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The Impact of Social Media on the November 2019 Protests in Iran

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Social media, due to its highly diverse and fragmented nature, leads to chaos, conflict, and opposition because it is entirely centrifugal and boundless. It is a weightless space where the concept of a defined and concrete boundary cannot be applied. This decentralized space fosters semantic multiplicity and escapes any unified classification or articulation. The internet, as the cornerstone of social media, plays a fundamental role in generating disorder and conflict. The internet serves as an outlet for political parties and marginalized political groups, facilitating their political opposition. Marginalized and protesting groups can use the internet to expose political and economic corruption, discrimination, political repression, and governmental inefficiency, highlighting these issues and seriously challenging the government and its actions. This emphasis on corruption and governmental inefficiency can be considered the most significant function of social media in shaping both the mental and physical rebellion of activists. Given these points and the influence of social media on the November 2019 protests, the existing grievances reflected in the rebellious actions of the people can be categorized into poverty/misery, class division in society, and economic corruption. In this regard, this study, using a qualitative method, aims to test its research hypothesis. The statistical population includes 15 experts and specialists from reputable domestic universities. This population was obtained through purposive and snowball sampling methods, achieving theoretical saturation with 15 participants. To identify the framework and main sociological elements of social media's impact on the formation and spread of social protests, semi-structured interviews with three open-ended questions were conducted. After each interview, the text was transcribed, and responses were categorized. Based on the overall concept of these categories, the proposed features and elements by experts were coded, classified, and analyzed.

Keywords: Social Media, Internet, Chaos, November 2019.

1. Introduction

Cyberspace is an environment constructed from invisible information that can take various forms. Although space itself lacks inherent meaning and gains significance in relation to time and place, five general principles regarding space exist as follows. Space is a social construct, the social realm is spatially constructed, cyberspace is not static and emerges through changing social relations, space is engaged with questions of power and symbolism—specifically the power/geometry of space—and finally, social space encompasses a multiplicity of coexisting spaces that intersect, relate internally, align, or exist in contradictory and oppositional relationships. In cyberspace, the boundary between truth and non-truth is removed, creating a confused space that can lead to crisis and chaos. Social media, due to its highly diverse and fragmented nature, leads to chaos, conflict, and opposition because it is entirely centrifugal and

boundless. This weightless space defies any concrete framework of boundaries. Decentralization fosters semantic multiplicity and avoids any unified classification or articulation, as each actor provides different meanings to social phenomena. The identity produced within such an anarchic space is fluid, unstable, and boundless. If globalization is a project and globalizing is a process, cyberspace, according to scholars, is a construct capable of generating crises, rebellions, and spatial manipulation either for or against any social and political structure. In the information age, cyberspace plays a crucial role in the formation and expansion of social movements. When governments block political and social mobilization, cyberspace can bring individuals together and serve as a platform for collective action or social uprisings. With the intertwining of space and time, individuals are compelled to act within this interplay. Time-geography examines the movements and movement patterns of individuals within physical environments. In these spaces, material and social components impose constraints on our movement patterns (Khaniki & Babaei, 2012). Consequently, influenced by this notion, it can be argued that space and cyberspace provoke the rise of subjects and challenge structures.

With these explanations, it is certain that the November 2019 protests in Iran are rooted in the protests of 2017 and their consequences. The November 2019 protests were entirely different from the Green Movement of 2009, as their primary demand was economic justice and equality, and their social base consisted mainly of the lower-middle and economically underprivileged classes. A significant portion of the middle class, which typically drives political activism, distanced itself from this protest due to the aftermath of the 2009 events and a cost-benefit analysis of the uprising. The geographical distribution of the protests across the country and around the capital clearly indicates the uprising of economically disadvantaged classes.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Theory of Geographic Diffusion and the Spread of Protests

Schools of social movements have emphasized the role of diffusion theory and innovation in various types of protests (Myers, 2000). Some scholars highlight how different protest tactics, such as sit-ins, geographically spread and are influenced by diffusion theory (Andew & Biggs, 2006). Others examine how protest tactics and their diffusion transfer from local to national levels (McAdam et al., 2001) and how different cities and locations become ready to embrace the spread of uprisings (Myers, 2000). When analyzing online protests and diffusion, social movement schools primarily focus on the spread of information.

