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The Selfie Protest: A Visual Analysis of Activism in the Digital Age

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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The Selfie Protest: A Visual Analysis of Activism in the Digital Age

Clare Sheehan

Activism in the digital age is a subject widely debated in the field of media and communications. As the phenomenon of mass-self communication continues to expand through the advance of social media technologies, new modes of political engagement, self-expression, and collective organization are emerging that challenge the logic of how activism has traditionally been conceived. The selfie protest, as one of the latest novelties in virtual politics, is a practice that exemplifies the politically creative possibilities offered by social media as well as the ways in which the nature of political participation may be evolving in the digitally mediated sphere. In an attempt to position the selfie protest as a trend that warrants scholarly appreciation, this dissertation will examine how protest manifests in the images that selfie demonstrations produce.

By conducting the social semiotic approach to visual analysis on a case study of selfies from the 2014 #NotAMartyr Facebook campaign, this dissertation specifically argues that the manifestation of protest occurs through the semiotic assembly of three overlapping motifs: the performance of political identity, the building of trust, and the assertion of political efficacy. The deployment of this methodology enables the researcher to empirically assess the manifestation of protest as a meaning that is conveyed through the semiotic choices selfie-takers apply within the assembly of their images. To the extent that the analysis reveals precisely how the motifs discussed above are semiotically constructed, this dissertation ultimately reveals selfie demonstrations as mediums where the manifestation of protest can occur and by extension advances the position of those enthusiastic about the potential that cyberspace offers for digital activism.

INTRODUCTION

(Fig. 1)

On the morning of 27 December 2013, 16-year-old Mohammad Chaar (pictured above in the red hoodie) posed for a 'selfie' with his friends on the streets of downtown Beirut. Moments after the photo was taken, a car bomb hidden in the golden Honda SUV shown parked behind the group detonated. In a second image captured shortly after the explosion occurred, Chaar appears unconscious and bleeding on the sidewalk. He later died from his injuries.

(Fig. 2)

The car bomb, which *CNN* (Jamjoom, 2014: para. 2) reports was planted to assassinate former Lebanese Ambassador to the United States Mohamad Chatah, resulted in eight fatalities and over 70 injured – exemplifying the severity of sectarian violence often experienced by those caught within the crossfire of Lebanon's warring political factions. Victims of these attacks are quickly labelled 'martyrs,' a mark of status commonly used in Lebanese culture used to valorize those who die for their religious beliefs.

In reaction to this sectarian outbreak and the death of 16-year-old Chaar, a group of Lebanese youths launched an online Facebook campaign called '#NotAMartyr' to express frustration with their country's continued instability and lament the martyrdom tradition for the way it normalizes protracted patterns of violence. 'We can no longer desensitize ourselves to the constant horror of life in Lebanon,' the #NotAMartyr Facebook page (2013) reads. 'We are victims, not martyrs. We refuse to become martyrs. We refuse to remain victims. We refuse to die a collateral death.' Seeking tribute for Chaar, the campaign encourages supporters to

upload their own version of a 'selfie' with the hashtag '#NotAMartyr' and a statement about the changes they would like to see in Lebanon. 'Post a photo or status to this page,' urges the #NotAMartyr Facebook group (2013). 'Tell us what you want for your country. Tell us what you want to live for.'

Referred to by the mainstream media as a 'selfie protest' (Hebblethwaite, 2014; Nassar, 2014; Jamjoom, 2014), the #NotAMartyr campaign represents an emerging form of virtual demonstration whereby individuals upload self-portraits of themselves online identifying with a political cause. Over the past few years, social media has witnessed the staging of numerous selfie protests, such as the 2012 #StrikeTheHike campaign in the Philippines, where people used selfies to protest hikes in train fares (Katz, 2014), the 2013 #StandByMe campaign in the United Kingdom, where students from the University of Sheffield used selfies to protest their government's policy on immigration (Young-Powell, 2014), and the 2014 international #BringBackOurGirls campaign, where public figures like First Lady Michelle Obama and activist Malala Yousafzai used selfies to show support for 200 missing girls abducted in Nigeria (Katz, 2014). In all of these cases, the selfie protest was the means through which politically motivated groups chose to vent and broadcast their concerns in cyberspace.

Given the rate at which the selfie protest seems to be proliferating as a popular method of online activism, this researcher finds it worthwhile to introduce the selfie protest into the lexical repertoire of the academic realm and explore the extent of its potential as a practice of 'self-actualizing digitally-mediated DIY politics' (Bennett, 2012: 30). Though largely unexplored by scholars thus far, the rise of the selfie protest is a phenomenon that can be situated within an unresolved debate in the field of media and communications about the political possibilities offered by social media. This discussion features claims from two competing camps: 1) social media pessimists who criticize online activism as a shallow, fleeting social networking trend that corrupts the integrity of public discourse (Gladwell, 2010; Morosov, 2011) and 2) social media optimists who defend online activism for empowering political participation and encouraging social change (Castells, 2009; Shirky, 2008; Bennett, 2008; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Steigler, 2009).

Contextualized against the backdrop of this debate, numerous questions about the selfie protest can be raised: should scholars conceive of the selfie protest as a legitimate and effective form of networked resistance? To what extent does the novelty of the selfie protest challenge the norms and expectations associated with traditional forms of protest? What kind of social, culture, or political impacts – if any – do selfie protests inspire? Can the nature of

this impact be assessed? It is in the pursuit of answers to these questions that this dissertation finds its purpose. Undeniably, the expansion of cyberspace and the 'new tools of social media' are 'making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to concerns' (Gladwell, 2010: para. 6). 'When more and more people socialize, organize, contribute, inform and publish their concerns and themselves on the Internet,' as Svensson (2011: 42) argues, 'political participation takes on different meanings and citizenships are enacted differently.' In this sense, undertaking research on the selfie protest seriously may offer a reference point from which to think about how the traditional concept of activism is changing as well as develop insight into a potentially 'important mode of action making its mark in contentious politics today' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 762).

Using the #NotAMartyr campaign as a case study, this dissertation departs from the conventional construal of protest as a tangible, concrete act belonging to the realm of the physical and explores a more malleable interpretation of protest as a *meaning* that can be visually performed in the realm of the virtual. Following a literature review explaining the rise of the selfie phenomenon and the nuances of the academic debate surrounding online activism, this dissertation narrows its focus by conducting a social semiotic visual analysis on a selection of selfies from the #NotAMartyr campaign. Though this dissertation does not attempt to reveal any sort of absolute truth about the data and offers merely one version of analytical possibility from the subjective interpretation of the researcher, the analysis that follows does attempt to validate the selfie protest as a virtual space where 'playful citizenship, critical discourse, and cosmopolitan solidarity' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227) appear. To the extent that further research is pursued on this topic in the future, the researcher hopes it may be possible to more thoroughly ascertain the value of the selfie protest as a harbinger of 'empowerment, agency, and resistance' (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 179) in the modern day repertoire of digital activism as well as ultimately advance the position of those optimistic about the opportunities that cyberspace offers for political behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a 'Selfie'?

The 'selfie,' defined by Oxford English Dictionary (2014) as ‘a photograph that one takes of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website,’ is a viral networking trend that has exploded in recent years with the expansion of digital technologies. Conceptually, the practice of selfie-taking is invariably tied up with the strategic

activities of self-presentation, identity construction, and impression management (Goffman, 1959: 14; Mehdizadeh, 2010: 360; Ellison, *et al.*, 2006: 417). As a visual artifact of an individual's 'self-concept,' or the 'totality of a person's thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself as an object' (Zhao, *et al.*, 2008: 1817), selfies enable individuals to assert an 'identity statement' (Zhao, *et al.*, 2008: 1820) about how they reflexively claim to perceive themselves. Importantly, the opportunities selfies offer for role-play with 'unexplored aspects of the self' (Turkle, 1995: 12) make the medium an ideal site for the expression of a 'hoped-for possible self,' or a self possessing 'highly socially desirable qualities that an individual would like to establish given the right conditions' (Skoric, 2012: 81). The hoped-for possible self departs from what Higgins (1987: 320) refers to as the 'actual self,' or the identity an individual actually is, and resides in the domain of the 'ideal self,' or the identity an individual wants to embody.

According to the *BBC* (2013: para. 1-2), the Oxford English Dictionary honoured the selfie with its award for 'Word of the Year' in 2013, noting how the word 'has evolved from a niche social media tag into a mainstream term for a self-portrait photograph' and citing research that suggests 'its frequency in the English language had increased by 17,000% in the last year.' Overall, the response to OED's recognition of the selfie has been mixed, with reactions ranging from what *The Paris Review* (2014: para. 1) describes as 'apocalyptic to cautiously optimistic.' From the perspective of those opposed to the rise of selfie culture, selfies are viewed as a superficial act of online hedonism that degrade and trivialize the nature of social interaction in cyberspace. Jonathan Freedland from *The Guardian* (2013: para. 1), for example, castigates the selfie as 'the ultimate emblem of the age of narcissism,' while Geoff Nunberg from *NPR* (2013: para. 8) denunciates the selfie as 'a proxy for all the deleterious effects of social media' and cautions against the rise of a 'selfie society where people will stoop to anything to get attention.'

