

## Art and Activism: Analyzing Instagram Artworks During Iran's 'Women, Life, Freedom' Movement

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### Abstract

This study presents a content analysis of cartoons and illustrations shared on Instagram during the early days of Iran's 2022 protest movement, from September 20 to October 3, before state violence escalated. By applying semiotic and rhetorical theories, the study explores how visual elements in political art communicate meaning and persuade audiences. The findings reveal clear visual patterns in gender representation, emotion, and symbolism: women are portrayed as the sole protestors, embodying resilience and leadership, while men appear exclusively as suppressors, reinforcing traditional power structures. Protestors are often depicted with calm and confident expressions, whereas suppressors display aggression and are frequently dehumanized through grotesque or monstrous depictions. This visual dichotomy not only highlights power asymmetries—especially in the portrayal of weapons—but also functions rhetorically to legitimize the protestors' cause. The study underscores how artists employed visual strategies to reflect and amplify the movement's core messages of resistance and justice. However, the limited timeframe of analysis excludes subsequent visual shifts following the escalation of state violence.

**Keywords:** Social Media Studies, Social Movement, Iran Politics, Visual Analysis.

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## **1. Introduction**

The intersection of politics and visual culture serves as a potent arena for the expression of resistance against authoritarian regimes. In Iran, a nation marked by a complex sociopolitical landscape, recent years have witnessed waves of social movements challenging the status quo.

The most recent movement in Iran named after the slogan “Women, Life, Freedom”. This movement is a series of protests that started on 16 September 2022 after the death of Mahsa/Jina Amini, a young Kurdish Iranian woman who was arrested by the morality police in a street for not covering her hair correctly in public. The movement demands the end of compulsory hijab laws and other forms of discrimination and oppression against women in Iran. The movement has been met with brutal repression by the Iranian authorities starting from the second week, who have killed and arrested thousands of people. Since then, the movement is still going on in different forms of resistance.

Iran has witnessed multiple protests and political movements since the first month of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The Women, Life, Freedom movement has launched a new generation of young women to the forefront of the movement alongside of men. Amidst these movements, the proliferation of cartoons and illustrations on social media has emerged as a notable form of expression, offering a glimpse into the collective consciousness of the populace and the dynamics of power and resistance, which are unique and outstanding compared to previous movements.

## **2. Objective and Scope**

This study conducts a comprehensive content analysis of 100 cartoons and illustrations (Appendix 1) produced and disseminated in the early stages of a significant social movement in Iran, aiming to discern the multifaceted responses to political dissent and examine the portrayal of protesters and supporters within this visual discourse. To do so, we considered the following research questions:

QR 1. In what ways are the suppressors portrayed in these artworks?

QR 2. In what ways are the protestors portrayed in these artworks?

QR 3. What are the main demands of the protestors as portrayed in these artworks?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to visual discourse analysis and its illumination of the sociopolitical dynamics within Iran during a pivotal moment of political upheaval. By examining cartoons and illustrations, the research uncovers how visual media serve as powerful tools for political expression and communication, revealing the complex portrayal of protestors and suppressors. This study captures the immediate public reactions during the early stages of the social movement, offering critical insights into the movement's development and the public's initial sentiments.

By systematically analyzing the artwork and illustrations, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the political movement's impact, strategies, and cultural significance, contributing to a richer analysis of social and political phenomena.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Media and Social Movements in Iran since 1979**

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has experienced significant social movements intertwined with the role of media, shaping its sociopolitical landscape. The revolution itself was fueled by widespread discontent with the Shah's regime, amplified through underground publications, clandestine radio broadcasts, and mosques that disseminated revolutionary messages (Abrahamian, 1982). These media channels played a crucial role in mobilizing support and coordinating protests, contributing to the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

Post-revolution, Iran's media landscape underwent significant changes, with state-controlled media channels becoming dominant. However, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of reformist newspapers and satellite television channels that provided platforms for dissenting voices, particularly among students and intellectuals advocating for political reform and civil liberties (Moin, 2001). These media outlets facilitated the dissemination of critical viewpoints and mobilized public support for reformist agendas, challenging the conservative establishment.

