



# UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

## **The emblem of the Sudanese Revolution:**

A social semiotic analysis of online activists' creative manipulations of a photograph as a tool of political dissent on Twitter and the subsequent iconization of Alaa Salah

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## **Abstract**

Whether in the form of memes, videos or graffiti, Sudanese activists tapped into a reservoir of resources and visual strategies as a creative tool for political dissent during the 2018 to 2019 anti-government protests. By disseminating and reproducing certain images on social media platforms, these non-elite individuals have helped define how the public addresses important societal tensions (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Focusing on a bottom-up approach to political activism, this research examined the role of Twitter as a space in which a “public discourse of images” was realized (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002, p.133). It traces the re-working practices of one of the many prominent visuals of the Sudanese protests, namely the image of Alaa Salah taken by the photographer Lana Haroun. Soon after its publication on Twitter, the photograph became a “symbol of the importance and complexity of the nation's recent political revolution” (Stewart, 2020, p.33). By co-constructing the emotional, political, and cultural significance of the image to express their individual aspirations and opinions, online activists participated in the creation of a visual icon of protest (Aiello and Parry, 2020). As such, an in-depth social semiotic analysis of a sample of eight image-tweets revealed the dominant themes and symbols around the reproduction of the photograph, as well as the discursive and visual strategies used by Twitter users to build solidarity and resistance. Therefore, this research draws on the new visual practices of networked audiences and documents the evolving definition of the icon in the digital age as a “universal template or model suitable for circulation as a symbolic resource for political change” (Parry, 2019, p.242).

**Key words:** social semiotics, Twitter, social media, activism, networked publics, iconic images, Sudan uprising

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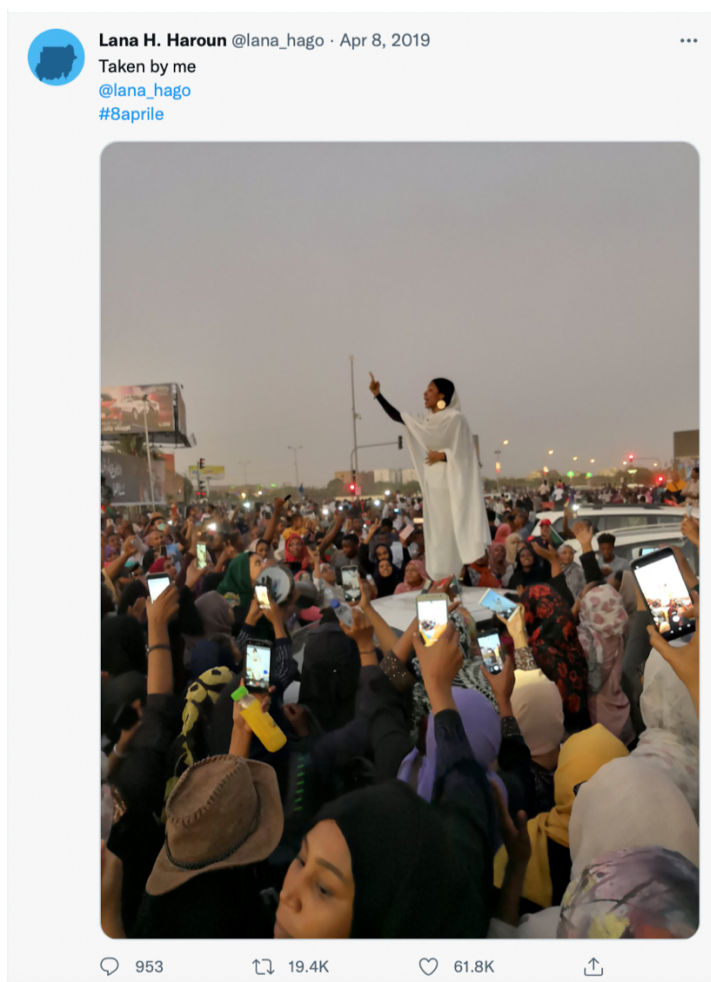
## **1. Introduction**

With a population increasingly oppressed by political and military forces, a deteriorating economy, and the suffocation of women's rights, Sudan was at its breaking point in 2019 (Stewart, 2020). In Khartoum, protesters, the majority of whom were young well-educated women, surrounded the military headquarters, refusing to stop until President al-Bashir resigned. While April 11, 2019, marked the day the dictator was overthrown and replaced by an interim military government, the demonstrations continued with women at the forefront of the revolution (Attia et al., 2020). The recent coup was triggered by an escalation of factors since the independence of Sudan in 1956, such as an oppressive authoritarian regime with limited freedom of expression, increasing violence, severe food shortages, a deteriorating humanitarian situation, and critical economic and educational conditions (Attia et al., 2020).

A defining moment in the documentation of the protests in Sudan was the capture and widespread dissemination of the image of Alaa Salah in Figure 1, a young activist and architecture student photographed by Lana Haroun (Nugdalla, 2020). While the anti-regime protests received poor media coverage, the photograph propelled the conflict to the international stage (Nugdalla, 2020). The image of a woman dressed in white, standing on top of a car and pointing her finger to the sky as she led the crowd in chants with a sea of phones recording her, almost instantly captured the public imagination (Nugdalla, 2020). According to Friedman (2019) the image is part of a series of photographs “that have become synonymous with the historical moments they represent”, including the woman in sundress, or more recently, Ieshia Evans during the Black Lives Matter protests. In each case, the power of the image comes from the purely quotidian nature of the participant, dressed not in depersonalizing apparel, but in everyday clothing (Friedman, 2019). In regards to Alaa Salah’s photograph, the symbolic power is embedded in her traditional yet impactful outfit. First, the



jewelry or moon-shaped earrings were passed down from mother to daughter and were the means by which Sudanese women established their wealth and domestic authority (Friedman, 2019). The white thobe, on the other hand, reflects the clothing worn by secretaries and lawyers as well as a color embraced by women and student activists (Friedman, 2019). Since its adoption, female protesters wearing white started to be called Kandakas, in reference to Nubian queens, connecting their ancient power to the one of women protesters leading the protests.



**Figure 1:** Photograph of Alaa Salah taken by Lana Haroun

A few days after April 8, 2019, when the photograph was first posted on Twitter by Lana Haroun, the image took on a life of its own, where multiple collages, graffiti, cartoons, or illustrations by online users reimagined and negotiated its political and symbolic meaning. Through such practices, online activists actively participated in constructing the iconicity of the image, elevating it to the emblem of the Sudanese revolution. As such, focusing on the early reproduction of a protest icon on social media by “networked publics” as a tool for political resistance, this research provides insight into the nature of visual activism and the re-conception of icons in the digital age (Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.155). While the iconicity of photographs was initially constituted by institutional gatekeepers and media, in the digital age, ordinary individuals have the ability to actively construct their emotional, political, and cultural significance. Importantly, in this new connective environment, the interest lies less in the traditional focus on a “single icon” or photograph, but rather in the collection of diverse forms of images revolving around the same message (Parry, 2019, p.241). The shared discussion and repetition of tweets constructed around the photograph on Twitter highlighted the important role played by the platform as a space where a “public discourse of images” occurs (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002, p.133). Although widely used for political communication and action, images and symbols on Twitter were important motivators in the Sudanese uprising (Attia et al., 2020; Graefer et al., 2019).

Drawing on social semiotic analysis, the research conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of a subset of eight tweets, effectively reflecting the various forms of images, such as collage, graffiti, cartoon, and illustration, in which the photograph was reimagined. Throughout the analysis, three themes were discovered, depicting Alaa Salah as: (1) Symbol of peace and freedom, (2) the leader of Sudanese revolution, and (3) empowerment and glorification of Sudanese women activists. The research delved headfirst into the discursive

and visual strategies used by online activists to expand the meaning of the photograph. By exploiting various semiotic resources including colour, texture, historical linkages, or modes such as interactivity, these non-elite actors have helped to construct the representation of Alaa Salah as a national and international emblem of protest.