For those more optimistic about selfie craze, however, selfie-taking represents a creative advance in the online social experience. Jenna Wortham from *The New York Times* (2013: para. 7) argues that the selfie 'signals a new frontier in the evolution in social media' and describes the practice as 'the perfect preoccupation for our Internet-saturated time, a ready-made platform to record and post our lives where others can see and experience them in tandem with us.' In Wortham's (2013: para. 10) view, the manifestation of selfie culture symbolizes the way human beings are 'swiftly becoming accustomed to – and perhaps even starting to prefer – online conversations and interactions that revolve around images and photos' over conversations and interactions in person or through the written word. *Times* columnist James Franco (2013: para. 12) also echoes Wortham's pro-selfie stance, arguing

that selfies function as 'mini-me' avatars that offer a new way of giving others 'a sense of who we are.' 'A texting conversation might fall short of communicating how you are feeling,' Franco (2013: para. 10) writes, 'but a selfie might make everything clear in an instant. Selfies are tools of communication more than marks of vanity.'

Situating the 'Selfie Protest' in the Academic Realm

The polarization of the mainstream debate over the selfie craze offers an entry point for thinking about how the phenomenon of the selfie protest might be approached through the lens of scholarly understanding. In recent years, the rapid advance of the Internet Revolution has ignited discussion about the extent to which the use of digital technologies – particularly social media – work to contest or reinforce traditional conceptions of social activism. Between the 'hitherto unseen possibilities for distributing and redistributing information' (Boulianne, 2009: 193) and the unprecedented levels of communicative and creative autonomy available through Web 2.0 platforms (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 182), scholars are faced with the challenge of assessing precisely what kinds of affordances and constraints the digital age offers those looking to contest the status quo. Recognized as a form of social media-centric activism that is unique to the digital age, the selfie protest is a newfound unit of analysis through which this challenge can continue to be contended with.

While acknowledging how the Internet may increase access to political information and offer more 'convenient ways of engaging in political life' (Boulianne, 2009: 193), many scholars (Christenson, 2011; Rotman, *et al.*, 2011; Skoric, 2012; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Hesse, 2000; Morosov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010) may question the extent to which digitally-driven activities like the selfie protest facilitate civically legitimate and politically effective types of engagement. 'Worries have been expressed,' as Christensen (2011: para. 4) writes, 'that these activities are pointless in that they are unable to achieve political goals and can derail political participants away from the more effective forms of participation in the activist's repertoire that have traditionally been used.' Even though scholars sceptical about the correlation between social media and social change do agree that online participation may 'raise awareness of, if not knowledge about, social issues,' the key area of dispute anticipated to emerge around the discussion of the selfie protest concerns whether the act of raising awareness actually translates into 'more meaningful and tangible social benefits' (Rotman, *et al.*, 2011: 820). Bennett (2012: 30), summarizing the crux of this debate, poses the following question: 'can these personalized forms of collective action achieve the levels of focus and

sustainability that have typically been required for social movements to press their demands successfully?'

The Slacktivist Approach to the Selfie Protest

For scholars like Morosov (2009), who pejoratively use the term 'slacktivism' to describe acts of social-media driven resistance, the answer to Bennett's question in regards to the selfie protest would be unenthusiastic. 'Slacktivism,' as Morosov (*ibid*: para. 1) defines, is 'feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.' Slacktivism critics find little reason to believe that people affiliate with online causes for any reason other than the narcissistic purpose of 'self-promotion, selecting flattering photos of oneself, and having the most friends' (Skoric, 2012: 85). Rather than delivering an impact on political outcomes in the real world, slacktivism focuses disproportionately on feeding an obsession with 'me, me, me and look at me and look at me' (Livingstone, 2008: 393) and the languid self-absorption of the 'lazy generation' (Morosov, 2009: para. 2). As a result, typical slacktivist displays of support – such as clicking a 'like' button, tweeting a hashtag, or even participating in a selfie protest – are 'hardly inspired with the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception' and are 'not likely to subsequently engage in more meaningful contributions to the cause' (Skoric, 2012: 80). While Skoric (*ibid:* 80) acknowledges that most slacktivists are 'probably genuinely well-meaning people,' he maintains their weakness is that 'they do not take the time to think about the value, or lack thereof, of their actions, in search of an easy way to feel that they are making a difference.'

Conceptualizing slacktivism as acts driven by self-gratification rather than the altruistic impulse of philanthropy, scholars criticizing the slacktivist mindset may dismiss the selfie protest as a practice that dilutes the concept of contentious political behaviour in the modern day. When comparing acts of online resistance with acts of offline resistance from the pre-Internet age, Gladwell (2010) asserts that electronic activism fails to meet the standards of what has historically been characterized as legitimate and effective forms of protest. Instead, as Gladwell (*ibid:* para. 31) states, online activism is more aptly described as:

> …Simply a form of organizing which favours the weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger…[…]…It makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the

> existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo. If you are of the opinion that all the world needs is a little buffing around the edges, this should not trouble you. But if you think that there are still lunch counters out there that need integrating it ought to give you pause.

'Real' activism, in Gladwell's (2010: para. 10) view, constitutes action that 'challenges the status quo' and 'attacks deeply rooted problems' – feats that individuals cannot accomplish simply sitting behind their computer screens. While traditional activism, as Skoric (2012: 78) elaborates, typically involves 'significant investment and risks to personal safety characterized by strong bonds among activists,' online activism releases participants from these risks and therefore does not 'require the participants to confront socially entrenched norms and practices.' If online activism counteracts the ability of individuals to confront the social order, then the growing tendency that 'people who would otherwise get involved through traditional means may instead opt for digital opportunities, believing that these activities are a sufficient replacement' (Christensen, 2011: para. 26) casts a dark shadow on future prospects for public participation in social change. In this sense, to the extent that the selfie protest is considered a slacktivist method of resistance, the proliferation of the practice is anticipated to stimulate concern about the democratic disadvantages the Internet offers civic life.

Redefining Protest for the Digital Age

From the perspective of those more optimistic about the value of digital resistance, however, the expansion of cyberspace is argued to be transforming the nature of social interaction to the extent that 'what is meant by contentious political behaviour at the dawn of the twenty-first century' (Ayres, 1999: 142) may be evolving. According to Castells (2007: 248), this evolution has occurred in tandem with the digitized phenomenon of 'mass self-communication,' or the process through which individuals can connect with global audiences using self-generated messages in cyberspace (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 182). The ease of mass self-communication online relocates the dynamics of how and where people interact from a physical to a virtual setting, where the transmission of conversation, the exchange of ideas, and the broadcast of beliefs proliferate at unprecedented levels. Free from the restraints of time and space, people from across the globe are being empowered to participate in new virtual communities, where citizens possess the creative and communicative autonomy to both 'construct, experiment with and present a reflexive project of the self in a

social context' (Livingstone, 2008: 396) and participate electronically 'in politically significant ways' (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 183).

Within these virtual enclaves, where special interest groups sharing 'common hobbies, identities, or political views' (Barber, 2001: 45) are able to collectivize, the notion of 'the political' is becoming inherently more issue-oriented and personalized. 'Personalized politics' or 'lifestyle politics,' as Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 743) define, materialize as the 'expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances' through which people use their own stories, experiences, and concerns to initiate the process of collective action. In this way, though it may appear to those criticizing the slacktivist mindset that socially networked activism is 'all about me, me, me,' the personalization of contentious behaviour need not necessarily 'imply a narcissistic self-absorption' (Livingstone, 2008: 396). Instead, as Svensson (2011: 44) argues, 'it seems that political participation has increasingly become part of an individual self-realization project' and differs in nature from how political engagement has traditionally been conceived. The pursuit of self-realization may itself be a politicized process – one that focuses less on the 'ideologies and formal group identifications' (Bennett, 2012: 22) that organized civic life in the pre-digital age and more on the dynamics of 'lifestyle politics in which the ordinary day-to-day decisions of citizens carry a political meaning' (Skoric, 2012: 79).

Overall, the combination of the rise of digital mass self-communication, the organization of virtual communities, and the resulting personalization of political behaviour are changing how people experience and engage with politics to the extent that the modern meaning of activism requires review. As politics undergoes the process of personalization, it may be worthwhile to consider 'new styles of collective action quite different from the styles attributed to social movements over the past 25 years' (Ayres, 1999: 135). McCafferty's (2011: 17) statement, for example, that activism 'has always been – and always will be about people who show up in person' seems less convincing within the context of a world where the bulk of social contact takes place electronically rather than face-to-face. To rigidly defend outdated definitions and expectations of political engagement from the pre-digital age only denies the 'novel possibilities of cyber communities' (Barber, 2001: 45) and the way the Internet 'sometimes serves as a catalyst for building civic communities and as a networking tool for civic participation' (Zhang, *et al.*, 2010: 78). Dismissing the selfie protest as 'slacktivism' without thorough analytical review, in this sense, endangers the possibility of overlooking 'creative developments that may be building the foundation of civil society in the twenty-first century' (Bennett, 2008: 4).

The Micro-Activist Approach to the Selfie Protest: Arriving at a Research Question

In an attempt to construct a framework through which acts of online activism like the selfie protest may be more positively construed, this dissertation invokes Marichal's (2013) idea of 'micro-activism.' As Marichal (*ibid:* para: 6) defines, micro-activism refers to small-scale forms of activism that derive from the political activities of everyday Internet users. Diverging from the slacktivist approach to digital resistance, micro-activism expands the traditional definition of protest to accommodate forms of electronic contentious behaviour emerging out of the lifestyle-based approach to politics. While these behaviours may not constitute 'a full-fledged effort to affect social outcomes,' Marichal (*ibid:* para. 18) argues that scholars should not 'invalidate their political purpose' by misrepresenting them as the 'passive political acts' associated with slacktivist intent. Instead, micro-activism exemplifies 'middle-level acts of political participation online that do not carry with them goals of full-scale activism, but require political engagement in a deeper and reflective way' (Marichal, *ibid.*: para. 80). At this middle-level of political participation, micro-activism can be used to describe initiatives like the selfie protest which – rather than catalyzing 'deep cultural economic changes' (Conway, 2012: para. 5) – are intended to 'inject public issues into everyday politics' and 'help solidify engaging in politics into an individual's sense of what it means to be a digital citizen' (Marichal, 2013: para. 46).