Table 1

The Role of Social Media in Social Uprisings

Factor	Strategy	Tactic	Goals	Outcomes
Activist networks in social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Telegram (Amad News, Ava Today, Gooya News), etc.	Formation and direction	Development and organization	Mobilizing the masses	Destabilization and overthrow of the regime
News websites such as Balatarin and Gooya News	Provocation of the masses	Rumor spreading	Focusing on the collapse of the national currency	Social disturbances and chaos
	Systematic corruption among government officials	Weakening and reducing the power of the military as an economic oligarchy	Mass mobilization	Citizen journalism coverage and amplification of protests

Social media, as "invisible floating networks," serves as a source of potential and actual conflicts and social uprisings, acting in a Janus-faced manner by simultaneously provoking, expanding, and pacifying uprisings. As mentioned, social space encompasses a multiplicity of coexisting spaces that intersect, relate internally, align, or exist in contradictory and oppositional relationships (Masi, 2018). The main hypothesis of this research is that social media influences the formation and spread of social uprisings. The subsidiary hypotheses of this study are as follows:

Social media, by amplifying variables such as government corruption, human rights violations, and

fragile national security, influenced the November 2019 protests.

A sense of relative deprivation in accessing equal economic opportunities, political participation, and perceived violations of the rule of law and governmental corruption leads to public uprisings.

Social media is influenced by diffusion theory and the geography of uprisings.

2.2. Ted Robert Gurr's Theory of Relative Deprivation

The theory of relative deprivation, due to its constructs, has influenced many disciplines such as political sociology, particularly in explaining the causes of social movements and protests (Gurr, 1994). Ted Robert Gurr, as one of the most prominent theorists in this field, asserts that the essential prerequisite for violent civil conflict is the presence of relative deprivation, which is defined as the perceived discrepancy between actors' value expectations and their perceived value capabilities in their environment (Gurr, 1970). In other words, Gurr conceptualizes relative deprivation as the negative gap between legitimate expectations and reality (Gurr, 1994).

Value expectations refer to those goods and living conditions that people believe they rightfully deserve. Gurr categorizes civil conflict into three types: turmoil, conspiracy, and internal war. Turmoil is the most spontaneous form of uprising, including events such as strikes, riots, or demonstrations. Conspiracy refers to organized activities like coups, assassinations, or small-scale guerrilla wars. Internal war can also encompass revolutions. Notably, in Gurr's theory, long-term deprivation indicators, such as economic and political discrimination and potential separatism based on regional, ethnic, or group divisions, contribute to the emergence of these behaviors. As shown in the graph below, the theory of relative deprivation provides a sociological framework that can complement resource mobilization theory and other social movement theories in analyzing the November 2019 protests and their inherent characteristics.

In Gurr's theory, action and activism are fundamentally influenced by all types of social movements. Gurr situates relative deprivation as the starting point for analyzing civil violence. He defines relative deprivation as the actor's perception of the gap between their value capabilities and value expectations. Value expectations encompass the benefits and living conditions that people believe they are entitled to. Value capabilities refer to people's perceived ability to obtain or maintain these values. In essence, relative deprivation is the difference between legitimate expectations and claimants' assessment of their likelihood of achieving their goals.

Gurr classifies patterns of relative deprivation into three categories (Gurr, 1994):

Descending deprivation: In this form of deprivation, a group's value expectations remain relatively stable, but there is a perceived decline in value capabilities.

Aspirational deprivation: This type of deprivation occurs when value capabilities remain relatively constant, but expectations increase and intensify.

Progressive deprivation: This deprivation is characterized by a simultaneous increase in expectations and a decrease in capabilities.

