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TikTok as a Site of Social Protest in Iran's Gen-Z Uprising? A Critical Examination of Walsh's Analysis of TikTok in Iran

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical reassessment of Tom Walsh's article "TikTok as a Site of Social Protest in Iran's Gen-Z Uprising." The author argues that TikTok functions as a privileged space for authentic political expression and that viral videos posted during the 2022 protests following Mahsa Amini's death provide representative evidence of a grassroots youth movement within Iran.

This study interrogates the methodological and epistemic assumptions underlying that claim. Walsh's analysis is based on a small corpus of thirty highly visible TikTok videos, yet the dataset itself is not publicly available and the provenance of the accounts remains largely unverified. A structured inspection of the eleven accounts explicitly referenced in the article reveals that none can be reliably located within Iran. Several appear to be diaspora-based, while others display patterns consistent with episodic protest activity or non-organic amplification. Moreover, all analysed accounts rely on English-language framing oriented toward international audiences.

These findings raise broader questions about the relationship between algorithmic visibility and sociopolitical reality. TikTok's recommendation system privileges emotionally charged and aesthetically recognisable performances, meaning that virality cannot be equated with demographic representativeness or internal public opinion.

More broadly, the paper argues that techno-romantic narratives about digital activism risk reproducing simplified representations of Iranian politics aligned with dominant Western interpretive frames. To address these limitations, the article proposes a multiscalar analytical framework integrating micro-level visual analysis, meso-level platform infrastructures, and macro-level geopolitical and informational contexts for the study of digital protest.

Keywords: **Digital Protest; Hybrid Warfare; Iran; Social Media; Tiktok**