While researchers have relied on the effect of social media on behavior (Attia et al., 2020) or the use of graffiti to express political views during the Sudanese uprising (Mohammad, 2020), this study takes a different approach to understanding how networked publics in a specific revolutionary context contributed to mobilization and the early formation of a protest icon (Boudana et al., 2017). Similarly, it documents the fate of photographs as new image technologies such as the dissemination, reproduction, and editing of visuals become ubiquitous among ordinary people (Boudana et al., 2017). The conceptual framework includes recent concepts on public screens, connective action, personal action frames, memetic protest, and iconic images, highlighting the changing methods and visual materials used by activists to build support and express individual identities in the digital age. Thus, to understand the broad significance of the reproduction of Alaa Salah's photograph in the age of networked publics, this dissertation aims to address the following questions:

- (1) How do online activists draw on new technologies of image circulation and reproduction as creative tools of political dissent?
- (2) How does the creative manipulation of a photograph by online activists participate in the construction of a protest icon symbolizing global political values and philosophical ideals?

## 2. Literature Review

The relationship between digital activism and new visual creation practices in protest movements has been explored from a number of key perspectives. As such, the theoretical framework is divided into four main sections. Drawing on the concept of public screens, discussions of the interaction between technology and protest formation and the role played by images in these mediated political spaces are addressed in the first two sections. Aligning with the first concept, the following two sections develop the logic of connective action, personal action frames, memetic protests and iconicity, exploring what becomes of powerful images in the era of networked publics where online activists reappropriate visual content to express their political views and aspirations, ultimately constructing the iconicity of these images.

### 2.1 Digital Media for Political Dissent

From the Arab Spring to the Indignados movement in Spain, a significant wave of social demonstrations has flooded the 21st century. While there are significant differences in their respective political contexts and organisations, one key element connects these interrelated yet disparate movements: their use of digital media to discuss politics and mobilize support (Bennett et al., 2014). As such, a growing academic interest has focused on the development of social protest, and more specifically on the contribution of mass media in organising, mobilising, and amplifying efforts in various campaigns for political change (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Increasingly, protesters are coordinating their actions using digital means to network, organize and express their ideas directly to the public (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Whether a local or a large-scale network, the distribution and circulation opportunities enabled by the internet help activists redefine the norms of public discourse, build solidarity, and mobilize supporters (Cottle and Lester, 2011). As such, technology and protest formation are no longer

seen as a causal relationship, but protests are from the start “a product of mobile transnational or translocal geographies of resistance and solidarity” (Askanius, 2010, cited in Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.142).

While the new media ecosystem still displays a certain top-down dimension, in the digital age, bottom-up activism is becoming increasingly important (Mortensen, 2016). As such, the formation of global media and information networks has opened up new opportunities for those who wish to make their voices heard. Internet-based digital tools and media can significantly reduce the expense of connecting and organizing individuals and can lower the barriers once assumed by bureaucratic coordinations of social protest (Thorson et al., 2013). Similarly, the socio-cultural constraints imposed on modern citizens have reduced their tolerance for institutional involvement, leading ordinary individuals to use more expressive modes of participation (Thorson et al., 2013). The consequence is an unprecedented array of modern protest movements, not just in terms of their capacity to grow in attention and visibility, but also in terms of diversity and transnational coordination (Thorson et al., 2013).

An important question surrounding the analysis of protest movements and the new media ecology concerns the actual functions played by digital media in organizing dissents. Thorson et al. (2013) argue that mobile means of communication provide unparalleled on-the-ground coordination and mobilization of activists. However, the Internet and new information technologies can also serve other equally important ends for activists. For example, in discussing the role of Twitter as an "organizing mechanism" in protest movements, Segerberg and Bennett argue that the platform actively participates in the construction of protest spaces (2011, p.198). Indeed, social media are increasingly becoming fruitful grounds where multiple actors with different aspirations and ideologies work together

to articulate the identity and next actions of the movement (Segeberberg and Bennett, 2011; Thorson et al., 2013). Crucially, in these digitally mediated political spaces, visuals play an important role in helping different demonstrators construct and negotiate such meaning. While images are intimately linked to dissent and were initially used in social movements as objects of contentious politics, the emergence of new technologies and, with it, new creative political practices, has expanded the roles played by visual content circulating on digital platforms, being more personalized and less focused on collective values. Thus, it is interesting to examine the close link between images and the democratic struggle in protest movements, to better shed light on what these images become in the era of networked publics where they are re-contextualized and re-shaped in multiple forms of visuals by online activists to support their political ends (Bennett and Segeberberg, 2012).

## 2.2. Images, Contentious Politics, and the Public Screen

Discussing the role of images in Middle Eastern politics, Lina Khatib argues that contentious politics is a “visually productive process” by nature, translated as a “struggle over presence, over visibility” (2012, p.1). For protesters who aspire to construct a contrasting political and social reality counterbalancing the dominant discourse, “democratic representations” align with “visual representation” (Khatib, 2012, p.1). As such, whether it was the people's occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt, Zuccotti Park in the United States or the Puerta del Sol in Spain, different forms of images are used as “vivid tools of ‘countervisuality’” (Mirzoeff, 2011, cited in Doerr et al., 2013, p.xi). For example, Mattoni and Doerr (2007) explore how activists in the Euro Mayday Parada (EMP) campaign against precarity in Italy draw on a wide range of images and visual means to create a divergent and distinct representation of precarious workers in the country. In addition, as images can be used to support complex

ideas, visual codes actively participate in framing social movements (Doerr et al., 2015). In discussing the anti-Pinochet protests in Chile, Jacqueline Adams (2002) states that art in movements can fulfill three framing purposes: to illustrate the poor living conditions in Chile, to portray the Pinochet regime as evil, and finally, to serve as a socializing space to discuss the meaning of the movement.

The dramatic nature of contentious politics is a way for the protesters to capture the attention of external audiences but also of the activists themselves (Doerr et al., 2013). Yet, the concept of performance is not a new phenomenon. Drawing on the historical examples of the antislavery movement and the Ukrainian Fall, Tilly and Tarrow (2015) explore the dramatic manifestations of political struggle, namely how actors draw on a variety of public performances or modes of collective action to advance their claims across different eras and political regimes. While the authors focused less on the role of images, other scholars have recognized the importance of the visual materials and accompanying symbols and codes in the dramatic organization of protests (Doerr et al., 2015). Of interest here, are the embodied practices of protestors and the visual codes commonly utilized to demonstrate dissent (Doerr et al., 2013). However, although a growing body of research acknowledges the increasing centrality of images in protest movements, systematic visual analysis or integration of visual studies into a broader framework remains rare (Doerr et al., 2013). As such, while attention to the act of dissemination, editing and sharing is necessary, the style and aesthetic strategies employed in the visual and textual content are equally important (Aiello and Parry, 2020).

Through the term “image event”, DeLuca and Peeples (2002, p.145) illustrate how activists, in their struggle for visibility, are involved in the construction of a visual *mise en scène*, staging striking images and performances to attract global attention and initiate public debate. Specifically, the authors focus on the WTO protests in Seattle to account for

technological and cultural changes, where protesters tactically exploited technologies such as television, photography, and the internet. Thus, in order to understand the contemporary political scene, they articulate the concept of the "public screen" which acts as a complement to the metaphor of the public sphere (2002, p.125). This term highlights the changes in modes of organization and perceptions introduced by digital media (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). Indeed, in the current screen age, it is necessary to diversify the term public sphere to accommodate to the new circumstances of politics and activism, where it is not rational or embodied debates that dominate, but visuals and the hyper-mediatization of events (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). As such, rather than focusing solely on voice and debate, DeLuca and Peeples' allusion to a "public discourse of images" accentuates the civic participation and engagement of the audience while acknowledging the role of the rhetorical power of images in this interplay (2002, p.133). Individuals are conceptualized not as passive entities, but as active social agents who shape, share, reframe, and remix media material and content in ways not previously considered (Jenkins et al., 2013). As a result, one must question what becomes visual content in the age of "personalized politics" (Bennett, 2012, p.20) and "networked publics" (Boudana et al., 2017, p.1212), when technologies for distributing and reproducing images transcend the traditional confines of institutional media and are used by ordinary individuals (Rovisco, 2017).