It is with the hope of continuing to expand Marichal's understanding of modern micro-activism that a study of the selfie protest phenomenon becomes compelling. Before embracing an overly hyperbolic narrative about the futility of online activism as true, it is necessary for scholars to properly appraise novelties like the selfie protest as part of 'the many innovations that young people have brought to our public communication space' (Bennett, 2008: 4) and avoid any 'sweeping generality' (Kavada, 2012: 32) about the slacktivist intentions of its participants. The dynamics of a selfie protest may not resemble 'classic social movement collective action schemes' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 760), but it is for precisely this reason that the practice warrants examination. 'There are no "bad" and "good" social movements,' as Castells (2004: 73) relates, and all attempts made to 'impact our social structures' should receive appropriate consideration in the academic realm. 'Only by scanning with an open mind the new historical landscape,' Castells (*ibid:* 74) continues, 'will we be able to find shining paths, dark abysses, and muddled breakthroughs into the new society emerging from current crises.'

In this way, by undertaking research on the selfie protest seriously and 'analyzing social deployments of technology adequately' (Bennett and Segerbeg, 2011: 199), it may be possible to attain a more 'critical perspective on some of the prominent forms of public engagement in the digital age' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 762) and raise awareness about 'not only how the Internet is being used but also how it might be used in as yet untested ways' (Delli Carpini, 2000: 347). Contextualized within the overarching perspective of those optimistic about the opportunities cyberspace offers for political behaviour discussed above, this dissertation seeks to assess the extent to which the selfie protest can be regarded as a virtual space where 'protest' – defined here in line with Marichal's notion of micro-activism – breeds. In order to achieve this assessment, this dissertation will operate its analysis around the following research question:

How does protest manifest in the images produced by selfie demonstrations?

Using the #NotAMartyr campaign as a case study, this research question seeks to interrogate the variety of possible ways that selfie protest participants exhibit and express the micro-activist notion of protest through their engagement with a cause. Crucially, the 'manifestation' of protest referenced here concerns the overall impression of protest that a campaign participant is able to establish in their selfie to a viewer. In this sense, therefore, this research question does not seek to evaluate the real world impact selfie protests produce, but rather analyze how campaign participants aesthetically experiment with the concept of protest in their selfies to the extent that the contentious nature of the political experience selfie protests offer their participants can overall be better understood.

The Conceptual Framework and Research Objectives

The framework this dissertation employs to conduct its analysis of how protest manifests in the images produced by selfie demonstrations revolves around the linked concepts of identity performance, trust building, and political efficacy. By positioning these concepts as a theoretical measure of how scholars can consider the selfie demonstration as a site where protest occurs, the research hypothesis for this paper posits that the #NotAMartyr campaign will reflect visual constructions of all three of these concepts in its images. In terms of identity performance, the #NotAMartyr campaign arguably encourages participants to support an end to sectarian violence in Lebanon by rejecting the culturally entrenched identity of 'the martyr' and making a visual assertion of a claim to be 'not a martyr.' To the extent that the #NotAMartyr identity can be understood as a construction of the 'hoped-for possible self,' the #NotAMartyr campaign may facilitate what Marichal (2013: para. 25) refers

to as an 'expressive political performance,' or a small-scale form of activism whereby participants can 'try an activist's identity on for size' and 'offer themselves as political subjects to interested others.'

Importantly, the #NotAMartyr campaign encourages participants to perform 'hoped-for possible selves' that are inherently political – namely, 'project identities' through which individuals may attempt to build a new sense of self that redefines their position in society or even aims at the transformation of society more generally (Castells, 2004: 8). According to Castells (*ibid:* 8), project identities emerge out of a desire to escape the confines of 'resistance identities' that convey an individual's sense of alienation or resentment against unfair exclusion. Dissatisfied with the image of their resistance self – understood here as the 'martyr' – participants in the #NotAMartyr campaign attempt to transcend the bounds of their 'political real' and enter the realm of their 'politically ideal' – projecting their politicized project identity of 'not a martyr' into the ether of cyberspace and photographing into being the possibilities for their political futures.

In terms of trust building, the collaborative nature of a selfie protest requires the submission of selfies from multiple individuals who work in tandem to present a political identity that is mutually shared. Based on their collective affiliation to a cause, participants in a selfie protest may experience a 'we-feeling' (Stryker, 2000: 23) that is associated with 'bridging social capital' and 'bond maintenance.' Especially when a selfie protest concerns the performance of a particular political identity, the dynamics of performative exchange – through which 'performers may wish to open the door to private or intimate aspects of their constructed identity' (Pearson, 2009: para. 22) – facilitates relational development and the forging of emotional ties. Though the selfie protest does not lend itself to the interpersonal face-to-face interactions of real world activism, all participants who cooperate in the selfie effort are arguably still part of a 'performance team,' which offers membership into a social group united by 'common interests, experiences, and solidarity' (Stryker, 2000: 23).

Finally, through facilitating expressive political performances and the building of emotional ties associated with trust, this dissertation proposes that #NotAMartyr campaign heightens a participant's overall sense of political efficacy. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954: 187) define political efficacy as 'the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizens can play a part in bringing about this change.' While not synonymous with political change, a sense of political efficacy is arguably necessary as a factor in convincing individuals that change is possible. As Zhang *et al.* (2010: 81) argue, 'perceptions of political efficacy are a prerequisite for political participation because citizens must first believe that

they are capable of affecting change before they are able to see the value of actively engaging in the political process.' To the extent that a visual assessment of how participants convey their sense of political efficacy can be reached, it may be possible to offer insight into how they are reflecting 'more deeply on themselves as civic beings' (Marichal, 2013: para. 25) and by extension experiencing the empowerment associated with the manifestation of protest.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Social Semiotic Approach to Visual Analysis

In order to investigate the research question of how protest manifests in the images produced by selfie demonstrations, this dissertation will undertake a visual analysis of the images contributed to the #NotAMartyr selfie campaign. As a methodology concerned with the 'constructed character of photographs, video, and film' (Collier, 2001: 35), visual analysis seeks to challenge the notion that images are mere 'records of reality' that serve only to provide 'documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions, and events they depict' (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001: 4). Instead, as Collier (2001: 35) explains, visual analysis 'assumes that photographs and other optical records of human experience may be both creations and concrete reflections of what is visible within the scope of the lens and frame.'

The visual analytical method operates around the idea that images contain layers of hidden meaning, which convey not 'evidence of the who, where, and what of reality,' but 'evidence of how their maker or makers have (re)constructed reality' (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001: 5). Understanding images as 'constructs,' visual analysis critically explores the relationship between an image and its image-maker, whose choices, identities, and perspectives play an active role in 'constructing' the illustration that takes shape. This construction of an image requires an image-maker to participate in what Hall (1997: 15) refers to as the art of 'representation,' or the 'meaning-producing practice' that conveys 'something meaningful about the world meaningfully to other people.' Within visual texts, the expression of a message or idea relies entirely on the creative autonomy an image-maker has to articulate the *meaning* of that message or idea visually. Visual analysis, in its effort to decode or 'translate' representations for both deliberate and hidden meanings, provides a way of understanding 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see' (Rose, 2001: 6) the particular vision of reality an image-maker wishes to present.

The specific approach to visual analysis this dissertation chooses to perform is that of social semiotics. Associated with the concept of semiology, or the 'science of signs' (Silverman,

2011: 329), the social semiotic approach investigates precisely *how* meaning is constructed in an image through an image-maker's selection of semiotic resources. Hall (1997: 5) describes the function of semiotic resources as follows:

> Sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes – they signify. They construct meaning and transmit it. They are the vehicles or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand for or represent (ie. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate. To use another metaphor, they function as signs. Signs stand for or represent our concepts, ideas and feeling in such a way as to enable others to 'read,' decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way we do.

The utilization of signs is fundamental for constructing the visual representation of an image-maker's vision. From the social semiotic perspective, the meaning of a sign is not given, but rather *motivated* and *made* by the image-maker, whose task it is to fuse meaning and form into a single semiotic entity (Kress, 2010: 62). The fundamental question an image-maker faces in representation, according to Kress (2010: 51), is 'what are the best, the apt means for giving material realization to my meaning?' As a way of pursuing a solution to this question, the choice of a particular semiotic sign can be viewed as a social process through which an image-maker attempts to visually assemble their message and have their meanings realized using the aesthetics of representational design. In this way, as Kress (2010: 77) stipulates, 'the sign which the sign-maker has made gives us insight into their "stance'" in the world' or at least an 'indication of the interest of the sign-maker in relation to the specific bit of the world that is at issue' in an image.

Applied to the selfies from the #NotAMartyr campaign, the social semiotic approach to visual analysis enables the research to conceive of selfies as 'semiotic systems' through which selfie image-makers engage in the process of meaning-making (Jewitt, 2009: 23). Understanding the selfie as a complex construct of signs rife with possible meanings, the social semiotic approach provides a method for mapping out these possible meanings and analyzing the range of semiotic resources a selfie image-maker uses to communicate, organize, and represent their messages. The selfie itself is a unique unit of analysis for the social semiotic approach, given the high levels of agency and artistic license the image-maker enjoys as both the creator and central focus of the image. By nature of their presence in the selfie, selfie image-makers play the dual role of both 'the designer' and 'the rhetor' (Kress, 2010: 49) in

the process of meaning-making – assigned not only with the semiotic task of assembling the signs that convey meaning, but also with the performative task of incorporating themselves into the image's overall ensemble of signs through which meaning is conveyed.