The Green Movement of 2009 represented a watershed moment in Iranian politics and media history, leveraging digital and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to organize protests, disseminate real-time information, and amplify dissent against the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2016). Citizen journalism and user-generated content played a pivotal role, circumventing state censorship and providing alternative narratives to traditional media channels. The regime's crackdown on independent media and online platforms highlighted the pivotal role of media in both galvanizing and challenging state authority during periods of political upheaval. In recent years, protests over economic hardships, corruption, and political freedoms have continued to resonate across Iran, fueled by social media platforms like Telegram and Instagram, where grievances are shared, mobilization efforts are coordinated, and images of unrest are disseminated globally (Alfoneh, 2019). Despite state efforts to control information flow and restrict access to digital platforms, social media continues to serve as a vital arena for public discourse and collective action, shaping the narrative of dissent and resistance against the backdrop of a tightly controlled media environment.

The "Women, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran started in September 2022 emerged as a powerful grassroots response to decades of systemic gender discrimination, state repression, and social injustice, gaining international attention following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022 while in the custody of Iran's morality police. Rooted in feminist and human rights discourses, the movement is led predominantly by women, yet supported by a broad cross-section of Iranian society, including youth, ethnic minorities, and activists across ideological lines. The slogan encapsulates a vision for a future where women's rights, dignity, and bodily autonomy are central to broader democratic and societal transformation. Far beyond a demand for reform, "Women, Life, Freedom" represents a deep yearning for structural change, challenging patriarchal norms, authoritarian governance, and the state's control over private and public life. Its significance lies not only in its political demands but also in the cultural and symbolic resistance it fosters, making it one of the most impactful movements in Iran's contemporary history.

### **3.2. Theoretical Framework**

Visual representations have long been recognized as powerful tools for political expression and social critique (Entman, 2010; Gray, 2010). Cartoons and illustrations, in particular, possess a unique ability to convey complex socio-political messages through visual metaphor, satire, and symbolism (Baker, 2015; Joshi, 2018). Within the context of social movements, visual imagery plays a crucial role in mobilizing collective action, shaping public discourse, and challenging dominant narratives (Meyer, 2019; Kraidy, 2005).

In Iran, where dissent often faces severe repression, the proliferation of cartoons and illustrations serves as a vital avenue for dissenting voices to circumvent censorship and convey their grievances to a wider audience (KhosraviNik, 2015; Mirzoeff, 2011).

In this context, two theories help us understand the function and importance of content analysis of these artworks during the social movement: Semiotics Theory and Rhetorical Theory. By combining these two theories, the research not only decodes what the artworks mean but also how and why they

persuade—demonstrating that protest visuals are not neutral images but ideologically charged narratives that shape public perception and mobilize resistance.

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, helps reveal how meaning is constructed in the visual elements of the Instagram artworks. Through a semiotic lens, the research examines:

**Signifiers and signifieds:** For example, women depicted without hijab, holding symbols of resistance, or facing armed men represent not just individuals but broader concepts of freedom, resistance, and gendered oppression.

**Symbolism and codes:** Weapons, body postures, facial expressions, and clothing act as cultural codes that signify power, control, resistance, or victimhood.

**Binary oppositions:** The contrast between women (calm, resilient) and men (aggressive, suppressive) highlights ideological struggles embedded in the artworks.

**Rhetorical Theory** focuses on the persuasive strategies embedded in visual narratives. This theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, is the study of signs and symbols as a fundamental part of communication and meaning-making. The research analyzes:

**Ethos (credibility):** The portrayal of women as moral and dignified leaders builds ethical appeal, encouraging identification with their cause.

**Pathos (emotion):** Emotional expressions such as calm defiance or suffering evoke empathy, anger, and solidarity in the viewer.

**Logos (logic):** The structured opposition between unarmed women and militarized men constructs a logical argument about power asymmetries and injustice.

According to Saussure (1983), the sign is composed of the 'signifier' (the form that the sign takes) and the 'signified' (the concept it represents). Charles Sanders Peirce expanded on this topic by introducing a triadic model consisting of the 'representamen' (the form of the sign), the 'interpretant' (the understanding of the sign), and the 'object' (the thing to which the sign refers) (Peirce, 1931). In the context of visual narratives in political movements, semiotics allows researchers to decode the symbolic content of cartoons and illustrations, revealing how these visual elements convey specific messages and ideologies. For example, the use of certain colors, symbols, and characters in protest art can signify broader themes such as freedom, oppression, and solidarity. By applying semiotics, this study aims to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in visual representations, providing insights into how visual media shapes and reflects the sociopolitical landscape.