### 2.3. New acts of networked political participation

New forms of digital communication and individual self-expression have emerged as critical tools for political discourse and protest mobilization (Bennett, 2003). Increasingly, scholars have started to move beyond the traditional focus on collective organizations or leaderships in protests mobilization to recognize the importance of identity and emotion (Denisova, 2016).



In particular, the rapid emergence and ubiquity of interactive technologies is partly responsible for the increasing centrality of emotion and storytelling in social movement practices (Papacharissi, 2015). The affordances offered by social media help generate "the in-between bond of publics", fostering the exchange of information and the expression of the collective imagination (Papacharissi, 2015, p.9). Freeing ordinary individuals from institutional power and enabling "quick-moving, attention-grabbing, bytesized communication" (Penney and Dadas, 2014, p.86), they invite the development of new forms of civic mobilization (Papacharissi, 2015). A new virtual ground is formed, where the fictional and the real overlap and where online activists can shape and negotiate virtualities of freedom, change, revolution, truth, but also paranoia, distrust, anger and fear (Karatzogianni, 2012). Ultimately, social media users can connect, interact, and further build these virtualities by adding their opinions, emotions, and connecting with their peers by approving or rejecting recommended stories (Denisova, 2016).

These new forms of participation ushered in a new era of personalized politics, where "individually expressive personal action frames" replaced "collective action frames" (Bennett, 2012, p.20). As such, the political demands articulated by networked activists are often a means of communicating their personal aspirations, complaints, or lifestyles, in stark contrast to the traditional framework of collective identity characteristic of more conventional movements (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Bennett, 2012). Whether it is the expression of one's opinions through the sharing or liking of visual and textual content on social media or the artistic contributions to the digital domains such as memes, all represent new acts of networked political engagement (Denisova, 2016). For instance, drawing on the example of the Occupy movement, Bennett and Segerberg trace the replacement of conventional and traditional discourse of "who we are" with personalised action frames (2012, p.754). Thus, in

light of the variations in large-scale activity, the authors articulate two possible logics of protest movements: the former and well-known logic of "collective action", linked to high organizing funds and the collective construction of identities, and the lesser-known "connective action", which is based on the exchange of personalized content on social media networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.739). Both forms of actions are generally intertwined and present in protest movements. It is important to note that in this interplay, technology platforms play the role of "established political organisations", with connective actions being a form of activism that develops within communication networks rather than through political organizational structure (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.754).

The concept of network individualism developed by Wellman (2001) aligns with Segerberg and Bennett's (2011) logic of connective action. Indeed, they both describe new forms of community emerging from interactive technologies, where individualized networks gradually replace solidarity groups. As such, individuals are still inclined to participate in large-scale events, but identity reference is formed less through shared allegiance to a group or ideology than through individual expression (Segerberg and Bennett, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Similarly, this transition from collective-based to individualized societies has been further developed through the term of flexible "weak-ties' networks" that recognize changing political environments (Granovetter, 1973, cited in Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p.744). As a result, social networks that loosely connect people with individualised personal frameworks can quickly evolve into vast networks of users with numerous interconnections, offering a promising ground for all kinds of participation. Importantly, at the heart of the connective logic, and in contrast to the former collective issue of inciting individuals to contribute, is the self-motivated sharing of already internalized ideas, visuals, and sources with others (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The sharing of content may take place on Twitter

or YouTube through practices such as re-tweets or comments (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The interplay between easily spreadable and customizable frameworks through digital media and technologies allows the action networks defined by this logic to escalate rapidly (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

## 2.4. Memetic Protests as a Creative Tool of Political Resistance

### A. Memetic practices

Forms of human creative expression, such as the re-working and re-contextualisation of images, have proliferated in contemporary protest movements due to the innovative and personalised approach to the exploitation of media for political purposes. In this participatory logic of personalization and exchange, networks can develop and stabilize through available interactive digital technologies, allowing individuals to develop relationships with others and share internalized content (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). These personal action frames or creative practices are embedded in the memetic or viral nature of online images, which spread quickly and easily and are recognized as important or notable across many communication networks (Parry, 2019). Thus, in this new activist paradigm of connective action, creative demonstrators continually shape, remediate, and re-contextualize images in such a way that they lead to the formation of "*global meme clusters*" (Olesen, 2018, p.668). It should be noted that, although the research does not focus on memes per se, but rather on the different forms of images shared as part of a memetic or multimodal performance, memes as a highly emotional, symbolic, and culturally imbued artefact that spreads through individual appropriation and imitation is a concept that aligns with this research, and as such, is useful to develop.

While internet memes' conceptualization varies between sciences and disciplines, it can be understood as "small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation" and which reflects "general social mindsets" (Shifman, 2014, p.2). Furthermore, such artefacts spread through personalized expression via sharing, so that others can internalize, imitate, or share them in turn (Bennett, 2012). More specifically, Shifman (2014) defines memes as visual texts that share similar characteristics or form, aim to raise awareness, and can be easily transformed and disseminated on the Internet by various users. Individuals engage in the creation of memes as part of a perceived ongoing discourse to engage in humorous, social, or politically critical behavior (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014). However, as Olesen points out, Shifman's conception of memes mainly encompasses "cultural memes" such as entertainment (2018, p.660). Thus, with respect to this research, the memetic character of images is extended to the discourse of protest and photography, and more specifically to the memetic reproduction of powerful photographs in protest movements (Olesen, 2018). For example, Olesen (2018) explores the injustice photograph of Alan Kurdi, a refugee boy whose dead body lied on a beach in Turkey, and its subsequent transformation by activists into a viral meme.

#### B. Iconicity in the digital age

Thus, as they penetrate the public sphere, photographs are re-imagined and re-worked by protesters due to their highly emotional and powerful nature (Olesen, 2018). Online activists actively participate to re-signify and personalize the meaning of the original material to adapt it to new forms and political contexts, ultimately building its iconicity (Olesen, 2018). As such, what is meant by iconic image in this memetic cluster is the co-created iconization produced by multiple forms of images derived from a single photograph. Indeed, in the digital age,

attention is redirected to how social media users maintain or reverse social ties by granting specific images iconic status (Mortensen, 2016). Users are redefining the modern conception of iconicity through practices such as retweets, sharing or editing, which are now the new determinants of iconic impact (Mortensen, 2016). For instance, the memetic practices of sharing and reprocessing Alaa Salah's photograph in the context of the Sudanese uprising encouraged its subsequent iconization. Through interpersonally charged content and different forms of visuals, the image gained significance as an emblem of the protest movement and a symbol of resistance against the ruling government.

Thus, what is understood as memetic protests can comprise multiple forms of visual texts such as still images- cartoons, illustration- or audio-visual images derived from one single photograph (Parry, 2019). For instance, Bruns and Hanusch recognize audiovisual materials and drawings shared on social media platforms following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels as “news icons” (2017, p.1138). Similarly, discussing the role of the visual in the Brussels terrorist attacks, Berkowitz (2017) argues that, so as photographs, political cartoons play a critical role in expressing emotions and inducing grief. As such, in her study of the digital derivate images’ communication functions in constructing the iconization of Jo Cox death, Parry notes that “there is not a single icon or image but multiple manifestations of the same message in multimodal form” (2019, p.241). As underlined by the author, while the appropriation of icons has already been addressed in the existing literature, “the idea that assemblage of similar but different images works to form an icon collectively is a newer idea” (Parry, 2019, p.241).

Similarly, Rovisco's research on the indignados movement notes how the resonance and meaning of the occupied square for audiences is not the result of a single visual but rather a "multiplicity of images" (2017, cited in Parry, 2019, p.241). With respect to this research, the

use and creation of digital images inspired by a powerful photograph are studied in relations to one social movement. Through the appropriation and sharing of these images by protesters in their respective struggles for a new political reality in Sudan, they participate in the construction of the iconicity of the original photograph. Thus, by adopting a bottom-up approach focusing on the political agency and creativity of ordinary online activists, this research documents the innovative and rapidly emerging reshaping practices of networked publics in a revolutionary context in Sudan.