All three patterns can trigger and fuel violent protest actions. Naturally, the greater the intensity and scope of relative deprivation, the more widespread collective violence will be. Given that Iran, influenced by events of the past decade, has become a highly mobilized society, social protests can easily transform into collective actions.

Two Dominant Social Movement Theories Relevant to the Research Hypothesis:

Relative Deprivation: People compare themselves to others' progress and achievements, and feelings of deprivation link them to social movements aimed at achieving fairness and justice (Gurr, 1994).

Resource Mobilization: People participate in social movements only when these movements have access to key resources (Reed, 2014).

The limitations of domestic media contribute to the reproduction of violence through social media. Freedom of expression can reduce the radicalization of cyberspace from protest to violence.

2.3. Social Networks and Activism

Social movements extensively use cyberspace for interaction, education, organization, sharing cultural products of the movement, communication, and fostering solidarity (Reed & McAlpin, 2005). However, some scholars question the decisive and all-encompassing role of cyberspace in social movements, pointing to inequality in internet access and the lack of widespread coverage of movements despite their

expansion (Masi, 2018). Others even question the quality of democratic and effective use of the internet in social movements, even when access is available (Milan, 2015). Nonetheless, the use of cyberspace by social movements remains a subject of serious consideration. The extensive use of blogs, websites, online videos, and social networks for movement objectives significantly broadens the scope of their information dissemination.

Regarding social actors, it is important to note that this issue has become one of the major topics in sociology and perhaps the most significant in recent decades. Guy Rocher, a prominent 20th-century sociologist, states that "the subject of sociological study is social action, meaning human action in a social environment" (Roche, 1970). According to Castells, the concept of the social actor encompasses a range of topics related to action, including individual actors, groups, organizations, institutions, and networks, even when these actions are institutionalized or organized through past processes. What matters is that all organizations, institutions, and networks ultimately reflect human actors' actions (Castells, 2009). More operationally, users who join a social network as activists or supporters and engage in media content production within that network are considered social actors (Khaniki & Babaei, 2012). Activism refers to the ability, will, and capability to engage in social action, utilizing tools, symbols, and signs within the framework of social values and technological mechanisms for mutual interaction. Therefore, activities by users relying on their skills to use internet communication tools to connect, exchange, and respond appropriately to others in cyberspace are considered activism (Khaniki & Babaei, 2012).

It is essential to highlight that activism is a product of new media and is a contemporary concept. Social media activism draws its political, social, and cultural practices from popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram. As media experts argue, this phenomenon stimulates and accelerates civic movements and social mobilization among virtual site users (Khaniki & Babaei, 2012).

Norris, a communications scholar, in *Digital Divide*, highlights key points regarding the internet's impact on civil conflict (Norris, 2001):

The internet serves as an outlet for political parties and marginalized political groups to express their political opposition. Marginalized groups can use the internet to expose political and economic corruption, discrimination, political repression, and governmental inefficiency, challenging the government and its actions by highlighting these issues. This exposure of governmental corruption and inefficiency is arguably the most significant function of cyberspace in shaping activists' mental and physical rebellion.

The internet contributes to mental rebellion, awareness-raising, organization, mobilization, and civil and political conflict among educated and young individuals.

The internet plays a role in fostering and spreading democratic values such as participation, freedom of expression, tolerance, and justice, encouraging political engagement with structures through changes in citizens' attitudes.

2.4. The November 2019 Protests

The November 2019 protests in Iran undoubtedly have roots in the 2017 protests and their aftermath. The November 2019 protests were entirely different from the Green Movement of 2009, as their primary demand was economic justice and equality, and their social base comprised the lower-middle and economically disadvantaged classes. A significant portion of the middle class, typically a catalyst for political activism, distanced itself from this protest due to the aftermath of the 2009 events and a cost-benefit analysis of participation. The geographical distribution of the protests across the country, particularly around the capital, highlighted the uprising of economically marginalized classes. According to statistics, the population of marginalized residents in key protest hubs—Islamshahr (548,000), Qods County (316,000), Shahriar (377,000), and Malard (744,000)—reflects the economic disparities fueling the protests (Etemad Online, September 3, 2019).