Rhetorical theory, with foundations laid by classical theorists such as Aristotle and further developed by modern scholars like Kenneth Burke, examines how messages are crafted to persuade and influence audiences. These appeals are crucial in analyzing how visual narratives in political movements engage viewers and elicit responses. Kenneth Burke (2007) expanded the scope of rhetorical theory by introducing the concept of identification, which emphasizes the role of rhetoric in creating a sense of shared identity and common purpose between the speaker and the audience.

In the context of political cartoons and illustrations, rhetorical theory helps to uncover how visual elements are strategically used to persuade and mobilize support, evoke emotional reactions, and establish credibility. For example, cartoons may use caricature and satire to critique political figures, appealing to the audience's sense of justice and indignation. By applying rhetorical theory, this study aims to understand the persuasive strategies embedded in visual narratives and their impact on shaping public discourse and perceptions during political upheavals.

Previous studies by Adelkhah and Rouhi (2011), Wilkerson (2013), Khalil (2015), Shahrokni (2015), Wong (2016), and Martinez (2021) highlight the importance of visual media in political contexts. They show how cartoons and digital art express grievances, critique authority, and mobilize support. In Iran, protest art is crucial for resisting censorship and political repression.

### **3.3. Recent Trends and Emerging Themes**

Recent developments in social media have revolutionized how visual narratives are produced and disseminated during social movements. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become crucial arenas for sharing political cartoons and illustrations, enabling rapid dissemination and broad reach. The interactive nature of these platforms allows for immediate feedback and engagement, amplifying the impact of visual content (Patterson & Wilkins, 2020). This trend reflects a shift from traditional media to digital spaces, where visuals are increasingly used to galvanize support and frame political discourse in real-time.

The rise of digital art tools and platforms has enabled activists to create and share visuals with greater ease and creativity. Digital illustrations, memes, and infographics have become popular forms of protest art, allowing for the production of visually engaging content that can quickly go viral (Shapiro, 2021). This new form of activism highlights the evolving nature of protest art and its role in contemporary social movements.

Government censorship and repression have a profound impact on the production and dissemination of visual art in politically turbulent contexts. In Iran, strict control over media and public expression forces artists to navigate a complex landscape of self-censorship and subversive strategies (Ghasemi & Valizadeh, 2022). Understanding these constraints is crucial for analyzing how protest art manages to convey dissent under repressive conditions and the ways in which artists adapt their methods to circumvent censorship.

Underground and independent media play a vital role in amplifying dissenting voices and showcasing visual protest art that might otherwise be suppressed. These alternative channels often serve as platforms for artworks that challenge the dominant narrative and provide a space for marginalized voices (Bakhshi & Amiri, 2023). Analyzing the relationship between mainstream and alternative media can provide insights into how visual narratives persist and evolve in repressive environments.

Comparing visual protest art across different political and cultural contexts can offer valuable insights into common themes and unique approaches. Studies of visual art from other regions experiencing political unrest, such as the Hong Kong protests or the Syrian Civil War, can reveal similarities and differences in how artists use visuals to convey political messages (Wong, 2016; Martinez, 2021). Such comparisons can enrich the understanding of visual protest art's role in global movements. Global art movements and trends, such as street art and guerrilla art, have influenced how visual protest art is created and perceived. Understanding these global influences can provide context for analyzing the specific characteristics of Iranian protest art and its connections to broader artistic trends (Smith & Jones, 2022).

### **4. Methodology**

To achieve the research objectives, a quantitative content analysis approach was adopted. Data collection occurred over a two-week period, from September 20, 2022, to October 3, 2022. During the period under review, due to the suppression of media in Iran, people responded to the popular movement spontaneously. These artworks were collected randomly through the trending hashtags #MahsaAmini and #Mahsa\_Amini. By searching these hashtags, a diverse set of 100 artworks was gathered, originating from multiple accounts. These accounts belong to individual users and are not affiliated with any specific

organizations or NGOs. Interestingly, many of the artworks include the creators' signatures, adding a layer of personal expression and authenticity. While the researcher did not focus on whether the images were digital or physical, the majority appear to be digital artworks. The geographical location of the accounts could not be determined and was not traceable. Similarly, the analysis focused solely on the artworks themselves, without examining the accompanying captions or texts. This approach highlights the decentralized, grassroots nature of the movement and reflects the diverse participation of individuals.