### 3. Methodology

The nature of the research is qualitative and draws on social semiotic analysis to understand how networked publics on Twitter negotiated the meaning of the photograph to express personalized political opinions and values (Aiello and Parry, 2020). While a quantitative strategy focuses on quantification for data collection and study, a qualitative approach focuses on the interpretation of important relationships, effectively studying the role that images play in creating meaning (Bryman, 2016; Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Brennen, 2017;). By highlighting the importance of form and choice and integrating images into a broader social context, as well as capturing the wider “lives” of visuals themselves, namely their appropriation, recontextualization and sharing on Twitter, social semiotic as a mode of analysis effectively addresses the aims of this research (Aiello, 2020, p.378). Therefore, to understand the ways in which activists contributed to the early formation of a protest icon expressing their individual personal aspirations, two sub questions are important to consider:

- (a) What visual strategies and semiotic resources were used to alter and expand the meaning of the original photograph and what does this reveal about its political, cultural and emotional significance?
- (b) How is the iconicity of the image debated and mobilised in the image-tweets?

#### 3.1 Social semiotic analysis

Through a social semiotic approach, the present research investigates how the visual and discursive strategies employed, as well as the interactional, compositional, and representational changes, are linked to new political meanings, which ultimately participate in the construction of the iconicity of the photograph. It assesses which semiotic works have been, whether intentionally or unintentionally, used by activists and to what extent they

reinforce or undermine their former intentions, considering, for example, how the visual images interact with the accompanying text written alongside the image-tweets, and how other semiotic resources could have been considered. It should be noted, however, that by acknowledging the choice of the producer behind any semiotic work, this methodology effectively recognizes the agency of online activists in constructing visual meaning in protest movements. Furthermore, as the online environment is highly interactive and sociable, especially on Twitter, it allows these images to be studied as part of a multi-modal performance, investigating their connectivity, cultural relevance, as well as the historical context in which they are produced and disseminated (Parry, 2020).

Visual social semiotics can be broadly defined as "the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images" as well as "how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted" (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, cited in Harrison, 2003, p.48). Social semiotic analysis draws on traditional structuralist semiotics and Halliday's systematic functional linguistics (Aiello, 2020). This methodology is functionalist in nature, as it perceives semiotic resources as having been designed to accomplish specific semiotic objectives (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.140). While the structuralist approach emphasizes the importance of identifying "*codes*" within a specific cultural system, social semiotic substitutes this notion for that of "*semiotic resource*", ultimately accounting "for change and power imbalance in the visual signification process" (Aiello, 2006, p.90). The way semiotic resources are used in a text provides a variety of potential meanings for image makers and viewers to activate (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). However, it is important to note that there is a limit to the range of alternative meanings and that some semiotic works are more likely to be chosen than others to achieve a specific objective (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001).



Social semiotic analysis accounts for top-down and bottom-up power in the use of semiotic resources (Aiello, 2020). According to Rovisco, it effective questions “who makes the rules of particular forms of visual communication and who has the power to break these rules with novel modes of production and interpretation” (2017, p.339). Embracing a bottom-up social semiotic approach, the following research considers the innovative use and creation of visual resources by public networks in the context of the Sudanese uprising. By exploiting different strategies and forms of images to transcribe visually their political and personal aspirations and opinions, they ultimately contribute to the production of alternative meanings of the original photograph as a site of active resistance and democracy. To this extent, the use of social semiotics as a mode of analysis in the context of visual social movement research is a valuable methodology as it assesses the link between image forms and how individuals construct signs in a particular historical or institutional context and how people discuss them under those circumstances (Aiello, 2020).

Therefore, before providing some information about the type and function of the image sample being analyzed (Aiello, 2020), the research, following Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) framework, assesses three distinct semiotic work performed by images: the “representational meaning”, interested in the general story of the images, “interactive meaning” rooted in the relationship with the viewer, and finally “compositional meaning” linked to the disposition of the image (Aiello, 2020, p.374). Such a framework allows for a more systematic and descriptive engagement with visual texts while addressing issues related to the situated meaning of images as well as their aesthetic, political and cultural significance (Aiello, 2020). However, the transcription of Halliday's three metafunctions into a visual analysis system has raised some concerns because it is based on linguistic principles and may be perceived as too rigid (Aiello, 2020). Thus, these three metafunctions must be enriched by

four other elements: the types of acts of communication permitted by the form of the semiotic materials, the "canons of use" linked to the semiotic components of visual texts, the part played by "plastic elements" in transforming the style or overall content of images, and finally the "viewing practices" allowed by the meaning potentials that differentiate producers and users of visuals (Aiello, 2020, p.375). Without performing a full linguistic social semiotic, the text of each tweet is also analysed alongside the visuals to understand whether the image supports or undermines the statement of the text. Ultimately, throughout the social semiotic analysis, themes are developed to account for potential patterns or differences between the set of images.

### 3.2. Sampling and ethics

The sample consists of a selection of eight image-tweets, accompanied by their texts, created shortly after Alaa Salah's photograph was published on Twitter. Although the sample size was limited to conduct an in-depth analysis of the visuals, it allows the research to capture an important part of the conversation. The timeline chosen starts on April 8, 2019, the day the photograph was first published on Twitter, and ends on April 15, 2019, one week after its publication. This very short time frame aims to capture the phenomenon of time compression between the publication of the photograph and its subsequent re-production and re-fashioning into different forms (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Similarly, it emphasizes the idea of "instant news icons", tracing how images are instantly elevated to iconic status and become a reference within hours of publication (Mortensen, 2016, p.413).

The sample was further classified according to the different forms of images (Boudana et al., 2017). Aiello and Parry's (2020) study and Drainville's (2018) analysis of the reproduction and iconization of Iesha Devans' photograph at the Black Lives Matter protests identified forms as diverse as collages and caricatures, or techniques such as textual overlays and

photoshop-like manipulations. The current sample aligns with such studies and includes cartoons, graffiti, collages, digital illustrations, and paintings, which allowed for an in-depth and systematic analysis of different visuals that vary in communicative function, design, strategies, and resources used. Ultimately, the tweets were broken down into different themes that were discovered throughout the analysis. For example, whenever a Twitter user mentioned the word "freedom," "justice", or used visual references such as the Statue of Liberty alongside textual information, the tweet was categorized as a symbol of freedom and peace. The iterations were grouped together to make sense of similarities or differences between users' interpretations of the photograph.

There were a significant number of challenges in collecting visual images on Twitter, as it is easier to gather linguistic information rather than images with search tools (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Thus, drawing on Twitter's full archive search REST API, images were collected through the hashtags #Sudan and #SudanUprising. While many hashtags such as #Kandaka or #SudanRevolution were used by Twitter users, #Sudan and #SudanUprising resulted in the largest collection of derivative images, including visuals of different forms and content. Ultimately, to effectively archive visual messages, sample tweets were collected through screenshots, in case their messages were changed or deleted (Mayr and Weller, 2017). To comply with GDPR guidelines (2016), the research did not include any identifying data about Twitter users, and the purpose for studying the image-tweets was explicitly stated as well as referencing each tweet analyzed.

### 3.3. Limitations of research

While social semiotics allows for a more systematic analysis of visual images, qualitative analysis cannot be applied to a larger population with the same level of assurance as

quantitative studies (Ochieng, 2009). The aim of the research to trace the reproduction of the photograph on a single platform, Twitter, can also be seen as limiting the ability to generalize the results of the study. Future research on this topic could consider a comparable approach drawing on both content analysis and social semiotic analysis or on popular social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, which focus on imagery and played an important role during the event. On the other hand, although the sample includes languages other than English, namely Arabic, it can be said that the use of English hashtags, namely #Sudan and #SudanUprising, to collect the tweets limits an important part of the conversation around the photograph and privileges a certain category of population that speaks English.