In pursuit of uncovering how protest manifests in the selfies produced by #NotAMartyr campaign, therefore, the social semiotic approach provides an intriguing method for empiricizing protest as a concept that can be measured visually. Preoccupied with the way image-makers express meanings through their selection of semiotic resources, the social semiotic approach can be used in this study to reveal how selfie image-makers use semiotic resources to construct the *meaning of protest* in their selfies. This approach will dissect the semiotic resources a selfie contains and interrogate the extent to which the meanings being semiotically expressed can be considered protest-related. Crucially, the research question's concern with the manifestation of protest will be addressed through the level of coherence an image-maker achieves in articulating the meaning of protest semiotically and imparting an overall impression of the image as 'at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance' (Armstrong, 1996: 28). In this sense, by conceptualizing protest as a meaning selfie image-makers endeavour to semiotically construct, the social semiotic approach can help theoretically evaluate the claim that selfie demonstrations are places where protest occurs.

Justifying the Use of Visual Analysis

Before sampling and procedure are discussed, it is worthwhile to outline the ways in which visual analysis is preferable to other methods for the purposes of this dissertation. Given the research question's inquiry into the visual phenomenon of the selfie protest, this project requires a method formulated for the study of images and therefore finds visual analysis more suitable than other methodological approaches. Interviewing participants from the #NotAMartyr campaign was initially considered a possible methodological route, as hearing from selfie-takers directly about how they decided to represent protest would lead to a clearer, more nuanced understanding of how protest manifests. While it would have been ideal to combine a visual analysis of selfies with actual testimony from selfie-takers themselves, the time, resource, and length restrictions of this paper would not allow for such an extensive research endeavour. Visual content analysis was also briefly considered as a methodological choice; however this approach would only quantify the types of representations present within a body of images in its entirety rather than exploring the nuances of *how* these representations are semiotically assembled within each individual image.

Through both its general suitability to the study of images and its skill for contending with the intricacies of *how* meanings are constructed and conveyed, visual analysis receives justification as the appropriate methodological choice for this project. As Silverman (2011: 328) writes, visual analysis offers a 'valuable way of understanding the mechanisms through which images produce a particular meaning and does so in a more sophisticated technique than content analysis.' For a project looking to 'produce detailed accounts of the exact ways the meanings of an image are produced through that image' (Rose, 2001: 69), the ability of visual analysis 'to articulate a range of systematic methods of analysis in order to complexly address questions of form, production, reception and meaning while taking account of political issues, institutions, and ideological discourses makes it comprehensive, significant and fascinating as a field of operation' (Lister and Wells, 2001: 90).

It is important to note here that the social semiotic approach to visual analysis is a highly subjective method, often requiring researchers to trust their own feelings, reactions, and impressions about the meanings of the semiotic resources they encounter when studying an image. 'We recognize that "looking" is always embodied and undertaken by someone with an identity,' as Lister and Wells (2001: 64) relate. 'In this sense, there is no neutral looking.' The search for meaning is an inherently biased process that makes it difficult to know whether the researcher is finding truth in their analysis or an exaggerated interpretation that corresponds to the answers they hope to find. For this reason, the author of this project does not assume that the purpose of her analysis is to achieve neutral objective understanding, but rather hopes than her own subjective, personal interpretations of how protest manifests in #NotAMartyr selfies may indicate a sense of the impression the campaign may leave on other viewers. It is in this line of thinking that the author encourages further research on this topic and urges others to replicate this project so that the findings ultimately reported here can be tested.

Selection of Data

From the launch of the #NotAMartyr campaign in December of 2013, exactly 351 selfies have been uploaded and featured on the #NotAMartyr Facebook page. These 351 selfies comprise the data set through which this dissertation will explore its research question and conduct the social semiotic approach to visual analysis. In terms of drawing a sample from this data set to investigate, it is important to note that the sampling process for visual analysis differs from the sampling processes of other methods. When performing a visual analysis, as Rose (2001: 73) explains, it is not necessary to adhere to a 'rigorous sampling procedure as a content analyst would.' The nature of visual analysis as a qualitative rather than quantitative method

affords researchers more flexibility in terms of their selection of sample images to explore. This selection of images is not chosen on the basis of acquiring a large volume of researchable material, but rather on the basis of 'how conceptually interesting they are' (Rose, 2001: 73). For this reason, according to Rose (2001: 73), visual analysis 'often takes the form of detailed case studies of relatively few images, and the case study stands or fails on its analytical integrity and interest rather than on its applicability to a wide range of material.'

Thus, each of the selfies presented in this dissertation were chosen based on the researcher's own impressions about which images seemed most rife with social semiotic potential and by extension most fruitful for examination and discussion. While it should be stated that every selfie from the #NotAMartyr campaign contains enough semiotic potential to warrant review, the time constraints and length limitations of this project necessitate analyzing only the images that seem *best fit* for investigating the research question of how protest manifests. It is perhaps also important to mention here that many of the selfies from the data set contain text written in Lebanese Arabic. So as to not restrict the images able to be chosen for study, the author of this paper commissioned the Columbia University Tutoring and Translating Agency to translate the selfies containing Arabic into English. Accordingly, the sample of selfies analyzed in this project was not compromised by the author's lack of Arabic fluency.

Methodological Procedure

This project will operationalize the social semiotic approach to visual analysis using a three-step procedure. The first step entails what Collier (2001: 39 - 40) refers to as 'open viewing,' or an 'open immersion that allows images to speak to us in their own terms' and enables the researcher to 'observe the data as a whole, look at and listen to its overtones and subtleties.' The goal of open viewing, besides acquainting the researcher with the material, is to identify which images in the data set of 351 #NotAMartyr selfies possibly elicit protest-related meanings associated with the conceptual categories of identity performance, trust building, and political efficacy. Following the intuition of the researcher, a selection of selfies will be chosen based on their perceived relevance to these conceptual categories and then grouped accordingly for deeper analytical review.

After open viewing is complete, the researcher will initiate Jewitt and Oyama's (2001: 140) framework for social semiotic visual analysis on all three selfie groupings. This framework assumes that images are assembled by 'three main kinds of semiotic work, which are always performed simultaneously': 1) representational metafunction, 2) interactive metafunction, and 3) compositional metafunction. A 'metafunction,' according to Jewitt (2009: 24), can be

thought of as a 'meaning potential,' or 'what can be meant and what can be done with a particular set of model (semiotic) resources.' 'Representational metafunction' refers to semiotic resources that relate concrete patterns of 'doing something' to conceptual patterns of 'being something' (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 141). These resources, as Rose (2001: 75) relates, can be found in the narrative characteristics of an image – namely, the representation of bodies (age, gender, race, build, size, looks) the representation of manner (facial expression, pose, demeanour), and the representation of activity (touch, movement, gesture).

'Interactive metafunction' refers to the semiotic resources an image-maker uses to create 'particular relations between viewers and the world inside the picture frame' (Jewitt and Oyama, 201: 145). Here, the semiotic resources of depth, gaze, and point of view gain relevance, having been shown to cultivate ties of distance, closeness, submission, voyeurism, superiority, inferiority, and equality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Lister and Wells, 2001: 84; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 136). Thirdly, 'compositional metafunction' concerns the way an image is designed and spatially organized, revealed most readily through the semiotic resources of colour, lighting, and layout. Degrees of saturation, the logic of linearity, and the centrality of subjects, for example, can be used to 'stress certain elements of an image' (Rose, 39) and distinguish which elements an image-maker desires to obscure or make obvious for the viewer. Overall, by analyzing the semiotic resources in #NotAMartyr selfies within the confines of these metafunctions, the researcher can contend with the vast lexicon of visual semiotic resources in a more systematic way and assess precisely how the meaning potentials of identity performance, trust building, and political efficacy are aesthetically constructed.

The final step of the methodological procedure entails a 'closing viewing' of the #NotAMartyr campaign and evaluating whether these aesthetic constructions of identity performance, trust building and political efficacy coalesce across the data in a way that qualifies the manifestation of protest. Collier (2001: 39) encourages 'returning to the whole view' as a way to respond again to the 'complete visual record in an open manner so that details from structured analysis can be placed in a context that defines their significance.' By completing this step and comparing findings of the ways image-makers have deployed semiotic resources in their individual representations, 'myriad details may now be seen in their larger context' and 'a coherent statement of meaning and significance' (Collier, 2001: 44) about how protest manifests in the #NotAMartyr selfies overall may be made.

ANALYSIS

Open Viewing

Open viewing of the 351 selfies collected from the #NotAMartyr Facebook page reveals a number of initial descriptive observations about the data. Every selfie from the campaign features the hashtag #NotAMartyr and some form of accompanying statement about changes the selfie-taker would like to see in Lebanon. Most of these statements are handwritten onto paper signs that participants uphold themselves, with the exception of nine that are typeset and superimposed electronically onto the image as well as two that are imprinted with ink onto the participant's body.