Economic marginalization, which intensified from the second term of President Hassan Rouhani's administration due to the rising dollar exchange rate, extended beyond the economic realm to encompass social and political dimensions. Consequently, many citizens felt marginalized in economic, social, and political spheres. The events unfolded on Friday, November 15, when the government suddenly announced an increase in gasoline prices, setting two new rates: 15,000 rials per liter for quota gasoline and 30,000 rials for non-quota gasoline. Rumors of gasoline

price hikes had circulated for months, with near-unanimous expert consensus on the need for price adjustments. However, the government repeatedly denied any decision on the matter. On the evening of November 14, the possibility of a price hike began to circulate, prompting many to rush to gas stations, creating long queues in some cities. At midnight on November 15, the price hike was officially announced, a decision made by the Supreme Council of Economic Coordination of the three branches of government.

In summary, the existing grievances reflected in the protests can be categorized into poverty/misery, class division in society, and economic corruption. However, as noted, this protest cannot be analyzed through established sociological theories of rebellion, such as social movements or resource mobilization, due to its unique characteristics, including sudden emergence, rapid dissipation, nationwide spread, radicalization, and the absence of stable leadership. Although some scholars argue that the absence of leadership can render social movements fragile, unstable, and paradoxical (Milan, 2015), the events of November 2019 are better classified as a protest rather than a social movement.

3.   Methodology

The statistical population consisted of 15 experts and specialists from reputable domestic universities. The sample was obtained through purposive and snowball sampling methods, achieving theoretical saturation with 15 participants. To identify the framework and key sociological elements of the impact of social media on the formation and expansion of social protests, semi-structured interviews with three open-ended questions were conducted. After each interview, the text was transcribed, and responses were categorized. Based on the overall concepts of these categories, the features and elements proposed by the experts were coded, classified, and analyzed.

Interview Questions Were as Follows:

1. To what extent did the formation and expansion of social protests in social media impact the November 2019 protests? How did traditional media (newspapers, television) and social media (Facebook, Telegram, etc.) influence these protests?
2. To what extent did amplification in social media impact the November 2019 protests? How did social media amplify governmental corruption, human rights violations, and ethnic divides through platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp, contributing to relative deprivation and subsequent public protests?
3. To what extent did diffusion theory and the geography of protests impact the November 2019 protests? How can social media expand the geographical scope of protests?

In the qualitative section of this study, the collected data are based on the opinions of experts and university professors. Therefore, it can be stated that the collected data are accurate, and the research method employed ensured precision, thus providing the qualitative section with the necessary reliability.

The data analysis involved analyzing the interviews conducted with experts, ultimately leading the researcher to a structured and systematic model. Descriptive statistics were first employed to examine the respondents' characteristics and describe the demographic status (distribution by gender and education) of the collected samples. Subsequently, inferential statistics were used to explain the model.

4.   Findings

Among the 15 experts who participated in this study, 7 were men, and 8 were women. Additionally, 7 participants were assistant professors, 6 were associate professors, and 2 were full professors.

During the design of the interview, all main categories, most subcategories, features, and dimensions were included in the interview form.

Table 2

Open Coding

Row	Transcribed Content from Interviews	Open Code
1	The internet leads to mental rebellion, awareness, organization, mobilization, and civil and political conflicts among educated and young individuals. The formation and expansion of the November 2019 protests were significantly influenced by social media. The inherent nature of social media in Middle	Internet and social media