In addition, other weaknesses inherent in social semiotic analysis itself can be identified. Although other components related to the functions of images have been added, the three metafunctions of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) social semiotic framework can make the process of analysing visual data quite technical (Iedema, 2001). At the same time, while this technicality and rather complex analysis of visual images may seem almost straightforward, one should not forget that an important interpretive element is at work (Iedema, 2001). Although the researcher had no particular connection or personal interest in the social movement and the Sudanese culture, other factors such as the researcher's own understanding of images and cultural symbols and signs could have affected the readings of the conclusions. Thus, measures such as relating the research to previous work and a particular analytical framework helped defend the validity of the results. Despite the dedication to primarily pulling insights from the current data sample, social semiotic analysis was used to validate the findings by situating them within the existing literature on social movements and iconic images.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 The distinct types and functions of images

The first images shared are of an abstract or symbolic nature and reflect a personalised approach to the exploitation of the image-tweet for political purposes. As online creators have used a range of semiotic resources and image forms to express their message, the present sample reflects this diversity and include graffiti, cartoons, digital illustrations, paintings and finally collages of the original photo. It should be noted that the images selected reflect the activists' desire to draw on new or existing practices that break with old institutional modes of production, such as photographs. As such, each form of communication has different types of affordances that shape the acts and meanings of the image.

Cartoons are typically inspired by a "satirical form of communication" and the use of "verbal and non-verbal signs to disseminate information and express ideas and opinions on contemporary issues" (Mhamdi, 2017, p.194). Graffiti, on the other hand, is a "form of rhetoric that provides a democratizing space to enable its disenfranchised peoples to articulate their own narratives" (Cappelli, 2020, p.323). In fact, graffiti was widely used during the Sudanese uprising as an effective means of expressing political messages (Mohammad, 2020). Thus, while some communication formats such as graffiti are more typically rooted in a history of protest movement, other representational art forms such as collage have been increasingly used in online activism, magnified in the reproduction of Ieshia Evans as a Black Lives Matter protest emblem (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Therefore, these different forms of co-created images merge creativity with new political meanings and actively participate in the reproduction of Alaa Salah's photograph as a space of democratic resistance.

## 4.2 The iconization of Alaa Salah

The producers relied on different visual and discursive techniques that actively participate in the mobilization of the image as a protest icon. While retaining Alaa Salah's posture and outfit and her relationship with the audience, such as the gaze, the producers relied on texture, colour, actors, or distance and perspective, to add layers of technicality and expand the meaning of the photograph. In addition, the images associated Alaa Salah with various national or international historical and political symbols, such as the Statue of Liberty or a kandaka. In doing so, the public began to shape the significance of the image in relation to historical events and cultural mythology. Omitting any direct reference to Alaa Salah's name and instead associating it with a series of external values and symbolic meanings, it became a projection of each user's personal imagination and aspirations online in the context of an uprising. Thus, the sample of images reflects a variation on three different yet overlapping themes: Alaa Salah as a symbol of peace and freedom, a leader of Sudanese revolution, and as the empowerment and glorification of women activists. Themes were discovered through specific words used by activists or direct textual and visual references that helped to categorize the information.

### 4.2.1 Symbol of Peace and Freedom

#### A. Representational meaning

Drawing on a constellation of semiotic resources, the collage in Figure 2 reimagines Alaa Salah as a symbol of freedom, peace, and struggle for democracy. As such, the signifier of the birds and the dove holding an olive branch in the image act as “props” or “symbolic conceptual structures” which characterize Alaa Salah’s identity (Aiello, 2020, p.376), the latter generally linked to a symbol of peace in Western Cultures (Teng, 2009). The caption reads “The future

belongs to those who believe and fight for freedom, the future belongs to Nubian Queen, the future belongs to Sudanese people!”. There is certainly a political message of hope, democratic freedom, and justice in this image, not only in the signifiers used, but also in the words, “rights”, “justice”, “freedom” and “revolution” in Arabic and English, which reflect the struggle of the Sudanese people for a peaceful and democratic state. The historical linkage with the Nubian Queen also adds some layers of interpretation to this idea of fighting for their rights, as they represent the warriors and queens of the land of Kush, in northern Sudan. Other conceptual structures such as the protesters, the colours of the Sudanese flag, but also the physical form of the map of Sudan in the background, place the image in a specific historical context and represent Alaa Salah as a national emblem of the Sudanese uprising. In fact, the colour refers to the Sudanese revolutionary flag, which evokes “the first democratic, civilian administration after Sudan’s independence in January 1956” (Mohammad, 2020, p.16). Ultimately, through the phrase and hashtag “love from turkey” the function of the image-tweet becomes linked to social action, expressed through the emotion of love and support from Turkey to Sudanese activists (Parry, 2019).



**Figure 2:** Example of a collage depicting Alaa Salah as a symbol of freedom

On the other hand, the graffiti in Figure 3 makes a textual and visual reference to the Statue of Liberty, linking Alaa Salah's political values to those attributed to the national monument. Thus, it reads "liberty is not a Statue anymore SHE is alive with flesh and blood". By using the capitalized personal pronoun "SHE", which refers to Alaa Salah as a woman, the creator merges the values associated with the Statue of Liberty, such as freedom and justice in Western culture, with the image of Alaa Salah. The graffiti was created by a group of Syrian



artists called Kesh Malek and was painted on the wall of a farm in the rebel-held Syrian village of Kafranbel in the northwestern region of Idlib. The date the image-tweet was posted corresponds to the ouster of former President Al-Bashir, and thus supports a message of celebration of freedom for Sudan from a country, Syria, that has not achieved, but hopes to achieve, a state of peace. The hashtag #SudanUprising but also #SyriaBanksy emphasizes the solidarity between two different countries. Thus, Figures 1 and 2 become an illustration of these transnationally and multilingually constructed diverse collectivities (Parry, 2019). Unlike Figure 2, however, the image associates the representation of Alaa Salah with a Western emblem, and as such, as an international, rather than national, site of democratic struggle and freedom.



**Figure 3:** Example of graffiti associating Alaa Salah with the Statue of Liberty

Figure 4 is a form of tweet with different versions of Alaa Salah. The producer recognizes the “powerful” values of the image and places a painting next to the graffiti associating Alaa Salah with the Statue of Liberty. Although there is no reference to “freedom” in the painting, the vibrant colours and abstract nature of the image communicate a very peaceful and hopeful feeling that distances itself from the violence and oppression in the country.



**Figure 4:** A single Tweet with multiple images of Alaa Salah

In terms of narrative structures, the illustration in Figure 4 has no gaze line vectors or body language and is essentially conceptual in nature, with Alaa Salah almost blurred and blending into the colorful background. In contrast, the vectors delineated by Alaa Salah's well-

defined and outstretched arm and finger indicate that she is “doing something” in Figures 2 and 3 (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.141). Her index finger points to the sky as she speaks and sings the odes of the Sudanese revolution. However, while Figure 3 is non-transactive, as Alaa Salah's arm does not point to any goals in the frame, Figure 2 can be argued to be a transactive scene. By superimposing the bird behind the exact location of Alaa Salah's arm, it almost looks as if Alaa Salah's finger is pointing at the dove holding an olive branch in its beak in the background. The bird embraces the shape of Alaa Salah's arm and finally ends at her finger. Thus, through strong vectors of body language, the image expresses the meaning between the actor and the goal: her arm symbolically gives life to freedom and peace.

#### B. Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning in visual images can be constructed through gaze, distance, the viewpoint or perspective, and modality (Mohammad, 2020). As emphasized by Parry, the "iconisation occurs when meanings are condensed and charged interpersonally", underlining the way semiotic materials generate social relations (2019, p.235). So once again, the focus is on building solidarity in these acts of meaning-making (Parry, 2019). As such, in Figures 2, 3, and 4, the viewer is positioned as a rather distant observer. Alaa Salah is represented in a long shot, as the whole body can be clearly seen. Similarly, no eye vector is created with the viewer since Alaa Salah is shown with her eyes closed, or even without facial expression and features in the illustration in Figure 4. The audience must therefore speculate on what the depicted participants are dreaming or thinking in this situation. However, the textual and verbal inscriptions act as an indicator that nourishes the viewer's imagination. Furthermore, Figure 3 is more abstract in nature, as it depicts the demonstrators as a mass of individual shadows indistinguishable from each other and without identity markers such as gender or ethnicity.

Thus, it can be argued that by emphasizing the impersonal nature of the crowd, the producer encourages other viewers to identify with the activists. Ultimately, in these three images, the participants are presented as an “offer” and the viewer is encouraged to contemplate them rather than engage with them and the values they represent (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.146).

