences.

Visuals that conveyed hope mainly focused on imagining a better future, seeking an end to the Islamic Republic's dictatorship, and envisioning a society where the hijab is a choice, not a law (Figure 4). X users minimally deployed several other emotions in their rhetoric, including sadness, hatred, happiness, and anger. However, sarcasm was the least-used emotion, reflecting the seriousness of the tweets in the movement and the clear dedication to demanding freedom without mockery. This finding contradicts previous literature, which found sarcasm to be among the most frequently used Emotions in social movements, suggesting that sarcasm and politics are indistinguishably linked (e.g., Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). However, the lack of sarcasm might be related to the overall tone of the rhetoric, which was a pro-movement tone with extremely minimal anti-movement rhetoric.

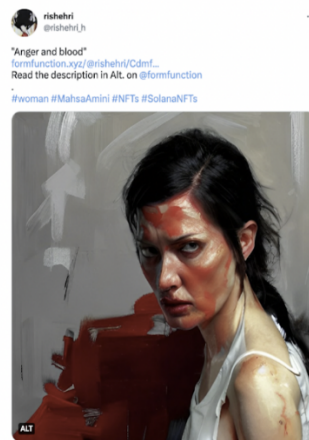


Figure 3. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that shows an angry woman bleeding heavily from her face (Rishehir, 2022).



Figure 4. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that reflects hope and inspiration (Abdelle Nazarian, 2022).

Ethos, the ethical appeal, focuses heavily on portraying celebrities, authorities, public figures, and testimonials as credible sources whose presence in a visual would appeal to the viewers. The rhetoric depended more on testimonials than on celebrities and authorities, which might be due to the lack of trust in figures of authority that the movement originally opposed. Examples of visuals that depicted testimonials included photographs of protesters on the streets holding signs to express their solidarity with the anti-mandatory hijab demands (Figure 5). Visuals that used logos relied on recorded evidence, statistics, and historical facts to support the rhetoric claims. Within this strategy, recorded evidence was heavily used, suggesting that during social movements, X becomes a space for documenting evidence (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022). An example of the latter includes screenshots of Internet pages that are not loading as evidence of the Internet blackout. Other photographs included tear gas cleanups on streets as evidence of repression toward the protesters (see Figure 6).



Figure 5. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini photo that features testimonials of women demanding their rights against mandatory hijab law (WUTangKids, 2022).



Figure 6. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini photo that shows tear gas cleanup in the streets (Azadah, 2022).

Contrary to previous studies (e.g., Pang & Law, 2017), our analysis revealed no significant differences among ethos, pathos, and logos in their impact on retweet counts. This might be due to the unique nature of our study, which focuses on a digital feminist movement, while previous studies that examined a similar assumption predominantly focused on health- and environment-related topics. Consequently, it appears plausible that neither of the rhetorical strategies—ethos, pathos, or logos—exerted a discernible influence on retweeting in our study. Nevertheless, on further investigation into the impact of individual categories within each strategy, ethos stood out as the only strategy with statistically significant categories affecting the number of retweets. More specifically, the presence of testimonials showed an influential impact on retweeting; visuals that depicted testimonials garnered a notably higher retweet count. Examples include visuals depicting protesters holding expressive signs and visuals portraying victims of oppression, such as a woman who was murdered by the morality police (see Figure 7). This finding suggests that X users were more inclined to retweet visuals featuring ordinary individuals involved in the movement, such as protestors and victims, rather than those featuring celebrities or authoritative figures. This highlights the significant role of personal narratives and grassroots activism in driving online support for social movements on X.