	Eastern and less developed countries, particularly with opposition to the government, makes it prone to rebellion, with news favoring public dissent. Telegram channels and social media highlighted economic problems before the fuel price hike, preparing the ground for immediate uprisings and protests, undoubtedly influencing the formation of these protests. Social media played a leading role in this process, surpassing physical indicators, as evidenced by protest calls and the type of slogans shared as cohesive messages in cyberspace.	
2	The use of cyberspace by social movements is a subject of serious consideration. The extensive use of blogs, websites, online videos, and social networks for movement goals has significantly expanded their information dissemination. Social media platforms serve as new and crucial resources for organizing and operationalizing social movements. In the modern world, traditional media have faded, replaced by online media that influence public perception, diverting it from reality. Since the early 2010s, with widespread internet access and public distrust in national and physical media, only social media platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp, as accessible and convenient media, have played a significant role in mobilizing and spreading protests.	Messaging apps and social networks
3	Marginalized and protesting groups use the internet to expose political and economic corruption, discrimination, political repression, and governmental inefficiency, exaggerating these issues to challenge the government and its actions. Highlighting corruption and inefficiency is perhaps the most significant function of social media in shaping activists' mental and physical rebellion. Three main features form the core of exaggeration in social media: creating a corrupt image of the government in the public mind, inciting the masses through social media activism, and fostering an anarchic mindset against dominant structures. Cyberspace can transform the cycle of protests from differences to contradictions, polarization, violence, and ultimately full-scale conflict through discourses like structural corruption, governmental misconduct, ethnic/religious divisions, and comparative well-being with other countries. Exaggerating governmental corruption, human rights violations, and ethnic divides has been a key focus of opposition media, inciting civil disobedience and protests. The main foundation of the November 2019 protests can be attributed to the amplification of these three elements by opposition media.	Governmental corruption – Human rights violations – Ethnic divides (Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.)
4	Exaggeration in social media manifests as making mountains out of molehills. Highlighting issues, protests, riots, and disturbances is tied to social media. The more rigid and closed a country's political and social regime is, the more social media amplifies issues, strengthening public belief in them. Social media, given its dark side and the presence of extensive political opposition, amplifies even the smallest political, economic, or social incidents, causing public unrest through exaggeration.	Exaggeration in social media
5	People constantly compare themselves to citizens of other countries and upper-class segments, attributing their sense of deprivation to flawed political structures. Social media incites the lower classes, far exceeding urban marginalized populations, whose relative deprivation leads to protests. Comparing Iran's living standards to those of Arab countries, Turkey, and others is a key agenda of opposition platforms. Despite abundant resources and capacities, why should Iran's living standards be so low? Relative deprivation has been a major project of social media in recent years, fostering public dissatisfaction and encouraging protests.	Comparison with better conditions in other countries
6	Diffusion theory applies to social protests, particularly the November 2019 protests. Spatial diffusion refers to movements that alter landscapes or behaviors, either consciously or unconsciously, through social media. It changes public attitudes and behaviors. Social movements and online protests mainly focus on the dissemination of information. Activism, a product of new media, draws political and social practices from popular social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram. Media experts argue that this phenomenon stimulates civic movements and social mobilization through virtual platforms. The geography of protests, influenced by the origin and social class of protesters, can be expanded through social media, though this depends on the type and nature of the protest. The November 2019 protests, however, did not achieve widespread diffusion across various regions. The more successful social media is in disseminating protest-related news, the broader the geographical scope of protests becomes, provided the protest's context—whether cultural, political, economic, or ethnic—supports such expansion. Economic protests generally have greater potential for spatial diffusion and operationalization.	Expanding geographical scope through social media – Organized dissemination of information