### C. Compositional meaning

In the illustration in Figure 4, the abstract and colorful brushstrokes convey a sense of emotion in the artwork. The low modality emphasizes the idea of a “fantasy” or a “promise”, of “what might be”, rather than “reality,” “what is” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p.159). Thus, the producers rely on a future that the viewer must imagine and aspire to, ultimately representing Alaa Salah as a distant symbol rather than an ordinary individual. While the modality is higher in the background of Figure 2, where the environment and the protesters are not drawn but are an identical reproduction of the photograph, the foreground is less naturalistic. In fact, the texture acts as a link and contrast between the conceptual representation of Alaa Salah and the bird, and the realistic representation of the protest in Khartoum (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). As such, the image is a medium modality, mixing abstract and realistic elements where “photographs are often thought of as ‘images of the real’” (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.151). Nevertheless, the fact that the actual photograph has been amplified by four distinct colours, black and white, and a saturated red and green, reduces the modality of the background image. In contrast, the modality of the image in Figure 3 is very low, as the foreground and background lack detail. While Figure 2 displays a wide range of colours, the image in Figure 3 essentially adopts a greyscale that further reduces modality. The latter also serves to link the elements together: from the white of the background to the white, yet almost grey, of Alaa Salah's dress, and then to the black for the activists in the crowd.

It should be noted, however, that both Figures 2 and 3 use the saturated colour red, yet for two different purposes. As such, the red end of the scale is often associated with “warmth, energy, salience” and “foregrounding” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p.235). In Figure 2, red serves to maintain a "sense of community" between Turkey and Sudan, as it connects the two elements together, and plays an important role, by highlighting the word “freedom”, in rallying the viewer to the activists' cause and values (Sawer, 2007, cited in Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.146). In Figure 3, the saturated red of SHE, combined with the words "fresh", "blood", "alive", gives some energy to the image and centralizes this idea of humanizing the Statue of Liberty. In addition, the "yellow", highlights the "moon earrings" worn by Alaa Salah. Ultimately, the producers in the three images centralize the attention on Alaa Salah’s white thobe, as the most salient element placed at center and contrasting with the other colours, notably a combination of rich tones of blue, yellow, and pink in Figure 4. The importance of this detail underlines and revives the symbolic significance of the photograph and connects it to broader themes included in some of the key words of the images, such as freedom, peace, democracy, and human rights.

#### 4.2.2. The Leader of the Sudanese Revolution

##### A. Representational meaning

In addition to elevating Alaa Salah as a universal symbol of freedom and peace, the producers also represent her as the leader or voice of the Sudanese revolution. For instance, the cartoon in Figure 5 deliberately decontextualizes the image and adds a new political actor to the Sudanese uprising. On the right, Alaa Salah, and on the left, Salah Abdallah Gosh, the former head of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) who resigned on 13 April, two days after the ousting of former president Ahmad al-Bashir. Alaa Salah can be seen holding

back with the force of her finger what is perceived as a disproportionate and sweaty version of Gosh trying to crush her with his foot. Gosh's almost exaggerated features contrast with the rigidity and lack of facial expression of Alaa Salah, who is seen as embodying values of strength and active resistance, while maintaining a sense of dignity in the face of oppression. In fact, the image seems to be satirically framed in a binary narrative opposing two subjects in size and strength, Alaa Salah, representing the Sudanese people, against Salah Abdallah Gosh, the political forces of the Sudanese government. Ironically, the hashtag #SIMILAR is the opposite of what is represented in the image. The latter, as well as the legend, serve to amplify this logic of solidarity against political and economic inequities.

The [#SudanUprising](#) was sparked by the price increase of [#bread](#). In 3 weeks from 19/12/18, +800 protesters were arrested & +19 killed.

The [#ZimShutdown](#) was sparked by the price increase of [#fuel](#). In 3 weeks from 14/01/19, +800 protesters were arrested & +16 killed.

[#SIMILAR](#)



9

40

78



**Figure 5:** Representation of Alaa Salah and Salah Abdallah Gosh

On the other hand, the cartoon in Figure 6 takes a different approach and satirically compares two distinct scenarios and actors separated by a frame. On the left, Alaa Salah can be seen in a protest context in "Khartoum", and on the right, an unknown woman in a private and closed space. In both image frames, the creator represents a detailed alignment of elements that act as important conceptual structures and attributes building the symbolic meaning of the participants. In the first, the weapons, the Sudanese flag, the crowd and the

smoke in the background mark the revolutionary context in which Alaa Salah finds herself. Furthermore, the presence of phones as well as the numerous hashtags, both in the caption and in the image, mean that the protest is not only taking place in Khartoum but also online, where the same logic of solidarity is occurring. The fact that Alaa Salah is positioned in the centre of the first frame and with a disproportionate size, albeit at the same height as the tanks, gives her power as a leader of the Sudanese revolution. Thus, as in Figure 5, she is depicted as actively speaking out and defiantly standing up to oppression, issuing imperatives such as "Down with despots" and "#Bashirout" on social media. In contrast, the setting of the second frame, a room, and elements such as the computer and telephone show that the idea of "revolution" for the second participant is exclusively enclosed in a virtual world. In fact, the titles of the two frames actively serve to separate them. While Alaa Salah is "leading a revolution", the other participant is "loading a resolution", the latter ultimately criticizing the idea of resistance as being exclusively related to the self-image, with "resolution" referring to the technical resolution of an image.



#RoleOfWomen  
#SudanUprising  
#SudanProtests  
#BashirOut  
#OgonCartoons



the woman's arm is connected to the mobile phone. Thus, while “defiance” is merely a marker of social identity in the second frame, in the first, it is transcribed into action, where Alaa Salah defies the military tank with her arm and gaze.

#### B. Interactive meaning

From an interactive standpoint, the images present the participants as making some form of “imaginary contact” with the viewer (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.146). Their “offer gaze” suggests that the viewer is observing rather than engaging with the participants. Similarly, they all depict Alaa Salah in a long shot that accentuates this sense of distance. The angle and size suggest that the viewer is standing far away from the subjects as they carry out their revolution. Nevertheless, the functions of the images, being cartoons, significantly alter the interactive meaning and message to the audience. Indeed, Figures 4 and 6, by adopting a satirical stance and depicting Alaa Salah with other key participants or objects, such as Gosh or the military tanks, encourage the viewer to adopt a critical attitude and take sides.

#### C. Compositional meaning

Compared to Figures 6 and 5, Figure 4 is low modality and abstract, and the lack of background makes the image very unrealistic. The producer uses primarily techniques such as the size and positioning of participants to articulate a political message of resistance and solidarity against unequal and unjust political forces. The creator highlights Gosh’s foot as the most salient element, due to its centrality and heavy form standing out on a white background. Although linked by the foot of Gosh and colours such as grey and yellow, the image marks a symbolic and imaginary division between the left, with Gosh, and the right, with Alaa Salah. Transcribing the position of the participants through a social semiotic analysis, the left side represents the “given” information (p.179), the old, outdated, and corrupt regime, and the right side

represents the "new information" (p.184) or the generation of civilians fighting for more egalitarian values (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996).