Posts were collected until a sample size of 100 was achieved. The selection of 100 posts was based on the principle of saturation, which indicated that additional posts were unlikely to reveal new themes or insights. This sample size is consistent with practices in social media content analysis, ensuring it captures a representative range of visual narratives related to the movement.

The data collection period includes the early phase of the protests and extends to October 3, 2022, when a significant government crackdown occurred first at Sharif University and then the entire country, marking a crucial turning point. This timeframe allows for a comprehensive analysis of visual narratives from the onset of the protests to a major event in the movement's trajectory.

Based on the research objectives and to address the research questions, each illustration was coded according to predefined variables, including gender portrayal of protesters and authorities, crowd dynamics, depiction of violence tools, facial and body expressions, and articulation of protester demands. The coding protocol involved detailed categories to capture the nuances of these variables. Two independent coders, trained in the coding protocol, ensured reliability through consensus discussions and the calculation of Cohen's kappa coefficient for two categories of facial and body expressions of protesters and suppressors. This process helped maintain consistency and accuracy in coding. Descriptive statistics were then applied to quantify the frequencies and percentages of coded variables, revealing patterns and trends within the visual narratives.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Measures were taken to respect the rights and dignity of individuals depicted in the illustrations, including safeguarding privacy and ensuring responsible use of sensitive content. The study adhered to ethical guidelines to prevent potential harm and maintain the integrity of the research.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. Characters appeared in the artworks**

Table 1 presents the distribution of characters depicted as protesters and suppressors in the artworks. This distribution shows that all characters in the artworks are depicted as protesters (100%), while a smaller proportion is depicted as suppressors (32%). The total number of characters exceeds 100, indicating that some artworks feature multiple characters of both suppressors and protesters.

**Table 1. Characters appeared in the artworks (N= 100)**

<b>Characters</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Protesters	100	100
Suppressors	32	32

### **5.2 Gender of Characters in the Artworks**

Table 2 provides an analysis of the gender distribution of characters depicted as protesters and suppressors in the artworks. This distribution highlights a stark contrast in gender representation between protesters and suppressors. All protesters are depicted as female (100%), while all suppressors



are male (100%), with a significant proportion also depicted in an unhumanized form (28.1%). The absence of female suppressors and unhumanized protestors also suggests a strong narrative focus on the dichotomy between humanized female protestors and dehumanized male suppressors in the artworks.

**Table 2. Gender of Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Gender	Protesters (n=100)	Suppressors (n=32)
Female	100 (100%)	-
Male	10 (10%)	32 (100%)
Unhumanized	-	9 (28.1%)

### 5.3. Detailed Appearance of Suppressors

Table 3 presents a detailed analysis of the appearance of suppressors in the artworks, categorized into four distinct types based on their attire and depiction. This distribution shows a significant portrayal of suppressors as men in military attire (46.9%), highlighting the militaristic aspect of suppression. The next prevalent category is the unhumanized depiction of suppressors (28.1%), followed by men in religious attire (25%). The absence of suppressors in plain attire indicates a focused narrative on the authoritative and dehumanized nature of suppression forces in the artworks.

**Table 3. Detailed Appearance of Suppressors (n=32)**

Suppressors' Appearance	Frequency	Percentage
Man with plain attire	-	-
Man in Military attire	15	(46.9%)
Man with Religious attire (Mullah)	8	(25%)
Unhumanized Man	9	(28.1%)

### 5.4. Distribution of Protestors and Suppressors in Artworks

Table 4 details the distribution of protestors and suppressors depicted in artworks, categorized by the number of characters involved. The table distinguishes between Individual (1 character), Small Crowd (2-10 characters), and Large Crowd (more than 10 characters). This distribution indicates a predominant depiction of protestors as individuals (78%), while suppressors are more commonly represented in small crowds (53%). The minimal representation of large crowds suggests a focus on smaller, more intimate groupings in the artworks. This pattern may reflect the artists' emphasis on the independent nature of protestor struggles and the collective dynamic of suppressive forces.