This is the conceptual label considered in this study. Given that this research investigates the sociological impact of social media on the formation and expansion of social protests, the open coding process and analysis of identified indicators led to selecting the formation and expansion of social protests as the central phenomenon or core category, based on interviewee insights and the theoretical foundations outlined above.
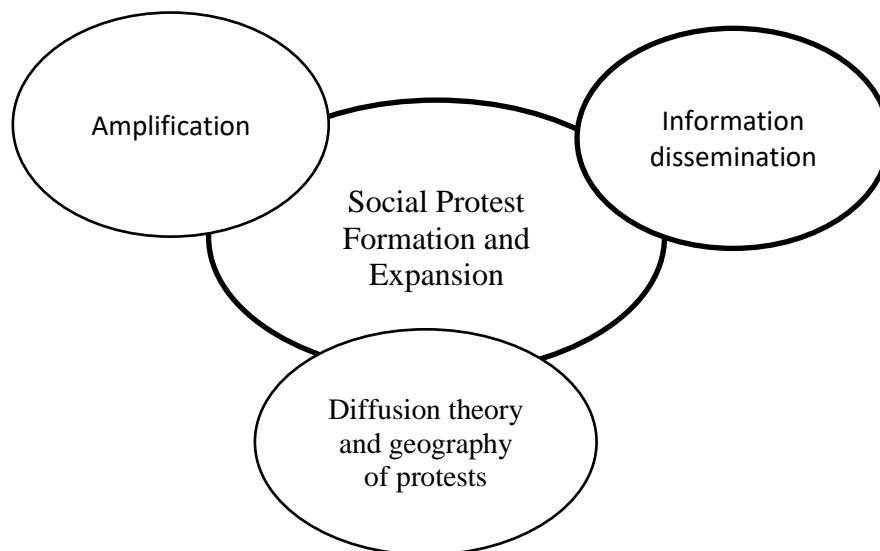
Table 3

Components Related to the Main Category of Social Protest Formation and Expansion

Open Code	Axial Code	Selective Code
Internet and social media	Information dissemination	Formation and expansion of social protests in cyberspace
Messaging apps and social networks		
Governmental corruption	Exaggeration in information dissemination	Amplification in social media
Human rights violations		
Ethnic divides (Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.)		
Exaggeration in social media		
Comparison with better conditions in other countries	Comparison and news dissemination	Diffusion theory and geography of protests
Expanding geographical scope through social media		
Organized dissemination of information		

In conclusion, the model of social protest formation and expansion in cyberspace is as follows:

Figure 1

Model of Social Protest Formation and Expansion in Cyberspace

5.   Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the question of whether social media and its tools influenced the formation and expansion of social protests, particularly the November 2019 protests. The research hypothesis posited that social media impacted the formation and expansion of social protests by employing a combination of Ted Robert Gurr's *Relative Deprivation* theory, the paradigm of virtual networks, Hägerstrand's *Geographic Diffusion* theory, and Galtung's *Cycle of Protest* theory.

Undoubtedly, this research faced numerous challenges, such as the novelty of the subject and limited field data. However, the genealogy of social protests in Iran, as presented in this study, utilized influential sociological variables, the geography of protests, and theoretical frameworks from sociology, geography, and psychology to produce a unique scholarly contribution.

Regarding the dependent variable, social protest, it is essential to note that resource mobilization and organizational theories are not applicable to cyclical protests like the November 2019 uprising, which was temporary and confined to a specific time frame. Therefore, the protest model can be subject-oriented rather than agent-oriented. Social media isolates subjects from national identity, disperses them, and subsequently integrates them under a new identity and umbrella. Resource mobilization and social movement

theories are inadequate for analyzing the November 2019 protests, as these theories are suited for sustained social movements, not spontaneous protests confined to specific periods.

Moreover, resource mobilization and social movement theories emphasize legitimate opposition as a fundamental driver of political structural change, but this variable is excluded from the decision-making sphere in the political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hence, the researcher firmly believes that describing and explaining these theories in the context of temporary and unorganized protests lacks the theoretical components provided by prominent social movement and resource mobilization theorists such as Tilly, Zald and McCarthy, Melucci, Touraine, and others. Only the theory of *Relative Deprivation* provides a sufficient explanation for the cyclical protests in the country.

Additionally, given the interconnectedness of space, time, and place concerning the research topic, the methodology of this study relied heavily on qualitative research variables, drawing from Ted Robert Gurr's *Relative Deprivation* theory, as well as network and virtual society theories and Hägerstrand's *Diffusion* theory.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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