In terms of sign content, the messages within each image voice a number of different social, political, and cultural issues. Selfie-takers alternate between expressing what they do and do not want for Lebanon, highlighting frustrations like government corruption, living in perpetually unsafe streets, having to re-locate outside of Lebanon in pursuit of a more stable life, and the grief of losing friends and loved ones to sectarian violence. Many participants also voice their hopes for the future, such as the aspiration that growing generations will enjoy a better life without the constant fear of death as well as the desire to a build a society where sexual preference and religious affiliation are not causes for persecution. Almost all messages begin with or contain the word 'I,' signifying to the viewer that what is being read is from a selfie-taker's own distinct view.

Overall, the theatricality with which the selfies are staged varies throughout the data. For most selfie-takers, the staging of the image appears relatively ordinary with a simple pose against a minimal background. There are a few participants, however, who exhibit more artistic creativity in their images, using photographic filters and other editing techniques to experiment with shadow effects, sharpness of focus, and colour saturation. In addition, all participants captured holding their signs position them over the fronts of their bodies. Many participants seem to utilize these signs as a form of concealment, either holding them tightly across their chests or in ways that hide their facial features. Concealment appears as perhaps the most recurring motif throughout the data, with most participants obscuring themselves partially or even almost entirely from the viewer. Where facial features can be seen, the expressions of participants appear uniformly vacant throughout. Gazes are transfixed both towards and away from the camera, engaging the viewer in varying degrees of passive and active interaction. Participants also frequently assume a forward-facing pose in close proximity to the lens.

The Performance of Political Identity

Evidence suggesting the performance of political identity can be derived from the triangulation of several semiotic resources throughout the data. Firstly, within the realm of representational metafunction, the simple action of holding up a sign emits a possible identity-related meaning through the semiotics of touch and activity. Using one or both hands, the physical grasp of the sign is an action that all participants portrayed in their selfies perform as a means of presenting their messages to the camera. This grasp, as shown in the three selfies below, impresses upon the viewer the sense that the message is an extension of the selfie-taker's being – an aspect of the inner self that the selfie-taker is choosing to release and reveal:

Fig. 3

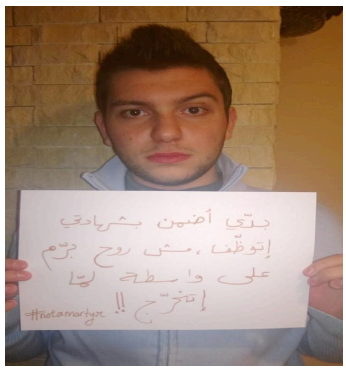

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

In each of these images, an unmistakable connection is construed between the selfie-takers and their signs on both a physical and metaphysical level. Each sign is positioned at the centre of the selfie-taker's body, indicating the selfie-taker's personal attachment to the message written and prompting the viewer to acknowledge the deliberate linkage that is being performed. The sign is something the selfie-taker wants the viewer to consider not just as a political message, but as a political message that radiates from *within* and is integral to the definition of their self-concept.

The semiotics of manner also connotes a representative metafunction relating to the performance of political identity. Through the vacant facial expressions present in all three selfies above, the selfie-takers deny the viewer immediate access to their characters and position the textual content of the sign as a type of 'identity barrier' that the viewer must read *through* in order to access the emotional content of the participant. Here, the sign is privileged as the primary location for self-expression in the image, where the participants compel the viewer to appreciate how their identities intersect with the politics of the campaign. An alternative, though equally compelling reading of this semiotic choice is how expressionlessness could potentially indicate the purging of one identity in preparation for

the adoption of another. From this perspective, the three selfie-takers from figures 1-3 semiotically deprive themselves of expression as a way of 'emptying' themselves of the martyr identity and priming themselves for the identity of being 'not a martyr.'

Having discussed the identity-related linkages that seem to exist between participants and their signs, it is relevant to note the varying levels of identity work being performed throughout the data. Instead of holding the signs directly over the fronts of their bodies, for example, the three selfie-takers pictured below make the compositional semiotic choice to align themselves with their signs in a 'left-right' placement:

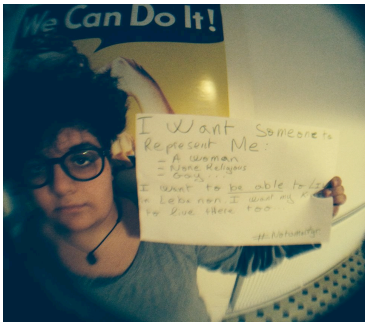

Fig. 6

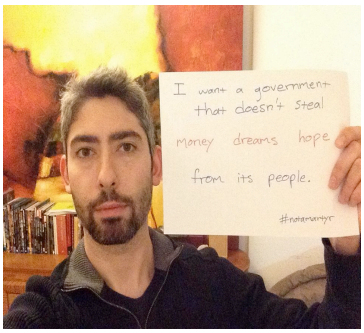

Fig. 7

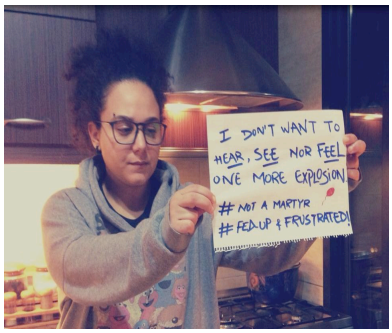

Fig. 8

According to Jewitt and Oyama (2001: 148), a left-right placement between objects connotes a 'given-new' structure, where 'the elements placed on the left are presented as "given" and the elements placed on the right as "new."' Here, the 'given' can be understood as the selfie-taker, while the 'new' can be understood as the sign a selfie-taker holds. Importantly, the left-right placement used in figures 6-8 creates not the 'identity barrier' found in figures 3-5, but two distinct 'identity realms' that convey a discrepancy between the 'real self' selfie-takers currently inhabit and the 'ideal self' selfie-takers hope to someday become. Though these realms remain separated by distance, the physical hold each selfie-taker maintains on their signs signals an intention to cling onto the realm of the ideal and bridge the gap between the 'given' and the 'new' – perhaps to the extent that a transformation from one identity into another can occur.

The second level of identity work performed throughout the data attempts to initiate the process of semiotically bridging the gap between the two 'identity realms' discussed above. In the three selfies presented below, each selfie-taker appears in varying degrees to be leaving the realm of the real and entering the realm of the ideal:

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

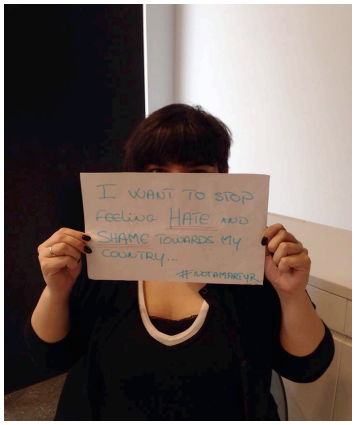

Fig. 11

In figure 9, the selfie-taker enters the image from the left side of the frame, beckoning the viewer through the semiotics of gaze to witness how she is turning her back on the realm of the real and embarking on pursuit of the identity that awaits her in the realm of the ideal. Though she has not yet fully detached herself from the realm of the real (the majority of her body disappears through the left side of the frame) and therefore not yet positioned in the realm of the ideal entirely, the interactive metafunction of her interlocked gaze with the viewer conveys the sense that she is pushing toward the identity she aspires.

In figure 10, while the woman positions her body more centrally in the frame and therefore more fully in the realm of the ideal, the leftward direction of her gaze suggests she is 'looking back' on the identity left behind in the realm of the real. Here, the selfie-taker clearly experiences some form of resistance from the left side of the frame that detains her in the realm of the real and prevents a full transference into the realm of the ideal. This tension between the real and the ideal is a motif also present in figure 11, where the selfie-taker uses the semiotics of colour to perhaps convey the struggle of identity transformation. The contrast between black and white on the left and right side of the image carries a compositional metafunction relating to the demarcation between a 'dark' realm of the real and a 'light' realm of the ideal. The selfie-taker spatially confines herself amidst these two colour blocks, indicating to the viewer the dilemma of being caught between two worlds.

Finally, the third level of identity work performed in the data involves selfie-takers who attempt to semiotically conquer the struggle of assuming the '#NotAMartyr' identity and overpower the realm of the ideal to the extent that they can fully embody the sense of self they desire. In the two images shown below, selfie-takers forgo posing with a sign entirely and opt instead to transcribe messages directly onto their bodies:

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Here, each selfie-taker makes the overt semiotic choice to mark themselves with the #NotAMartyr identity and actualize the realm of the ideal as part of their physical realities. The representational metafunction of this choice indicates the intention of the selfie-taker to fuse 'the message' and 'the self' into one corporeal entity, quite literally *writing* the politics of the campaign into the physicality of their daily lives as well as the meta-physicality of their self-concepts. Intriguingly, the depiction of the Lebanese flag in each image creates a provocative tension within this fusion of message and self (perhaps that the personal identity choice of being 'not a martyr' conflicts with the political identity of what it historically means to be Lebanese) and therefore signifies the attempt of the selfie-taker to overcome this tension by forcing these two identities to intertwine.

In this way, the selfie-takers in figures 12 and 13 convey the difficulty of taking on the #NotAMartyr identity without abandoning loyalty to the pride of being Lebanese. Given the way martyrdom is an enduring component of Lebanon's cultural tradition, the *construction* of the #NotAMartyr identity necessitates a *deconstruction* of national pride as it has historically been conceptualized and a *reconstruction* of a new national pride built for those who choose not to be martyrs. As follows, the semiotic representational integration of 'message,' 'flag,' and 'self' can be analyzed as the selfie-taker's effort to perform this reconstruction and ensure the viewer that the choice of being #NotAMartyr is not a choice to renounce Lebanon, but a choice to reform Lebanon to the extent that the #NotAMartyr identity can flourish. By communicating this effort through the medium of their skin, the sentiment of Lebanon's reconstruction transcends not only from the realm of the real into the realm of the ideal, but also into the realm of the *lived*, where the #NotAMartyr identity will endure as part of the selfie-taker's physical being.