**Table 4. Distribution of Protestors and Suppressors in Artworks (N=100)**

Gender	Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Individual (1 character)	78	(78%)	10	(31%)
Small Crowd (2-10 characters)	16	(16%)	17	(53%)
Large Crowd (more than 10 characters)	6	(6%)	5	(16%)

### 5.5. Types of Weapons Associated with Characters in the Artworks

Table 5 presents the distribution of weapon types associated with protestors and suppressors in the artworks. This distribution indicates that protestors are rarely depicted with weapons, with only 5% associated with cold weapons like knife or scissor and none with warm weapons. In contrast, suppressors are more frequently associated with weapons, particularly cold weapons (56.2%), while a smaller proportion is associated with warm weapons (9.3%). The significant difference in weapon association between protestors and suppressors highlights the contrasting portrayal of these groups in the artworks and unexpected brutal violence with warm weapons in the following weeks.

**Table 5. Types of Weapons Associated with Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Type of Weapon	Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Warm Weapon	-	-	3	(9.3%)
Cold Weapon	5	(5%)	18	(56.2%)

### 5.6 Facial Expressions of Characters in the Artworks

Table 6 details the distribution of facial expressions among protestors and suppressors depicted in the artworks. This distribution reveals that a significant proportion of protestors are depicted with positive expressions (47%), while a smaller proportion shows negative expressions (29%).

Conversely, the majority of suppressors are portrayed with negative expressions (56.2%), with fewer showing positive expressions (9.3%) while (28.1%) remained unidentified expressions. This contrast suggests a deliberate artistic choice to portray protestors more confident and positive and suppressors more negatively, reinforcing the narrative of the artworks.

**Table 6. Facial Expressions of Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Face Expression	Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	47	(47%)	3	(9.3%)
Negative	29	(29%)	18	(56.2%)
Unidentified	13	(3%)	9	(28.1%)

### 5.7 Details of Facial Expressions of Characters in the Artworks

Table 7 provides a detailed breakdown of the types of facial expressions exhibited by characters depicted as protestors and suppressors in the artworks. This breakdown illustrates the diversity of facial expressions portrayed by protestors and suppressors in the artworks. Protestors are frequently depicted with calm or confident expressions (41%) and less frequently with negative expressions such as anger or sadness. In contrast, suppressors exhibit a wider range of negative expressions, including desperation, sadness, and anger, which collectively make up a significant portion of their depictions (59.4%). The presence of unidentified or unclear expressions further adds complexity to the portrayal of characters in the artworks.



**Table 7. Details of Facial Expressions of Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Detail of Face Expression		Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Positive</b>	Calm/ Confident	41	(41%)	-	-
	Cheerful/ Smiling	6	(6%)	3	(9.4%)
<b>Negative</b>	Angry/ Mad	15	(15%)	5	(15.6%)
	Desperate/ Sad	9	(9%)	12	(37.5%)
	Moaning /Crying	5	(5%)	2	(6.2%)
<b>Unidentified</b>	No Clear Expression	7	(7%)	7	(21.8%)
	No Clear Face	6	(6%)	3	(9.4%)

### 5.8. Body Expressions of Characters in the Artworks

Table 8 presents an analysis of the body expressions exhibited by characters depicted as protestors and suppressors in the artworks. This distribution illustrates a predominant portrayal of protestors as peaceful (68%) and suppressors as aggressive (81.2%) in the artworks. A smaller proportion of both groups have unidentified body expressions (7% for protestors and 9.4% for suppressors). This contrast in body language highlights the narrative tension between the peaceful stance of protestors and the aggressive demeanor of suppressors within the depicted scenarios.