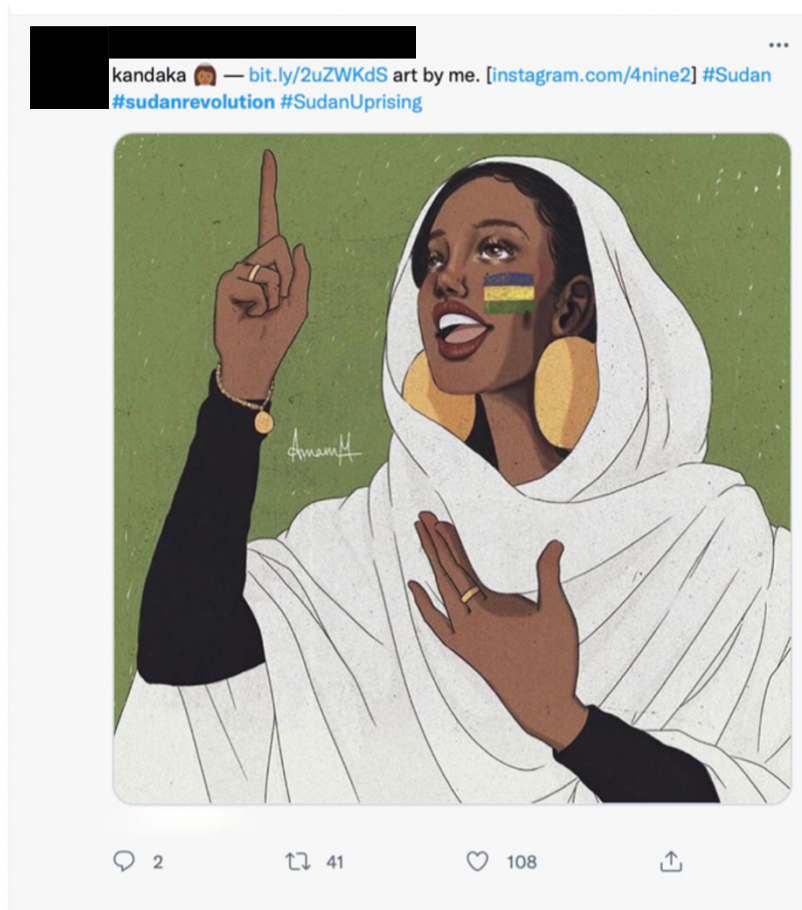
In contrast to Figure 5, Alaa Salah is the most prominent element in Figure 6. Her white thobe stands out from the rest of the elements, and she is shown taller than the other woman, but equal to the tank. The fact that she is equal in size to the tank shows her strength and defiance in challenging institutional and military power, no longer being in a position of supremacy. In addition, the producer depicts two very detailed backgrounds that encourage the viewer to pay attention to the action in the foreground but also in the background. There seems to be a deliberate decision to contrast the two participants in the image using different lines and colours. While the frame of the demonstration uses colours such as orange, yellow and blue, the second image indicates that the action is taking place at night, with the signifier of the moon and the dark sky. Similarly, the colour of the clothes worn by Alaa Salah, a white thobe, contrasts with the colourful pink and blue outfit of the woman and the room. Posture is another indicator. While Alaa Salah is standing for the revolution and holding a phone under her upper body, the woman is sitting in her room and holding a phone above her. Thus, the woman, unlike Alaa Salah who controls her environment, can be seen as controlled by social media.

#### 4.2.3. The empowerment and glorification of women activists

##### A. Representational meaning

Perhaps one of the most common associations, beyond the Statue of Liberty, is Alaa Salah's reference to a Kandaka, also considered a symbol of emancipation and freedom for Sudanese women and people. The digital illustration in Figure 7 is an example of this, as it clearly associates Alaa Salah with a "kandaka" in the caption, accompanied by various hashtags such

as #SudanUprising, #Sudan and #SudanRevolution. The focus is on Alaa Salah as the environment is decontextualized and she occupies the space in the image. Alaa Salah's outfit has the same symbolism as in the other image-tweets. However, the deliberate addition of more jewellery on Alaa Salah as well as the title given to the image formulate another layer of interpretation (Mohammad, 2020). As traditional jewellery in Sudanese culture is a symbol of the wealth and power of Sudanese housewives, it shows the empowerment of kandakas, wives and women activists who fight for their rights and take an active interest in public and political issues. This is consistent with the assertion by many that the Sudanese revolution was primarily led by women (Attia et al., 2020; Stewart, 2020). In the Sudanese uprising, women were also fighting against their precarious living conditions, as they were “increasingly beaten and whipped under unclear laws” (Attia et al., 2020, p.194). On the other hand, the Sudanese flag is depicted on Alaa Salah's left cheek. Thus, not only does Alaa Salah represent the national ideals and values that the Sudanese people are fighting for, but her depiction in the illustration also glorifies Sudanese women and empowers them for their independence and their role in the revolution.



**Figure 7:** Alaa Salah as a “Kandaka”

In addition to abstracting Alaa Salah from the former surroundings of the photograph, Figure 8 consists of several visual participants, which are all, to some extent, an identical reproduction of Alaa Salah. The identity of the participants is represented by the traditional thobe, Sudanese earrings and, interestingly, by what appears to be a celestial halo. The halo around the head of the different Alaa Salah is similar to the crown worn by the Kandaka. While other image-tweets have reproduced Alaa Salah as a single actor, the producer's choice to duplicate Alaa Salah in several identical kandakas is very interesting. There is no difference in the age of the participants, their clothes, hairstyle, or any other marker of cultural identity. Thus, the political message that can be interpreted from the illustration is that all women activists are, in a sense, Kandakas, as they fight for their kingdom.

Apr 10, 2019

Photo from EverydaySudan on instagram. [#SudanUprising](#)



↻ 3

♡ 9



**Figure 8:** Multiple Alaa Salah

In contrast, Figure 9 resembles the first photograph, reproducing almost identically the car Alaa Salah was standing on, her posture and the crowd. Yet, it adds some textual elements with the Arabic text translated as "the voice of the woman is revolution" within the image, and the comment, "to new beginnings" in the caption, communicating a peaceful yet revolutionary protest message while empowering women activists. Indeed, it associates the representation of Alaa Salah with that of a new and hopeful dawn for the country. Similarly, the creator provides a more detailed representation of the crowd, where the differences in

gender, hairstyle, or clothing depicted are indicators of the cultural identity of the country. In correlation with the central message of the image, this shows that all Sudanese are contributing to this new dawn against the oppressive regime.



**Figure 9:** Digital illustration representing Alaa Salah as the voice of the revolution

While Figure 7 and 9 adopt a narrative and a conceptual structure, Figure 8 uses mainly a conceptual structure. Thus, in Figure 7, the actor is Alaa Salah, and the vector is formed by her detailed and powerful gaze directed upwards towards a goal outside the image. This is similar to Figure 9, which provokes a non-transactive reaction because the viewer is not aware of the object that attracts the woman's attention in both images. Given the body language,

she is unlikely to be looking at anything, but rather thinking or reciting something. Her gesture is emotionally engaging, with her hand resting on her chest and ultimately showing that her words come from the heart. In contrast, the participants in Figure 8 appear static, frozen in time, and thus have no visible vectors that would indicate that an action or event is taking place. Thus, the producers aim to empower Alaa Salah and the women activists, but use different means to achieve this goal. Figure 7 associates the image of a *kandaka* only with Alaa Salah and depicts her as actively speaking to the odes of the revolution. Similarly, Figure 8 represents Alaa Salah as the leader or “voice” of the revolution, placing her as a powerful and inspirational figure above the rest of the people. In contrast, Figure 8 uses the figure of Alaa Salah in an almost secular way, as a relief representing not one, but several *kandakas*, who are all “voices” of this revolution.

#### B. Interactive meaning

Overall, participants are described as impersonal or “detached” from the observer as no eye contact is made between them (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.146). In Figure 8, the visual participants are depicted without eyes or, if they do, do not have clear pupils, which could have helped to distinguish an eye-line. Similarly, the participants are shown in long shot, yet some of the *kandakas* are half cut out of the image and others have their upper or lower bodies missing from the frame. This gives the impression that, even with a long shot, the activists are too numerous to be represented in one frame. In contrast to Figure 8 and 9, the producer in Figure 7 decided to represent Alaa Salah in a medium close shot, allowing the viewer to see the latter from the waist up. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) describe this distance as a “(f)ar personal distance” (p.124) enabling the viewer to “get close enough to form an imaginary friendship with the participants” (p.18). Furthermore, while the other



images show Alaa Salah in full profile, this illustration is not a true profile as the viewer can almost see both sides of the face and the eye on the other side. The potential political message conveyed to the viewer in this illustrative image is that the uprising brings them together as close friends in their common struggle against the oppressive regime.