The Building of Trust

Having analyzed how selfie-takers semiotically engage in the performance of political identity within their selfies on an individual basis, it seems necessary to also consider the possible protest-related metafunctions that may arise from the way these semiotic engagements coalesce and replicate throughout the data on a collective basis. When presented with the images from the #NotAMartyr campaign, the viewer is struck by the high levels of compositional and representational similarity shared between selfies. The continuous repetition of poses, movement, staging, and expression seems to congregate campaign participants in a display of communal assemblage – the impact of which is considerably poignant for the viewer:

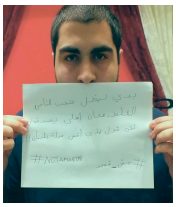

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

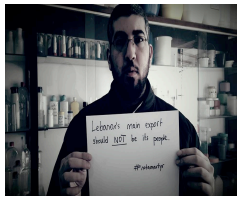

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

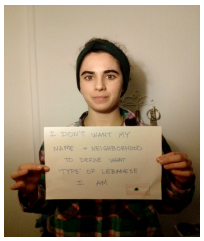

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

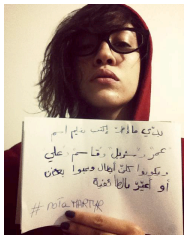

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

Fig. 25

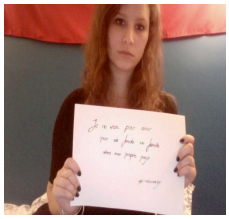

Fig. 26

Fig. 27

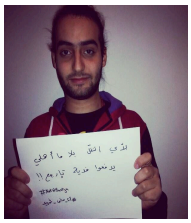

Fig. 28

Fig. 29

Fig. 30

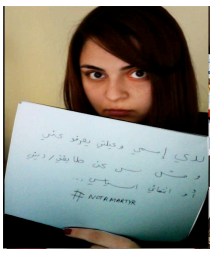

Fig. 31

Fig. 32

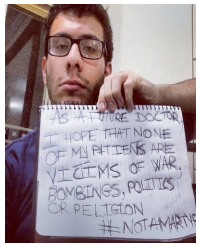

Fig. 33

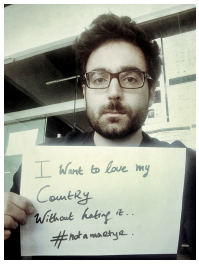

Fig. 34

Fig. 35

Fig. 36

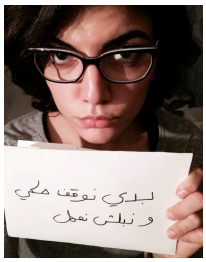

Fig. 37

Fig. 38

From image to image, each selfie-taker in figures 14-38 gazes intently towards the camera and faces forward with their signs held in front. While the nuances of how selfie-takers present themselves shows slight variation, the repetitive use of this semiotic pattern creates a cascading effect on the viewer. Sifting through this seemingly unrelentingly uniform stream of images, a visual rhythm develops through which the viewer is able to figuratively follow along with the pulse of the campaign. The penetrative gaze each selfie-taker directs towards the lens grips the viewer's attention and fosters a type of immersive interaction that deepens as the gaze is passed on between participants. In this sense, the viewer is confronted with the impression of being 'locked in' to witness the unfolding plight of the selfie-takers as they make their voices heard onscreen.

Through the multiplicative power of these semiotic reverberations, the solitary act of selfie-taking is re-appropriated into a collaborative act of virtual demonstration. Working together in semiotic tandem to compel viewers to bear witness to the #NotAMartyr cause, these selfie-takers engage in a collective gesture of performative exchange that builds up the presence of solidarity over the course of the campaign. Here, participants choose to not only take a stand with #NotAMartyr cause but also to semiotically take the *same* stand as other participants, conveying the compositional metafunction of 'we're all in this together' and tying participants to the unifying thread of belonging to a cohesive team. As members of this team, selfie-takers may deliberately share semiotic resources as a way to mutually indicate their commonality and construct a network of trust through which the message of the campaign can endure. While each selfie-taker poses in their image unaccompanied, the cumulative effect of semiotic repetition echoing across the body of selfies as a whole conveys to viewers and participants alike that the search for the #NotAMartyr identity is not a struggle that needs to be fought alone.

Trust building is a theme that also materializes through the representational settings in which selfie-takers choose to stage their selfies. The recurring presence of living rooms and bedrooms, for example, as illustrated below, invites viewers into the personal spaces of selfie-takers as they watch the #NotAMartyr demonstration unfold:

Fig. 39

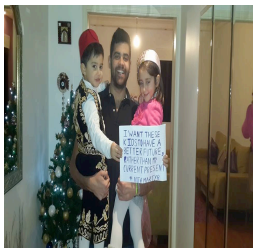

Fig. 40

Fig. 41

Fig. 42

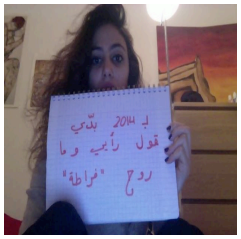

Fig. 43

Fig. 44

Fig. 45

Fig. 46

Fig. 47

By appearing within the confines of their homes, these selfie-takers welcome viewers into a space conventionally associated with notions of safety and protection. The home, as a deeply private and sanctified space of the self, symbolizes the location where people can find refuge from the outside world and seek solace in an environment they can call their own. Overall, the choice to incorporate the home into the semiotic repertoire of the image may be analyzed in two different, yet still intersecting ways. Firstly, the personalization of space can be construed as a correlation to the personalization of politics each selfie-taker performs. In an attempt to establish their personal stake in the #NotAMartyr cause, the representation of the home is a semiotic gesture that shows how the #NotAMartyr campaign impacts participants in an intensely profound way. The presence of the home, therefore, holds a possible representative metafunction of showing viewers how the political intrudes on the personal in addition to how the grievances discussed in the campaign are struggles from which there is no refuge or relief.

Secondly, to the extent that participation in the #NotAMartyr campaign can be understood as a disclosure of deeply felt frustrations and privately held political sentiments, the representation of the home conveys the emotionality with which selfie-takers connect with

the cause as well as potentially the trust selfie-takers extend to viewers in revealing these aspects of their innermost selves. A visual sphere of intimacy is created where selfie-takers are empowered to become vulnerable in front of the viewer and forge the emotional bonds necessary for confiding to take place. Notably, the cultivation of this intimacy is an interchange that also occurs between selfie-takers themselves. Similar to the motif of trust discussed in reference to figures 14-38, the selfie-takers in figures 39-47 elaborate on this motif by conveying the sense of closeness that accompanies inviting someone in from the outside. Together, these selfie-takers cross back and forth between the threshold that separates the personal from the political and demonstrate their mutual willingness to put their privacy at risk for the sake of standing united with the campaign.

The Assertion of Political Efficacy

In chapter two of this dissertation, political efficacy was defined as 'the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual can play a part in bringing out about this change' (Campbell *et al.*, 1954: 187). This feeling – or more specifically, the *meaning* of this feeling – is found to be conveyed through the data by two key semiotic choices: the spatial organization of selfie-takers around the openings of doors and the recurring depiction of children. In all nine of the selfies presented below, for example, the selfie-takers make the compositional choice to appear within close semiotic proximity of an entryway or window frame:

Fig. 48

Fig. 49

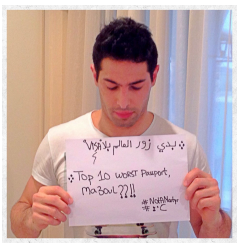

Fig. 50

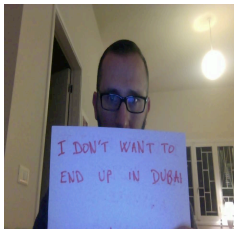

Fig. 51

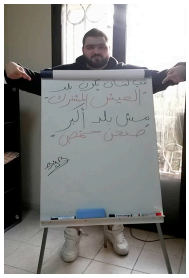

Fig. 52

Fig. 53

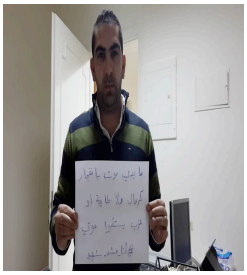

Fig. 54

Fig. 55

Fig. 56

Here, the repeating motif of open doors and windows can perhaps be read as a semiotic metaphor for the desire selfie-takers have to transcend the barrier between their real and ideal selves and seize a better future. Each selfie-taker is positioned within striking distance of a windowpane or door threshold, signalling their collective ambition to cross over from one reality – or one identity – into another. In this way, the semiotic representation of these openings arguably conveys the hope selfie-takers have about the opportunity the #NotAMartyr campaign holds to affect change in their lives. Rather than conveying the sentiment of being caught between two worlds, the selfie-takers above seem to deny the viewer the impression of 'feeling trapped' and instead challenge the viewer to consider their capacity to escape. In figures 52, 56, 59, and 60, for example, selfie-takers situate themselves in the centre of their doorframes, implying that they are ready to take a step forward into the unknown of the future. By signalling their intention to take this leap, the selfie-takers overcome the helplessness of being stuck in the martyr identity and assert the political efficacy associated with empowering themselves into identity of being 'not a martyr.'