**Table 8. Body Expressions of Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Body Expression	Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Peaceful	68	(68%)	3	(9.4%)
Aggressive	25	(25%)	26	(81.2%)
Unidentified	7	(7%)	3	(9.4%)

### 5.9 Details of Body Expressions of Characters in the Artworks

Table 9 provides a detailed breakdown of the types of body expressions exhibited by characters depicted as protestors and suppressors in the artworks. This breakdown highlights the diversity of body expressions depicted in the artworks. Protestors are shown in various states, including defensive calm standing (33%), celebrating or dancing (7%), and protesting (16%). In contrast, suppressors are predominantly depicted in aggressive actions such as attacking (62.5%) and being attacked (18.7%), with a smaller proportion displaying unclear expressions or bodies. This portrayal emphasizes the dynamic interactions and tensions between protestors and suppressors within the depicted scenes.

**Table 9. Details of Body Expressions of Characters in the Artworks (N=100)**

Detail of Body Expression		Protestors (n=100)		Suppressors (n=32)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Peaceful</b>	Freed/Relieved	25	(25%)	-	-
	Defensive Calm Standing	33	(33%)	-	-
	Celebrating/Dancing	7	(7%)	3	(9.4%)
	Demonstrating Unity	3	(3%)	-	-
<b>Aggressive</b>	Protesting	16	(16%)	-	-
	Attacking	5	(5%)	20	(62.5%)
	Being Attacked	4	(4%)	6	(18.7%)
<b>Unidentified</b>	No Clear Expression	3	(3%)	2	(6.2%)
	No Clear Face	4	(4%)	1	(3.2%)

In summary, the analysis of 100 Instagram posts tagged with #MahsaAmini over two weeks revealed notable trends in visual representation. All protestors were depicted as female, while all suppressors were male, with many suppressors portrayed in a dehumanized form (28.1%). Protestors were mostly shown individually (78%) and were rarely associated with weapons (5%), whereas suppressors frequently appeared in small crowds (53%) and were often depicted with cold weapons (56.2%). Protestors were commonly shown with positive or calm expressions (47%), contrasting with the negative expressions of suppressors (56.2%). The body language of protestors was predominantly peaceful (68%), whereas suppressors were primarily depicted as aggressive (81.2%). These visual narratives emphasize the dichotomy between peaceful, positive protestors and aggressive, negative suppressors, reflecting the dynamics of resistance and oppression within the sociopolitical context of the movement.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Gender Representation and Characterization

Based on the findings, there is a clear gender difference between the protestors and the suppressors. All the protestors are women, highlighting a clear artistic choice to show women as the main leaders in the movement later known as "women, life, freedom." This choice reflects reality, where women often lead social protests, showing their strength and resilience as central figures in these movements. On the other hand, the suppressors are all men, highlighting the traditional view of authority, usually depicted by men. This difference in gender roles not only highlights the contrast between the protestors and the suppressors but also encourages us to think critically about power and societal norms shown in these artworks.

### 6.2. Facial and Body Expressions

As the results show, protestors are predominantly depicted with positive facial expressions such as calmness, confidence, and occasional celebrations, reflecting themes of empowerment, unity, and resilience in the face of adversity. It should be noted that these artworks were published before the government began to open direct fire on the protesters, after which the movements turned violent. The body language of protestors often conveys defensive stances or assertive actions like protesting, symbolizing active resistance and solidarity within the depicted protests.

In contrast, suppressors exhibit predominantly negative facial expressions, including anger, aggression, and despair. Their body language frequently portrays aggressive actions such as attacking or being attacked, underscoring their role as agents of conflict and oppression within the depicted narratives. The juxtaposition of these expressions underscores the thematic tension between protagonists striving for change and antagonists defending the status quo through forceful means.

### **6.3. Weapon Association and Symbolism**

While protestors are rarely depicted with weapons, suppressors are significantly associated with cold weapons like firearms, illustrating their role as enforcers of authority and control. This weapon asymmetry not only underscores the power differentials between protestors and suppressors but also symbolizes the unequal distribution of physical and symbolic violence in societal conflicts depicted in the artworks. The lack of warm weapons in these artworks clearly shows how peaceful the movement has been perceived by the artists who expressed themselves in these artworks, despite the unexpected use of guns and cold weapons.