### C. Compositional meaning

While the modality of Figures 7 and 8 is low because the background lacks detail and is reduced to a single colour, Figure 7 provides a very detailed representation of Alaa Salah's facial expression, which reinforces the foreground modality. At the same time, both images use rather warm colours, using brown, green and yellow. Alaa Salah's white thobe in Figure 7 and 9 clearly stands out from the rest of the colour and makes it the most prominent element. The almost shining whiteness of her thobe in Figure 9 also echoes the word "revolution", further emphasizing her role as a key symbol of the Sudanese uprising. In Figure 8, on the other hand, it is the halos and earrings that are more eye-catching in colour and texture than the other elements. Nevertheless, the three symbols, the traditional earrings, the white thobe, and the crown worn by the kandakas, are part of a historical and cultural context that serves to enrich the images and reinforce the power of women activists. The yellow and glittery texture of the earrings and halos helps to emotionally involve the viewer in the admiration of their powerful heritage. Indeed, the use of a warm, saturated colour expresses "emotional temperatures" and a "maximum intensity of feeling" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p.233). It can therefore be said that the texture of the halo attracts the viewer's attention and aesthetic taste.

## 5. Conclusion:

This research explored and developed contemporary approaches to political activism and iconic images in the new media ecology. Framed by academic debates on public screens, connective action, social media, and iconic images, it highlights the agency and creativity of ordinary users and activists in interpreting and making sense of a protest movement through the sharing and reproduction of a photograph. Rather than focusing on the institutional media coverage of the photograph, this research, through a social semiotic analysis, highlights the logic of connective action and solidarity via Twitter, examining how different visual strategies were used as well as how values were attributed to the image to sacralize it as an emblem of the Sudanese Uprising. The critical and turbulent context between 2018 and 2019 has been the catalyst for user activism and creative practices.

Thus, in examining the formation of a public discourse of images through the sharing and reshaping of Alaa Salah's photograph on Twitter (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002), the research addressed the following questions:

- (1) How do online activists draw on new technologies of circulation and reproduction as creative tools of political dissent?
- (2) How does the creative manipulation of a photograph by online activists participate in the construction of a protest icon symbolizing global political values and philosophical ideals?
  - (a) What visual strategies and semiotic resources were used to alter and expand the meaning of the original photograph and what does this reveal about its political, cultural and emotional significance?

(b) How is the iconicity of the image debated and mobilised in the image-tweets?

The study of new sharing and re-working practices in social movements revealed how activists utilized emerging technologies as creative tools of dissent during the Sudanese uprising. Using social semiotic analysis, the research highlighted how Twitter users engaged in the social movement around personal action frames, where they appropriated and expanded the meaning of Alaa Salah's photograph to align with their own orientations and perceptions of the conflict (Bennett, 2012). Thus, visuals shared were not singular images but variations and reproductions of the photograph in different forms and themes. As such, three distinct themes were identified, such as the interpretation of Alaa Salah as a symbol of freedom and hope, the leader of the Sudanese uprising, and the empowerment and glorification of Sudanese women activists. These different yet highly related representations of Alaa Salah demonstrated the logic of connective action that occurred on the platform where users moved away from expressing collective identities to communicate their individual aspirations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Furthermore, it was seen that activists reproduced the photograph in several forms, such as cartoons, graffiti, or digital illustrations, all of which supported their political messages, yet with distinct creative means and functions, the cartoons, for example, often displaying a rather satirical position.

In conjunction, these new practices participated in the formation of an icon of the Sudanese uprising symbolizing wider political values and ideals. As such, the process of iconization manifested itself in the sharing of multiple versions of Alaa Salah's photograph, whose meaning was interpersonally charged by many forms of semiotic resources such as historical links or symbols (Parry, 2019). Specifically, social semiotic analysis allowed the

research to recognize how changes and alterations in semiotic resources were linked to new political meanings that ultimately participated in the construction of photograph's iconicity. In addition to simply sharing the photograph on social media through a sea of hashtags signifying solidarity, Twitter users began to make connections to other crucial occasions and moments, human rights struggles and national symbols. Indeed, while the distance, gaze and posture of Alaa Salah as well as her outfit was maintained, creators changed the contexts and backgrounds, and added new signifiers or linkages to personalize the meaning of the photograph. For instance, Twitter users connected the image of Alaa Salah to national symbols such as the Statue of Liberty, national historical linkages to Kandakas, or contrasted the image to political figures such as Gosh. Thus, through distinct visual and discursive strategies, the public began to share a common understanding of the importance of the image in relation to historical events and cultural mythology (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Furthermore, activists mobilized the iconicity of the image through textual and visual references to several powerful values, including peace, strength, and change, ultimately drawing on semiotic resources such as textures or colors, whether rich or neutral, to reinforce their arguments.

The impact of the photograph of Alaa Salah may have resonated with international communities because of its poetic and harmonious contrast with the injustices and violence that have taken place in Sudan. Although the demonstrations were largely peaceful, a considerable number of activists lost their lives in military interventions (Attia et al., 2020). As such, the aesthetics and peaceful nature of the photograph is directly reflected in the tweets shared which, to a certain extent, almost romanticized the conflict. Relying on low modality and various symbols or signifiers, they portrayed Alaa Salah as a projection of ideals rather than embedding the image in the violent reality of the uprising. Similarly, the viewer is always positioned as a distant observer, who is encouraged to admire the aesthetic, symbolic, and

political significance of the image rather than engage with it. Even though Alaa Salah is depicted as resisting external political and military forces, such as the Gosh or the military tank, she does so with a calm and beautiful dignity, almost as if she possessed supernatural and divine powers. Thus, it is legitimate to ask whether “the iconization of Salas as embodying the ‘future’ on Sudanese platforms” simplifies the “complex narrative of the historical erasure of marginalized communities in Sudan” and the violence that plagued the country (Nugdalla, 2020, p.126).

A potential limitation revolves around the nature and focus of the study, concentrating efforts into the study of Alaa Salah as a national emblem for the Sudanese Uprising which ultimately omitted other dimensions in the image. Indeed, another area of study that could have been considered is directly linked to the history of feminist activism in which the picture is also embedded. As expressed by Nugdalla, the photograph represented a “turning point for the documentation of women protesters in Sudan”, ultimately “carrying the common theme of how the woman in the image represents the “future of the Sudanese women” (2020, p.126). Additionally, the short time-frame chosen to effectively analyze this idea of the early mobilization of an icon, has in turn restricted the study of the long-term reproduction of the image. For instance, scholars such as Boudana et al. have argued “that some memes may actually dissolve the original significance of iconic photographs and potentially degrade, rather than enhance, public culture” (2017, p.1210). Thus, a long-term perspective could have shed the light on a degradation, rather than expansion, of the original photograph’s historical and political meaning.

Future research could consider the gender politics of the image and its reproduction and interpretation on social media platforms. Ultimately, as the sample of images primarily transcribes a peaceful interpretation of protest movements, the re-working practices of other

powerful photographs, such as that of Aisha Yesufu at the demonstration against police brutality in Nigeria in 2020, could be compared to that of Alaa Salah. This could provide a more complete understanding of the visual and discursive strategies used by activists to construct a public discourse of images in two oppressive and violent contexts.

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## Appendices:

### 1. Image-tweets

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Figure 3. 2019. [Twitter]. 11 April. [Accessed 13 September 2021]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/KeshMalekSyria/status/1116295003880321024/photo/1>

Figure 4. 2019. [Twitter]. 11 April. [Accessed 13 September 2021]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/Fatumaabdulahi/status/1116326912522117121/photo/1>

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Figure 6. 2019. [Twitter]. 13 April. [Accessed 14 September 2021]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/chrisatuk/status/1116972915151470593>

Figure 7. 2019. [Twitter]. 11 April. [Accessed 14 September 2021]. Available from: [https://twitter.com/suii\\_generiis/status/1116355108328157184/photo/1](https://twitter.com/suii_generiis/status/1116355108328157184/photo/1)

Figure 8. 2019. [Twitter]. 10 April. [Accessed 14 September 2021]. Available from: [https://twitter.com/search?q=%22Photo%20from%20Everydaysudan%20on%20instagram%22%20\(%23SudanUprising\)&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%22Photo%20from%20Everydaysudan%20on%20instagram%22%20(%23SudanUprising)&src=typed_query)

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