For the prominent activism themes, the two most prominent themes were Root Problems and Aspirations, which reflects that users mainly focused on the dictatorship of the Islamic Republic of Iran to demand an end to their repression. The visual tweets overwhelmingly belonged to the root problems theme. Examples included a direct reference to the morality police, such as images of police treating women violently, calling for basic human rights, and demanding a free flow of information. The visuals also included expressive illustrations, such as a woman combing her hair and detangling Iranian leaders from her strands and a woman cutting her hair to get rid of the authoritarian regime in Iran (see Figures 7 and 8). This finding resonates with various functions of protest art, which previous scholars have discussed (Vance & Potach, 2022). More examples of visuals from this theme were women fighting against Iranian authorities depicted as monsters (see Figure 9). The dominance of this theme is compatible with the findings of other researchers, who suggest that social media has become a vehicle for solving problems about political matters (Chon & Park, 2020).

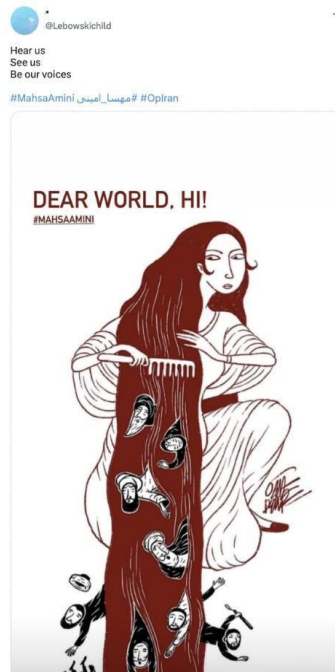


Figure 7. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that shows a woman combing her hair and detangling Iranian leaders from her strands (., 2022).



Figure 8. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that depicts a woman cutting her hair off to get rid of the authoritarian regime in Iran (Alok Putul, 2022).

The second most dominant theme was Aspirations, where visuals depicted a call for global support and solidarity. This theme included visuals imagining a better future in Iran. The most retweeted visual in our data corpus belongs to this theme (see Figure 1): a meme that raises awareness about the ongoing protests in Iran and asks for global solidarity. This result aligns with previous literature on how activists depend extensively on visuals to raise awareness and garner support (Zillmann, 2002).

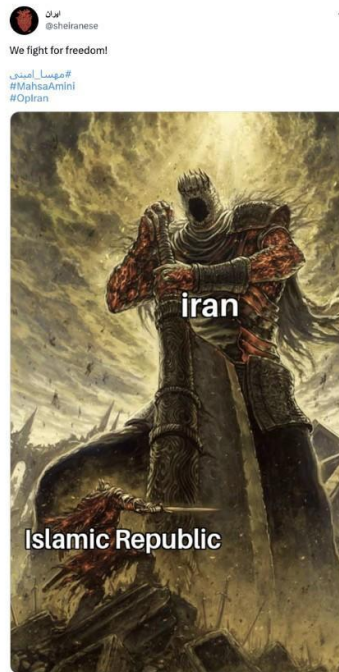


Figure 9. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini illustration that depicts the Islamic Republic and Iranians fighting each other and depicted as monsters (ایران, 2022).

Following the two most prominent activism themes, Identity Affirmation and Social Change were almost equally used. Identity Affirmation featured women demanding an end to the mandatory hijab laws imposed by the Islamic Republic, which are implemented irrespective of women's identity, nationality, or religion. It showed a sense of solidarity among Iranian women, who stood courageously to proclaim their identity and demand freedom of choice in wearing the hijab. Solidarity in this theme was reflected through images of veiled and unveiled women standing together as a sign of unity, as shown in Figure 10. It also included visuals of women burning their veils and chopping their long hair. Mehrabi (2023) indicates that long hair defines a woman's beauty, and people often evaluate a woman's attractiveness based on how long and thick her hair is. Therefore, Iranian women who willingly cut their hair reflect a mission of reclaiming identity through the feminist social movement on #MahsaAmini. On the other hand, visuals in the Social Change theme demanded societal changes through peaceful protests. Protesters call for justice and basic human rights and advocate for the hijab to be viewed as a choice, not an obligation. This theme included local and international marches and testimonials of peaceful protests demanding an end to violations of

human rights. In addition, it depicts protesters from the international community declaring their perception of the Internet blackout in Iran as equivalent to an actual “mass murder.”