In pursuit of enriching the lives of future selves, the recurring depiction of children throughout the data also appears to carry a semiotic metafunction relating to the assertion of political efficacy. In all seven of the selfies displayed below, children appear as a focal fixture of the image, either through the way selfie-takers pose alongside children or through the way children take on the role of the selfie-taker themselves and appear unaccompanied within the frame:

Fig. 57

Fig. 58

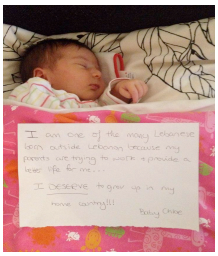

Fig. 59

Fig. 60

Fig. 61

Fig. 62

The presence of a child is a symbol conventionally associated with an emphasis on the future or the impression of hope. Children represent the virtue and innocence of youth, a sanctified facet of society yet to be corrupted by the politics of social reality. Within the context of the #NotAMartyr campaign, the inclusion of children conveys the selfie-taker's sense of obligation to protect the generation ahead. In this way, children are the conduit through which selfie-takers articulate their intention to pursue the possibility of change and prospects for a better life. Children infuse a sense of purpose into the selfies of the campaign, exemplifying for both the viewer and other selfie-takers a humanizing and emotionally provocative notion of what – or rather *who* – is precisely being fought for. This seems to be the representational metafunction figures 57, 58, and 59 convey, where children hold up the selfie-taker's sign and become directly implicated in the sign's message through the semiotics of touch. The children in figures 47 and 48 direct a defeated, pleading gaze towards the viewer, perhaps also carrying an interactive metafunction of the urgency each selfie-taker wants the viewer to feel about rescuing those who suffer undeservedly. An assertion of political efficacy ultimately takes place here, therefore, through the way selfie-takers use children to both demonstrate to the viewer the value of participating in the campaign as well as their own commitment to continue fighting for those too helpless and vulnerable to fight for themselves.

In figures 57, 61, and 62, the presence and perception of children (as illustrated in figure 61 where the female selfie-taker appears pregnant) continues to embellish each selfie with a sense of optimism about what the #NotAMartyr campaign can achieve. Drawing upon discussion of the 'ideal self' from the previous section, the representation of children here can be analyzed as a way of actualizing the 'ideal self' into a tangible 'future self' that is embodied not by the selfie-taker personally, but by the children who symbolize the selfie-taker's legacy. Figure 57, for example, uses the representational semiotic of a kiss between mother and child to communicate the transference of political efficacy from one generation to another. The spatial organization of these two figures around the light of the sun carries the compositional metafunction of signalling the start of a brighter beginning. Similarly, in figures 61 and 62, the anchoring of selfie-takers around and between their children establishes a sense of how the welfare of the future depends both physically on the selfie-taker's support as well as also metaphysically on the politically efficacious intention each selfie-taker holds for bringing new, enhanced life into the world.

Closing Viewing

Having analyzed how the concepts of political identity performance, trust building, and political efficacy assertion are semiotically constructed in the selfies above, the question remains of whether these constructions ultimately facilitate the visual manifestation of protest to occur overall. Upon return to a whole view of the data, the researcher has greater appreciation not only for the semiotic strategies selfie-takers employ to pledge their allegiance with the #NotAMartyr cause, but also how these strategies intermingle to create meaning potentials that are protest-related. Given the bustle of representational, interactive, and compositional semiotic activity found from image to image, the #NotAMartyr selfies can be assessed as exhibiting much more than merely the passive action of holding up a sign. From self-expression to solidarity to empowerment, each selfie abounds with thematic metafunction indicating the active engagement in a political pursuit – a pursuit that by involving the semiotic articulation of political identity performance, trust building, and political efficacy assertion can be construed as a form of protest.

In this way, the manifestation of protest arguably occurs in the images produced by the #NotAMartyr campaign through the simultaneous assembly and intersection of representational, interactive, and compositional semiotic choices selfie-takers undertake on both an individual and collective basis. As these choices relate to the performance of political identity, the building of trust, and the assertion of political efficacy, an overarching impression of protest triangulates through the data that is both explicitly conveyed *and* implicitly performed. Arguably, it is both the ability of selfie-takers to explicitly convey protest as a *meaning* as well as the ability of selfie-takers to implicitly perform protest as an *action* that enables the manifestation of protest to take place. The manifestation of protest ultimately occurs in the selfies produced by the #NotAMartyr campaign, therefore, not only through the way the dynamics of semiotic design convey the *impression* of protest, but also through the way selfie-takers visualize the *experience* of protest as they participate in their images first hand.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to broaden scholarly understanding of the selfie protest phenomenon, this dissertation set out to examine precisely how protest manifests in the images that selfie demonstrations produce. By operationalizing the social semiotic approach to visual analysis on a selection of selfies from the #NotAMartyr campaign, this study found that the

manifestation of protest occurs through the semiotic assembly of three overlapping motifs: the performance of political identity, the building of trust, and the assertion of political efficacy. Confirming this paper's hypothesis that the appearance of these motifs would be integral to the way protest could conceivably manifest, the analysis conducted was especially useful for examining how the *meaning* of protest can be visually constructed through semiotic resource as well how the *action* of protest can take place within the confines of a visual medium.

It is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge here how the partiality of her subjective analysis may have led to inflated reporting of the extent to which protest-related semiotic potential actually resides in the data. While some may scrutinize this paper's analysis of the #NotAMartyr selfies as biased towards the images where protest-related meanings were most readily apparent, the analysis can still be considered successful in the way it offers one *possible* reading of how the manifestation of protest occurs. Further research would benefit greatly from a replication of this methodology on the selfies from the #NotAMartyr campaign and a formulation of alternative semiotic readings of how protest manifests. The researcher also acknowledges that her hypothesis about how protest manifests specifically may not necessarily apply to images other selfie demonstrations produce; the performance of political identity, the building of trust, and the assertion of political efficacy may not be relevant actions for all causes where selfie demonstrations are staged. In this way, in the interest of deepening insight into the phenomenon of the selfie protest as a whole, future researchers are encouraged to undertake studies of images from other selfie campaigns and compare how the politics of different causes are visually handled. This line of research could additionally include interviews with selfie-takers themselves, enhancing the researcher's subjective analysis with an image-maker's direct testimony about their intentions, choices, and experiences participating in a particular campaign.

Overall, however, the results of this dissertation are significant in that they reveal the selfie protest as a potentially viable form of Marichal's (2013) micro-activist concept. Though it is impossible to fully assess the intent of a selfie-taker without his or her own testimony, the analysis of the #NotAMartyr campaign suggests that the nature of the political experience selfie protests offer should certainly not automatically be dismissed as slacktivism. On the contrary, the #NotAMartyr selfies reveal themselves as sites rife with semiotic potential for active political engagement, demonstrating impressive and innovative displays of political agency and creative self-expression. In this sense, this dissertation also inserts optimism into the discussion about the imaginative opportunities social media offers for individuals looking to get involved politically with a cause. The selfie protest represents a materialization of the

way mass self-communication and the tools of social media can serve to politicize the everyday experience of an Internet user and fuse the personalized, reflexive project of self with an impulse for social change. As new, politically creative uses of social media like the selfie protest continue to emerge, the researcher hopes that this study will encourage scholars to keep an open mind about how the dynamics of activism and political participation may therefore be evolving in the digital age.

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APPENDIX

All images were collected from the photos section of the #NotAMartyr Facebook page

Notamartyr. (2013) I Am Not A Martyr, *Facebook* URL: https://www.facebook.com/notamartyr [Last Consulted: 19 August 2014]

Introduction:

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

The Performance of Political Identity:

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

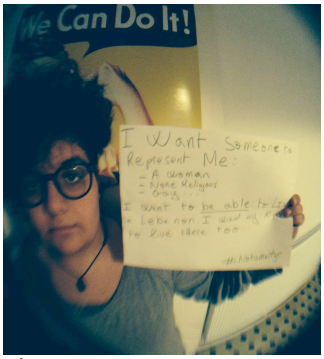
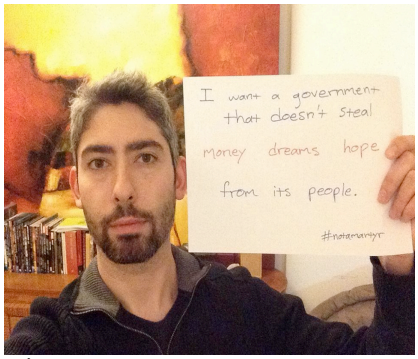


Fig. 6



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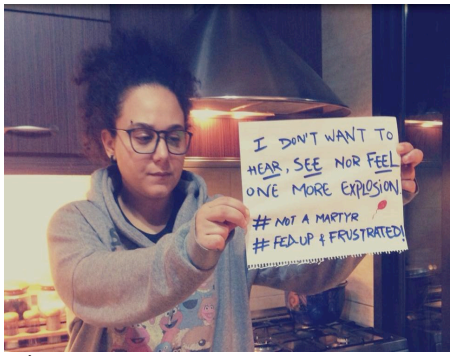

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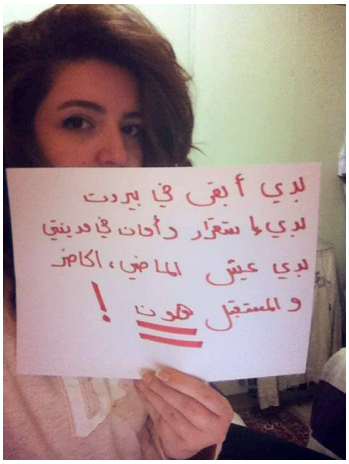