### **6.4. Dehumanizing the Suppressors in Protest Art**

By studying the artworks, it is evident that a significant number of them depict suppressors in a non-human form. Based on Burke, K. (1973), Dehumanizing the enemy or suppressors in art is a significant rhetorical strategy that has been extensively documented in academic literature. This approach involves depicting the enemy in a way that strips them of their human qualities, often portraying them as monstrous, animalistic, or devoid of individuality and empathy. Such depictions serve to intensify the perceived moral divide between the opposing sides, making the enemy appear as a faceless embodiment of evil or oppression. According to Bhabha (1994), the use of dehumanization in colonial discourse functions to justify and maintain hierarchical structures by constructing the colonized as the 'Other.' Similarly, in protest art, dehumanizing imagery of suppressors reinforces the legitimacy of the protestors' cause by highlighting the stark moral contrast between the protestors and their suppressors.

The use of dehumanization in art can also be understood through the lens of semiotics and visual rhetoric. As Barthes (1972) posits, mythologies embedded in visual representations can reinforce dominant ideological constructs. In the context of protest art, the dehumanization of suppressors can be seen as a mythological construct that communicates the brutality and inhumanity of the oppressive regime. By portraying suppressors as grotesque or sub-human, artists employ visual symbols that resonate with viewers' emotions, fostering a sense of solidarity and moral urgency. This technique not only mobilizes public opinion against the oppressive forces but also empowers the protestors by framing their struggle in terms of a clear and unambiguous moral narrative. The effectiveness of such representations lies in their ability to simplify complex socio-political conflicts into easily digestible and emotionally compelling images, as observed in the works of various social movements worldwide (Chilton & Lakoff, 1995; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

### **6.5. Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the portrayal of characters in artworks depicting societal protests, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and consider implications for future research. One significant limitation is the temporal focus of this study, which only encompassed the first two weeks of the protest movement before a violent government crackdown occurred. During this initial period, the artworks primarily reflected the sincere and main demands of the protestors, illustrating their initial motivations and aspirations for social change.

The study's temporal scope may restrict a comprehensive understanding of how the visual narratives evolved in response to escalating government repression and societal dynamics over time. The dramatic shift in the narrative and themes of artworks following the crackdown, including changes in symbolism, tone, and thematic focus, remains unexplored in this analysis. Future studies are thus warranted to investigate these subsequent phases of the protest movement, examining how artworks adapted to reflect the shifting socio-political landscape and the resilience of protest movements in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, the sample size and selection of artworks analyzed in this study may limit the generalizability of findings across different cultural contexts or historical periods within Iran and beyond. Future research endeavors could enhance the robustness of conclusions by expanding the sample size, incorporating a broader range of artistic mediums beyond cartoons and illustrations, and conducting comparative analyses across diverse socio-political contexts.

Implications for future research include exploring the role of digital platforms in disseminating and amplifying protest art, investigating the reception of visual narratives among different audience demographics, and examining how these artworks contribute to shaping public discourse and collective memory of social movements. By addressing these avenues, scholars can deepen our understanding of the multifaceted impacts of visual media in mobilizing public opinion, challenging authority, and advocating for social change.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study explores how characters in protest artworks are portrayed, using content analysis to uncover deeper meanings in Iranian social movements. The findings highlight the artists' choices and the societal implications embedded in these visual artworks. By applying Semiotic and Rhetorical Theories, we understand how visual elements in political art communicate and persuade. Semiotics, from Saussure and Peirce, helps decode symbols, colors, and characters that express themes like freedom, oppression, and solidarity. Rhetorical Theory, especially Kenneth Burke's insights, shows how artists use caricature, satire, and symbolic imagery to critique authority, evoke emotions, and mobilize viewers. These visual narratives shape public discourse, mobilize protest movements, and amplify dissent.

This study contributes to understanding how visual art serves as political discourse and social critique in Iran. It analyzes character portrayal, gender representation, and weapon symbolism to reveal how artists convey resistance and resilience. Future research could explore how different audiences receive protest art, the role of digital platforms, and comparative studies across different contexts.

In essence, this study reaffirms that visual representations are powerful agents of social change, amplifying marginalized voices and challenging injustices through art.

## **Competing Interests**

*The authors declare that they have no competing interests.*

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### **Ethical Statement**

*It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. The measures were also taken to respect the rights and dignity of individuals depicted in the illustrations.*

### **Authors' Contributions**

*This article was created as a result of the author's own efforts and reviews.*

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## APPENDIX 1

The 100 artworks which have been studied in this research