Figure 10. An example of a collected #MahsaAmini visual that depicts the unity between a veiled and an unveiled woman (Simple, 2022).

The two least-used themes were Talking Heads and Emotions. Talking Heads depicted international politicians, government officials, and decision-makers amid their presence with national leaders from Iran. The final and last theme, Emotions, included photographs of individuals mourning over the brave ones who passed and memorials of both the protesters shot during the demonstrations and the political prisoners executed inside the prisons of Iran.

Overall, the use of persuasion techniques based on Aristotle’s rhetorical framework revealed that even though users are most likely to resort to the use of Emotions in the visual tweets analyzed, the actual raw document experience through testimonials is more likely to yield online interaction and participation evident through various engagement metrics on X. Our findings suggest that X users expressed solidarity in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in several ways, starting from their predominantly pro-movement tone to their visibly heavy usage of the pathos strategy to unite the local and global voices toward the freedom of Iranian women and the outcast of the Iranian regime. This became evident through their prominent reference to the root problems and aspiration activism themes. The ethos and logos persuasion strategies were minimally implemented with other activism themes.

Conclusion

Individuals using digital technologies are restoring to online platforms to address political matters. The findings from this study contribute to advancing the literature on X as an indispensable platform during contemporary feminist movements in the digital era. The work here adds a unique dimension to Aristotle's rhetorical framework by bringing the theory into practice to a specific incident of violence and oppression in Iran, namely the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. During the movement, networked publics organized to express political opposition, demand an end to the Iranian regime, and influence global publics in a request for support and solidarity. This finding aligns with the previous literature on how activism is a means of problem solving (Chon & Park, 2020). Furthermore, our study demonstrates how digital feminism represents a tool for women to call for social change.

Despite previous scholars arguing for the prevalence of misogyny against feminist activists, especially after the takeover of X by Elon Musk (e.g., Siemon, Maier, & Pfetsch, 2024), our study provides empirical support for the platform's capacity to host a predominantly pro-feminist discourse. The content on #MahsaAmini gave Iranian women an opportunity to share their experiences and for the global community to stand in solidarity with them. Our key findings provide several valuable insights into how the three persuasion strategies—ethos, pathos, and logos—are deployed in the visual rhetoric of an online feminist social movement and their possible impact on retweeting as an engagement metric. Moreover, this study captures cyberfeminism in Iran, a Middle Eastern country, by exploring how X users employ different persuasion techniques to raise awareness, seek global support, and disseminate content about feminist causes. In addition, we provide insights into how online discourse influences social movements in the Middle East.

The work is not without limitations. First, the results are specific to its context. The study explored the visual rhetoric of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, making the results only relevant in the context of a feminist social movement. Future studies should consider analyzing the visual rhetoric of other social movements and on different online platforms, including TikTok and Instagram. Furthermore, the researchers had to filter for English tweets only, which might have limited the results. Future researchers should consider analyzing the visual rhetoric in Persian and Kurdish, which are the two local languages of Iran. Finally, the work only examined original visual tweets. Future studies should look into the comments to explore the visual rhetoric disseminated within the ongoing conversations that take place in digital spaces.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By understanding how individuals visually communicated on #MahsaAmini through Aristotle's lens and the impact of its various strategies on retweeting, the study provides theoretical and practical implications that can maximize the effectiveness of visual digitally mediated social movements. Theoretically, we advance the applicability of Aristotle's framework to online social movements, which is a promising start for academics wishing to explore this theory in social and political contexts. Specifically, the study speaks to the unexplored territory of the art of persuasion through user-generated visuals present in digital environments, since this framework originally focused mainly on analyzing the discourse of political figures (e.g., Mori, 2016; Mshvenieradze, 2013). The study further takes the lead in understanding how Aristotle's strategies impact retweeting on X, which is essentially a promising research area for scholars

interested in visual activism, social media engagement, and audiences' perceptions. Practically, we provide empirical insights into the most impactful persuasion strategies for eliciting responses during digital feminist movements, making the study a powerful read for advocates wishing to take part in social and political movements.

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