Fig. 9

Fig. 10

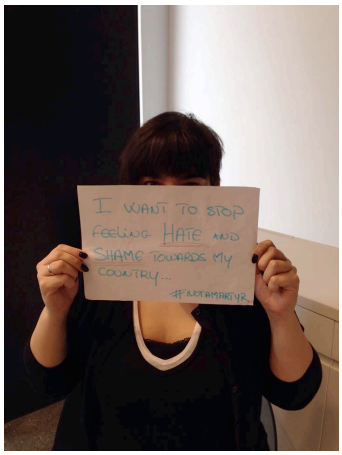


Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

The Building of Trust:

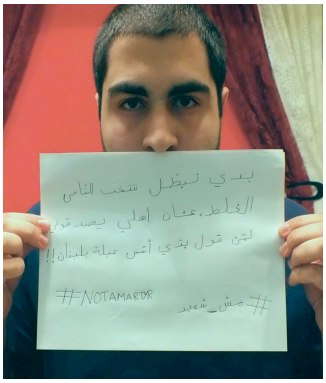


Fig. 14

Fig. 15

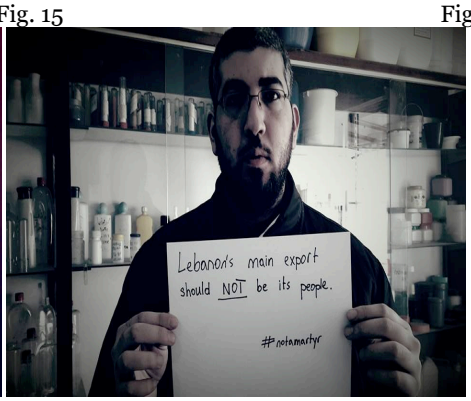


Fig. 16

Fig. 17

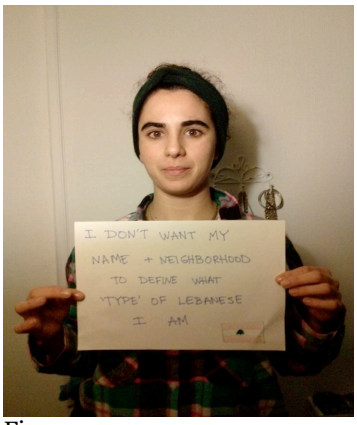


Fig. 18

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

Fig. 25

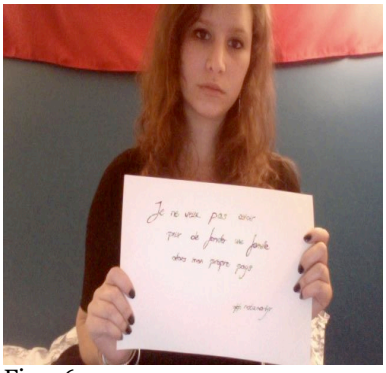


Fig. 26

Fig. 27

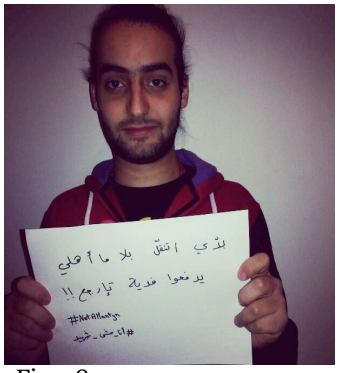


Fig. 28

Fig. 29

Fig. 30

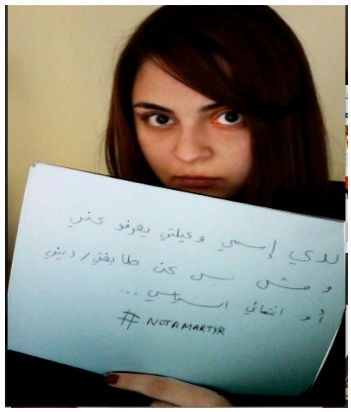
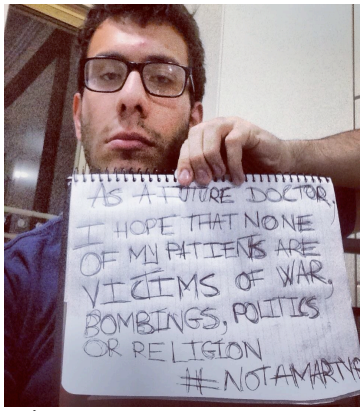


Fig. 31

Fig. 32



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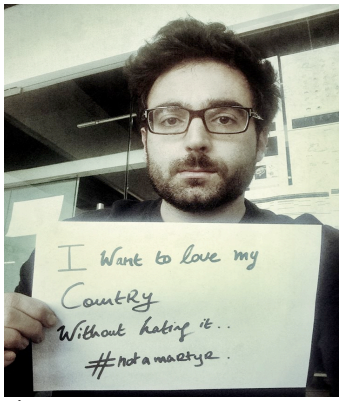


Fig. 34

Fig. 35

Fig. 36

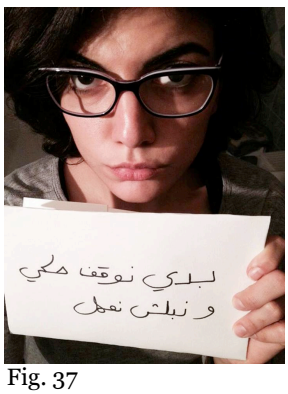


Fig. 37

Fig. 38

Fig. 39

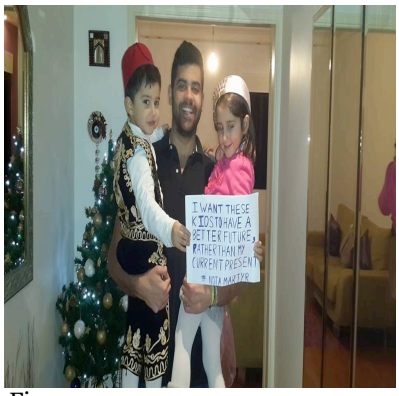


Fig. 40

Fig. 41

Fig. 42

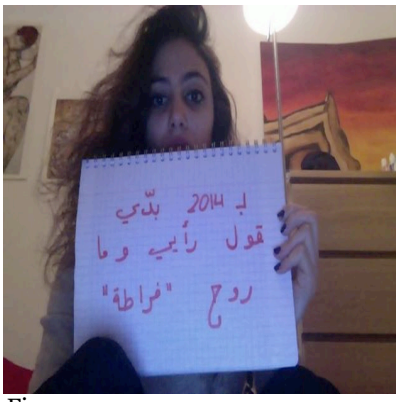
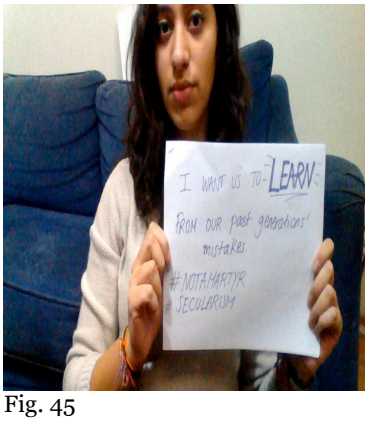


Fig. 43

Fig. 44



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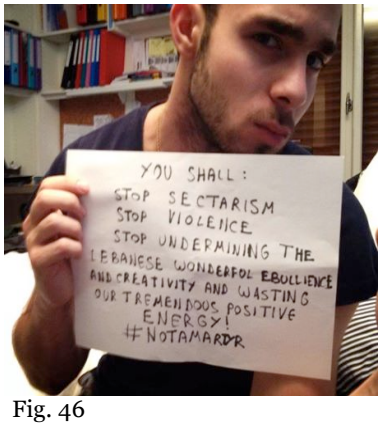

Fig. 46

Fig. 47

The Assertion of Political Efficacy:

Fig. 48

Fig. 49

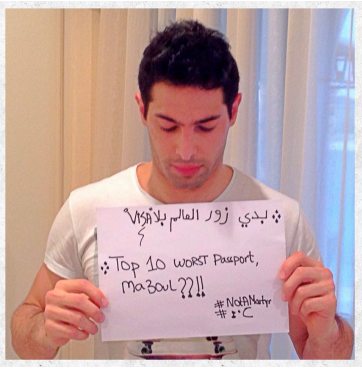

Fig. 50

Fig. 51

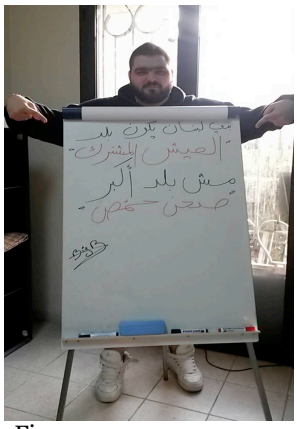
Fig. 52

Fig. 53

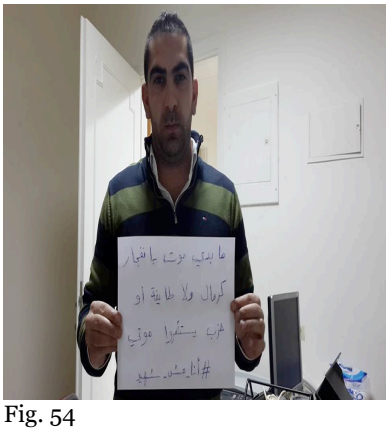
Fig. 54

Fig. 55

Fig. 56

Fig. 57

Fig. 58

Fig. 59

Fig. 60

Fig. 61

Fig. 62

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